THE MORAL RHETORIC OF CHILDHOOD

ANNEKE MEYER
Manchester Metropolitan University

Key words:
child, innocence, morality, sexual abuse, sexuality

Mailing address:
Anneke Meyer
Department of Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University, Geoffrey Manton Building, Rosamond Street West, Manchester M15 6LL, UK. [email: a.meyer@mmu.ac.uk]

www.sagepublications.com
10.1177/0907568207072532

In the UK, the discourse of innocence currently prevails as a major way of understanding children. This article argues that the strength of this discourse lies in its prevalence, its resistance to challenges and the ways in which it connects ideas of innocence and vulnerability. The moral quality of the discourse of innocence works in conjunction with the sacred status of the child, to produce childhood as a moral rhetoric. Children and childhood function to explain and legitimize any practice or opinion as right while removing the necessity to provide reasons: children are the reason. The article also considers how issues around childhood and morality are implicated in the generation of social concern with risks affecting children.

This article is structured around three objectives. It (1) outlines and illustrates the strength of the discourse of childhood innocence in the UK today, (2) supports Zelizer's (1985) interpretation of this strength as intertwined with the sacralization of childhood and (3) takes this argument further to show that childhood has become a moral rhetoric through the discourse of innocence and the process of sacralization. These arguments are constructed on the basis of empirical research into social reactions to paedophilia. Children are arguably conceptualized as 'at risk' from numerous social conditions or phenomena, ranging from video nasties to obesity (Thompson, 1998). Paedophilia, embodied by the figure of 'the paedophile', has recently been identified as a *major* risk to children and attracted considerable attention in the media, the government and the wider public.

The research into social reactions to paedophilia included documentary analysis of legal and governmental actions, discourse analysis of the print media and focus group research with members of the public. Media analysis focused on *The News of the World* and *The Guardian*. *The News of the World* is the biggest selling British Sunday newspaper and has played a prominent role in the construction of paedophilia as a social problem. In summer 2000, for instance, the newspaper ran a 'Name and Shame' campaign in which it published the photographs, names and addresses of child

sex offenders. The media study comprised *The News of the World* and *The Guardian* in order to capture opposite ends of the British newspaper spectrum. *The News of the World* is a populist, conservative tabloid and *The Guardian* a liberal broadsheet (Tunstall, 1996). Newspaper articles were analysed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) in order to establish the major discourses through which paedophilia is understood in the media. Further, critical discourse analysis provides a model for connecting media discourses to wider social practices of the law and the public. Practically, critical discourse analysis was applied to paedophilia-related articles in *The Guardian* and *The News of the World* between 2000 and 2004. These newspaper articles represented a range of text forms and genres, including news articles, features articles, editorials, analyses and opinion columns. The wide scope in terms of time and numbers is useful as discourses emerge from a multiplicity of texts and can change over time. However, only an extremely small selection of examples could be reproduced here.

The focus group study, comprising three groups of seven to 10 participants each, openly centred on attitudes to paedophilia as the research topic. Two groups were pre-existing: a group of access course students at Manchester College and a group of parents at the Rusholme Sure Start centre. The third group consisted of parents affiliated to Manchester University, which were recruited through Manchester University nursery and academic departments. In the case of pre-existing groups, all members were invited to join focus groups and the vast majority took part. Hence, there was little self-selection. In the case of the third group, positive response rates from both the nursery and academic departments were relatively low, partly due to gatekeepers (Bloor et al., 2001). As a consequence, all those willing to participate could be accommodated but this focus group was significantly self-selected.

Social class represented the key break variable to ensure group homogeneity and open discussions of a potentially sensitive topic (Kitzinger, 1994). According to the Registrar-General's classification (Crompton, 1998), the groups broadly fell into categories of upper working class, lower working class and middle class. The groups were mixed in terms of age and ethnic background; 24 out of a total of 27 participants were parents; and 23 participants were female. Hence, these focus groups were not representative of the whole population, either in terms of numbers or composition. Clearly, not all social classes were represented, and the group of upper working-class students occupied an aspiring class position with a strong possibility of upward social mobility. Non-parents and males were underrepresented due to two factors. Access points such as nurseries and Sure Start centres were predominantly used by parents and females, and there was a lack of positive responses from potential male participants. However, representativeness and generalizability are not necessarily the objectives of focus groups (Bloor et al., 2001). There are several opinion polls available (e.g. MORI, 2000, 2001,

2002) for those interested in generalizable, if not in-depth, findings on attitudes to paedophilia. This focus group study set out to discover the major discourses through which ordinary members of the public make sense of paedophilia, i.e. it was designed to reveal the kind of in-depth understanding that opinion polls cannot produce.

In this context, one has to be careful about generalizing findings, especially the concern with paedophilia that all focus group participants expressed. The group discussions were structured around five general and open-ended questions (e.g. What do you think about paedophiles?) in order to give participants space to explore particular issues they considered important. But discussions like focus groups are in themselves incitements to fear and concern, carrying out research into paedophilia suggests that it is a significant problem that needs to be worried about. Moreover, the discourse of the good parent (Lawler, 2000) encourages the explicit expression of concern as an indicator of care for the safety of your children; and the vast majority of participants were parents. This does not mean that fears and concerns expressed by participants were not genuine, but that the expression of concern was encouraged in a number of ways.

Paedophilia and the discourse of innocence[1]

In contemporary British culture, children and childhood are conceptualized through three major discourses: the discourse of evil, the discourse of innocence and the discourse of rights (James et al., 1998). Some writers have identified historical shifts from the discourse of evil towards the discourse of innocence and, most recently, the discourse of rights. However, such conceptual shifts have not been straightforward. The discourse of evil persists, and the discourse of rights has not displaced the discourse of innocence or gained the status of supremacy. Different social issues *tend* to be marked by the predominance of different discourses. For instance, child crime tends to be understood through the discourse of innocence when children are victims (Kitzinger, 1997) and through the discourse of the evil child when children are perpetrators (Valentine, 1996). Yet even these trends are patchy, some liberal commentators for instance use the discourse of the 'innocent yet damaged child' in discussing child crime (e.g. Morrison, 1997). Generally speaking, paedophilia is marked by a prevailing discourse of innocence.

The law and the government

The discourse of the innocent child, which emerged with Romanticism, constructs children as inherently virtuous, pure, angelic and innocent. This innocence makes children immature, ignorant, weak and vulnerable, and creates a need for protection (Ariès, 1962; Jenks, 1996). Through the discourse of innocence, sexuality and morality became central issues in relation to children. Many sexually charged practices were identified as 'adult vices' and

deemed dangerous to children, whose innocence had to be protected from 'pollution'. Sexuality is, of course, socially constructed and what counts as 'sexual' or 'sexy' varies over time and across cultures (Kincaid, 1998). Childrearing doctrines emerging in 18th- and 19th-century Europe required children to cover up their bodies and prohibited sharing beds with servants. Adults were required to moderate their language and manners as children should not be exposed to sexual talk or activity (Ariès, 1962).

A new discourse of children's rights emerged in the latter part of the 20th century to challenge the discourse of innocence. The discourse of rights centres on children's rights instead of needs, and demands rights for children to *do* things instead of having things *done to* and *for them* by adults. The child is conceptualized as an active, independent person with rights, interests and agency (Lansdown, 1994). Nevertheless, the discourse of innocence continues to dominate official understanding of paedophilia and child sexual abuse, as reflected in legal measures and political actions. For instance, the Protection of Children Act 1999 (note the name) has sought to identify and ban 'unsuitable persons', among them child sex offenders, from working with children (Cobley, 2000). The Sexual Offences Act 2003 has created a new offence of 'grooming' children for sexual abuse and introduced the automatic classification of sexual intercourse with a girl under 13 as rape. Both acts conceive and reproduce children as innocent, vulnerable beings who cannot defend themselves and need adult protection. Indeed, children under the age of 13 are deemed to lack (sexual) competence to such an extent that they are unable to give true consent to sexual acts. Moreover, the government has rejected public access to the sex offender register on the grounds of alleged adverse effects on the protection of children. Community notification is said to drive child sex offenders underground and thereby put children at greater risk. This argument has been challenged and disputed, most publicly by *The News of the World*. The newspaper has campaigned for public access to the sex offender register, arguing that this would enable parents to better protect their children. Hence, the battle over community notification is fought in terms of how best to protect children; the idea that innocent, vulnerable children need protection is the taken-for-granted basis of disputes.

The media

The Guardian and *The News of the World* are two British newspapers at opposing ends of the spectrum, the former being a liberal broadsheet and the latter a conservative tabloid. Yet in the case of paedophilia, both newspapers understand children through a discourse of innocence:

> For too long the nation has endured the pain of seeing *innocents* such as Sarah Payne snatched from streets to become victims of paedophiles. For too long not enough has been done to *protect* our *young ones*. (*The News of the World*, Editorial, 'Our Aim is the Safety of our Children', 23 July 2000: 6)

> Legislation to criminalise what is known as 'internet grooming' is due to receive a second reading in the Commons today, providing some *protection* for *vulnerable* youngsters who use computer chatrooms. . . . [W]e need to ensure that we tackle those who want to use it to take advantage of the *innocence* of children. (*The Guardian*, O. Bowcott 'Curbs on Chat: Grooming to be Outlawed', 15 July 2003: 3)

Through this discourse of innocence, children are reproduced as possessing an essentially virtuous and innocent nature. This nature makes them naive and vulnerable, and turns them into helpless victims in constant need of adult protection. This discourse of innocence is extremely resistant to challenges, whether logical, experiential, evidential or otherwise. In the following article, children are acknowledged to be knowledgeable and skilled at using the Internet, and indeed more skilled than many adults. Children are also recognized to have internalized stranger danger education. These acknowledgements should encourage a way of thinking about children as able to negotiate the Internet safely and provide their own protection. In this context, the discourse of innocence, which constructs children as incompetent, should be questioned. But this is not the case:

> Children are becoming the internet *experts* in families as their parents leave them to it in what could be 'a lasting reversal of the generation gap', according to research published today. The report from the London School of Economics claims that warnings about the risks of chatrooms and of meeting strangers and paedophiles have got through to youngsters, but that *parents, government departments* and *internet providers* could *do more to make the internet safer for children.* (*The Guardian*, R. Smithers 'Children Are Internet Experts', 16 October 2003: 5)

On the contrary, the discourse of innocence is reinforced through calls for adults to 'do more to make the internet safer for children'. Such demands assume that children need adult protection, which is incongruent with claims that children tend to be more skilled at using the Internet than their parents. The discourse of innocence is not disrupted by challenging research findings, a strength that can be further illuminated through an analysis of connections between innocence and vulnerability.

Innocence and vulnerability

Christensen (2000) has argued that vulnerability is a *key* feature of western conceptions of childhood. This vulnerability is socially constructed as well as biological. Although closely tied to innocence, vulnerability cannot be reduced to it because any childhood discourse can inform institutions (e.g. laws) and social practices (e.g. childrearing practices) that produce vulnerability. For example, the discourse of rights can produce vulnerability by exposing children to a neoliberal society of competitive markets and individual responsibility (Lavalette, 2005), while the discourse of evil makes children vulnerable by encouraging harsh forms of discipline and control (Jenks, 1996). However, there is a particularly close fit between innocence and

vulnerability that can be grasped through distinctions between different *kinds* of vulnerability. Vulnerability as a generic term includes and conflates ideas of children as physically vulnerable (e.g. their bodies are smaller and weaker), socially vulnerable (e.g. they lack certain social skills) and structurally vulnerable (e.g. there are asymmetrical power relations between children and adults). Social and physical vulnerability are usually thought of as 'innate' characteristics of the individual child and denote a lack of personal competence or strength. In contrast to this, structural vulnerability – as a lack of power – is a product of society. Discourses of rights and evil can produce structural vulnerability (i.e. they can render the child relatively powerless through social practices and structures) but they cannot produce children as innately vulnerable. This incapacity is grounded in (1) the structural perspective of the rights discourse, and (2) the innate characteristic of evil that is fundamentally opposed to the characteristic of innocence. Hence, the discourse of innocence is uniquely able to conceptualize and produce children as both structurally *and* innately vulnerable. By presenting children as lacking a range of social skills (e.g. being street-smart, able to judge dangerous situations), the discourse of innocence constructs vulnerability as directly deriving from the being of the child. Innocence also produces children as structurally vulnerable, for instance by encouraging protectionist legislation, but this kind of discursive effect is rarely acknowledged.

In the preceding extract, *The Guardian* portrays children as simultaneously technologically competent *and* innocent and vulnerable. Technological competence may not be easily transferred onto social competence, i.e. the kind of competence that could be argued to make children more clued up and less vulnerable. The discourse of innocence is problematic because it conflates innocence and vulnerability and constructs both as innate characteristics. Any relative lack of competence and vulnerability should be understood in relation to the sociostructural position of the child where weakness goes hand in hand with adult demands for obedience (Kitzinger, 1997). Children cannot be expected to confidently shrug off obedience in particular situations when it is generally encouraged as an aspect of the adult–child relationship. Children are expected to abide by their parents' rules, listen to their advice and follow the instructions of other adults, such as relatives or teachers. Children do not have the same rights as adults, e.g. they have no rights to vote or to benefits (Qvortrup, 2005). A legal ban on smacking children has been consistently opposed by many parents and the British government, who foreground parental rights to discipline their children. Children's practices, decisions and ways of reasoning are generally not awarded the same status as those of adults because they are considered immature. These structures make children relatively powerless and structurally vulnerable, and they promote compliance with adult wishes, rules and practices. Moreover, they can produce the kind of personal lack of social experience and social vulnerability that the discourse of innocence portrays as innate to

children. As children are discouraged from being independent and gaining experiences, their judgements of danger and acceptability may be impaired (Holloway and Valentine, 2003).

The discourse of innocence is deeply implicated in the (re)production of these power structures by promoting a needs perspective foregrounding children's dependence. Children's needs are defined by adults and children's agency is constrained in the name of protection. By defining children through lack and absence (of adult competence), the discourse of innocence also renders children incapable of exercising many rights and undermines demands for equal rights. Paedophilia and child sexual abuse are offences that involve adults coercing children into sexual activity. Importantly, the discourse of innocence does not protect children from abuse and indeed may be seen as producing vulnerability rather than protection. It is implicated in the (re)production of unequal power structures that make children (structurally and socially) vulnerable, i.e. it produces structural and social vulnerability through conceptions of children's innate vulnerability. Further, the discourse of innocence is silent on issues of lack of power and structural vulnerability, and this silence disguises its involvement in the production of vulnerability. As a consequence, the discourse of innocence can continue to present itself as simply being about the protection of children. This morally powerful position is further reinforced by circular discursive dynamics: the discourse of innocence conflates notions of innocence and vulnerability, which means that the (structural and social) vulnerability that the discourse produces can be read back as a sign of innate innocence.

The public: focus groups

My focus group research suggests that some members of the public contradict or challenge the discourse of innocence through direct experiences. For instance, participants share experiences of their children possessing sexuality (in the sense that genital touching is interpreted as a sign of sexual curiosity, feeling and pleasure):

> *Rachel:* But are children not sexual?
> (silence)
> *Helen:* Yeah, they have sexual feelings, don't they, I've got a 3-year-old and she touches her bum, so certainly she's got feelings down there.
> *Hannah:* My daughter's obsessed with her . . . vagina, and she's two and a half!
> *Vic:* My son's 4 and he's . . . <u>always</u> got hold of his willy, <u>always</u> got hold of it.

Parents think of their children as sexual in some senses, and this thinking is shaped by mainstream discourses defining sexuality through genital stimulation and pleasure. Yet, while discourses on sexuality construct the behaviour of these children as sexual, the discourse of innocence constructs children as asexual beings. This results in tensions and awkwardness, as indicated by silence. Discourses on sexuality make the parents' direct experiences alternative by providing an interpretation of children's behaviour that does not fit

images of 'normality' produced by the discourse of innocence. Despite these challenges, the discourse of innocence is upheld and reaffirmed:

> I believe in childhood . . . and if you believe in childhood . . . and if you believe in kind of childhood being *innocent* then . . . and *innocent* being part of a *non-sexual* . . . kind of life. (Hannah)

Again, this illustrates the power of the discourse of innocence. No matter what children do, no matter what alternative interpretations of their behaviour are provided, children continue to be understood as generally innocent and asexual beings. Thus parents see their children as sexual in *some* respects, but as asexual in many other respects. This can be made intelligible by looking at the *kind* of sexuality children are thought to possess. The social construction of sexuality and childhood means that children are neither inherently sexual nor asexual (Jackson, 1982), generating significant space for varying definitions of sexuality. Parents' accounts confine children's sexuality to masturbation, i.e. sexual contact with the self. Therefore, it is *possible* that they do not see children's sexuality as an expression of a wish for sexual contact with other persons. Parents do not seem to consider sexual activity in very young children sexual in the sense of intimate, seductive or shameful. Hence young children are allowed to carry out masturbation in front of parents but older ones are not:

> But we draw a line then, don't we, sometimes, I'm, I'm sure I must have done it myself with my kids, I mean . . . my kids did that [touch their genitals] but then . . . there must've come *a time* when I thought . . . there's *an age* where . . . either don't do it in front of me or don't do it in front of your friends or don't, don't . . . you start putting all . . . these barriers in. (Rachel)

Therefore children are granted sexuality but it is a kind of 'innocent sexuality' in that it is directed at the self only, automatic, unconscious and physical rather than affected. This *may* be why participants can simultaneously claim that children are innocent and sexual.

While a lack of sexuality features as a key characteristic of children, the discourse of innocence also constructs children as lacking other forms of 'adult' knowledge and competence, such as reason or maturity (emotional, physical and mental). Lack of knowledge and skills constructs children as innately vulnerable and defenceless. For instance, children are seen as endangered through their trusting, naive nature:

> And some kids will talk to anyone, even Wesley . . . he'd go off with anybody . . . if someone was to say to him 'We're going to the shop' or whatever, he . . . just grab onto the hand and off he'll go. (Sinead)

Such conceptions of children as innately innocent and vulnerable have two important implications. First, they construct children as 'at risk'. Second, this 'at risk' status is constant because it is grounded in the nature of the child, its incompetent and vulnerable nature. Being a child becomes synonymous with being at risk, hence risks to children are ever present and

constant protection is required. As the 'at risk' status is rooted in the being of the child, anything can be identified and popularized as a risk to children. Paedophilia is just one, albeit major, risk currently identified in relation to children.

Morality and (a)sexuality

Historically, children were conceived as 'little adults' (Ariès, 1962), but with the emergence of modern conceptions of childhood as a special stage children came to be seen as essentially different from adults. These conceptions possess a normative and moral dimension as it is widely seen as appropriate, healthy and 'normal' for children to be different from adults. The discourse of innocence is also fundamentally moral. Connecting innocence and sexuality, it produces asexuality as a defining property of children that is virtuous, decent and right. This moral dimension becomes most obvious when it is seen as threatened, e.g. when people lament the 'inappropriateness' of some children. Adult objections to children not being 'proper' children are grounded in children not conforming to the discourse of innocence and its defining essence of asexuality. Asexuality is *the* structuring and defining absence as behaviours and clothes labelled inappropriate for children are those deemed adult-like and sexy:

> *Kerry:* I've been looking for like . . . swimming costumes for Rachel [daughter] and they've got like these . . . she's 2 . . . tops there [handkerchief tops that cover the upper torso], all this stuff.
> *Amy:* Yeah the little triangle things.
> *Kerry:* And I'm thinking why?! She's 2! Why does a 2-year-old have to show her midriff? . . . And you see . . . young girls . . . whose fashion just replicates what the older . . . teenagers and stuff are doing, and I'm sorry it's obscene. . . . And there's one, this girl [in a TV singing contest] . . . had hair up like this, lip gloss, make-up out here . . . and she was only 10 . . . and some kind of outfit on, heels that thick, and you just thought 'Why?' . . . and she had a fantastic voice, she did, but it spoilt it because of all this.

What counts as 'sexy' are practices and products which reveal parts of the (naked) body or possess sexual connotations, such as high heels or make-up. Such laments disregard the fact that these are mass market products that position children as major consumers. Concerns about the effects of 'sexy' practices and products are clearly gendered as they focus on girls only (Renold, 2005). This is partly rooted in risk perceptions in focus groups being generally gendered, with girls often being considered more 'at risk' than boys. These perceptions rely on traditional concepts of femininity as weak and vulnerable, and masculinity as strong and powerful (Oakley, 1972). However, there is also a sense in which sexiness, especially in conjunction with beauty and seductiveness, is itself a gendered concept. Despite masculinity arguably being increasingly connected to beauty and health regimes (Mort, 1996), femininity has a long history of being deeply intertwined with ideals around the body beautiful. Participants may be

encouraged to complain about girls' sexy appearances because the very idea of being sexy and seductive through beautification is still more easily applied to females than males. This tendency is to an extent rooted in the fact that sexual innocence is itself a gendered concept; in our contemporary culture it is mostly girl-children who are eroticized and girls are always already (hetero)sexualized as part of 'normal' femininity and girlhood. Hence, boys' expressions of (hetero)sexuality are rarely pathologized and only girl-children invoke social anxieties when they consume products or engage in behaviours associated with 'older' female sexualities, such as high heels (Renold, 2005). When gendered notions of sexiness and sexual innocence are combined with the virgin/vamp discourse of femininity, they produce the notion of females endangering themselves through seduction (Benedict, 1992). This further fuels anxieties about girls', rather than boys', displays of sexuality and sexiness.

These issues raise questions about the relationship between 'sexy' and 'sexual'. Focus group participants conflate the two concepts, so that 'being sexy' and 'being sexual' become synonymous. The discourse of innocence constructs children as asexual in the sense of lacking sexual knowledge or experiences, but it seems that even sexy clothes indicate a sexual child. Through these conflations, examples of 'sexiness' become sufficient to launch complaints about the contravention of 'appropriate' childhood behaviour and dress. Further, 'sexy' adult clothes or demeanours are sufficient to announce the loss of innocence and childhood:

> *Amy:* I mean S Club Juniors, that's awful the way they are . . . *they're acting like they're adults.*
> *Jack:* Yes, and that's wrong because their . . . their *childhood innocence will be lost* . . . in that sort of development.

Similarly, adult sexual 'appreciation' or objectification of children is not just seen as inappropriate but harmful in the sense of constituting the loss of childhood:

> *Kerry:* The minute they start looking at young children *in that sort of* . . . *a way.*
> *Amy: It's not children anymore.*

The rhetoric of the loss or destruction of childhood is a powerful one, suggesting irreparable damage. The loss and destruction referred to in these examples are of course not real but metaphorical. At stake is not the physical harm done to children, as an element of physical harm is not even necessary to declare the end of childhood, but rather the infringement of defining characteristics of the concept of childhood. Kitzinger (1997) has identified several problems associated with the concept of childhood innocence, such as titillation or the stigmatization of the 'knowing' child. If children and childhood are *defined* by innocence then children who do not conform to this image are excluded. However, the argument that the category of childhood is preserved through the removal of 'errant' children who do not fit adult

conceptions of 'the child' is most persuasive in the case of violent children (Jenks, 1996). Sexual abuse of children is, on the one hand, interpreted as the end of childhood. Yet, on the other hand, sexually abused children continue to be represented as innocent, for instance in legal cases. And in this study, parents and the media generally seem keen to affirm innocence even against serious challenges. These tensions are the result of opposing tendencies to exclude and include. The general tendency in the media and the public – as focus groups have indicated – is to exclude children who do not fit in order to preserve images of innocence. But the sexually abused child is the paradigmatic, blameless victim who deserves inclusion (Davis, 2005). As a consequence, sexual abuse can be pronounced as the end of childhood and yet sexually abused children continue to be seen as innocent and remain part of the childhood category. These inclusion/exclusion dynamics are structured along the lines of childhood, morality and gender. Those children whose transgression has been forced upon them and who are therefore not to blame, e.g. the sexually abused child, tend to be included. Those whose transgression of the ideal can be interpreted as wilful and their fault, for example children who display 'sexy' clothes or demeanour, can be excluded. However, exclusion is mediated by gender in the sense that only girls' displays of sexuality or sexiness tend to be pathologized (Renold, 2005). Moreover, even such 'deviant' children are often still included in the category of childhood as the blame for their transgression is shifted onto the adult agencies considered responsible, such as parents, industry or governments:

> I cannot believe some of the things I see *little girls* wearing. Any child's party these days is likely to yield a crop of lisping Lolitas in *boob-tubes*, *mini-skirts* and *high heels*. Even more upsetting are *black lace knickers*, *G-strings* and *padded bras* with the Little Miss Naughty logo. It's a paedophile's dream come true. And by dressing our kids so provocatively we're handing it to them on a plate. . . . So any *manufacturer* who encourages that situation is unbelievably irresponsible. . . . *Parents* who try to resist these sick trends find themselves under incredible pressure. . . . Of course we have to assume some responsibility but so do *retailers*. (*The News of the World*, U. Jonsson 'Our Kids Shouldn't be Dressed to Thrill', 25 September 2005)

The concept of sacralization

Several writers (Jackson and Scott, 1999; Jenks, 1996; Zelizer, 1985) have noted historical shifts from a discourse of evil to discourses of innocence and rights. My research into social understanding of paedophilia suggests a plurality of discourses, which differ in terms of pervasiveness. Children are overwhelmingly understood through a discourse of innocence, but the discourses of evil and rights are occasionally invoked to explain certain aspects of paedophilia controversies. For instance, stories about false allegations of child sexual abuse tend to draw on the discourse of evil to make sense of

children, and disputes over legal measures are often fought in terms of children's rights (as well as needs).

Zelizer (1985) interprets historical shifts towards the discourse of innocence as a cultural transformation of the meaning of children (in the US and other western industrialized countries). This transformation is termed the 'sacralization of the child', a process by which the meanings and values of the child have shifted from economic worth to emotional pricelessness. Children, she argues, have become sacred, i.e. invested with religious and sentimental meanings, since the start of the 20th century. The point is not that adults lacked sentiments to children prior to this or that children are no longer economically useful. Historically, the number of children in work has declined dramatically in the 20th century, yet even in industrialized western societies, large numbers of children are currently in paid employment, if often part-time (e.g. Hobbs and McKechnie, 1997). Sacralization is a representative ideal referring to the child today being *valued exclusively* in emotional terms. This ideal includes a belief that economic and emotional values are incompatible, which encourages a tendency to downplay economic values.

Zelizer identifies sacralization as the cause of public concern with and indignation about risks facing children, and her theory does capture a contemporary cultural attitude. For example, many participants in my study see crimes against children as more important and severe than other crimes:

> That crime's a lot more important as well, isn't it . . . than any other crime that's . . . gonna be reported about, I mean . . . crime, paedophilia . . . with children. (Abi)

The perception that crimes against children are particularly serious and worse than other crimes (against adults) suggests that children do have a special status. Violating children seems particularly morally base and causes indignation because children are conceived as innately innocent, defenceless and vulnerable:

> *Interviewer:* How would you compare crimes against children with crimes against adults?
> *Sinead:* I think it's different because *adults can defend themselves*, they know, kids don't, so I think it's worse.
> *Donna:* Yeah, cause kids are *innocent.*

Participants here conceptualize crime as an interpersonal power struggle between two individuals. Based on individual conceptions of power, this struggle is unequal when it involves individuals with different 'amounts' of power. The point is that the discourse of innocence makes crimes against children 'worse' than crimes against adults by constructing the child as innately weak, vulnerable and defenceless. In this context, adult crimes against children become unequal and unfair, cowardice and 'bad'. Targeting those who cannot even fight back seems particularly morally reprehensible:

> And I think any sort of sexual crime is quite bad but . . . I think with children it is *particularly bad* because they do seem so *innocent* and so . . . *vulnerable*. (Fiona)

Hence, the sacred status of the child seems to gain its moral authority from the discourse of innocence.

The concept of sacralization does not just capture a cultural attitude but offers to explain contemporary periods of social concern through a social predisposition to be concerned about (risks to) children. However, the concept of sacralization cannot explain why attention focuses on some risks at the expense of others, or indeed the timing of such attention. In the case of paedophilia, the sexual nature of the crime is a factor attracting attention and concern. Sexual crimes generally generate much interest and outrage in the media and public (Greer, 2003), and they are seen as particularly serious in our culture due to a number of factors. First, they involve physical violence against a person. Second, they involve a violation of what is seen as the most intimate sphere of the body. And third, sexuality, according to Foucault (1978), is seen as the defining essence and truth of the self, constructing sexual crimes as violating a person in a particularly profound way. This is why sexual violence is often seen as having traumatic and long-lasting psychological consequences.

> It [child sexual abuse] scars you, as a child . . . and you don't . . . you're not the same person as an adult . . . as you might have been. (Sarah)

In some sense, all bad childhood experiences are seen as scarring the future adult because childhood is conceptualized as the cradle of the self (Lawler, 2000); but sex(uality) seems central as negative *sexual* experiences commonly elicit claims as to their life-transforming impact (Davis, 2005), claims that are rarely disputed.

If sexual violence is generally considered serious and horrific, sexual violence against children is further aggravated by the discourse of innocence. By defining children as lacking sexual knowledge and experience, the discourse of innocence renders sexual violence against children 'unnatural' and 'immoral'. Child sexual abuse is interpreted as an act of violation that forces experiences onto children that 'nature' had not intended for them:

> When you hear about a sexual crime between . . . a grown man and a grown woman . . . it's still really bad but . . . because adults have sex anyway . . . but when you hear about sexual crimes to children it's *sick* . . . it's so different . . . because *children shouldn't have sex.* (Fiona)

Arguably all forms of interpersonal violence inflict physical and/or psychological harm on victims. But child sexual abuse becomes 'worse' than, say, child physical abuse or sexual abuse of adults because it additionally violates children in a metaphysical and moral way. It 'destroys' their childhood, their being as a child, by affecting the essence of childhood, asexuality.

Recent proposals of the ex-home secretary, David Blunkett, to change criminal sentences are another indicator of both sacralization and the importance of sexuality. In 2003, he proposed the creation of indeterminate 'life means life' sentences for those who kill an adult or a child under certain circumstances. *Multiple* murders involving a high degree of premeditation, abduction or sadism would be punished through indeterminate sentence, as would the *single* murder of a child involving a high degree of premeditation, abduction, sadism or sexual conduct. The importance of sexuality is emphasized by sexual murders being rated worse than non-sexual murders. Further, the proposals reveal that children have a more sacred status than adults as crimes against them are rated as deserving tougher sentences than those committed against adults. A single murder of an adult in the same circumstances as mentioned would 'only' gain a 30-year prison sentence (Travis, 2003).

From attitudes and practices of participants in my study and the government, we can hypothesize that paedophilia is considered so horrific because it is a crime which is sexual *and* committed against children. The two key elements – sacralization and sexuality – are further aggravated by the discourse of innocence. Paedophile crime violates two deeply held and cherished views: that children are sacred and that children are sexually innocent. It might be this mix that makes paedophilia so potent in raising emotions; the dynamics between innocence, sexuality and violent crime turn paedophilia into a veritable atrocity.

The moral rhetoric of childhood: children as explanation and legitimation

Arguably there has been a cultural transformation of the meaning of childhood beyond children becoming sacred objects: childhood has become a moral rhetoric that can legitimize anything without actually having to explain it. In debates on paedophilia, participants in my study, as well as the media, often demand the harshest forms of punishment for paedophiles, such as indeterminate 'real life sentences' or even capital punishment. These measures are only seen as appropriate for those committing crimes against children, and children serve to legitimize these demands:

> Once they've been classified as paedophiles, that's it . . . ehm . . . locked up . . . and they stay there . . . once someone's interfered with a child that's serious enough. (Jack)

> That [reintroducing capital punishment] would be a start, wouldn't it, that would be a start . . . cause that's [paedophilia] the most heinous crime of all, that's what they deserve. (Donna)

> If someone kills a child, I want it [capital punishment] for that. (Sinead)

But *why* should crimes against children deserve particularly harsh pun-

ishment? Children in themselves are not a proper explanation but they can come to function *as* an explanation. 'Because it is children' is the quintessential idiom of the moral rhetoric:

> *Miles:* Ok, is a paedophile worse than rape then? Paedophilia?
> *Kerry:* 'Cause it's sex with children Miles . . . it's sex with children, it's . . . it is . . . that violence, it's not just sex, it's . . . it's violence against children.

The linguistic terms 'child' and 'children' can become explanations in themselves because they invoke ideas of children being special, sacred and innocent beings who are extremely valuable and virtuous. 'The child' becomes a shorthand for sacralization and moral status; its meanings no longer have to be made explicit. This rhetoric is so powerful that in fact *any* opinion can be justified by simply referring to children, and without having to explain *why* and *how* children justify it. To include just a few examples, children serve to legitimize and explain assessments of crimes against children as particularly serious and emotive:

> You've got to be really careful though, cause it's *obviously* like one of the most emotive issues [paedophilia], that's like people don't like seeing murders and stuff on TV, we do, but *obviously* . . . when seeing kids go missing, obviously they think it's worse. (James)

In this case, James cautions against quickly labelling people as paedophiles because of the emotive reactions that this label invokes. The media reference in this context is an interesting reminder of just how media-ted and televised people's experiences of crime are, especially of crimes like paedophilia, which are prominent in the media.

Children in focus group debates are also used to legitimize a general prioritization of policy matters in favour of children:

> They spend all these resources on . . . stupidities like speed cameras . . . it's fucking . . . when it comes to children . . . I think it *should be a priority*, that they spend more money on that, on the *kids' side of things* . . . so we are protecting them. (Jack)

Children legitimize the introduction of public access to the sex offender register:

> *Beth:* I think the residents should know if there's one [paedophile] in the area.
> *Fiona:* Yeah, cause they're kids.

And children even come to legitimize violence towards child sex offenders:

> *Tanya:* There's a few that would be aggressive to that paedophile.
> *Sinead:* But if you do something like that to a child what do you expect?

These very different examples show how children can be directly used as an explanation for a wide range of opinions. Children absolve the speaker of the necessity to provide specific explanations for *how* the involvement of children supports their argument. Several factors indicate that the perception

of the special and moral status of the child is deeply entrenched, widespread and powerful: (1) children are used as a shorthand explanation; (2) such explanations are understood and not disputed by those listening; and (3) words such as *obviously* can be used (e.g. James's comment). These aspects combined suggest that the perception has become so powerful and accepted as to seem *natural*. When a discourse becomes 'natural' it becomes powerful: it gains the status of an irreversible, natural fact and obliterates its origin as a social *idea*. Children can become an explanation because of this natural fact status, and the concept of sacralization can be developed into the concept of childhood as a moral rhetoric.

A second major dimension of the moral rhetoric of childhood is moralizing, i.e. presenting yourself as a moral person and turning social issues into moral problems. By portraying children as entirely virtuous beings, the discourse of innocence predisposes children to become objects of emotional and moral valuation. Children are constructed as the *deserving* recipients of attention, care, effort and protection, which they *need*. Hence, anyone speaking on behalf of children can represent him- or herself as a moral person, as somebody who protects the weak. Jack's comment earlier is a case in hand as he presents himself as moral by demanding a greater proportion of public expenditure for policies 'protecting children'. He emphasizes this commitment through affect, using strong evaluative words such as 'stupidities' and 'fucking' to describe current policies and spending priorities. This affect is displayed to suggest genuineness of concern and a strong sense of morality. Legitimation and moralizing are inextricably linked dimensions of childhood rhetoric; hence, childhood rhetoric is always moral rhetoric and *anything* can be justified via children as children make the case necessarily good and right.

However, issues concerning children and their need for protection are raised in specific contexts. There is a hierarchy of social problems in terms of interest because not all risks facing children are equally high on the agenda of the media, the public or the government. For instance, the media and the public have recently been more pre-occupied with paedophilia than child physical abuse or child deaths through traffic accidents. These hierarchies indicate the explanatory limits of the theory of sacralization and the concept of childhood as a moral rhetoric. Some crimes affecting children are considered more severe than others and attract more interest and outrage, suggesting that the power of the moral rhetoric to invoke the sacred status of the child is not independent of social context.

Moralizing, class and enlightenment

For Jenks (1996), the modern project of Enlightenment, marked by principles of reason, rationality and progress, is at the heart of contemporary concern with child sexual abuse. Modern society sees the treatment of children, its vulnerable members, as symbolic of the social order and indicative of its

moral state. However, the continuing occurrence of child sexual abuse contravenes the image of contemporary society as enlightened and protective. This dilemma should curb any moralizing, but instead it is resolved in ways that safeguard moralizing. In order to illustrate this, the analysis shifts between child abuse generally and child sexual abuse specifically. Such shifts are justified in that child abuse generally fits into Jenks's analytic framework of the enlightenment of modern society being thrown into question. In focus groups, the contradiction of child (sexual) abuse occurring in modernity is, in the first instance, resolved through comparisons of the UK with other countries. Other countries, as well as other historical periods, can be seen as less developed in that child (sexual) abuse is not even acknowledged or talked about. Such comparisons portray this country as enlightened, progressive and morally superior:

> I think we talk about it [child sexual abuse] a lot in this country . . . in Cyprus it probably happens just as much but people . . . don't talk about it, you know . . . maybe it's a blessing that we hear about it because people can talk about it. (Hannah)

In the second instance, the dilemma of continuing child abuse is resolved through class bias. The problem is located in the lower social classes, who are understood as not having made the kind of progress typically associated with the Enlightenment. The lower classes are seen as physically abusing their children because low levels of intelligence and education lead to an inability to reason with children and recourse to violence:

> But also there's a class thing, as well . . . you know, we do . . . I mean this idea of a classless society is farcical, we do have differences in class, different classes, and you know . . . you have to say, you know, people who <u>reason</u> with their child, you know . . . and then you have people who won't reason, who just, you know . . . have different levels of physical abuse. (Celia)

This suggests that child abuse can be seen as premodern *and* prevalent in modern society if it is 'explained' through social class divisions. However, this reconciliation might work better for physical than sexual abuse of children because the former is obviously physical and therefore more easily associated with violence and the lower classes. Both ways of resolving the dilemma of continuing child abuse in modern society are ultimately forms of locating the problem 'outside' or with 'the other', either other countries or other social groups within society. This strategy reflects the exclusionary dynamics Jenks (1996) identifies in the preservation of the category of childhood. The removal or displacement of unfitting, 'other' or deviant elements in order to preserve widely cherished categories and images seem to be a feature of child (sexual) abuse controversies in more than one way.

Conclusion

The discourse of innocence shapes the understanding of child sexual abuse and paedophilia in the law, the government, the media (at least *The Guardian* and *The News of the World*) and members of the public (at least those who participated in my study). The power of the discourse of innocence lies not only in this prevalence but also in the discourse's resistance to challenge and change. For instance, mainstream discourses on sexuality encourage parents to interpret some of their children's behaviour as sexual, yet they cannot disrupt the notion of childhood asexuality, i.e. the essence of innocence. The power of the discourse of innocence also derives from connections between innocence and vulnerability. While I have only been able to sketch the beginnings of such connections, three factors have emerged as particularly important. First, the discourse of innocence constructs the concept of *innate* vulnerability, which creates a particularly close fit between notions of innocence and vulnerability. Second, the discourse of innocence produces *structural* vulnerability yet conceals it through silence. As a consequence, it can still present itself as simply protecting vulnerable children and maintain its moral authority. Third, the concepts of innocence and vulnerability are often conflated and used synonymously. Hence, (structural) vulnerability – which the discourse of innocence is involved in producing – can be read back as a confirmation of the (innate) innocence of children.

The moral dimension of the discourse of innocence and the sacred status of the child arguably allow for two sets of developments: (1) childhood becomes a moral rhetoric and (2) issues affecting children become moral issues. Childhood as moral rhetoric means that 'the child' can become an explanation in itself; by invoking the status of the sacred child it can be used to legitimize a range of practices and opinions. Moral rhetoric is a particular form of moralizing; justifying attitudes and practices in the name of the child can serve to represent yourself as a moral person. This opportunity for moralizing is inherent in any debates and issues involving children today because to speak up 'on behalf of' children – the innocent, vulnerable and deserving beings – is seen as indicating a moral, caring person. This kind of moralizing cannot simply be equated with genuine care or concern. It represents *claims* to be moral and concerned, and indeed these claims have to be regarded with some suspicion. For instance, one of the powerful arguments of paedophilia controversies holds that child sexual abuse causes the death or destruction of childhood. Both the media and focus group participants tend to conflate notions of 'sexiness' and 'sexuality', and as a consequence they invoke the argument on the basis of children's 'sexy' clothes, demeanours, hairstyles, etc. An element of real bodily harm, whether physical or psychological, is not even necessary to claim the destruction of childhood. This suggests that adult indignation is not only motivated by the harm inflicted on children but also by the infringement of adult ideals of child-

hood. I do not want to dispute that adults are concerned about the sexual abuse of children, but I do think that the moral claims made in these debates have to be deconstructed. The equation of openly displayed moralism and outrage with concern for children is misconceived as there are multiple motivations behind such displays. Further, the equation skews the debates on child sexual abuse and paedophilia as anyone who does not moralize, outrightly condemn or openly display emotions of indignation can be accused of being 'on the wrong side'.

Concepts of sacralization and moral rhetoric suggest that interest in and concern with issues affecting children are *generally* fuelled by enjoyment of moralizing. Yet there are plenty of risks affecting children, and in order to explain why society focuses its interests and emotions on *particular* issues it is necessary to look at *specific* aspects involved in these high-profile issues. In the case of paedophilia the combination of crime and sexuality is a very potent one in terms of invoking public interest and indignation; these effects are multiplied by the involvement of children and the discourse of innocence, which constructs sexual crimes against children as unnatural atrocities. Hence, the social hierarchy of concern and interest has to be explained through issue-specific factors, but their meanings and power seem to remain deeply connected to childhood and morality.

Note

1. In all quotations words typeset in italic indicate emphasis added by the author to highlight certain discourses, while underlined type represents original emphasis.

References

Ariès, P. (1962) *Centuries of Childhood*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Benedict, H. (1992) *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bloor, M., J. Frankland, M. Thomas and K. Robson (2001) *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Christensen, P.H. (2000) 'Childhood and the Cultural Construction of Vulnerable Bodies', in A. Prout (ed.) *The Body, Childhood and Society*, pp. 38–59. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Cobley, C. (2000) *Sex Offenders: Law, Policy and Practice*. Bristol: Jordans.

Crompton, R. (1998) *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Davis, J.E. (2005) *Accounts of Innocence: Sexual Abuse, Trauma, and the Self*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Greer, C. (2003) *Sex Crime and the Media: Sex Offending and the Press in a Divided Society*. Cullompton: Willan.

Hobbs, S. and J. McKechnie (1997) *Child Employment in Britain: A Social and Psychological Perspective*. Edinburgh: The Stationery Office.
Holloway, S. and G. Valentine (2003) *Cyberkids: Children in the Information Age*. London: Routledge.
Jackson, S. (1982) *Childhood and Sexuality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Jackson, S. and S. Scott (1999) 'Risk Anxiety and the Social Construction of Childhood', in D. Lupton (ed.) *Risk and Sociocultural Theory: New Directions and Perspectives*, pp. 86–107. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
James, A., C. Jenks and A. Prout (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Jenks, C. (1996) *Childhood*. London: Sage.
Kincaid, J.R. (1998) *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. London: Duke University Press.
Kitzinger, J. (1994) 'The Methodology of Focus Groups: The Importance of Interaction Between Research Participants', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16(1): 103–21.
Kitzinger, J. (1997) 'Who Are You Kidding? Children, Power and the Struggle Against Sexual Abuse', in A. James and A. Prout (eds) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, pp. 165–189. London: Falmer Press.
Lansdown, G. (1994) 'Children's Rights', in B. Mayall (ed.) *Children's Childhoods: Observed and Experienced*, pp. 33–44. London: Falmer Press.
Lavalette, M (2005) ' "In Defence of Childhood": Against the Neo-Liberal Assault on Social Life', in J. Qvortrup (ed.) *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, pp. 147–66. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Lawler, S. (2000) *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects*. London: Routledge.
MORI (2000) 'Naming and Shaming', opinion poll commissioned by *The News of the World*, 20 August, London.
MORI (2001) 'Crimes against Children', opinion poll commissioned by *The News of the World*, 16 December, London.
MORI (2002) 'The Repercussions of Soham Murders', opinion poll commissioned by the NSPCC, 19 September, London.
Morrison, B. (1997) *As If*. London: Granta.
Mort, F. (1996) *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain*. London: Routledge.
Oakley, A. (1972) *Sex, Gender and Society*. London: Maurice Temple Smith.
Qvortrup, J. (2005) 'Varieties of Childhood', in J. Qvortrup (ed.) *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, pp. 1–20. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Renold, E. (2005) *Girls, Boys and Junior Sexualities: Exploring Children's Gender and Sexual Relations in the Primary School*. London: Routledge Falmer.
Thompson, K. (1998) *Moral Panics*. London: Routledge.
Travis, A. (2003) 'Blunkett to Bypass Judges on Life Sentences', *The Guardian* 8 May: 6.
Tunstall, J. (1996) *Newspaper Power: The New National Press in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon.
Valentine, G. (1996) 'Angels and Devils: Moral Landscapes of Childhood', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14: 581–99.
Zelizer, V. (1985) *Pricing the Priceless Child*. New York: Basic Books.