

# **Performing childhood:**

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# **Media, childhood and identity**

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# Abstract

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This thesis explores the potential explanatory value of viewing the 'child' as a foundational identity category. In doing so, the thesis attempts to move beyond social constructionist accounts of childhood by adapting Judith Butler's theory of performativity to the study of childhood.

The research emerges out of my involvement in the 'Harm' research, a collaborative project between the University of Western Sydney and the then Australian Broadcasting Authority. The thesis 're-uses' or 're-analyses' materials collected as part of the Harm research. Although the identity was not the topic of the Harm research, by foregrounding the research participants' identities as 'children', the Harm research provided the opportunity to explore how the identity 'child' was achieved in the interactional context of the focus group discussions.

The thesis has a dual focus. First, it lays the groundwork for the development of a performative theory of childhood, using Butler's work on identity, and exploring parallels between the development of the feminist distinction between sex and gender and social constructionist accounts of childhood. Second, the thesis uses these theoretical insights and the tools of critical discourse analysis to conduct an empirical investigation of how a group of young people perform their identities in the context of focus group discussions on media harm.

The thesis, then, is offered as a site for critical conversations about the 'child'; media

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discourses and practices; and identity with the hope that it can make a contribution to the theorisation of 'childhood' and to cultural studies inspired 'audience' research on children. Additionally, the empirical research which forms the bulk of the thesis is offered as a concrete demonstration of the explanatory power of conceiving childhood as performative.

## Statement

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This work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Ethics approval was sought and gained for this project from the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Research). Ethics protocol number: HE26MAR2004-D02807.

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Dianne Dickenson



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# Introduction

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‘What other foundational categories of identity ... can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable?’ (Butler 1990/2006: xxxi)

This thesis explores the potential explanatory value of viewing the 'child' as a foundational identity category; a direction suggested by the challenge inherent in the question posed by Judith Butler in her preface to *Gender Trouble* (1990/2006). In doing so, the thesis attempts to move beyond social constructionist accounts of childhood by adapting Butler's theory of performativity to the study of childhood.

The thesis has a dual focus. First, it attempts to lay the groundwork for the development of a performative theory of childhood, using Butler's work on identity. Second, the thesis uses these theoretical insights in an empirical investigation of how a group of young people perform their identities in the context of focus group discussions on media harm. In doing so, my hope is that the thesis will make a contribution to the theorisation of 'childhood' and, additionally, demonstrate in a practical way the explanatory power of conceiving childhood in these terms.

Every piece of research emerges out of a particular context or contexts. This thesis has emerged out of multiple contexts or 'moments'; each of which has left its mark on this project. The first and most direct of these was my involvement as a research assistant in the Harm research, a collaborative project between the then Australian Broadcasting Authority and the University of Western Sydney, examining children's understanding of

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media Harm. It was while involved in this research that the idea occurred to me that the participants' discussions of media harm potentially provided a rich source of material for another project—one with different objectives and an alternate research focus. Although identity was not the topic of the Harm focus group discussions, in attempting to learn about children's views of media harm and children's media experiences, the Harm research foregrounded the participants' identities as 'children'. The Harm focus group interactions, then, provided me an opportunity to explore how the identity 'child' was constructed through discursive practice in discussions about media harm and how the participants performed their identities in a context in which they were explicitly positioned as children.

The thesis also developed against the backdrop of renewed interest across many disciplines in the concept of identity. This growth in interest in identity has, according to Hall (1991), coincided with disturbances to 'traditional' notions of identity brought about by five great decenterings of modern thought. Here Hall cites the contributions of Marx, Freud and Saussure; the relativisation of the Western episteme; and the displacement of the masculine gaze. Poststructuralist thinking on identity, such as the work of Stuart Hall (especially Hall 1991; 1996a) and Judith Butler (especially Butler 1990/2006; 1993), has had a major influence on the conceptualisation and the direction of this thesis.

My research is also situated in the context of the rise to prominence of social constructionist accounts of childhood. Since the French historian Philippe Ariès first published his important work *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960, childhood has been increasingly viewed, at least within academic circles, as 'socially constructed' rather than as a 'natural' phenomenon. The significance of this shift has lead Prout to declare social

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constructionist conceptions of childhood now to be 'something of an orthodoxy' (Prout 2000b: 3). The disciplinary rise to power of social constructionist accounts of childhood invites critique. In my research, this critical reflection occurred somewhat fortuitously as a consequence of my use of Butler's early work on identity and performativity (Butler 1990/2006; 1993); work where she outlines her critique of feminist social constructionist formulations of the sex/gender distinction. Butler's criticisms lead me to reflect on whether the theoretical basis of her critique could be extended to social constructionist accounts of childhood and, finally, to consider the possibilities for and the explanatory value of a 'performative theory of childhood'. In Chapter 2, I outline what I consider to be the key features of such a conceptualisation of childhood.

Media studies, specifically cultural studies inspired audience research on children, as well as 'real world' concerns expressed about children's engagement with the media, provide another important context to this study. The Harm focus group discussions, in common with much media research on children, are framed to a significant extent by concerns about the potentially harmful effects of the media on children. Underlying these concerns are different ideological constructions of the child. These contradictions and tensions are played out in the focus group discussions.

My thesis shares many theoretical and methodological similarities with cultural studies inspired audience research, particularly that of David Buckingham and his colleagues (e.g. Buckingham 1993a; b; Buckingham 1993c; Buckingham & Bragg 2004; Davies, Buckingham & Kelley 2000; Kelley, Buckingham & Davies 1999), including its focus on identity, emphasis on media 'practices' rather than 'representation', conceptualisation of talk as social practice and the rejection of behaviourist assumptions about the powerful

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influence of the media. It is in relation to these characteristics this project's focus on the 'child' as an *identity* and 'identity' as *performance* can be situated.

Finally, my research can also be situated in the context of the ongoing challenges to qualitative research (and empirical research, more generally) that have been mounted, particularly from within poststructuralism. Like other empirical research studies, this project has struggled with and been shaped by these insights and challenges. As a consequence, I offer my research as a 'reading' or interpretation of the focus group discussions rather than as evidence of the reality or truth of the child.

As the discussion above suggests, this project has made use of multiple modes of analysis or 'critical reading practices' (Threadgold 2003: 31). It has also made strategic use of the tools of critical discourse analysis to provide a detailed analysis of the processes through which 'the child' is achieved in the interactional context of the focus group discussions. Both Threadgold (2003: 31) and Poynton and Lee (2000: 6) argue the usefulness of critical discourse analysis for empirical social research employing fairly abstract poststructuralist concepts.

Bailey's (2005: 3) account of his own research on media and identity, which similarly attempts to offer both theoretical and empirical insights, describes an iterative process in which his theoretical work and empirical research 'loop back' and inform each other. This was certainly the case in my own research where, in attempting to mobilise Butler's and others' work to analyse the focus group interactions, the practices and outcomes of the analysis 'looped back' to inform the ongoing development of my understanding of how Butler's work might apply to childhood, often in unexpected and unpredictable ways.

These insights then provided new alternatives for analysing the focus group materials. The thesis, then, is a result of the often unexpected and unpredictable outcomes of this iterative process.

### **An overview of the thesis**

The thesis is broadly organised into three parts. The first three chapters provide the background or multiple contexts out of which this thesis developed. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to some of the key issues around identity that inform the discursive approach to childhood identity developed in the thesis, focusing in particular on the work of Judith Butler (1990/2006; 1993) and Stuart Hall (1996a).

Chapter 2 draws parallels between the development of feminist research on gender and social constructionist accounts of childhood. It lays the groundwork for a performative theory of childhood, adapting Butler's theory of performativity to the study of childhood and attempting to sketch in key elements of a performative theory of childhood.

Chapter 3 situates the thesis in the context of media research on children and identity, specifically in relation to the shift from research which focuses exclusively on the study of the impact of media *representations* on children's identities to more recent interest in children's media-related *practices* and children's identities.

Chapter 4 discusses the research process itself, beginning by contextualising the research with a short description of the 'Harm' project out of which this study emerges, and followed by a discussion of the research strategies and conceptual frameworks which have

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informed the research. The chapter then briefly discusses what is conventionally referred to as 'data collection' and 'organisation' before examining the various strategies I have used for analysing the research materials, including a discussion of the 'tools' of critical discourse analysis. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the approach I have taken to writing up the research, including the shift between first and third person modes of address.

The next three chapters are the analysis chapters and represent the substance or core of the thesis and its central arguments. The chapters are fairly lengthy because of the inclusion of extended examples from the focus group discussions interwoven with analysis and interpretation.

Chapter 5 lays the groundwork for the exploration of the participants' 'performance of childhood' by analysing how 'the child' is constructed through the research design of the original Harm project and subsequently by the moderators' practices within the focus group discussions themselves. In so doing, the chapter examines the normative presuppositions about childhood that inform both the research aims of the Harm project and the moderators' practices within the focus group discussions and which together position the participants in relation to the collective stage of life identities, 'adult' and 'child'. It is in relation to this interpellating address that the participants' deployment of the identity categories 'child' and 'adult' and their performance of self are examined in the later chapters.

The chapter argues that the identity 'child', as it is constructed through the research design of the Harm project, functions to negotiate a number of competing discourses about media

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harm; to navigate the difficult terrain between the emancipatory and protectionist ideals of both contemporary Australian broadcasting legislation and media research traditions and to fulfil the research aims of the Harm project; that is, to uncover the differences between adult and child views of harm while ‘giving children a voice’ in the debates about media harm.

Chapter 6 builds on the analysis of the previous chapter by shifting the focus from the aims of the Harm research and the moderators’ practices within the focus groups to examine the activities of the research participants themselves. The chapter examines how the participants, having been positioned by the research as ‘children’ and asked to speak from their positions as ‘children’, mobilise cultural knowledge about children and childhood in their discussions; particularly, given the context of the discussions, knowledge derived from media discourses.

The chapter highlights the high degree of uncertainty about the situational meaning of ‘children’ (or ‘kids’), especially in relation to the participants themselves and that, rather than identifying as children, the participants more often attempted to *distance* themselves from the identity category, child. The chapter demonstrates the participants’ familiarity with popular discourses about media effects, arguing that the participants’ ability to apprehend the discursive category, ‘child’, is conditioned by the normative ‘framing’ of the research.

Chapter 7 explores the participants’ performance of self through a closer examination of the distancing strategies employed by the participants. Drawing on Butler’s conceptualisation of intersubjective recognition, this chapter interprets the focus group



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discussions as sites where the participants engage in a ‘struggle for recognition’. In an extension of the analysis of the previous two chapters, the chapter demonstrates that the participants do not ‘recognise’ themselves in the discursive categories which frame the research. Rather, interpellated as children in the context of discussions framed by normative discourses which construct the identity ‘child’ as vulnerable, naïve and deficient, the participants’ distancing strategies can be viewed as both a repudiation of childhood and part of the participants’ struggle for affirmation of their existence as ‘self-conscious and autonomous’ beings (Lloyd 2007: 16).

The chapter concludes, somewhat provocatively, with the suggestion that childhood identifications may be even more unstable and the norms of childhood even less ‘realisable’ than those that characterise gender. The chapter suggests that such instability may be the result of childhood identity being at the intersection of contradictory discourses (protectionist and emancipatory discourses, developmental discourses) and the child being constructed as both a ‘being’ and a ‘becoming’; that is, both as a social subject and as a ‘potential subject’. As such, the shifting and situational meaning of child in the discussions coupled with the participants’ distancing of themselves from childhood may be viewed as attempts by the participants to affirm their existence as subjects by repudiating the identity ‘child’ and assuming more ‘adult’ identity positions.

The final chapter offers a brief conclusion to the thesis and suggests avenues for further research.

# Chapter 1

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## Theories of identity/subjectivity

### Introduction

This is the first of three chapters which together provide an account of the scholarly background or multiple disciplinary contexts for the development of this thesis. The aim of this first chapter is to introduce some of the key issues around identity that will inform the discursive approach to ‘the child’ as identity developed in the thesis.

The chapter begins broadly and ends with a focus on the work of Judith Butler. The work of Butler (especially Butler 1990/2006; Butler 1993, but also in some of her later work on intersubjective recognition; e.g. Butler 2004; 2005; 2009) and Stuart Hall (especially Hall 1991; 1996a) is of importance for the thesis. Butler, in particular, especially in her early works, provides one of the most extensive, non-psychological theorisations of identity from a socio-cultural or discursive perspective. These two theorists, whose work on identity can broadly be described as emerging out of 1980s poststructuralist thinking, also retain through their involvement with identity politics and borrowings from Marxism—including the work of Althusser and the neo-Marxists, Laclau and Mouffe—an engagement with the social and political aspects of identity. This engagement with relations of power is significant for this thesis given that media research on children can be situated in relation to the centrality of concerns about the child in both existing media regulation and the campaigns by lobby groups for further regulation and control of the

media.

Butler's work in particular will be drawn on in Chapter 2 in the development of a performative theory of childhood. The three analysis chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) make extensive use of Butler's theorisation of identity in their reading of the Harm research to explore how the identity 'child' functions within the context of the Harm focus group interactions.

In this discussion of identity I cannot hope to traverse all of the terrain occupied by the concept of identity which has a lengthy history that can be traced back to the pre-Socratics (Gilroy 1996) as well as a presence in a wide range of academic and popular discourses. Instead I will take as my starting point what Hall (1991) refers to as the 'end' of the 'old logics of identity'.

According to Hall (1991), the old logics of identity are associated with the notion of the true inner self and have their bases in both philosophical and psychological discourse. In philosophy, the old logic of identity takes the form of the Cartesian subject as origin of being and ground of action, while in psychology it is associated with the view of the self as inner, continuous, self-sufficient, developmental and unfolding (Hall 1991). As Hall (1991: 43) says: 'Much of our discourse of the inside and the outside, of the self and other, of the individual and society, of the subject and the object, are grounded in that particular logic of identity.' As outlined in Chapter 3, research on the effects of the media on children's identities is, often implicitly grounded in this view of identity. Research has focused on children's *developing identities* underpinned by theories of identity formation derived from developmental psychology; in particular, the influence of Erikson's theory of

personality development (Erikson 1959; 1968) and his axiom that the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood is dependent on the formation of a coherent sense of identity. Such views are consistent with a view of childhood as a process of 'becoming' and the child as 'incomplete' (see Chapter 2 for further discussion), in which the passage from childhood to adulthood is constructed as a process whereby the 'natural' child progressively develops his or her 'personhood' or 'identity' (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992).

Hall (1991) argues that the end of the old logics of identity came about because of five great decenterings of modern thought that disturbed the continuity of the subject and the stability of identity. Hall cites the contributions of Marx, Freud and Saussure; the relativisation of the Western episteme by the rise to prominence of other cultures; and the displacement of the masculine gaze. Thus, according to Hall, Marx's positioning of the individual or collective subject always within historical practices challenged the belief that the individual could ever have been the origin or author of those practices. Freud's confrontation of the self with 'the great continent of the unconscious' transformed the self into a 'fragile thing'. While Saussurian linguistics' positioning of the speaking subject in and by discourse offered yet a further challenge to the originary, continuous subject. Hall identifies one further disturbance to the logic of identity, the transformation and erosion of collective social identities brought about through the instability and decline of the nation-state. So that, Hall concludes, the old collective identities—gender, class, race, nation and the West—no longer provide the codes of identity they did in the past (Hall 1991). Instead, we are now as aware of the inner contradictions, fragmentations and differences inherent in these collective identities as we are of their homogeneity and unity (Hall 1991).

These ‘disturbances’ to traditional notions of identity have not caused the demise of the concept of identity, but neither has a new concept emerged in its place. Instead there has been a ‘discursive explosion’ around identity (Grodin & Lindlof 1996; Hall 1996a; Jenkins 1996). Identity has become an important concept across many academic disciplines despite, or perhaps as result of, the perceived instability of the concept and its ongoing critique. As Jenkins (1996: 7) observes, everyone it seems has something to say about identity.

This chapter will focus primarily on socio-cultural and discursive approaches to identity which take as their starting point the deconstructive critiques of identity outlined by Hall (1991; 1996a). As a way of exploring the cluster of issues associated with the concept of identity, I will draw on Gilroy’s (1996: 38) suggestion that the concept of identity ‘tangles together three overlapping but basically different concerns’ centred around questions of the self (subjectivity), identification (sameness) and agency (solidarity). The chapter is divided into three sections, each of which discusses one of these key concerns: ‘The self—identity as subjectivity’; ‘Identification—identity as sameness’; and ‘Agency—identity and solidarity’.

### **The self—identity as subjectivity**

The first set of issues that underpins scholarly work on identity clusters around questions of the self, self-identity and individual subjectivity (Elliott 2001; Gilroy 1996). Extensive use of the concept of identity has been made, for example, from within feminism and critical studies of race and ethnicity to ‘explore how “subjects” bearing gender and racial

characteristic are constituted in social processes that are amenable to historical explanation and political struggle' (Gilroy 1996: 39). Key debates centre on the social construction of the self and lead to questions of agency and to distinctions between social and individual identity(ies) which, in turn, become entangled with issues of identification. All have implications for any attempt to explore childhood/child identity.

### **The socially constructed 'self'**

Socio-cultural and discursive approaches to identity generally deal with the 'self' via notions of the subject and subjectivity, given the sense of social and cultural involvement implicit in these concepts:

The subject is always linked to something outside of it ... One is always subject *to* or *of* something ... The word subject ... proposes that the self is not a separate and isolated entity, but one that operates at the intersection of general truths and shared principles. (Mansfield 2000: 3)

Mansfield (2000), however, distinguishes between what he calls 'subjective' and 'anti-subjective' theories of the subject. The first he links to psychoanalytic theories such as those of Freud and Lacan and the second to the more discursive approaches associated with the work of Foucault and Althusser. Both the subjective and anti-subjective theories reject the view of the free, autonomous subject and also see the subject as 'constructed'; that is, 'made within the world, not born into it already formed' (Mansfield 2000: 11). But, whereas the psychoanalytic approaches attempt to 'explain the truth of the subject' (Mansfield 2000: 9), the anti-subjective approaches reject the notion that subjectivity is an

existing 'thing', instead arguing that the subject only comes into existence through the complex interplay of power and knowledge.

The terrain already contested by psychoanalytic and discursive, or subjective and anti-subjective theories, is further complicated by the degree of agency attributed to the subject in the constitution of identity through, for example, such activities as role-play, choice, risk-taking and consumption (Elliott 2001). Some theorisations of the process come close to readmitting the originary subject of the old logics of identity. Gergen (1991: 228) appears to suggest a *self*-determining subject when he says that 'persons may inscribe, erase, and rewrite their identities'. Douglas Kellner (1992: 142) describes how in modernity persons can choose to creatively make and remake their identities 'as fashion and life-possibilities change and expand', while Giddens (1991; 1993) rejects the notion of the self as a 'passive entity'. Instead he describes the self as a 'reflexive project' in which individuals 'forge' their self-identities through, among other things, 'lifestyle choices'. Self-identity, for Giddens, is not a set of individual traits, or behaviours. It is a self-defining process based on a person's own reflexive understanding of his or her self in terms of individual biography. The ability to put together and sustain a continuous narrative of self is, according to Giddens (1991), indicative of a fairly stable sense of self-identity. Individual choice is also explicitly mentioned by Gauntlett (2002) in his discussion of identity and more implicitly in opening up of the concept of identity to include aspects of someone's chosen appearance such as whether someone is 'hairy, shaven or bald, or wearing spectacles, unusual clothes or piercings' (ibid: 14).

Butler (1993: 124) in her work on gender, sex and performativity rejects the notion of a 'substantial or self-determining subject'. This is clearly stated in an amusing rejoinder to

questions raised by her notion of gender performativity in her earlier work (Butler 1990/2006):

If I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender. Certainly, such a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject—humanist—at the center of a project whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite opposed to such a notion. (Butler 1993: x)

For Butler (1990/2006; 1993) identity is not *who you are*, some kind of ‘authentic’ or ‘core’ self or even who you *think* you are in Giddens’s terms, and neither is it a set of attributes of a person. Instead, Butler sees identity, following Foucault, as an *effect* of discursive practices. Her understanding is elaborated in her description of gender as a ‘doing’, a practice, as *performative*. According to Butler, ‘the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced’ (Butler 1990/2006: 34) through the process of iterability, the ‘regularized and constrained repetition of norms’ (1993: 95). In her formulation, the repetition is not performed *by* a subject; that is, the subject does not ‘take on’, ‘assume’ or ‘choose’ a sex or gender in the way someone might choose to don ‘unusual clothes’ or make lifestyle ‘choices’. This is because, for Butler, there is no subject prior to its constructions. Instead, it is this repetition of norms that ‘enables’ the subject. As Butler (1990/2006: 202) puts it: ‘To enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the ‘I’ that might enter is always already inside’.



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The subject, then, does not take on or assume a sex or gender identity but rather is formed by virtue of having gone through the process of assuming such an identity. Butler links this process to the concept of identification and ‘the discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications’ (1993: 3). This will be taken up in more detail in the discussion of identification.

Hall (1996a) in his discussion of identity also appears to ascribe very little activity to the subject in constituting identity, describing identities as ‘sites’, ‘positions’ or ‘meeting points’ constructed within discourse. In reference to his use of identity, he says:

I use ‘identity’ to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us ... They are the result of the successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of the discourse. (Hall 1996a: 5)

Tensions, however, are acknowledged by both Hall and Butler in their attempts to theorise identity. Both authors regard questions of agency and politics as central to any formulation of identity, so that, while rejecting a self-determining subject, both authors want to retain a notion of agency and to avoid the charge of social or discursive determinism. In relation to gender, Butler asks:

But if there is no subject who decides on its gender, and if, on the contrary, gender is part of

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what decides the subject, how might one formulate a project that preserves gender practices as sites of critical agency? If gender is not an artifice to be taken on or taken off at will and, hence, not an effect of choice, how are we to understand the constitutive and compelling status of gender norms without falling into the trap of determinism? (1993: x)

Butler's answers to the questions she poses are quite complex and will be dealt with in more detail in the discussion of agency. For the moment, suffice it to say that while dismissing the 'willful instrumental' subject, Butler also rejects the idea that the subject is determined, saying that to be 'constituted' in discourse is not to be 'determined' by it. In other words, to 'claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes or exhaustively composes' (Butler 1993: 10). The possibility of agency is located by Butler in the process of reiteration—the repetition of norms which can never be followed in 'strict obedience' (Vasterling 1999). It is through performativity that the subject is involved in his/her 'self-production':

There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the "we" cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. (Butler 1993: 124)

In later work (e.g. Butler 2004), Butler incorporates an account of the intersubjective constitution of the subject, through a re-working of the concept of recognition. Such a formulation is argued by some of her critics (e.g. by Magnus 2006) to provide a more satisfactory and empowering notion of agency.

Hall's (1996a: 6) position is to argue that: 'the effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject *invests* in the position' (emphasis added), so that suturing must be thought of as '*articulation*, rather than a one-sided process' (ibid). Hall's rejection of identity as a 'one-sided process' suggests a degree of involvement ('investment') by the subject in identity construction, which Hall discusses via the notion of identification (discussed below). The concept of articulation is used by Hall to avoid the charge of determinism while simultaneously refusing a subject-centered notion of agency (Braun & Disch 2002), in much the same way that Butler employs the concept of performativity.

Bannerji (2002) takes Hall's and Butler's rejection of a 'one-sided process' of identity one step further. In her explanation of the 'double meaning' of the title to her book, *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism*, Bannerji formulates a position in which the subject is simultaneously a *self*-constituting political agent and a cultural/ideological construction:

The notion of inventing subjects, read in a nuanced way, contains a double meaning. It speaks to social subjectivity as being both inventing and invented. Through this formulation social subjects can be considered as cultural and ideological subjects of others' invention while pointing to the possibility of inventing themselves as subjects within a given socio-historical context. (Bannerji 2002: 3)

The tension between these different conceptualisations of identity can be seen in the approaches to media research on identity—particularly in relation to young people's identity 'formation'—explored in Chapter 3, which similarly make the constitution of

identity more or less active, more or less intentional.

### **Individual and social identity(ies)**

Crossing both the sociological and psychological/psychoanalytical domains, a number of authors (e.g. Friedman 1994; Giddens 1991; Goffman 1959; Jewkes 2002; Taylor 1994) maintain a distinction between individual identity and social identity/ies, sometimes expressed as a difference between ‘self’ and ‘identity’ or between ‘personal’ and ‘collective’ identities. In many formulations the person/self/individual, is simply the sum of their socio-cultural identity(ies) and individual-personal identity. Jewkes (2002: 1), for example, says that ‘personhood is composed of both a personal identity, informed by largely unconscious process’ which she terms ‘self’ and a social identity ‘attuned to the value judgements of others’ which she terms ‘identity’. Jewkes (2002) compares this to the concepts of ‘backstage’ and ‘frontstage’ settings in the work of Goffman (1959) and Giddens (1984). However, as Jenkins (1996) observes, the relationship between the two dimensions of identity remains in much work on identity relatively untheorised, founded on unproblematic distinctions between individual/society, public/private and the internal (mind)/external (body).

Many formulations, which distinguish individual-personal identity from social-cultural identity, also assume that one of these aspects of identity is more important or more ‘real’ than the other and, ‘even if only in the last instance’, to be determinant of the lesser (Jenkins 1996: 15). This can be seen in Jewke’s formulation which could be seen as echoing the ‘inside-outside’ discourse of the old logics of identity in its description of personal identity as a fairly constant/stable ‘emotional core’, as somehow more ‘authentic’—a place where one can ‘be oneself’:

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The self, then, might best be conceptualised as the emotional ‘core’ which people carry with them from context to context. It represents a place of retreat: when the public work of identity management becomes too arduous it is important to have a private place where the public façade can be put aside and one can ‘be oneself’. (Jewkes 2002: 41-42)

Jenkins’s (1996) position is that individual and collective identities are routinely related to, and entangled with each other and that all identities are in some sense social:

The *individually unique* and the *collectively shared* can be understood as similar (if not exactly the same) in important respects; that each is routinely related to—or, better perhaps, entangled with—the other; that the processes by which they are produced, reproduced and changed are analogous; and that *both* are intrinsically social ... Perhaps, the most significant difference between individual and collective identities is that the former emphasises difference, the latter similarity. (Jenkins 1996: 19-20)

Jenkins asserts that he maintains only an analytical/pragmatic distinction in his work between the collective and individual dimensions of identity which, in recognition of the social basis of all identity, he refers to as ‘social identity’. Jenkins argues for a model of identity in which identity is unitary and the constitution of identity is based on the internal-external dialectic of identification in which the process of selfhood is a dialectical synthesis of internal (self-definition) and external (collective) definitions (Jenkins 1996: 20-21). Selfhood—‘each individual’s reflexive sense of his or her own particular identity, constituted *vis à vis* others in terms of similarity and difference’ (Jenkins 1996: 29)—Jenkins describes as a primary social identity.

Unsurprisingly, given their constructivist positions neither Hall nor Butler draws a distinction between individual-personal identity and socio-cultural identity since neither sees identity as either an attribute or a ‘thing’. Both reject the idea of the self as origin—a ‘stable core, the bit of the self which remains always-already “the same”, identical to itself across time’ (Hall 1996a: 3). Both reject the notion that collective identities or identity categories are universal, stable or originary. Butler (1990/2006: xxxi) says instead that collective identities (like gender) are the ‘*effects* of institutions, practices and discourses’ rather than origin or cause while Hall (Hall 1996a: 4) rejects the possibility that collective identities ‘can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging “oneness” or cultural belongingness’. For these reasons, Hall (1987: 45) concludes that ‘the self is always in a sense a fiction just as the kinds of ‘closures’ which are required to create identification—nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities etc.—are arbitrary closures; and the forms of political movements, or parties, or classes, those too, are temporary, partial, arbitrary.’ The concept of identification will be dealt with in more detail below.

While accepting Jenkins’s assertion that all identity is social, the thesis will follow Hall and Butler, in refusing the distinction between social and individual identities, acknowledging the constructedness of identity and conceiving of identity as an effect rather than a cause or origin. For this reason, the remainder of this chapter will focus primarily on the work of Butler and to a lesser extent Hall. Additionally, given that the primary focus of the thesis is on the collective social identity ‘child’ rather than on individual subjectivity, psychological approaches to studying the ‘self’ or ‘individual identity’ will not be a focus of interest in this thesis. Chapter 2 will adapt the work of Hall and Butler in its attempt to formulate a performative theory of childhood.

## Identification—identity as ‘sameness’

The second set of concerns around identity is described by Gilroy (1996: 39-40) as operating at the point where a focus on individual subjectivity shifts to an ‘engagement with the dynamics of identification’; that is, to a consideration of: ‘how one subject or agent may come to see itself in others, to be itself through its mediated relationships with others and to see others in itself’. This then, in turn, leads to a consideration of ‘otherness’ and difference. ‘Identity as sameness’ differs from ‘identity as subjectivity’ because it shifts from ‘dealing with the formation and location of subjects and their historical individuality into thinking about collective or communal identities: nations, genders, classes, generational, ‘racial’ and ethnic groups’ (Gilroy 1996: 40). Indeed much work on identity grew out of ‘identity politics’ and identity has been an important signifier for political movements organised around socio-cultural or collective identity categories (Gilroy 1996; Hall 1996a).

Kavka (2001), Gilroy (1996) and Hall (1991; 1996a) link the increased interest in identification in the 1990s with the prominence of anti-essentialist critiques of identity which began to undermine the stability and coherence of old collective identities. Kavka (2001: xv) describes the move in feminism from identity to identification as a shift in focus from what people ‘were’ to ‘how they imagined themselves to be’ and thus how they participated in the constitution of their subjectivities. She continues, saying that within feminism the ‘fracturing’ of the term ‘women’ drew attention to the complex of identifications—based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and so on—that had been ‘masked by a focus on gender’.

Scholars whose work engages with concepts of identification have drawn on its

psychological, psychoanalytical and discursive meanings in their attempts to understand how subjects (or agents) are ‘constituted’, ‘produced’, ‘formed’ or ‘enabled’. Key debates arise from concerns about the compatibility of these theories with the various forms of identity politics, particularly in relation to the degree of agency attributed to the subject in the process of identification. Contrast, for example, Appiah’s (1996: 69) explanation of identification as ‘the process through which an individual intentionally shapes her projects ... by reference to available labels, available identities’ with the positions of Hall and Butler outlined below.

Many see the dissolution of the subject and with it concepts of intentionality, self-reflexivity and autonomy as incompatible with the emancipatory aims of many types of identity politics (in relation to feminist critiques see discussions in Benhabib, Butler, Cornell & Fraser 1995). Identity politics, then, which has appeared to rely upon fixed or stable collective identities, has been faced with a central paradox:

That of wishing to assert or claim a distinctive identity, in the sense of taking individual selfhood and collective identity seriously, while also wanting to dismantle and critique the very notions of self, agency and identity. (Elliott 2001: 158)

The chapter will now discuss both Hall’s and Butler’s use of the concept of identification before moving to a fuller consideration of the third aspect of identity—agency.

### **Identification in the work of Hall and Butler**

For researchers working within a poststructuralist theoretical framework the concept of identification has provided a way of rearticulating the relationship between the subject and



discursive practices (Hall 1996a: 2), particularly in relation to questions of agency and politics. This can be seen in Hall's description of identification as a process of articulation—the process by which the 'hailed' subject *invests* in a subject-position, and in Butler's consideration of the relationship between identification and hegemony (Butler 2000). In these approaches, the concept of identification is utilised to complement Foucault's account of 'discursive and disciplinary regulation' with an account of the mechanisms by which interpellations may be produced, negotiated or resisted (Hall 1996a) or, in Hall's words, to provide a theory of the 'psychic mechanisms' or 'interior processes' by which:

Individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the 'positions' to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and 'perform' these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in a constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves. (Hall 1996a: 14)

As Hall's formulation suggests, this is the point at which theories of discourse engage with psychoanalysis. In particular, Hall highlights the contribution of Butler (1990/2006; 1993) in bringing together insights from psychoanalysis and Foucaultian discourse theory in her formulation of the complex relationships between the subject, the body and identity. In this work, psychoanalytic accounts of the *unconscious* are drawn on to provide an explanation of the practices of 'self-production' without recourse to the intentionality that features in some academic and most 'common sense' understandings of identification as:

The recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or

group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. (Hall 1996a: 2)

In contrast to such common sense understandings, discursive approaches see identifications as constructions, as multiple, as never completed but always ‘in process’ and ‘incessantly reconstituted’ (Butler 1993: 105). They are not the imitative activities of conscious beings since identifications ‘are not, strictly speaking, performed by a subject’ (Butler 1993: 15). As has been mentioned in the discussion of the socially constructed self, Butler links the formation of the subject to the process of identification so that, rather than being performed by the subject, identifications ‘precede and enable the subject’ (Butler 1993: 15).

Butler (1993: 105) says identifications are ‘never achieved’ and Hall says, that there ‘is always “too much” or “too little” ... but never a proper fit’ (1996a: 3). This is because, for both Hall and Butler, identifications belong to the imaginary; they are ‘phantasmic efforts of alignment’ (Butler 1993: 105) or ‘a fantasy of incorporation’ (Hall 1996a: 3). For this reason, Butler can say that identification can never be said to have ‘taken place’:

Identification does not belong to the world of events. Identification is constantly figured as a desired event or accomplishment, but one that is never achieved: identification is the phantasmic staging of the event. (Butler 1993: 105)

For Butler, in relation to sex, the subject is formed through the process of assuming a sex. Such a process, requires identification with an idealised or fantasised set of norms ‘marked out in the symbolic domain’; what Butler calls the ‘normative phantasm of “sex”’ (1993:

3). But, such identifications are never fully, finally or deliberately made but are reiterative or citational practices subject to regulation, so that identification is always ‘the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses’ (Butler 1993: 126). In this process certain identifications are enabled and certain identifications foreclosed or disavowed. For this reason, Butler (1993: 3) says, the subject is constituted through a process of ‘exclusion and abjection’, which produces a ‘constitutive outside’ to the subject—the domain of the ‘unintelligible’, ‘the unspeakable, the unviable, the nonnarrativizable’ (Butler 1993: 188). Identification then is simultaneously and, almost paradoxically, a ‘repudiation’ or ‘disidentification’ with the abjected Other. Hall’s position is quite similar, saying that identification: ‘entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of ‘frontier-effects’. It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process (Hall 1996a: 3).

Butler further says that identification is a ‘temporary resolution of desire’ (Butler 1993: 99) that always takes place in relation to a law or prohibition that operates through threat of punishment, what Butler refers to as the ‘spectre of abjection’ (1993: 101). The subject then, given that identifications are never fully or finally made but rather are imaginary alignments that fail to fully conform to the norm, always lives under threat of joining the ranks of the abject or ‘unintelligible’. Thus, Butler concludes, to identify with a sex is also ‘to stand in some relation to an imaginary threat, imaginary and forceful, forceful precisely because it is imaginary’ (1993: 100).

One final point about identification: Butler says that given the constructed nature of identification it is always an unstable and ambivalent process, with a cost involved:

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Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. Thus 'being a man' and thus 'being a woman' are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely. (Butler 1993: 126)

It is these instabilities in identificatory practices—the 'unsettling' of the 'I'—that Butler sees as both essential to the operation of hegemony and as having the potential to permit 'a different sort of hegemonic formation to emerge' (Butler 2000: 150).

The concept of identification will be employed in the thesis to examine how the young people in this study are positioned in relation to the collective identity categories 'adult' and 'child' and how they resist such positioning. The thesis will also use the notion of identification to explore how young people 'fashion, stylize, produce and "perform"' (Hall 1996a: 14) these collective identities. It will also attempt to explore what the norms of adulthood and childhood are for these young people. Other aspects of Butler's formulation will also be explored in relation to the study, particularly the notions of ambivalence, intelligibility and the 'costs' of young people's identifications.

## **Agency—identity and solidarity**

This third aspect of identity ‘concerns how both connectedness and difference become bases on which social action can be produced’ (Gilroy 1996: 40). Key issues centre on the social constraints to agency and the possibilities for collective and individual social action.

While there has been renewed interest in questions of agency in feminist and social theory in recent years (Lovell 2003; Markham 2002a; McNay 2000), concerns about agency date back to the sociological structural functionalism of the 1950s (Lovell 2003) and have continued to be a feature of left debate at least since Althusser’s ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay (1971). It was in this essay that Althusser formulated his theory of the constitution of subjects and introduced the notion of ideological interpellation (see discussion in Hall 1996a; Hall 1996b) which was to become so influential for later discursive and poststructuralist work on identity and subjectivity. Concerns about agency have followed Foucault’s formulation of the subject as constituted in and through discourse with many arguing that his early formulation of the subject as a ‘docile body’ would preclude the possibility of agency (see for example, Butler 1997c; Hall 1996a; Markham 2002a; McNay 1999; 2000). On the other hand, Foucault’s formulation of the ‘reflexive subject’ in his later work is criticised for coming close to reintroducing the autonomous subject, leading McNay (1999: 96), for example, to characterise Foucault’s work as embodying ‘an unresolved vacillation between determinism, on the one hand, and voluntarism, on the other.’ Debates about agency have continued to plague discursive and poststructuralist accounts of the subject causing some to exclaim that ‘the sheer weight of literature devoted to reconciling agency to poststructuralist theory suggests that the two cannot be compatible without a significant softening of the poststructuralist line’ (Markham 2002b: 8).

Debates about agency are particularly strong within feminism and other political movements given their commitment to socio-cultural and political change. On these grounds, Judith Butler's work has been heavily critiqued from feminist, Marxist and broad left perspectives.

The thesis will now consider Judith Butler's account of agency in her work, some of the criticisms of her work, her responses, and the implications of these criticisms for the thesis.

### **Butler and the problem of agency**

As stated earlier, Butler rejects the notion of a 'substantial, self-determining subject' so that, in Butler's work, the 'subject' is not interchangeable with the 'person' or the 'individual'. Rather, an individual becomes a subject by being 'subjected' to power—the rules and laws that precede the subject. Further, in Butler's account, the subject does not 'take on' or choose an identity because there is no subject prior to its constitution and, identity itself, is an effect of discursive practices rather than the stable 'locus of agency from which various acts follow' (Butler 1990/2006: 140). Therefore, Butler asserts, gender is 'not a stable or fixed point of agency, but rather is an identity category created and constituted through "a stylized repetition of acts"' (Webster 2000: 4). Following from this, agency, then, should not be understood as 'a controlling or original authorship' (Butler 1993: 219), is not located in the individual and cannot depend on the existence of a pre-discursive 'I'—a subject that exists, in some sense, outside of discourse. Instead, Butler says, agency is initiated and sustained, almost paradoxically, though the process of subjection itself. For this reason, subjection carries a double meaning: that of being 'subordinated by power' and of 'becoming a subject' (Butler 1997c: 2)—the 'one who is presumed to be the presupposition of agency' (Butler interview, Meijer & Prins 1998:

285). The social constitution of the subject is not then 'opposed' to agency but is 'the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible' or possible (Butler 1990/2006: 201):

The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power. (Butler 1993: 15)

The possibilities for agency, according to Butler, are opened up in the compulsory appropriation of and identification with the regulatory norms which enable the subject, so that agency, for Butler, is a rearticulatory or reiteratory practice which is implicated in power. The insistent citing of norms, a process which paradoxically constitutes the very identity such norms are said to express, is also always a reworking or resignification of those norms since 'there can be no complete or self-identical articulation of a given social identity' (Butler 1993: 218). Social norms are then, both produced and destabilised, interpreted and exposed in the course of this reiteration. The gaps in the citational process that come about through this 'double movement' of repetition and reworking 'mark the multiple sites on/in which the contestation of regulatory norms occurs' (Hollywood 2002: 93). Butler outlines how this process can lead to resistance or rearticulation in her argument that 'sex' like gender is an ideal construct:

Regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their

materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (Butler 1993: 2)

Butler (1990/2006; 1993) anticipates and addresses many of the criticisms of her reworked concept of agency and to some extent her responses provide a further clarification of her position. The first criticism that Butler addresses is that ‘constructivism forecloses agency by doing away with the subject’ (Butler 1993: 7). Butler’s response is firstly, that the constructivist claim that the subject is constituted as an effect of discourse is not to ‘do away’ with the subject, but rather ‘to ask after the conditions of its emergence and operation’ (Butler 1993: 7). What Butler has ‘done away with’ is the idea that the subject is the ‘enabling source’ (Butler 1995: 134) of meanings and actions. This in itself is tantamount to doing away with agency for those who, like Benhabib (1995a; b), equate agency with the ‘subjective capacities for *choice* or *self-determination*’ (Webster 2000: 11). Butler’s second response to the criticism, then, is to dispute the claim that agency can only be established through recourse to an autonomous or ‘prediscursive “I”’ (Butler 1990/2006: 195-8), saying that:

To enter into the repetitive practices is not a choice, for the ‘I’ that might enter is always already inside ... there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have. (Butler 1990/2006: 202)

The second and related criticism that Butler addresses is that constructivism forecloses agency because ‘to be constituted by discourse is to be determined by discourse’ (Butler



1990/2006: 195). Benhabib (1995b: 110), for example, says that Butler's theory of performativity 'still presupposes a remarkably deterministic view of individuation and socialization processes' and fails to account for 'the capacities of human agents for self-determination'. Her view is that Butler attributes 'too much power to culture (/society/discourse) as a constitutive force, and too little power to individuals to resist wholesale determination' (Webster 2000: 4). Further, Butler says that even among those who accept that the subject is socially constructed there are nonetheless some who insist on vesting the subject with the 'capacity for reflexive mediation' (e.g. the position of Giddens 1991) in order to 'establish a point of agency that is not fully determined by that culture and discourse' (Butler 1990/2006: 195). Butler's response is a further clarification of her assertion that discourse is formative:

To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. (Butler 1993: 10)

To unpack this slightly, what we have here is an elaboration of Butler's rejection of determinism. As mentioned earlier, Butler rejects the idea that the subject is determined by discourse, instead seeing the subject (and identity) as being an effect of discourse. Discourse, says Butler, would correctly be regarded as determining if, construction was thought of as a 'unilateral' process that culminated in a 'set of fixed effects' (Butler 1993: 9-10). If this were the case, agency would be displaced, since:

In this ... view construction is not an activity, but an act, one which happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed. Thus constructivism is reduced to determinism and implies the

evacuation or displacement of human agency. (Butler 1993: 9)

Instead, Butler's position is that construction takes place in time. It is not a single act but 'a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms' (Butler 1993: 10). In relation to gender, for example, gender is both produced as a result of the reiteration of norms and, importantly, destabilised through this process. It is destabilised because the process of reiteration is not a process of simple repetition. Rather, every citation involves a shift in context, in time and, as a consequence, a shift in meaning. For this reason 'the process of reiteration is a process of change that can be either stabilizing or destabilizing, that is, reinforcing or undermining signifying conventions' (Vasterling 1999: 28). Therefore, although the embodying of norms is a compulsory practice, it is never fully determining. Butler elaborates this point, again in relation to gender:

To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. (Butler 1993: 231)

It is through this constrained appropriation of norms that Butler says the possibilities for agency are opened up. Butler summarises her position in a response to Behabib's (Benhabib, et al. 1995) criticisms:

If a subject were constituted once and for all, there would be no possibility of a reiteration of those constituting conventions or norms. That the subject is that which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance ... if the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked, then agency is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened up by discourse. (Butler

1995: 135)

Much of the recent debate that Butler's work has provoked centres on the extent to which Butler's formulation of the performative does indeed offer a viable reworked concept of agency (see, for example, Magnus 2006; McNay 2000) and of the implications of such a formulation for political, especially feminist, action. McNay (1999: 105), for example, accuses Butler of constructing resistance as 'an inevitable consequence of instability rather than a potentiality whose realization is contingent upon a certain configuration of power relations'. Lovell (2003) criticises Butler for 'conflating historical agency with the performance of an individual' (2003: 2). In other words, of too narrowly attempting to locate 'transformative agency in the socially constituted self' (2003: 1) rather than in 'collective social movements' in specific social contexts (2003: 2). McNay (2002: 6), following Bourdieu (2000), accuses Butler of a 'linguistic fetishism' which reduces 'material inequalities and economic exclusions' to 'the narrow issue of the symbolic construction of sexual identity'. McNay further asserts that Butler reduces political agency to purely performative celebrations of resistance, concluding that she does not provide a theory of agency at all, but rather a general account of the linguistic conditions of possibility of agency' (McNay 2002: 7).

The assessment of such criticisms depends to some extent on one's own political aims and corresponding view of what sort of agency is necessary to support such aims. Although an account of social or political change and the mechanisms or means of achieving such change is not within the scope of this thesis, issues of agency are important, given the thesis focus on exploring the complex interactions between young people, media and identity and given the emphasis on notions of 'agency' and 'activity' in certain types of

media research on children (see Chapter 3). Agency, then, will be considered not in relation to broader political issues but in the context of young people's own involvement in what is variously referred to as fashioning, forming, constituting, producing or constructing their identities. To this extent, in relation to the constitution of identity, Butler's formulation of agency as resignification through the reiteration of norms will be followed.

The second criticism of Butler's rendering of agency that will be taken into account in this thesis is her propensity to overprivilege language. Although, Butler follows Foucault in her understanding of discourse as more than language, as 'bodies of knowledge' (McHoul & Grace 1993: 26), her focus remains very much on language. At times Butler's seems to use discourse interchangeably with language. In addition, despite Butler's assertion that 'acts, gestures and enactments ... are performative' (Butler 1990/2006: 185) there is very little attention paid, particularly in her later work, to the way non-linguistic acts signify (Hollywood 2002). This thesis will retain a notion of discourse as 'bodies of knowledge' and attempt to explore, where possible within the limits of the Harm research 'data' (see Chapter 4), the performative dimension of both linguistic and non-linguistic acts.

One final perceived weakness in Butler's work that this thesis will attempt to address is to reinstate or at least give greater emphasis to the material aspects of performativity alongside the discursive. Butler (1990/2006: xxxi) clearly states that the identity category gender is not just an effect of discourse but also an effect of institutions and practices. She also clearly states that performativity has material effects and is both enabled and constrained not just by discourses but also through the lived experience of iteration:

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The forming, crafting, bearing, circulation, signification of that sexed body will not be a set of actions performed in compliance with the law; on the contrary, they will be a set of actions mobilized by the law, the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity. (Butler 1993: 12)

Yet this aspect of Butler's work receives little emphasis or elaboration, leading to the charge that she reduces material inequalities and effects to the level of the symbolic. This thesis will attempt to emphasise the material as well as the discursive effects of performativity as well as its 'lived necessity' and constraints to performativity that operate through institutions and practices.

The next chapter will attempt to move beyond social constructionist accounts of childhood by adapting Butler's theory of performativity to the study of childhood.

## Chapter 2

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# Towards a performative theory of childhood

### Introduction

This purpose of this chapter is to situate the thesis in relation to social constructionist accounts of childhood which have come to characterise what is variously known as the ‘sociology of childhood’ or ‘new childhood studies’ and to lay the groundwork for the development of a performative theory of childhood. The chapter adapts Butler’s (1990/2006; 1993) work on identity, introduced in Chapter 1, to explore the value of viewing the ‘child’ as a foundational identity; an identity constituted through institutions, discourses and everyday practices.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section draws parallels between the development of feminist research and that of social constructionist accounts of childhood. In particular, it examines Butler’s critique of the feminist distinction between sex and gender and the applicability of the critique to social constructionist accounts of childhood. The purpose of this section is twofold. Firstly, it aims to contextualise Butler’s theory of performativity as response to and extension of feminist social constructionist approaches to sex/gender. Secondly, the section highlights key similarities and differences between social constructionist accounts of the sex/gender distinction and social constructionist accounts of childhood. The second section of the chapter begins to sketch in the key elements of a performative theory of childhood by adapting Butler’s theory of

performativity to the study of childhood.

Following Butler, this chapter will argue that in the contemporary west childhood is a discourse of identity fundamental to the construction of child subjectivity.

## **Childhood: from ‘nature’ to ‘social construction’**

Alanen (1994) notes the parallels between the development of feminist research and the development of research into children and childhood, suggesting that there may be ‘lessons that feminist scholarship is able to teach the scholars of childhood’ (Alanen 1994: 30).

Butler’s theory of performativity, then, may have implications for the study of childhood especially given that performativity could be characterised as both a response to and an extension or development of feminist social constructionist approaches to sex/gender.

Before considering how Butler’s theory of performativity might be adapted to the study of childhood, particularly in relation to childhood identity, this chapter will examine Butler’s criticisms of the social constructionist account of the sex/gender distinction. In so doing, the chapter will explore the applicability of her critique to the social constructionist account of childhood. Parallels between the strategic and theoretical interventions of social constructionism in feminism and in the study of childhood will be highlighted. Similarities and differences between the foundational identity categories of male/female and adult/child will also be discussed.

## **The social construction of childhood**

Since the French historian Philippe Ariès first published his important work *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960, childhood has been increasingly viewed as ‘socially constructed’ rather than as a ‘natural’ phenomenon that is clearly defined through reference to ‘biological fact or chronological age’ (Pilcher & Wagg 1996: 210). According to the social constructionist view of childhood, ideas about childhood and ‘the meanings that we place upon children’ (Jenks 1996: Foreword) are not ‘natural’ or unchanging but vary cross-culturally and through time. James and Prout (1990) identified the social construction of childhood as a central tenet of an ‘emerging paradigm’ for the study of childhood in the first edition of their book, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Childhood*:

First, and of prime importance, childhood is, within this paradigm to be understood as a social construction. That is, the institution of childhood provides an interpretive frame for understanding human life. In these terms it is biological immaturity rather than childhood which is a universal and natural feature of human groups ... (James & Prout 1990: 3)

Subsequent to James and Prout’s announcement of the emergence of a new paradigm, social constructionism has become ‘something of an orthodoxy’ (Prout 2000b: 3) in what variously has come to be known as the new ‘sociology of childhood’, ‘sociology of children’ or ‘new childhood studies’<sup>1</sup>. By 1997, however, in the preface to the second edition of their book, James and Prout acknowledge limits to the social constructionist account of childhood, highlighting in particular the social and political implications of its relativism, for children facing real material difficulties. In 1998 in *Theorizing Childhood* James, Jenks and Prout warn against the potential for social constructionist accounts of



childhood to abandon the ‘embodied child’ (1998: 28) and in 2000 in *The Body, Childhood and Society*, Prout declares the time has come to critically evaluate social constructionism as a theoretical orientation. In particular, Prout criticises social constructionist accounts of childhood as being too narrow in focus and for failing to apprehend ‘childhood bodies as both material and representational entities’ (2000b: 2).

The majority of these criticisms of the social constructionist accounts of childhood, such as Prout’s (2000b) concern about discursive reductionism, have been voiced about social constructionism more generally and, as chapter 1 has shown, have also been raised in relation to Butler’s so-called ‘radical constructivism’ (Vasterling 1999: 17). Butler’s responses to many of these criticisms in relation to her own work, particular around questions of agency, have been examined in Chapter 1. This chapter will now focus on Butler’s own critique of the social constructionist account of the sex/gender distinction and the relevance of this critique for the study of childhood. It is out of this critique that Butler’s work on performativity has developed.

### **Feminism and the cultural construction of childhood**

Since the 1960s second wave feminists have distinguished between sex as a biological given and gender as a social or cultural category. A parallel can be drawn between the feminist distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, and the social constructionist distinction between what is ‘natural’ about the child—‘biological immaturity’ or ‘chronological age’—and what is ‘social’ or ‘cultural’—‘childhood’ (James, et al. 1998; James & Prout 1997; Prout 2000b); sometimes also expressed as a distinction between ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ (Gittens 1998), or ‘concept’ and ‘conception’ of childhood (Archard 1993). Unlike the feminist accounts, however, no ‘terminological distinction, analogous to sex vs.

gender’ (Alanen 1994: 36) has developed. For this reason Alanen (1994) employs ‘generation’ as a parallel concept to that of gender.

Continuing the parallels between feminist research and research into childhood, Alanen (1994: 35) further suggests that it might be useful to rethink ‘the relationship between children and adults as being analogous to the relationship between men and women’. In this vein a number of authors (e.g. Alanen 1994; Buckingham 2000; James, et al. 1998; Jenks 1982) have observed that ‘child’ and ‘childhood’, are binary relational concepts. Thus, ‘the concept of “childhood” is *necessarily* linked to that of “adulthood”’ and being ‘a child is the *opposite* of being an adult’ (Archard 1993: 23 emphasis added). Within the ‘oppositional logic of binarism’ neither of the paired terms or concepts can exist without reference to the other (Chandler 2007: 95). Jenks (1982) makes just this point in relation to the necessary and contingent relationship between adult and child, saying that:

The difference between the two positions indicates the identity of each; the child cannot be imagined except in relation to a conception of the adult, but interestingly it becomes impossible to produce a well defined sense of the adult and his [*sic*] society without first positing the child. (Jenks 1982: 10)

Within other domains of meaning, or other discourses, however, childhood simultaneously exists in a non-binary relation (as a taxonomic ‘sister’) to any number of discrete ‘categorical and generational spaces’ (Hockey & James 2003: 15)—infancy, adolescence, youth, middle age, old age etc. Further, ‘adult’ and ‘child’, although polarised concepts, are sometimes used as locations on a gradable scale—the ‘life course’ (Hockey & James 2003)—rather than as mutually exclusive terms. Finally, ‘child’ is relational in a ‘double

sense' (Honig 1999 summarised by Alanen 2000: 503). In addition to its relationship with 'adult', it also 'refers to the (social relations) of filiation in a broader societal context' (Honig 1999 summarised by Alanen 2000: 503) through the pairing of parent/child.

Despite these differences from the male/female binary, the binary adult/child in western discourse is nevertheless a powerful binary opposition and organising principle. An example from Schultz (1995a) illustrates this clearly. He explains that when the cry, 'women and children first', went out as the *Titanic* sank, it was clearly meant to prescribe identities to everyone as 'men', 'women' or 'children'. It was not meant to exclude adolescents, infants or the aged. It would seem clear that the other generational distinctions or categories with which the concepts of 'child' and 'childhood' relate lack the force of the distinction between adult and child (Archard 1993: 23). Schultz concludes that what is unclear from a contemporary perspective, however, is whether a 14 or 16-year-old boy was expected to join the women and children, or go down with the men and the ship.

Explaining the second wave feminist distinction between sex and gender, Butler (1990/2006) says that distinction was originally intended as a counterpoint to biological determinism by distinguishing the wholly natural or biological category of 'sex' from culturally constructed 'gender'. Following from this distinction, the relationship between gender and sex is not assumed to be one of causality, where gender is the 'causal result of sex' and neither is gender 'as seemingly fixed as sex' (Butler 1990/2006: 8). Rather, the meanings of 'man' and 'woman', 'masculine' and 'feminine', are plural, cultural and subject to change.

In much the same way, Prout (2000b) says the social constructionist view of childhood

provided:

A necessary, useful and even essential counterpoint to biological reductionism, helping to create a conceptual space within which to think about the non-biological correlates of both the body and childhood. (Prout 2000b: 1)

Social constructionist accounts of childhood dispute those theorisations that see childhood as ‘natural’ and relatively unchanged by differentiating the ‘natural’—biological immaturity/chronological age—from the social or cultural—socially constructed childhood. This point is made by Prout and James (1990) in the quote previously discussed in this chapter in their assertion that: ‘it is biological immaturity rather than childhood which is a universal and natural feature of human life’. Proponents of the social constructionist position then argue that the distinction between adult and child and the meanings or significance that accrue to each of these collective identities is not a direct consequence of age or biological immaturity. This position is elaborated by Jenks (1996):

All contemporary approaches to the study of childhood are clearly committed to the view that childhood is not a natural phenomenon and cannot properly be understood as such. The social transformation from child to adult does not follow directly from physical growth and the recognition of children by adults, and vice versa, is not singularly contingent upon physical difference. Furthermore, physical morphology may constitute a form of difference between people in certain circumstances but it is not an adequately intelligible basis for the relationship between the adult and the child. Childhood is to be understood as a social construct, it makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society but which are incorporated within the social structure and thus manifested through and formative of certain typical forms of conduct. Childhood then always relates to a

particular cultural setting. (Jenks 1996: 7)

The political motivation behind the sex/gender distinction in feminist work is also paralleled in the shift towards conceptualising childhood as a social construction. Social constructionist work is linked to concerns about the social situations of the world's children: the marginalisation of children (children as 'minority group' e.g. Holt 1975; or as a 'class' e.g. Oldman 1994), children's rights, children's agency and about the need to reconceptualise children as persons in their own right—as human 'beings' rather than human 'becomings' (Buckingham 2008a; James, et al. 1998; Qvortrup 1994; Uprichard 2007).

### **Nature vs. culture**

Butler (1990/2006) explores the consequences of the feminist distinction between sex and gender when taken to its logical limit. She says that if the constructed status of gender is independent of sex then '*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a feminine one' (Butler 1990/2006: 9). Butler says that, even assuming an unproblematic binary distinction between the sexes, there would be no 'reason to assume that the genders ought also to remain two' (Butler 1990/2006: 9). Therefore, Butler concludes, the presumption of a binary gender system in feminist work implicitly retains a belief in the 'mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it' (Butler 1990/2006: 9).

In much the same way, many researching childhood from within a social constructionist paradigm, despite rejecting the notion that one's status as adult or child follows from

biological immaturity or age, nevertheless retain in their work a close association between socially constructed childhood and the 'natural' child, who is identifiable by reference to his/her age, biological immaturity or development. This relationship is manifested in at least two respects: firstly, in theoretical accounts of childhood and secondly, in empirical research.

Archard's (1993) work is illustrative of the former tendency. In his rejection of Ariès's (1960/1996: 128) claim that in 'medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist', Archard adopts a position which distinguishes a 'concept' of childhood from a 'conception' of childhood. According to Archard, the 'concept' of childhood requires that children be distinguishable from adults in respect of some 'unspecified' but by implication 'natural' set of attributes: 'at a minimum, childhood has to be understood in terms of *age*' (Archard 1993: 23). A 'conception' of childhood, on the other hand, is the social or cultural specification of those attributes:

To have a 'concept' of childhood is to recognise that children differ interestingly from adults; to have a 'conception' of childhood is to have a view of what those interesting differences are. (Archard 1993: 22)

Archard says that 'there are ... good reasons for thinking that all societies at all times have had the concept of childhood' (Archard 1993: 23) but that there have been different 'conceptions' of childhood, that is, 'different claims about the extent of childhood ..., its nature ... and its significance ...' (Archard 1993: 24). The 'natural' and enduring differentiation between adult and child, which as a minimum is linked back to chronological age, is then opened up to differing cultural or social interpretations. In this

way, Archard too, retains a mimetic relationship between, in this case, chronological age and conceptions of childhood. In other words, the ‘conception’ of childhood presumes a ‘concept’ of childhood or, the social/cultural construction of childhood presumes a ‘natural’ distinction between adult and child.

The second respect in which studies from the perspective of the social construction of childhood retain a connection between the ‘natural’ child’ and socially constructed childhood can be seen in many of the empirical studies of ‘children’. Despite distinguishing the ‘constructedness’ of childhood from the one’s age or biological maturity, some studies are nevertheless guilty of assuming the ontological integrity of the subject of their own discourse (the object of study). In other words, researchers go out and study ‘children’ who are identified fairly unproblematically as ‘children’ primarily by their age. Lee asserts that the requirement to resolve the ontological status of children is fundamental to the discipline of sociology itself and has carried across to the sociology of childhood. He says that in order to study children ‘we must decide for ourselves what they are ...’ (Lee 1998: 464). Johnson’s (2001) account of the major tenets and research agendas of the ‘New Sociology of Children’ demonstrates the relatively unproblematic status of the category ‘child’ as ‘the basic unit of study’ in much of this research:

Firstly, the New Sociology of Children takes children as the basic unit of study. Children are the explicit subject of analysis. Unlike much of the work before it, the New Sociology of Children focuses on kids—just kids. (Johnson 2001: 82)

Alanen (1994: 36) describes this tendency in the study of childhood as embodying only a

‘superficial’ recognition of Ariès’s assertion of the social nature of childhood, saying that the child in this research fundamentally remains ‘a “natural” child whose destiny is to live in historically changing societies: the social is outside the child, although it has powerful formative effects on him/her’.

An alternative approach to empirical research on children, which attempts to avoid the problem of defining children by age, is typified in the work of Qvortrup et al. (1994). This approach starts from societal ‘understandings’ of childhood, rather than age, to identify the child: ‘Childhood may be defined as *the life period during which a human being is regarded as a child, and the cultural, social, and economic characteristics of that period*’ (Frønes 1994: 148). Children, then, are simply the ‘incumbents’ of the socially defined structural category ‘childhood’ (Qvortrup 1994: 6). James and Prout (1990; 1997) and James, Prout and Jenks (1998) do not explicitly address the issue of how they identify the object of their empirical research, not even in a chapter entitled ‘Researching childhood’ (James, et al. 1998). In a later work, however, Hockey and James (2003) take a similar, although non-social structuralist approach, to that of Qvortrup et al., defining ‘children’ as simply those who occupy the socially constructed ‘space’ of childhood:

Thus the experiences and identities of those individuals who occupy the space of ‘childhood’—that is children themselves—can be said to be, in part, shaped by the politics and policies through which the conceptual category and social identity of ‘child’ is given material form in everyday life. (Hockey & James 2003: 15)



Empirical research on children then, either assumes some commonality among children that pre-exists their construction/constitution as children or, that a common identity is created for children *by virtue* of their construction/constitution and status as children.

Many authors, particularly from within feminism itself (e.g. Butler 1990/2006; 1993; Haraway 1991; Merchant 1995; Plumwood 1993), have critiqued the relationship between nature and culture presupposed in some formulations of the sex/gender distinction and, paralleled in much of the social constructionist work on childhood. The sex/gender distinction has been criticised for implying a model of nature/culture that assumes ‘a culture or an agency of the social’ that acts upon and invests with meaning a prior (pre-discursive) and passive ‘nature’, which is ‘outside the social and yet its necessary counterpart’ (Butler 1993: 4).

Recent work on childhood has also begun to critique the social/natural distinction in social constructionist (Prout 2000a) and sociological (Lee 1998) accounts of childhood. Prout (2000b: 3), for example, says that in attempting to establish ‘childhood as “social” rather than “natural”’ social constructionism made ‘a radical distinction between society and biology’ (Prout 2000b: 3) which has meant a lack of focus on children’s bodies as material entities. Lee (1998: 461), on the other hand, says that sociological theory itself rests on a model which posits an ‘incomplete nature and completing society’ so that children were initially only of passing interest to sociology because ‘they provided an indication of how society completes nature’s work’. According to Lee (1998), the new sociology of childhood, in attempting to overcome this marginalisation of children in mainstream sociology, endeavoured to make ‘children fit for sociological theory’ rather than ‘sociological theory fit for children’ (1998: 463).

Butler argues that another weakness of the sex/gender distinction is that gender seems as ‘determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation’ except that it is culture not biology that becomes destiny (Butler 1990/2006: 11). Schultz’s (1995a) comments below on the way cultural expectations of children shape a culture’s children are an exemplar of this tendency in work on childhood:

What we think about children affects not only the way we treat them but, as a consequence, what they actually become: because American parents believe that children should sleep through the night, five-month-old American babies have learnt to sleep eight hours without interruption, while babies of the same age in cultures where uninterrupted sleep is not an issue sleep only four hours without waking. Only a few months after birth, infants have already begun to become the children their culture expects them to become. (Schultz 1995a: 10)

One consequence of this inclination toward cultural determinism is that, if children are simply the ‘outcomes’ of society or culture, questions about the possibility of children’s agency arise (Prout 2000b: 2). Agency is another key tenet of James and Prout’s (1990) emerging paradigm for the study of childhood and an acceptance of children’s agency underlies the political motivation of much of the social constructionist work. Lee expresses this dilemma for the sociology of childhood, saying that: ‘Either society is complete and completing, or children are complete as agents and thus capable of speaking in their own right’ (Lee 1998: 463).

### **The ‘fictitious unity’ of the ‘natural’ child**

The ‘natural’ differences between the sexes is most often invoked as material or physical differences between male and female bodies. In much the same way, work from the

perspective of the social construction of childhood invokes the materiality of differences between adult and child (demonstrated through age, physical morphology, etc.) as a point of contrast to the social/cultural interpretations of those differences.

Butler's position, however, is that 'sexual difference ... is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices' (Butler 1993: 1). In other words, for Butler, sex is as much a matter of culture as is gender. Or, in relation to studies of childhood, the 'natural' differences between adult and child, whether based on age, biological immaturity or other criteria, are culturally inscribed. In this, Butler follows Foucault's rejection of 'sex' as the pre-discursive, the 'natural', the biological basis upon which gender is inscribed:

The notion of sex made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (Foucault 1980: 154 cited in Butler 1990/2006: 124)

For Foucault, then, sex is a 'fictitious unity' rather than a pre-discursive/pre-cultural given since 'the body is not "sexed" in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an "idea" of natural or essential sex' (Butler 1990/2006: 125). Similarly, there are good grounds for viewing the 'natural' child likewise as 'a fiction of coherence and unity' imposed upon 'an otherwise random or unrelated set of biological functions, sensations and pleasures' (Butler 1996: 67), including chronological age, anatomical difference, psychological development, biological

immaturity and physical/cultural dependency.

Butler uses the existence of the ‘intersexed’, individuals ‘who live and breathe in the interstices of this binary relation’ between the sexes, to demonstrate that the binary distinction between male and female is ‘not exhaustive’ or ‘necessary’ (Butler 2001: 627). The ‘intersexed’ include a diverse range of individuals who in some way fail to conform to sexual norms; grouped together are individuals who have neither XX or XY chromosomes, and individuals whose bodies in some way differ from those considered to constitute a ‘standard’ male or female, including those whose sex is uncertain at birth because of their external genitalia and those considered to have cosmetically ‘unacceptable’ genitalia (e.g. girls born with ‘big’ clitorises<sup>2</sup>, boys born with hypospadiac penises<sup>3</sup>, or ‘unacceptably small’ penises<sup>4</sup>). The power of Butler’s assertion about the cultural constructedness of sexual difference is demonstrated in the difficulty experienced in defining the ‘key’ elements of a ‘standard’ male or female and the unfortunate results that follow for those individuals who anatomically, chromosomally or in some other way fail to conform to one of the two sexes. Cases such as that of Joan/John<sup>5</sup> support Butler’s claim that certain kinds of gendered or sexual identities simply ‘cannot exist’ and that the existence of such deviations from accepted sexual norms is so threatening that it appears to call into question ‘the very notion of the “person”’ (Butler 1990/2006: 23)<sup>6</sup>.

Butler concludes that however sexual differences are categorised or made sense of, the norms that are thought to determine the sexes and, for that matter, the number of sexes, are cultural not natural. This then leads Butler to question the stability of the distinction between sex and gender and to wonder at the social and political interests that underlie the scientific discourses that establish the ‘facts’ of sexual difference:

## Towards a performative theory of childhood

What is sex anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess scientific discourses which purport to establish such ‘facts’ for us? ... Are the ostensible natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler 1990/2006: 9)

Before discussing the implications of Butler’s position for the study of childhood, it is important to note that Butler’s claim that sex is cultural not natural is not a denial of materiality; that is, of ‘certain kinds of biological differences’ (Butler interview Osborne & Segal 1994: 33) or an assertion that ‘discourse *causes* sexual differences’ (Butler 1993: 1 emphasis added). Rather, it is an assertion that the material world is not accessible except through discourse and that discourse can never fully capture that prior materiality (Butler interview Meijer & Prins 1998: 278). In this, Butler’s work is offered as a challenge to the naturalness and universality of the binary distinction between male and female, not a reduction of everything to discourse, or a negation of materiality.

In the study of childhood, Jenks’ (1996) question, ‘What is a child?’, closely parallels Butler’s, ‘What is sex?’ Similarly it highlights the ambiguity of the concept of ‘child’ and the uncertainty of the grounds for distinguishing child from adult. In what sense, then, is the ‘natural’ child (or the ‘natural’ adult) a ‘fictitious unity’?

Arguably, if it is possible to accept Butler’s assertion that sex and sexual difference are culturally constructed, there are many reasons why it should be easier to accept that claim in relation to the ‘natural’ or material differences between adult and child. One reason is

that, as previously mentioned, in everyday discourse, 'child' does not always relate to 'adult' as a binary opposite. Unlike the male/female binary, within certain domains of meaning, 'child' already exists on a continuum with 'adult' or as a taxonomic 'sister' to other generational terms. The category of 'adolescent', for example, is already in place for those who 'live and breathe in the interstices' of the binary relation between adult and child.

Similarly, although one's status as child or adult, like one's sex is generally prescribed in law, it does not have the same universality as the male/female distinction. Within any one country this can be demonstrated by noting the different ages at which any one individual may legally consume alcohol, engage in sexual activity, be held criminally responsible, view adult content or vote. This can also be seen in the conflict between international and local definitions of adult/child. For example, the United Nations' definition of the child is anyone under the age of 18 years; the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Geneva Protocols generally set 15 as the 'highest age limit for establishing the entitlements of childhood' (Kuper 2000: 42); while the Australian Children's Television Standards defines children as being individuals under 14 years of age. Further, the Australian Office of Film and Literature Classification guidelines for film, and the television industry codes of practice, set the mature audience threshold at 15 years and over (the M and MA classifications) and the adult audience at 18 years of age (the R classification).

The 'fictitiousness' of the unity created by the criteria used to mark the natural or material differences between adult and child similarly can be demonstrated. Even 'age', which is generally thought of 'simply as a measure of the passage of time between birth and death' (Hockey & James 2003: 3), is not culture free. Blanchet's (1996) account of research into

children and childhood in Bangladesh, for example, highlighted differences in Bengali attitudes to age compared to those of the west. At the time of her writing, there was no official birth registry<sup>7</sup> in Bangladesh and she describes how in Bengali culture the quantification of age was of 'negligible importance' only: years of age were not counted precisely and birthdays were generally not celebrated, except occasionally in the urban middle and upper classes, where the custom was widely recognised as 'foreign'. In her research she described children's attitudes to questions about their age:

When children are asked about their age they are likely to reply, 'How do I know? Ask my mother', as if this information did not concern their individual self ... As for mothers, when pressed to give the age of their children, they commonly reply by giving a range. For example, my son is 8 to 9, my daughter is 11 to 12 years old. (Blanchet 1996: 41)

Blanchet also reported that government schools did not segregate children on the basis of age and that the estimated 'ages of students in Class I ranged from 5 to 14 years old' with the average being around 9 years (Blanchet 1996: 62). In July 1993, after Bangladesh came under international pressure for relying on child labour, she says that height rather than age was used as the basis for distinguishing adult from child. Factories dismissed 'most children measuring less than four feet six inches (i.e. supposedly below the age of 12)' in order to meet international concerns (Blanchet 1996: 80). The rules however were flexibly applied. Blanchet reports:

We met an 8 year old girl who entered the factory at the age of 5. Her height is well under four feet six inches, but she was not dismissed on the ground that she is an orphan and has no other source of livelihood. (Blanchet 1996: 80-81)

However, Blanchet says that age had some, although limited, legal basis in Bangladesh. She describes how age was recorded on official documents although, not necessarily having ‘a credible correspondence to the child’s date of birth or physical growth’ (Blanchet 1996: 224). Blanchet illustrates this with the example of what in the west would be thought of as ‘child prostitution’. Prostitution is legal in Bangladesh but forbidden for those below the age of 18. Blanchet describes how all prostitutes working in official brothels must be ‘licensed’ and have their name entered in a police register. Despite these requirements, Blanchet (1996: 43) reports meeting many prostitutes who she estimates to be no older than 11 or 12 with ‘affidavit documents stamped by a magistrate stating that they are at least 18 years old’ and who were officially registered with the local police. She also gives the example of a marriage of a girl and boy, estimated to be aged five years and 12 years respectively, performed by an official state registrar who ‘recorded in the marriage registry that the bride was 18 and the groom was 21’ (Blanchet 1996: 43). Blanchet states that the magistrate clearly knew that under the law girls and boys cannot be married below the ages of 18 and 21 respectively so, in recording the ages as he did, the magistrate ‘ensured that the law was followed “on paper”’ (Blanchet 1996: 44).

Particularly when looking across cultures and through time it is possible to identify many challenges to the universality of the ‘natural’ binary distinction between adult and child. An interesting example was reported on ABC radio on 14 August 2002. The ABC reported that the then Turkmen President, Saparmurat Niyazov, had issued a decree ‘dividing life into 12-year cycles’:

Childhood will continue until the age of 13, while from 13 to 25 Turkmen citizens will be considered adolescents, after which they will be youthful until 37 and then mature, the



presidential decree states.

Among other age cycles, the Turkmen President has ordered that the period from 49 to 61 be dubbed the prophetic phase while the inspirational age will continue from the ages 61 to 73 ...

Old age, meanwhile will begin at the age of 85 and any Turkmen who lives until they are 97 will reach a stage named after the founder of the Turkmen nation, Oguzhkan. (ABC Online, 14 August 2002)

Such a division draws attention to the cultural constructedness of the distinction between adult and child, and challenges both the naturalness of the binary relationship adult/child and the link between biological immaturity and one's status as adult or child. It also draws attention to the difficulty of cross-cultural research on childhood. How, for example, would one conduct comparative research on children in Australia, Bangladesh and Turkmenistan? On what basis would one identify the object of the research and what would be the value of comparisons? Blanchet (1996) discusses the difficulty of cross-cultural translation in relation to Bangladesh's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Blanchet explains that there is:

No Bangla word to describe a life stage going from birth to the age of 18 which is the age span covered by 'the child' in the UN Convention. *Shishu*, the Bangla word chosen to translate child, to most Bengalis, has a meaning quite different from that spelt out in the CRC. (Blanchet 1996: 38)

Blanchet (1996: 37) says that *shishu* generally 'denotes a small, innocent and dependant

child' with no economic or social responsibilities. So that, 'children' who fend for themselves, work for their living and who may be as young as six years of age, as well as adolescents are not '*shishu*' (Blanchet 1996: 220). On the other hand, *shishu* may be used to refer to dependent children up to the age of puberty who are still at school. Dependency rather than age or biological immaturity is the basis for distinguishing *shishu* from other individuals. Thus, young people who work in factories, as prostitutes or in domestic service are not *shishu* and so are, in effect, denied the protection of the United Nations Convention. *Shishu adhikar*, the usual translation of 'rights of the child', then, is most frequently 'taken to mean small children's needs' and as Blanchet explains:

According to one highly educated District Commissioner interviewed in Kushtia, children (*shishu*) above all need milk, and if foreign donors increase aid to Bangladesh, children's rights (*shishu adhikar*) could be ensured. (Blanchet 1996: 37)

Problems of translation at the level of words and concepts are also common in historical research on children. This can be seen in Shultz's (1995a; b) study of Middle High German (MHG) texts written between 1100 and 1350. Shultz uses his research to dispute Ariès's assertion that in 'medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' (Ariès 1960/1996: 125).

Schultz begins by defining childhood in relation to adulthood. For Schultz, childhood is quite simply that period of life that precedes adulthood so that 'if a culture can be shown to distinguish such a stage of life, then there is every reason to call it childhood' (Schultz 1995b: 1). The existence of a term that approximates 'child' is for Schultz evidence of a concept of childhood. Schultz's conclusion that MHG writers did have a concept of

childhood then is based on the MHG use of *kint* a term that he says approximates the English ‘child’ and *kintheit* to refer to ‘the early years’.

However, Schultz also points out many differences between MHG use of *kint* and the contemporary use of child. For example, Schultz says, the word *kint*, had strong associations with virginity and could be used for those who today would clearly be considered as adults. Schultz (1995a: 25) says, virgins remained ‘kint no matter how old they’ were. Further, MHG did not divide the class children (*kint*) into two commensurate classes of boys and girls. Rather, as Schultz says, for females the division was around sexual experience so that a female could be either a virgin (*maget*) or a wife (*wip*); indicating nothing about her age only her sexual experience. Whereas for males, the language offered more possibilities (*knabe, junge, jungelinc, degen, knet, knappe*). All the terms were related to the masculine ideal of ‘knightly combat’ and, rather than distinguishing adult from child, designated ‘knights’ and ‘knights-in-training’. Schultz highlights the differences between contemporary and MHG usage:

While we define boys and girls as types of children, MHG defines virgins and youths as types of females and males. As such they have hardly a thing in common. There are no words to name a female child in MHG and no stories to tell about her, there are, that is, no ways of speaking about her except in relation to male sexuality. For males there are a greater variety of terms, a greater variety of roles, and an understanding of childhood that includes a larger stretch of life. (Schultz 1995b: 4-5)

It is instructive to place Schultz’s (1995a; b) historical research on childhood alongside Blanchet’s contemporary study of Bangladeshi children. Neither *kint*, nor *shishu*, is an

exact equivalent of the contemporary English ‘child’ since *kint* would potentially embrace those we would consider too old to be children and *shishu* exclude those we would consider too young to be adults. Yet the qualities of dependency associated with *shishu* and virginity associated with *kint*, although not defining, are nonetheless a part of most contemporary western constructions of childhood. The ambiguity of the concept of ‘child’ and the uncertainty of the grounds for distinguishing child from adult confirms Wood’s (2002) observation, following Foucault, that:

Some of the most productive learning about other times and peoples arises when we are confronted with categories of ordering different from those with which we are familiar or comfortable. As Foucault [(1973: xv)] writes, such encounters productively ‘[break] up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things’, allowing us to understand the contingency and artificiality of all human productions including our own categories of order. (Wood 2002: 157)

An alternate reading of Schultz’s work, then, could see it as a challenge to the ‘naturalness’ and universality the fundamental binary distinction between adult and child rather than affirmation of a medieval conception of childhood. For, if Schultz is correct in his assumption that the language of the MHG texts tells us something about the social reality of thirteenth-century Germany, then his research tells us a number things about the way this society broke up and understood human differences. It suggests that age alone did not define a child (*kint*) and that it is likely that ‘adult’ and ‘child’ were not binary foundational identity categories. As Schultz, himself, concludes, this section of German society appeared to attach relatively less importance to differences between adult and child and relatively more importance to gender differences that children *shared* with adults. For

the MHG writers, gender appears to be significantly more important than age in defining one's identity.

There are also many examples of children who challenge the mimetic relationship between the materiality of the child body and cultural construction of childhood further unsettling the dominant ways of categorising and identifying children. In many instances this disjuncture gives rise to what might be called, following Butler (1990/2006; 1993), the 'unintelligible' child.

Butler describes unintelligible genders as those that fail to 'institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire' (Butler 1990/2006: 23). As seen in the discussion of intersexuality, the very humanness of such individuals is called into question. In relation to children, this occurs when those who are biologically/naturally identified as children engage in activities or behaviours that do not cohere with their status as children. Such children are regarded as 'non-children' or, when cultural norms are severely challenged—as when children rape, murder or commit acts of extreme violence—as 'non-human'.

The extensively discussed case of Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, the two ten-year-old boys who were found guilty of having murdered James Bulger in 1993, is an exemplar. The two boys were regarded not simply as 'bad children', but as 'non-children' and even 'non-human' because the nature of their crime defied accepted 'notions of what children can do and what children should be' (Gittens 1998: 8). Thus the two boys were referred to as 'monsters', 'freaks' and 'the spawn of Satan' (Jewkes 2004: 58) and their actions described by the trial judge as 'unparalleled evil' (Foster 1993). Gittens explains how

children who kill challenge the unity and coherence of ‘the universal child’:

The rare instances of children who kill challenge the meanings adults ascribe to ‘child’ to the core, and can result, if only momentarily, in an unsettling awareness that there is no universal child, that childhood is socially constructed by adults. But this recognition, if it really occurs, is soon obliterated by a more acceptable and all-pervasive conclusion that such children are simply *non-children* who are some kind of freaks, monsters ... (Gittens 1998: 39)

Similarly, child combatants, are frequently feared by local communities more than adult soldiers. Adama, a 42-year-old Sierra Leone woman describes the fear adults felt at seeing children carrying out terrible atrocities:

We feared them. They were cruel and hardhearted: even more than the adults. They don’t know what is sympathy, what is good and bad. If you beg an older one, you may convince him to spare you, but the younger ones, they don’t know what is sympathy, what is mercy. (Human Rights Watch interview, Freetown, 20 May 1999 cited in Maxted 2003: 61)

Such children are frequently seen by local adults as evil ‘non-humans’ or as ‘non-children’ (as ‘bandits’, ‘barbarians’, ‘human tigers’, ‘born assassins’ or ‘vermin’) (Peters & Richards 1998: 1; Wessells 1997: 37-38) because of their involvement in terrible ‘adult’ activities. The self-description of Kay Yusseff, 16-year-old former Sierra Leone child soldier who has killed, raped and tortured, reflects this view when he says: ‘I am no longer a child for now’ (in Cornellier, Henriquez & Provencher n.d.). Similarly, Samuel T. Kamanda (T-Boy), an International Rescue Committee worker who runs rehabilitation programs for former child soldiers expresses the difficulties the former soldiers have in returning to

civilian life in terms of their having lost their childhood because of their involvement in 'adult activities': 'Most of the children have committed a lot of atrocities ... They find it very difficult, after behaving like adults, to return to their childhood' (Kamanda quoted in United Nations 2003: para. 3).

Yet, the dominance of the 'natural' adult/child binary, at least in the modern west, even in the face of alternate discursive constructions and challenges like those outlined above, suggests the strength of this binary. To this end, Holland (1992) describes the discursive 'effort' that must be expended in everyday cultural practice just to negotiate 'the difficult distinction between adult and child' and in boundary maintenance 'to keep childhood separate from an adulthood' (Holland 1992: 12). Similarly the endurance of the adult/child binary in both academic and popular discourse suggests entrenched resistance to viewing the 'natural' child as a cultural construction.

### **Implications for the study of childhood**

Butler's critique of the sex/gender distinction, has the following implications if similarly applied to the study of childhood as a social construction. First, it would make no sense to differentiate between the material or physical differences between adult and child (demonstrated by age, etc.) and the cultural interpretations of those differences if the 'natural' child is itself is a cultural category. Second, Butler's rejection of a simple nature/culture dichotomy, means that childhood is not to culture as the natural embodied child is to nature; and childhood is not merely 'the cultural inscription of meaning' (Butler 1990/2006: 10) on the bodies of 'pre-given' natural children. Rather, Butler's conclusion that 'sex' is itself an *effect* of gender, implies for the study of childhood, that it is through the discourse of the social construction of childhood, itself, that a 'natural', 'prediscursive'

child is established who is 'prior to culture' and 'a politically neutral surface *on which* culture' can act (Butler 1990/2006: 10). Therefore, following Butler, in casting the duality of adult/child in a prediscursive domain, the discourse of social construction plays a role in maintaining the stability of the adult/child binary by effectively situating it as 'natural' and beyond question.

## **From a performative theory of gender towards a performative theory of childhood**

Butler understands performativity as the 'reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (Butler 1993: 2). Following Butler, a performative theory of childhood would conceptualise the child not as a 'bodily given' (Butler 1993: 2-3) upon which the construct of childhood is 'artificially' or culturally imposed, nor as a common identity or category 'that simply needs to be filled with the various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete' (Butler 1990/2006: 20-21). Rather, a performative theory of childhood would view the child as a 'cultural norm', or an 'ideal construct', that is 'materialised' through time (Butler 1993: 1). In other words, the state of being a child is not a 'simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms' (Butler 1993: 2) 'materialise', give shape to, or define the boundaries of the 'child'. This materialisation is achieved through the *performance* or 'forcible reiteration of those norms' (Butler 1993: 2). To see the childhood as 'performative', is to see the child as an effect of the various discourses, institutions and practices that name, regulate and constrain it.



Importantly, Butler understands performativity ‘not as a singular or deliberate “act”, but rather, an iterable practice ‘ (Butler 1993: 2). For Butler, there is no ‘doer behind the deed’ (Butler 1990/2006: 195). Rather, the ‘doer’, in this case the child-subject, is constructed and secured in its position as ‘child’ only by repeatedly citing or ‘assuming’ the cultural norms of childhood. To illustrate, Butler uses the example of the medical interpellation, which announces a baby’s sex, but only *begins* the process of creating a gendered subject:

The medical interpellation ... shifts an infant from an ‘it’ to a ‘she’ or a ‘he’, and in that naming, the girl is ‘girded’, brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that ‘girling’ does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce [*sic*] or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (Butler 1993: 7-8)

An individual, then, would not freely ‘take on’ or choose an identity as adult or child. Rather, the subject-child (or adult) is formed by virtue of having gone through the process of assuming such an identity. The “I” is secured in its position as adult/child ‘by being repeatedly assumed, whereby “assumption” is not a singular act or event, but rather, an iterable practice ... a question of repeating that norm, citing or miming that norm’ (Butler 1993: 108). In this light, the former child soldier, Kay Yusseff’s failure to embody or repeatedly assume the norms of childhood are echoed in his comment, ‘I am no longer a child for now’. Similarly, Samuel T. Kamanda’s hope that the former soldiers can ‘return to their childhood’ suggests the possibility that the child soldiers can, in time, once again be secured in their positions as children by resuming the practices and conventions of childhood.

According to Butler, this process of ‘assuming’ an identity simultaneously requires an identification with an idealised set of norms—an identification that Butler describes as ‘internally unstable’ and ‘ambivalent’—and a *disidentification* with the abjected or ‘unintelligible’ (in the case of children, the ‘adult-like’ child). What is interesting for the study of childhood and for this thesis in particular, is that while one’s identity as child requires the repeated citing or assumption of the cultural norms of childhood, the ‘child’ is also constructed as a temporary subject position. From the standpoint of such constructions childhood is viewed as a process of ‘becoming’, a journey from childhood to adulthood, in which children ‘proceed through a logical sequence of “ages and stages” towards the achievement of adult maturity and rationality’ (Buckingham 2000: 14). Within such constructions children are viewed as both ‘incomplete’ and ‘incompetent’; that is, as deficient in relation to the ‘adult’ because they lack adult competencies. At some point, however, or potentially at many conflicting points in time and space, an individual is expected to move from being a child to being an adult, to perform an almost complete reversal of identification and instead to cite the cultural norms of adulthood. If Butler’s formulation is correct, this would require a quite complicated shift in identificatory (and *disidentificatory*) practices. Something, perhaps, beyond Butler’s description of identifications as ‘multiple’, always ‘in process’ and ‘incessantly reconstituted’.

This thesis will use these early moves towards a performative theory of childhood to focus on the way media-related discourses, institutions and practices materialise, give shape to and define the boundaries of adult and child. The thesis will explore the ‘idealised norms’ of childhood by examining how ‘child’ as an identity is constructed and performed both within the focus group discussions themselves, by analysing the focus group interactions; and in the context of the participants’ engagement with the media, by analysing the topics

of discussion. The concepts of identification/*dis*identification will be employed in the thesis to examine how the young people in this study are positioned in relation to the collective identities ‘adult’ and ‘child’ and how they perform these identities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘Sociology of Children’ was the name of the research section of the American Sociological Association (founded in 1992), whereas the ‘Sociology of Childhood’ is the name of the research committee of the International Sociological Association. ‘New Childhood Studies’, on the other hand, is described by Alanen (1994) more generally, as a multidisciplinary field of research. All have their bases in social constructionist accounts of childhood.

<sup>2</sup> Dreger (1998: Dominant Treatment Protocols section, para. 7) reports that: ‘Clitorises are frequently considered too big if they exceed one centimetre in length’. She says that ‘paediatric surgeons specializing in treating intersexuality consider “enlarged” clitorises to be “cosmetically offensive” in girls and therefore they subject these clitorises to surgical reduction meant to leave the organs looking more “feminine” and “delicate.” (ibid)

<sup>3</sup> The urethral opening is found somewhere other than the very tip of the penis (Dreger 1998: Frequency of Intersexuality section, para.3).

<sup>4</sup> Dreger (1998: Dominant Treatment Protocols section, para. 7) reports that a penis is ‘often considered too small if the stretched length is less than 2.5 centimeters ... Consequently, genetically male children born at term “with a stretched penile length less than 2.5 [centimeters] are usually given a female sex assignment.”

<sup>5</sup> The John/Joan case was brought to public attention in a BBC documentary in the early 1990s (Butler 2001: 622) and was the subject of a popular book, *As Nature Made Him* by John Colapinto (2001). The case has had wide popular and academic coverage. Briefly, ‘John’, a twin, had his penis burnt and severed at age eight months during a relatively minor surgical procedure. After:

Consultation with a team of physicians and sexologists at the Johns Hopkins Hospital (circa 1963) it was decided John should be medically reconstructed and raised as a girl—‘Joan’. Surgeons therefore removed John/Joan’s testes and subsequently subjected Joan to further surgical and hormonal treatments in an attempt to make her body look more like a girl’s. (Dreger 1998: para. 1)

John/Joan was deceived about the medical procedures he/she was undergoing and received substantial ‘psychological counseling’ to assist in him/her accepting the new gender. Reports of the success of John’s transformation into ‘Joan’ were premature. Later, ‘Joan’, with medical intervention (including a mastectomy and plastic surgery to re-build his penis) resumed life as John, married and through adoption became the father of two children (Dreger1998: para. 3)

<sup>6</sup> There are numerous historical accounts that support Butler’s assertion about the relationship between sexual intelligibility and the presupposition of humanness. In some cases intersexed individuals were put to death for failing to conform to sexual norms. Fausto-Sterling (1993) says that according to Plato there were three sexes—male, female and hermaphrodite—but that the third sex was lost over time. She says that in Europe by the end of the Middle Ages, hermaphrodites were forced to choose a sex and stick with it:

The penalty for transgressing was often death. Thus in the 1600s a Scottish hermaphrodite living as a woman was buried alive after impregnating his/her master’s daughter. (Fausto-Sterling 1993: 23)

<sup>7</sup> The right to be registered immediately after birth and to acquire a name and a nationality is recognised under article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2004 Bangladesh passed the Birth and Deaths Registration Act which came into force in 2006. The Act linked the possession of a birth certificate to the provision of public services such as education, immunisation and the right to vote (Chowdhury 2007). UNICEF estimates that the birth registration rate for children aged under five years has increased from 9.8 per cent in 2006 to 53.6 per cent in 2009.

## Chapter 3

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### Young people, media and identity

The study of children's popular culture has a great deal to say about childhood, and the relationship of adults to childhood ... (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002: 2)

#### Introduction

A new interest in identity across many academic disciplines coupled with growing interest in exploring the many identity-related issues that arise from contemporary children's engagement with new digital technologies, particularly those related to the impact of 'virtuality' (Bailey 2005) on the child subject has placed issues of identity firmly at the forefront of recent academic research on children and the media (see recent edited collections, for example, Buckingham 2008b; Buckingham & Willett 2006). However, while identity has not always had the prominence in media research that it now enjoys, it is nevertheless possible to trace fundamental assumptions about identity even in early research on the media's impact on children and, in later research on the media's, particularly television's, influence on children's *developing* identities.

This chapter will attempt to situate both the thesis and the Harm research in the context of media research on children and identity, specifically in relation to the shift from research which focuses exclusively on the study of the impact of *media representations* on children's identities to research more interested in children's *media-related practices* in

relation to young people's 'performance', 'exploration', 'definition', 'construction', 'negotiation' of their identities (e.g. Buckingham 1993b; Buckingham 1996; Davies, et al. 2000; Kelley, et al. 1999). In particular, it will highlight research which discusses identity in relation to 'childhood' and 'age' or 'generation' (e.g. Caron & Caronia 2000; Gixti 2000; Kelley, et al. 1999). It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive review of academic research on the child audience but rather, to examine how identity and childhood has been researched and understood in media research on children.

### **Concern about children**

Academic research on children, identity and the media, like other research which examines children's engagement with the media, is framed to a significant extent by concerns about the potential harmful effects of the media on children (see Buckingham 1993b; Buckingham 1993c). Underlying these concerns are different ideological assumptions about childhood and the child; the role and responsibilities of the state and parents in raising a child; child wellbeing; and hence, implicitly, about the nature and extent of the harm that may result from a child's engagement with the media. In their 'history' of child concern, Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) trace the rise of three contemporary discourses of child concern which have shaped both policy and practice in respect of children. These they refer to as traditionalism, welfarist protectionism and child emancipation. Although the Stainton Rogers's discussion is primarily in relation to the provision of child welfare, the three discourses of child concern they identify can similarly be seen to frame both academic research and public debate on children and the media; and media policy and practice in respect of children's engagement with the media.

The first discourse the authors identify is that of traditionalism, a discourse which they say is applied not to children generally but to ‘proximal’ children, children who are close to us, such as ‘children of our people, our caste, our tribe, our family’ (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992: 78). While ‘traditional’ understandings of the child and child-rearing are diverse they share a common tendency to frame childhood ‘within a continuous past’ with specific traditions of good child-rearing practice and established mores (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992: 78). Typically conservative, the diverse strands of traditionalism in practice ‘come together around concerns about parental rights, discipline, religious education and protecting the innocence of children from corrupting mass culture’ (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992: 79). Therefore, anything that threatens traditional child-rearing practices and understandings of the child is considered harmful. Characteristic concerns of this type construct the media as an unwelcome stranger that enters the homes and lives of ‘our children’ by stealth, challenging the parent’s role in child-rearing, eroding family values, undermining long held ideals such as respect for one’s elders and ‘exposing’ children to hitherto adult spheres of knowledge. Such views are informed by a ‘powerful nostalgia for a “golden age” which apparently existed before television’ (Buckingham 1993b: 7) and the protection of ‘our’ children from media harm becomes a moral crusade.

The second discourse, welfarist protectionism, developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a response to the challenges to received understandings of children and education posed by authors such as Locke, Rousseau and Montessori (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992). Welfarist protectionism ‘sought to improve the educational, environmental, legal, life-opportunity, moral, and physical condition of the young through an uneasy alliance between statutory and voluntary action’ (Stainton Rogers & Stainton

Rogers 1992: 80). In so doing, the discourse of welfarist protectionism defined the ‘needs’ of children; ‘created large scale monitorial agencies (child care workers, school medical services)’; and developed ‘institutional care systems’ to protect children (primarily poor, working class) whose families failed to meet their needs (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992: 80).

The lasting influence of welfarist protectionism in relation to concerns about the media and children can be seen in the call for state intervention to protect children, particularly those from ‘deviant families’—such as, single-parent families, welfare-dependent families and families where both parents work—from the harmful effects of the media (Buckingham 1993b). From the perspective of this discourse, such parents are believed to have failed their children through their inability to monitor and regulate their children’s media access and, the wellbeing of their children threatened by such harms as watching television or using the internet alone, and having unlimited and unrestricted media access, possibly to inappropriate content.

Underlying these concerns are ideological constructions of children as vulnerable and impressionable and therefore at particular risk from the harmful influences of the media. Much of the perceived vulnerability of children stems from dominant constructions of childhood, largely via borrowings from developmental psychology, which view childhood as a process of ‘becoming’ (see discussion in Chapters 1 and 2). Within such constructions children are viewed as lacking adult competencies. Typically then, media research undertaken in response to public concerns about children’s engagement with the media has been motivated by the desire to protect the developing child by measuring or furnishing proof of the negative effects of the media on children.

The contemporary legacy of welfare protectionism is, according to Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992: 81), that ‘the child's “right” to protection is viewed as paramount’ with the inherent consequence that in order to protect children the state may be called upon to override other rights, including the civil rights of parents and children. In Australian media regulation, this legacy has been manifested in the establishment of the television industry codes of practice, and the Children’s Television Standards where the child’s perceived need to be protected from media harm takes precedence over various kinds of freedoms, such as the right of children to freely access information.

The third discourse, child emancipation, according to Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992: 81), operates by modelling itself on other liberatory movements, such as those for women, the disabled and for workers’ rights. Hence, the delineation of children’s rights (as, for example, in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*) is a key objective and, the prevention of the abuse of children’s rights, is believed to be key to the wellbeing of the child. From within this discourse, children in so far as they possess rights ‘can be harmed through a failure to act towards them as is required by their possession of [these] rights’ (Archard 1993: 153).

In Australian media policy and regulation, evidence of a child emancipatory discourse can be seen in the ‘positive provision’ objective of the Australian Children’s Television Standards, which embodies an implicit conception of the entitlements or rights of Australian children:

The objectives of the CTS 2009 are to ensure that children have access to a variety of quality television programs made specifically for them, including Australian drama and



non-drama programs ... (ACMA 2009: 1)

In media research this emancipatory urge can be seen in research on children which claims to be ‘on the side of the audience’. This tendency, Buckingham (1993b: 42) says, typifies cultural studies audience research that seeks to ‘speak on behalf of those who are seen to lack a voice—and to enable them to “speak for themselves”’. In relation to children, the emancipatory desire in media research has arisen as a counter to the idea of the child as a ‘passive victim’ of a ‘powerful media’; a construction that frames public debates about the harmful effects of the media on children and certain types of research, primarily ‘effects research’ (Buckingham 1993b). Instead, as will be discussed further below, research having an emancipatory motivation tends to emphasise the ‘activity’ of the child in his or her engagement with the media and the right of children to have their voices heard in debates about the media.

Unsurprisingly, these discourses of concern in relation to children and their engagement with the media, also frame the Harm focus group discussions. Chapter 5 identifies the contradictions and tensions in the interplay of emancipatory discourses, the research aims of the Harm project, and more traditional protectionist discourses. Chapter 5 also examines the role these discourses play in ‘positioning’ the participants during the focus group discussions. Chapter 6 shows how the participants mobilise in the discussions cultural knowledge about children and childhood; particularly, knowledge derived from media discourses.

## **Media research and identity: the ‘activity/passivity’ binary**

As mentioned, research on children and the media has not always involved explicit discussion of children’s subjectivity or identity. Nonetheless, even where there is little explicit discussion of subjectivity or human agency, all media research makes fundamental assumptions about identity and the passivity or activity of individuals in relation to meaning-making and communication.

Characterising media research generally, Bailey (2005) and others (e.g. Buckingham 1993b; Buckingham 1993c; 2000; Morley 1992) have observed, that both popular and academic analyses of the media have tended to fall to one side or the other of ‘a binary of activity/passivity’ (Bailey 2005: 15) in their characterisation of the relationship of the audience to the mass media. The so-called ‘media effects’ and ‘uses and gratifications’ media research traditions are frequently contrasted to exemplify the opposing poles of this binary in relation to media research.

Standing at one pole, media effects research in its attempt to find proof of the negative effects of the media effectively eliminates a concept of active subjectivity through its characterisation of the media-audience relation as one of cause and effect. Here, the audience is understood as passively absorbing media messages from a powerful media. At the opposing pole, uses and gratifications research endows the audience members with agency by introducing a highly individualised and empowered, active, self-aware subject that is a variant of the ‘classical subject’ (discussed in Chapter 1), in its examination of how individuals actively select and use the media to satisfy a diverse set of needs.

In his work exploring the models of social subjectivity and identity employed in media

studies, Bailey (2005) traces the activity/passivity binary from effects research through uses and gratifications research, and various forms of textual analysis to later cultural studies inspired audience research. From his survey he concludes, despite the absence of explicit discussion of identity in early media research that the ‘fundamental assumptions’ in such research ‘regarding the passivity or activity of individuals in relation to systems of meaning making and communication are remarkably similar’ (Bailey 2005: 20) to those that characterise later media research that more explicitly deals with subjectivity. For example, he discusses how Althusser’s understanding of subjectivity as the product of discourse, which has left a lasting legacy informing academic media scholarship from *Screen* theory to much contemporary work, has become associated with the passivity side of the binary through its association with domination and the workings of ideology. While at the other pole, audience and fan-based work, like that of John Fiske which has focused on theories of agency, resistance and popular pleasure, characterises the audience as human agents rather than as social subjects interpellated by discourse (Fiske 1993).

The active/passive binary and associated assumptions about identity and subjectivity that Bailey argues characterise the field of media studies can be situated in relation to broader feminist and left debate about questions of agency, discussed in Chapter 1.

### **‘Compounding’ the activity/passivity binary: the ‘child-audience’**

In relation to media research on children, however, the activity/passivity binary has a dual existence. In addition to characterising the media-audience relationship, the binary is also intrinsic to contemporary constructions of childhood, commonly expressed in their characterisation either as ‘beings’ or as ‘becomings’ (see Chapter 2) and is again articulated in terms of children’s agency.

The child as ‘being’ is conceived of as a social actor or social subject in his/her own right (James, Jenks & Prout 1998); the child is understood as a ‘person’, actively constructing his/her own childhood. The child as a ‘becoming’, on the other hand, is passive, incomplete, acted upon, not yet formed and concern is for his/her *developing* personhood or identity. The latter construction is explicitly oriented toward the future and the child is seen as a ‘future agent’ or ‘potential subject’ (Uprichard 2007).

The bringing together of ‘child’ and ‘audience’ in the compound ‘child-audience’ requires that any attempt to understand how identity has been understood in media research necessitates an understanding of the ideological baggage carried by both ‘child’ and ‘audience’.

## Media ‘representations’ and identity

Where media effects research has attempted to examine issues of identity, such research has tended to focus on the effects of media *representations* and the possible impact of these representations on the identities of particular social groups, particularly those identified as marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable, including children. While generally little attention has explicitly been directed towards outlining the theory or model of identity informing the research, much of this research in respect of children has been consistent with a view of childhood as a process of ‘becoming’ and the child as ‘incomplete’, focusing on children’s *developing identities* underpinned by theories of identity formation derived from developmental psychology (see Chapter 1).

Sociological research on children and media has tended to operate from the perspective of functionalist 'socialisation theory' (Buckingham 1993b: 14) which shares many of the same assumptions as psychological theories of child development, regarding children as 'passive recipients of "external" social forces, rather than active participants in the construction of their own social lives and identities' (Buckingham 1993b: 14) and childhood as process whereby children progressively overcome their 'inadequacies' to enter 'the social world of adulthood' (Buckingham 1993b: 15).

Concern about media representations and research into the possible impact of these representations on children, in keeping with the developmental logic that underlies ideas about childhood, is often expressed in terms of children's *developing* personalities, attitudes, values and beliefs.

In both debate and research on the impact of media content on children, there has been a general, almost common-sense, presumption of the negative or undesirable effects of media representations on identity of the developing child, which derives its legitimacy from assumptions about the nature of the child and the 'natural' process of his/her development from childhood to adulthood (in the recent Australian context, see for example, the two reports published by the Australia Institute on the sexualisation of children, Rush & La Nauze 2006a; Rush & La Nauze 2006b)<sup>1</sup>. Premised on the belief that the present-day availability and ubiquity of the media ensures that contemporary childhood is a 'fundamentally different phenomenon' than childhood of the past (Huntemann & Morgan 2001: 309), the mere fact of the media's intrusion into the formerly 'natural' developmental or socialising processes, is usually presented as sufficient guarantee of its impact since every engagement with the media potentially provides the child with a guide

to behaviour, attitudes and beliefs and a ‘potential source of identification’ (Huntemann & Morgan 2001: 310).

With regards to the impact of televised violence and aggression; for example, a major area of concern was the potential for ‘imitative identification’ (Howitt & Cumberbatch 1976). Here reference to ‘identification’, whereby the child viewer identifies with one or more of the characters portrayed in the media, does not signal an engagement with the dynamics of identification (see Chapter 1) nor does it attribute agency to the child in terms of his or her involvement in meaning-making. Rather, in media effects research the concept of ‘identification’ does little more than provide a mechanism with which to account for powerful effects of the media on the ‘vulnerable’ child. Indeed in much effects research, the concept of ‘identification’ has not been satisfactorily theorised or rigorously studied (Cohen 2001; Howitt & Cumberbatch 1976). As a consequence of the presumption of the undesirable effects of media representation on children, the starting point for much research into the media’s influence on children’s developing identities has been the analysis of media *content*—as opposed to the study of audiences—to uncover how the media’s cultural messages represent particular social attitudes, values and beliefs; social groups and individuals; and the frequency of such portrayals. Take, for example, this statement from Huntemann and Morgan’s (2001) review of research on the role of the mass media in children’s identity development:

The first step in understanding how mass media influence the identity development of children is that something needs to be known about the content of the mass media, particularly the images and representations portrayed that may contribute to children’s conception of themselves and others. (Huntemann & Morgan 2001: 313)

Research into media content, ranging from relatively simple content analysis to more complex forms of textual analysis (such as, *Screen* theory and various forms of discourse analysis) has examined how different social groups are represented in the media by identifying racial and ethnic (e.g. Entman 1990; Greenburg & Brand 1994), sexual (e.g. Hart 1999; Seidman 1992), gender (e.g. Davis 1990; Macnamara 2006; Signorielli 1993b) and other representations and stereotypes (see Signorielli 1985 for summary); patterns of inclusion and exclusion (e.g. Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory 2009); ideological and other aspects of representation. In psychological and sociological research of this kind, the revelation through analysis of the presence of stereotypes or 'negative' representations and children's exposure to this content is taken as sufficient evidence of its effects (Buckingham 1993b), following the logic that increased media viewing 'by definition exposes children to a large quantity of stereotypical content' (Lemish 2007: 106) and provides potential sources for identification. Research from within media studies from *Screen* theory through various forms of textual analysis informed by postmodern or poststructuralist thought, although rejecting behaviourist assumptions that media texts 'cause' or 'influence' social attitudes and behaviour, has nevertheless retained an important role, more or less explicitly theorised, for media texts in relation to identity (see, for example, Macnamara 2006 on representation, boys and gender) particularly the discursive production of subjectivity (Bailey 2005; Buckingham 1993b).

### **Media representations, the child-audience and identity**

Moving beyond simple acceptance of negative or undesirable effects of media representations on the identity of the developing child based on the effects of mere

exposure, research turned to examine the question of *how* such representations have impacted on children's identity formation and, in doing so, began to examine the child-audience. The impact of media representation on children's *developing* identities has been explored from a number of different academic disciplines, particularly psychology and communications, using a variety of methodologies, including interviews, surveys, self-reporting and observation, to examine, for example, how children perceive media representations of gender behaviour and occupational roles; children's identification and para-social interaction with television characters; the effects of counter-stereotypical portrayals on children's attitudes; and the cumulative impact of watching certain types of content. Research, for example, has been carried out on the influence of the media representations on the development of children's gender identity (e.g. Götz, Lemish, Aidman & Moon 2005; Lemish 1998; Signorielli & Lears 1992); sexuality (e.g. Brown & Newcomer 1991; Wartella, Scantlin, Kotler, Huston & Donnerstein 2000); racial identity (e.g. Allen 1993) and attitudes (e.g. Graves 1999); and expectations about their future in the workforce (e.g. Signorielli 1993a).

Despite the move away from an exclusive focus on media content to greater examination of the child-audience, much of the psychological and sociological research on the impact of representation on children's identities retains a notion of the 'direct effects' of media representations on children. Such research underpinned by a concept of meaning as something contained within the text, capable of being 'objectively' identified and quantified (Buckingham 1993b: 13), effectively forecloses the possibility of considering the child-audience as active agents engaged in meaning making. The persistent influence of the 'effects' tradition in research and debate about children, particularly in relation to media violence, despite its declined use in the study of adults, reflects a sympathy between



its characterisation of the audience and dominant assumptions about childhood (Buckingham 2000).

The application of perspectives from cognitive psychology to study the impact of media content on children's identities signals the beginning of a shift towards a view of the child audience as 'active' rather than as 'passive' in their engagement with the media (Buckingham 1993b; 2000). Although children's role in actively understanding, interpreting and evaluating media texts is emphasised (Buckingham 1993b; 2000) such research retains a developmental focus. This can be seen, for example, in research which identifies deficits in the child's understanding compared to that of the adult (Buckingham 1993b; 2000), using normative developmental models to chart the growth of children's media competencies (e.g. development of children's ability to identify advertising content); or in research which measures how the 'micro' changes in children's attitudes, values and beliefs that occur as a result of their viewing of certain types of media content accumulate over time to 'shape the adult identity a child will carry and modify throughout his or her life' (Huntemann & Morgan 2001: 311) (e.g. impact of racial, gender and other stereotypes on children's developing identities).

With the development of cultural studies inspired audience research on children, can be seen the beginnings of a convergence of the emancipatory ideals of cultural studies audience research with those of the sociology of childhood. Such research (for example, Buckingham 1993b; 1996; Hodge & Tripp 1986) has challenged constructions of the child as passive and vulnerable which have dominated public debate and framed academic research about the potential harmful effects of the media on children, replacing them with constructions that emphasise children's agency and activity in their 'engagement' with the

media.

That audience researchers concerned with challenging dominant constructions of the child in popular debate about the harmful effects of the media on children should be primarily concerned with media content and children's identity is not surprising given the strong focus in public debate and early media research on the effects of media content on children's identity development. As a consequence, much research that has attempted to counter simple linear models of influence or effects and a model of a passive or manipulated audience has done so by emphasising the activity of the audience in relation to media content. Children's 'interpretation' of media content, such as television programs, is seen as an active process of meaning making with similarities to the reading of printed text (Buckingham 1993b; Messenger Davies 1997).

With children's agency at the forefront, research has shifted to centre on *how* children 'make sense' of what they view by investigating the complex ways in which children actively make meaning. Inspired by emancipatory urges, research frequently explicitly claims to be motivated by the desire to give children a voice, to be child-centred or to shift or widen the agenda of debate about children and the media (Buckingham 1996) in order to actively counter the absence of children's perspectives in debates about the potential harmful effects of the media (Buckingham 1993b: 10). In this respect, the Harm research comes out of this tradition: the stated aim at the heart of the project being to bring to the fore '*children's* understandings' of harmful media materials and to (re)position those understandings so that they sit alongside those of adults.

Until relatively recently, however, audience research of this kind has tended to address identity implicitly, primarily through its engagement with the ‘activity’ of the child-audience. The ‘activity’ of the audience becomes possible because meaning-making is conceptualised as a social process. The activity of the audiences is frequently expressed in relation to the complexity of media content and the activities of ‘meaning making’. In so doing, such work positions itself in opposition to both ‘effects’ research where meaning is something contained within the text, which effectively eliminates a concept of active agency; and forms of textual analysis informed by Althusserian theories of ideology which emphasise the ‘subjection’ of the audience to the workings of ideology. Where this approach differs from that of research employing perspectives from cognitive psychology is in its conceptualisation of the ‘activity’ of children; children are seen ‘not merely as cognitively active, but also as socially active—as social agents in their own right’ (Buckingham 2000: 118). Early research of this type, such as that of Messenger Davies (1997) and Hodge and Tripp (1986), which Tulloch characterises as ‘television literacy audience research’ (Tulloch 2000: 134), despite its attribution of agency to the child-audience through its use of concept of the ‘active audience’, retains a notion of the child as in some sense ‘incomplete’ through its exploration of children’s *developing* media competencies.

## **‘Using’ the media: media practices, identity and the child-audience**

The shift in audience research to an interest in children’s media *practices* rather than children’s ‘responses to’ media *content* is perhaps more readily apparent in audience work that could be labelled as ‘ethnographic’ or ‘observational’ in its approach, with its

emphasis on how children *use* the media in their everyday lives. In relation to identity, research has explored children's use of the media in 'negotiating' their identities (Buckingham 2000: 111); for example, Marie Gillespie's (1993; 1995) study of the ways in which young Punjabi Londoners use TV as a resource in negotiating issues of cultural difference and identity; and Chris Richards's (1993) examination of how children use television and other media in their enactment and exploration of their possible identities.

Significantly for this project, the beginnings of a similar shift can be seen in what might be characterised as less 'naturalistic' audience research on children (e.g. Buckingham 1993b; 1996; Davies, et al. 2000; Gixti 2000; Kelley, et al. 1999)—research which relies on the analysis of children's talk obtained through focus group discussions or interviews. As will be discussed below, this focus on media practices, particularly in work such as that of Buckingham and his colleagues (e.g. Buckingham 1993b; 1996; Davies, et al. 2000; Kelley, et al. 1999) which comes from a discourse analytic perspective is, at least in part, a result of its conceptualisation of language as 'social practice' and engagement with the burgeoning critiques of audience research and qualitative methodologies, largely informed by postmodern or poststructuralist theory (see Chapter 4).

In keeping with the new concerns with issues of identity across many academic disciplines, interest in the relationship between the media and children's identities has been more explicitly articulated in much contemporary audience research; particularly, children's gender and ethnic identities (for example, Buckingham 1993a on masculine identity; Buckingham & de Block 2010 on migrant and ethnic identity; Gillespie 1995 on ethnic identity) and, of importance for this research, a small number of studies which

examine, at least in part, age or ‘generation’ (Alanen 1994) as a dimension of identity (e.g. Caron & Caronia 2000; Davies, et al. 2000; Grixiti 2000).

In much of this research, the influence of the deconstructive critiques of identity (Hall 1991; 1996a) can be seen, with identity conceptualised as multiple, situational and fragmented (see Chapter 1). The notion of the ‘activity’ of the child is frequently extended to also encompass the child’s active involvement in identity ‘work’, signalling rejection or dissatisfaction with behaviourist assumptions about the powerful impact of the media as a source of stereotyped role models on children’s identity development and the ongoing legacy of uses and gratifications research with its focus on the activity or agency of the audience.<sup>2</sup> This new activity of the child is evidenced in the terms in which identity is discussed. Rather than children passively absorbing and internalising stereotypical role models, children are now increasingly conceptualised as *using* the media to ‘negotiate’, ‘explore’, ‘resist’, ‘define’, ‘construct’ and ‘claim’ identities.

The following section will look in more detail at the development of some key examples of this audience research on children, beginning with the work of David Buckingham which has been at the forefront of this trend. It will examine the shift in focus from media representation to children’s media practices and the emergence of a more explicit focus on children’s identity. The section will highlight research which contributes to an understanding of child and adult as identities, exploring how both the child and identity have been conceptualised within this research. It is within the context of these developments in cultural studies inspired audience research—the shift to a more explicit interest in children’s identity, the focus on media-related practices rather than

representation, the conceptualisation of talk as social practice and the rejection of behaviourist assumptions about the powerful influence of the media—that this project’s focus on the ‘child’ as an *identity* and ‘identity’ as *performance* can be situated.

### **Talk as social practice: the emerging focus on children, identity and media practices**

Buckingham (2000) characterises his 1993 study, *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy (Talk)*, and his 1996 work, *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television (Emotion)*, as research that investigates ‘how children define and construct their social identities through talk about television’ (Buckingham 2000: 110), suggesting both that identity is at the forefront of this research and that his research constructs children as actively involved in ‘identity work’ (Davies, et al. 2000: 21).

Despite Buckingham’s claim for the centrality of identity to his research, in both works the investigation of identity is not stated as an aim of the research and nor is space given to theorisation of identity. Rather, the work is positioned in terms of audience ‘activity’ and in opposition to effects research. In the introductory chapters of both *Talk* and *Emotion* Buckingham situates his work in the context of contemporary anxieties about the powerful influences of media texts on children. In *Talk* he says his aim is to question the notions of ‘influence’ and ‘effect’ on which such anxieties are frequently based (Buckingham 1993b: vii) and the book begins with an overview of media debates and a discussion of how these debates have framed research. In *Emotion* Buckingham similarly situates his work in the context of public anxiety about the murder of James Bulger and the ensuing moral panic over *Child’s Play 3*. In order to counter notions of media influence and the corresponding

construction of children as passive innocents that has dominated such debates, Buckingham expresses a strong desire to explore children's *activity* in relation to media texts. In *Talk*, he says his aim is to 'investigate the complex ways in which children actively make meaning and pleasure from television' (Buckingham 1993b: vii) while similarly in *Emotion* Buckingham says that his research 'seeks to identify how children—define and make sense of what they watch' (Buckingham 1996: 4).

Having clearly positioned his work in terms of audience activity and in opposition to effects research Buckingham highlights a further significant difference between his study and other research. In *Emotion*, he explains that the starting point for his investigation is different, 'instead of starting with material that we as adults suspect might upset children, this study begins by asking children themselves to identify such material, and to talk about how they respond to it' (Buckingham 1996: 5). His emphasis on children's 'responses' rather than the media's 'effects' further signals a more active role for the child viewer in his research and a view of 'communication as a kind of dialogue' (Buckingham 1996: 7) rather than as a one-way, linear process. While children's understanding of media content remains important in Buckingham's research, in that his work investigates the complexity of children's responses to television texts—'Part Three' of *Talk*, for example, explores children's understanding of genre, narrative, modality and character—there is a strong shift in focus. Both *Talk* and *Emotion* explore the inherent activity involved in children's responses to media texts, signalled by his interest in how children 'define', 'make sense of' and 'talk about' the media, which is indicative of a new interest in children's media related practices.

The influence on Buckingham's work of the emancipatory urges of both cultural studies audience research and the new sociology of childhood (see Chapter 2) are easily identified and his own aims in this regard are clearly stated. In *Emotion* these are expressed in his desire to give children a voice. He says:

The kinds of debates I have described in this chapter are typically carried on without reference to children's own perspectives. As in many other areas, it is adults who claim to act in the best interests of children—yet children themselves are often simply ignored. In attempting to move beyond the limitations of these debates, therefore, I want to begin by exploring children's responses ... (Buckingham 1996: 39)

In *Talk* the emancipatory aims are expressed in relation to the development of media education in schools; Buckingham states that the major aim of the book is 'to inform the work of teachers who are seeking to develop media education in schools' (Buckingham 1993b: 19) and to provide a basis for that work to proceed. This stance is further developed in *Emotion* in a call for an 'educational' approach to children's media regulation; one that 'empowers children and parents to make decisions on their own behalf' (Buckingham 1996: 16). Such an approach Buckingham asserts will require well-organised media education in schools, parental involvement and government support but, above all, must begin by 'listening to the voices of children themselves' (Buckingham 1996: 16).

While the exploration of children's identity is not expressed as a primary aim of either book, both studies make a major contribution to research on children's identity beyond the construction of children as active agents through their involvement in the activity of making meaning. Rather than being a central aim of the research, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Buckingham's focus on identity emerges via his critique of earlier



audience research, which he criticises for its propensity to take audience ‘talk’ at face value, and through his use of discourse analysis, with its conceptualisation of talk as ‘social practice’.

In an attempt to avoid the empiricism of earlier audience research with its tendency to reduce what people *say* to ‘evidence of what they think’ (Buckingham 1993b: 42), Buckingham offers his research not as an analysis of what children think about television but rather as a ‘reading’—one of many possible readings—of children’s talk about television. Consistent with this view he provides lengthy quotations from the transcripts of the discussions with the stated aim of giving ‘the reader access to at least some “raw” data in order that [his] analysis can be checked and disputed’ (Buckingham 1993b: 61). In addition, he argues for the importance of considering social context and social relations in interpreting children’s talk about television (Buckingham 1993b: 59); that is, for a focus on the complexity of the focus group discussions themselves rather than filtering out these dimensions of children’s talk in order to arrive at the ‘truth’ of what children really think:

Existing social relationships between members of the group, and the ways in which these relationships are negotiated and redefined in the process of discussion will significantly determine the meanings which are produced. Trying to “filter out” these social relationships in order to arrive at an account of “what children really think” may be a futile and indeed misguided activity. (Buckingham 1993b: 46)

Buckingham’s approach to the analysis of talk is informed both by his critique of empiricism and the theory of language which informs his analysis (these arguments are developed further in Chapter 4). Drawing on approaches from discourse analysis,

particularly those of Halliday (1985; 1994; 2004) and Fairclough (1992; 1995), which similarly reject the idea of the transparency of language and instead view language as social practice, playing a role in constructing or constituting social reality, Buckingham considers the social functions of language use in the specific context of the focus group discussions. In Buckingham's analysis, therefore, it follows that there is a much greater interest in children's talk about television as a *social act*, and its function in constructing and maintaining relationships in the specific context of the focus group interactions, than in the truths it may reveal about children's engagement with the media.

Having signalled the importance of not 'filtering out' social relations in order to arrive at the truth of what children think, Buckingham's conceptualisation of language as social practice and his consideration of the role of language in the dynamics of the focus group interactions leads almost inevitably to an interest in identity. Both Halliday (1985; 1994; 2004) and Fairclough (1992; 1995) identify the important role of language in constituting social relations, and Fairclough specifically outlines its function in constructing social identity. Similarly, for Buckingham, talk about television is 'instrumental' in 'constructing' and 'sustaining' both social relations and social identity (Buckingham 1993b: 39):

In describing how they feel about television, and passing judgment on what they watch, children (like adults) are also making claims about themselves, and thereby constructing relationships with others. (Buckingham 1996: 8)

In so far as Buckingham's understanding of identity is outlined, primarily in *Talk*, it is consistent with Fairclough's (1992) view of identity as 'constructed' in discourse. Identity

is not ‘fixed’ or ‘given’ but multiple, contradictory and situational, and ‘largely constructed through dialogue’ (Buckingham 1996: 58)—‘talk’ about television, Buckingham says, ‘defines’ us (Buckingham 1993b: 40). A strong notion of ‘activity’ is retained in Buckingham’s description of the process as one of ‘defining or positioning oneself’ (Buckingham 1993b: 75) which, despite his assertion that the process may be ‘conscious’ or ‘unconscious’, appears in most instances to attribute a high degree agency to the child-subject in the constitution of his/her identity (see Chapter 1).

Buckingham’s construction of the child remains consistently an ‘active’ one. Unlike the earlier television literacy audience research, Buckingham dismisses any sense of the child as ‘incomplete’ or incompetent in his ‘social theory of television literacy’. Rather than seeing children’s media competencies in developmental terms, he defines them as a ‘set of social practices’ that are plural and diverse (Buckingham 1993b: 284). Neither does he discuss children’s *developing* identities, instead he looks at how the children in his study in their talk about television ‘position’ themselves in relation to the social categories age, class, gender and race. In this, Buckingham’s general approach to studying identity would be the same for both adult and child.

The thesis shares many of theoretical and methodological similarities with Buckingham’s approach to analysing children’s talk: from Buckingham’s critique of empiricism to his conceptualisation of language as social practice. The thesis, however, has a dual emphasis on social practice. Firstly, drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity, the thesis endeavours to explore how the participants in the research perform their identities in the context of focus group discussions which foreground their identities as *children*, primarily through analysis of the participants’ interactions in the context of the focus group

discussions, as social practice. Secondly, by examining what the participants say *about* their media uses, the thesis attempts to shed light on the importance of young peoples' media practices in their everyday performances of themselves as 'adult'/'child'. The thesis also focuses on 'adult' and 'child' as identity categories, rather than, as Buckingham does, on 'age' since the Harm research principally addresses the participants as 'children' (see Chapter 5) and it is in relation to the binaries adult and child that the participants primarily perform their identities (see Chapters 6 and 7). It is Buckingham's discussion of his participants' use of the category 'age' in positioning and defining their selves and others that this research hopes to expand and build upon in its consideration not of age as an identity category but of the binary opposites, 'adult' and 'child'.

Using similar methods of analysis and working with similar assumptions to those employed by Buckingham (1993b; 1996) research by Kelley, Buckingham & Davies (1999) extends Buckingham's work and deals more explicitly with children's identity. Kelley et al. characterise their research as an examination of how children's talk about sexual content on television serves as a form of 'identity work', through which children define their identities in terms of age and gender (1999: 238). Their extended discussion of age, particularly, in relation to how children define what it means to be a 'child' or an 'adult', will be drawn on in this project.

As in Buckingham's work, Kelley et al. begin by situating their research in the context of anxieties about children's access to the media, in particular concerns about the erosion of traditional notions of childhood. They then quickly move to distance their study from research framed by such anxieties by signalling their focus on children's 'responses' to and 'interpretations' of media representations of sexual behaviour. Again, media content

remains important but the emphasis is on the analysis of children's talk about television, in particular on the interpersonal dimension of their talk in the specific context of the group discussions. The idea of talk as social practice is retained but now expressed in terms of 'performance'. The notion of the 'identity work' children are engaged in remains an active one, with children 'claiming' and 'constructing' their 'own' identities and the notion of performance is extended to include the 'discursive performance' of identity.

The authors' precise understanding of 'performance' is not elaborated other than to signal 'activity'; a notion of identity that is situational and constructed through discourse; and their rejection of empiricism. The attribution of high degree of agency to the child-subject in the constitution of his/her identity through the description of how children 'claim' and 'construct' their own identities suggests that the authors' understanding of performance is closer to that employed by Goffman than to Butler's 'performativity' (see Chapter 1). An interesting difference from Buckingham's early work is in the authors' conceptualisation of children's identities as 'ongoing' in their description of 'processes of identity formation' in the conclusion to their article:

Our emphasis here has been on the ways in which interpretation is performed in the context of group discussion; and on the functions that such talk might serve in terms of the ongoing formation of children's identities. (Kelley, et al. 1999: 238)

Given that the article provides no theoretical elaboration to clarify its use and understanding of identity, the return of the notion of identity formation, a concept with its roots in developmental psychology, suggests a similar return to the idea of children as 'incomplete' and a conceptualisation of the process of forming an (adult) identity as the

work of childhood or adolescence. The lack of theorisation of identity also causes ambiguity in relation to the meaning of their statement: ‘it is not our aim to uncover children’s “true” identities’ (Kelley, et al. 1999: 238). On the one hand, the presence of quote marks around ‘true’ suggests the term is problematic for the authors. But in the alternative aim they outline, ‘to provide an account of some of the ways in which identities are discursively defined and negotiated by these particular children in the course of these particular social interactions’, it is unclear whether the authors are expressing their rejection of the idea of a ‘singular identity’ or acknowledging that their research cannot get to ‘truth’ of children’s identities but only the discursive performance of identity within the specific context in which the research occurs.

### **Identity: ‘childhood’, ‘age’ and children’s media practices**

Significantly for this thesis, some of the work on children’s identity and media-related practices also touches on children’s understandings of ‘adult’ and ‘child’ and their ‘identification’ with adult subject positions. Caron and Caronia’s (2000) research, entitled ‘A study on Canadian family discourse about media practices in the home’ is one such example which offers some valuable insight into the relationship between children’s media practices and identity, particularly in relation to the identities ‘adult’ and ‘child’. In their discussion of television they conclude that children actively seek out adult content as part of an identity making strategy so that for young people choosing to view violent television is a ‘symbolic practice’:

Watching a film with “lots of blood” becomes a way of portraying oneself as an adult ...

In other words television preferences become a symbolic practice through which young people gain access to ways to define identity. (Caron & Caronia 2000: 317)

The research by Kelley, Buckingham & Davies (1999) discussed above similarly suggests that for children the appeal of 'adult' programs is as much about 'gaining access to them as it is do with their actual content', saying that television programs 'notorious for featuring scenes of sex (or for the younger children, action and horror genres) were for many children symbolic of entry into adult time and space' (Kelley, et al. 1999: 228).

Grixti's (2000) study of Maltese children's talk about 'adult-rated' material on television, similarly sheds light on how children's media practices are tied up with their identities, their understandings of 'adult' and 'child', the 'testing of boundaries' and trying 'prove that they are not "childish"' (Grixti 2000: 136).

As in Buckingham's (1993b; 1996) work and Kelley, Buckingham and Davies (1999) earlier collaboration, Davies, Buckingham and Kelley (2000) position their later work on 'children's taste culture' in the context of public concerns; in this case, concern about 'the shortcomings of children's natural tastes' (2000: 5). Similarly, this study also retains a conceptualisation of talk as 'social practice' and the study is of children's 'expressions' of their media 'tastes' and 'preferences' in the context of the focus group discussions themselves and not a study of what the focus group talk may 'represent'. Significantly for my research, their study continues the shift toward a greater interest in issues of identity and, importantly, specifically in relation to the identities 'adult' and 'child'. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1978/1984) work on judgements of taste and their relation to social class and power, the authors assert that children's declarations of their own television program tastes 'necessarily entail a form of "identity work"' (2000:21) and that children's preferences for certain forms of adult programming, suggest that 'children are choosing to identify with

and to occupy *some* “adult” subject positions rather than others’ (Davies, Buckingham & Kelley 2000: 10).

In this study, Davies, Buckingham and Kelley refer to the ‘socially performative nature’ (2000: 10) of the focus group discussions in their elaboration of how children use judgements of taste to ‘claim’ certain identities:

Children’s expressions of their tastes and preferences are self-evidently social acts: they are one of the means whereby children lay claim to—and attribute meaning to—their preferred social identities. (Davies, et al. 2000: 10)

In the absence of an elaboration of a theory of identity, the authors’ assertion of the importance of children’s agency in ‘choosing’ to identify with certain adult subject positions rather than others (Davies, Buckingham & Kelley 2000: 10) and in ‘constructing’ their own identities (Davies, et al. 2000: 11) suggests that their use of ‘social performativity’ is very different from that of Butler who rejects the notion of a self-determining subject (see Chapter 1).

In Davies, Buckingham and Kelley’s work there is also some qualification of the notion of children’s ‘activity’. This occurs firstly, in relation to the authors’ discussion of identity and their understanding of ‘choice’, in their clarification that their position does not imply that children ‘are free to select from an infinite variety of subject positions as and when they choose’ (Davies, et al. 2000: 10). The critique of children’s ‘activity’ is further extended in relation to the concept of children as active viewers—‘we need to avoid the sentimental view of children as necessarily “media-literate active viewers”’ (11).



This critique of the notion of audience activity begins to feature more prominently in later audience work on children, including Buckingham's (2000) own work in which he identifies the need to move beyond the activity/passivity binary that has characterised research on the child audience, proposing that research should no longer see the child audience in essentialist terms 'as *either* active *or* passive, competent or incompetent' (2000: 120). Cook (2005: 157) attributes this rejection of the active/passive (empowered/exploited) binary in later research on children to the growing recognition that many scholars in their dismissal of the 'passive, exploitable' child for the 'active, agentive' child had 'painted themselves into a corner' in relation to the study of children in consumer culture. Cook argues that such a conceptualisation of the child, rather than being liberating for children, is all too readily embraced by commercial industries themselves in order to market to children and that scholars who adopt these same discourses of the agentive, empowered child foreclose the possibility of criticising consumer culture for its role in the exploitation of children:

Many scholars have painted themselves into a corner by wholly embracing this very same, extremely agentive, child. It is a construction that renders criticism and critique of consumer culture and commercial industries nearly impossible because an empowered child is antithetical to exploitation. Thus, those interests and industries that continue to expend great resources on 'knowing' (i.e. researching) children ... in order to market them cannot, in this view be held accountable. (Cook 2005: 157)

While it is true that commercial industries have an interest in constructing the child consumer as active and empowered in order to market to children and break down parental resistance, the idea that the empowered child forecloses the possibility of exploitation is only sustainable if one ignores the very real material and power differences between the

child and global culture industries. Rather than a justification for the need to move beyond the active/passive binary, Cook's position could be interpreted as a yet another 'move' in the ongoing struggle between protectionist and emancipatory discourses: in his criticism of emancipatory discourses for their failure to protect or even account for the child's exploitation; and his reinstatement of the power of the cultural industries over the child. While Cook's rejection of the active/passive binary appears relatively straightforward, his alternative, to see children simply as 'like the rest of us'—as 'both subjects and objects, persons and symbols, active and passive' (Cook 2005: 158)—in its failure to fully elaborate his position or his understanding of the dualities he puts forward, ensures that his position remains too general to function as a guide to practice. In this, the position that Buckingham (2000: 120) advocates, for researchers to identify the range of different activities that children engage in and the social and cultural conditions under which they occur, is a more satisfactory alternative to the active/passive binary.

## **New questions of identity?: Online and digital identities**

The rise of the internet and the greater role of digital technologies in children's lives has seen a new wave of anxieties in relation to children and, questions of identity placed firmly on the agenda for both research and public discussion. Although a number of scholars (e.g. Wartella & Jennings 2000) have noted the similarities of the concerns expressed in relation to digital technologies to those that were associated with the introduction of television, a significant body of academic research has emerged on children, increasingly focused on the impact of digital technologies on the social subject, and framed to some extent by the belief that new technologies 'raise different questions from those which have dominated the research agenda over recent decades' (Livingstone 2002: 18).

The interest in ‘new’ digital technologies and identity has in large part been fuelled by the belief that technologies such as the internet, video and computer games are inherently more active or interactive compared to ‘older’ media, such as television, and therefore, that they raise new questions about identity, especially in a social context in which many believe that the ways in which identity is defined and understood has undergone extensive changes (Buckingham 2008a: 11). Research on identity has, for example, focused on the potential of digital technologies to create the ‘postmodern subject’ by destabilising traditional notions of identity (see Chapter 1); providing a more ‘fluid sense of self’ (Bailey 2005: 160); offering new opportunities for the adoption of multiple and hybrid identities (Bailey 2005; Buckingham 2006), and providing opportunities for ‘new forms of self-construction and self-realization’ (Bailey 2005: 159).

The strong interest in questions of identity in research and popular debate specifically in relation to young people and new technologies, can further be accounted for by the resilience of the idea, derived from psychological and sociological theories of identity formation, that identity and childhood, and particularly adolescence, are bound together in some way (Stern 2008: 96). The centrality of this view of identity can be seen in the ‘return’ in contemporary media research to essentialist constructions of children and young people. For example, Livingstone (2002: 4) describes children and young people as the cultural group ‘most motivated to construct identities’ and ‘adolescence’ as the period of life in which ‘concern with the self is of pre-eminent importance’ (Livingstone 2002: 153). Stern (2008: 96) describes adolescence as the time ‘when individuals are confronted with the task of defining their identity’ while Weber and Mitchell characterise it as a period of ‘identity crises’ (2008: 26).

Of significance for this thesis, the increased interest in the identity-related issues that arise from young people's involvement with digital technologies is reflected in the recent increase in publications, particularly those disseminating research in this area with a focus on youth or adolescent identity (e.g. Buckingham 2008b; Buckingham & Willett 2006; Livingstone 2002). However, even in this recent work, Bailey's (2005) observation about media research generally, that it can be characterised as either lacking or having an 'inadequate' theorisation of identity, retains its currency and, despite the predominance of issues of identity, the concept of identity itself remains thinly theorised. Further, and significantly for this thesis, there has also been a failure to integrate insights formulated by childhood scholars on the one hand and identity scholars on the other so that in the majority of research there tends to be little consideration given to the compatibility of theories of identity with theories of adolescence and childhood; for example, the difficulty of reconciling psychological theories of identity formation and social constructionist accounts of childhood and adolescence. Perhaps, rather than addressing new questions about identity, recent research on digital technologies and identity may, in part, at least, be a return to unresolved questions about identity in relation to a new technology.

That there may be some growing recognition of the lack of theorisation of identity in academic research on children and media, may account for the inclusion of Buckingham's introduction—entitled 'Introducing identity'—in the edited collection, *Youth, Identity and Digital Media* (Buckingham 2008b). In this opening chapter, Buckingham provides a brief introduction to debate about identity and an overview of five different disciplinary approaches to thinking about identity. In the chapter, Buckingham attempts to map how the concepts and issues raised by each approach have informed the research of the authors who comprise the collection, indicating the diversity of approaches to identity which

inform contemporary research on digital media. Very much an introduction rather than a comprehensive theorisation of identity, Buckingham's chapter discusses the implications of each approach to identity 'for understanding young people' (2008a) but gives little consideration to the compatibility of theories of identity with theories of adolescence and childhood in the research he introduces, something this thesis has attempted to address by adapting Butler's theory of performativity to the study of childhood<sup>3</sup>.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the *Corporate Paedophilia Report* suggests that 'exposure' to sexualised images of children may disrupt children's 'natural' development: 'Children's general sexual and emotional development is affected by exposure to advertising and marketing that is saturated with sexualised images and themes. Moreover, to the degree that children focus on sexualising themselves rather than pursuing other more age-appropriate developmental activities, all aspects of their development may be affected.' (Rush & La Nauze 2006a: 2). In their subsequent report on the sexualisation of children, the authors call for government regulation of advertising and marketing so that children are, 'free to develop at their own pace, in their own ways' (Rush & La Nauze 2006b: 1).

<sup>2</sup> Later uses and gratifications research, such as that of Arnett (1995) has listed 'identity formation' as one of the five main uses of the media by adolescents, while Harwood (1997) in his work has specifically examined age-based identifications and television viewing choices.

<sup>3</sup> A more extensive account of identity, particularly ethnic and cultural identity, in relation to children occurs in Buckingham and de Block (2010).

## Chapter 4

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### The research process

Social research, like other things people do, is a human construction, framed and presented within a particular set of discourses (and sometimes ideologies), and conducted in a social context ... Both the substantive concepts and the methods of research used are ways of describing the social world for particular purposes, not just abstract and neutral academic tools. In other words, social ... research is a political process, and always has been. (Punch 1998: 140)

### Introduction

A number of authors (e.g. Gray 2003; Pickering 2008; Threadgold 2003; Tulloch 2000) have commented, most often critically, on the lack of explicit articulation of method and methodology in much cultural studies and certain types of media audience research. This situation is frequently attributed to, among other things, the foundational critique of methodology mounted by poststructuralist theory which makes all methods suspect because of their truth claims (Lincoln & Guba 2005: 205), unanalysed assumptions, relations of power and decontextualised knowledge (Kincheloe & McLaren 2008: 318). The reluctance to discuss methodology, specifically in relation to cultural studies, has also been explained as an attempt to maintain disciplinary distance (Pickering 2008: 1; Threadgold 2003: 12) and avoid the constraints of particular methods and procedures (Gray 2003: 5; Pickering 2008: 1).

This chapter will approach the discussion of my own research practices against the backdrop of the poststructuralist critique of methodology and with an understanding of research methodology as ‘a technology of justification ... a way of defending what we assert we know and the process by which we know it’ (Kincheloe & McLaren 2008: 318) . In addition to providing an account of the methods and methodologies I have employed, I will also reflect upon my assumptions as researcher and the disciplinary and social contexts that have guided and constrained my research.

The chapter begins by contextualising the research, providing a short description of the ‘Harm’ project out of which my study emerges, and follows with a discussion of the research strategies and conceptual frameworks which have informed the research. The chapter then briefly discusses what is conventionally referred to as ‘data collection’ and ‘organisation’ before examining the various strategies I have used for analysing the research materials, including a discussion of the ‘tools’ of critical discourse analysis that have been most valuable for my analysis. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the approach I have taken to writing up the research, including an explanation of my decision to switch between first and third person modes of address.

### **Emerging research focus—the ‘Harm’ project**

This thesis developed out of my involvement in a collaborative project between the University of Western Sydney and the Australian Broadcasting Authority<sup>1</sup>. The project on children and media harm examined children’s understanding of media harm in the context of their everyday experiences of media regulation. The stated objectives of the original Harm project were threefold:

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- i. to illustrate the understanding children hold about media harm in the context of their everyday experiences of media regulation;
- ii. to explore the different media experiences and forms of media regulation described by children who use a broad range of media, including television, pay TV and the Internet; and
- iii. to identify any changes taking place in children's access to adult media material as a result of an expanding array of media and Internet availability, particularly in regard to the availability of violent and pornographic material. (ABA 2000: 3)

The study consisted of focus-group discussions with 50 young people aged between 10 and 15 years. The participants in the research came from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and all, with exception of two of the older girls, lived in the greater Western Sydney area. In all there were six focus groups into which children were placed on the basis of their age and gender. Single gender discussion groups were used. The focus group discussions took place in November 1999 at the Parramatta campus of the University of Western Sydney. The findings were published late 2000 as Australian Broadcasting Authority Monograph 10: *Children's Views about Media Harm*.

I was a research assistant in the original Harm research. I assisted with the original research design and ethics compliance. I was present during the focus group discussions, involved in setting up the recording equipment, in analysing the data, and in researching and writing the final report. The focus groups were recorded using both video and audio tapes. The purpose of the video recordings was primarily for identification of the 'speakers' in the discussions. To facilitate this, the camera was set up at a fixed distance from the discussions and the focus group discussions recorded using a wide angle. The



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audio tapes were transcribed by a professional typist. Brief field notes were also made.

The focus group materials collected during the Harm project were analysed with a view to meeting the objectives of the project which in turn were in part motivated by the regulatory imperatives of the ABA, particularly that of the protection of children from harmful program material<sup>2</sup> and Internet content<sup>3</sup>. Of importance also in shaping the research, were the liberatory or emancipatory desires embodied in the ‘positive provision’ objectives of the Australian Television Standards<sup>4</sup> and in recent cultural studies audience research which attempts to give the child a voice (see chapters one and five).

The final Harm report examined the research participants’ views about the harmful effects of the media, what the participants said they considered adults were concerned about, and the participants’ experiences of the Internet. There was a particularly strong emphasis on the participants’ discussion of sex, horror, violence and coarse language, all of which were of concern to the ABA.

While involved in the project and upon later reflection on the completed research, it occurred to me that the participants’ discussions of media harm potentially provided a rich source of ‘data’ for another project—one with different objectives and an alternate research focus. Although identity was not the topic of the Harm focus group discussions, in attempting to learn about *children’s* views of media harm and *children’s* media experiences the research foregrounded the participants’ identities as ‘children’ (rather than their ethnic, class, socioeconomic or other identities). The focus group interactions, then, provided me an opportunity to explore how the identity ‘child’ was constructed through discursive practice in the context of discussions about media harm and how the

participants performed their identities. The focus group interactions also suggested that media discourses and children's media practices played an important role in constructing childhood and adulthood; in maintaining and challenging the boundaries between childhood and adulthood; and in children's sense of themselves as 'adult' or as 'child'. This research developed in response to my involvement in the Harm project and my interest in exploring these ideas.

### **Positioning the research: research strategies and interpretive frameworks**

Denzin and Lincoln say that research strategies 'put paradigms of interpretation into motion' (2008: para. 4); that is, the specific methodological practices a researcher employs are connected to 'a complex literature', history, sets of assumptions and preferred ways of working. This section attempts to reflect upon my assumptions as a researcher and the disciplinary and social contexts that have guided and constrained my research.

Following Punch (1998: 23), the research strategy for this project could be described as 'unfolding'. My original research interest developed out of my involvement in the Harm research. The project's research questions, the methods of analysis I have adopted and even aspects of the project's conceptual framework emerged as my research developed; that is, they were not pre-specified. The luxury of using this research strategy was in large part a product of circumstance: my involvement in the Harm research and familiarity with the Harm research materials; the time this then afforded me to conceptualise, re-conceptualise and refine my own research project; and the opportunity that the Harm

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research presented to re-use or re-analyse existing empirical research materials which, in turn, reduced the need to pre-plan my research to satisfy requirements of the ethics approval process. The human ethics approval process in place in Australian universities generally requires that research questions, research design and data be largely pre-planned, particularly in the case of empirical research involving children.

Decisions about which interpretative practices to employ were not made in advance. The research questions, my own expertise, background and assumptions about the world strongly influenced my decisions about how to analyse and interpret the materials gathered as part of the Harm project. For example, the project's focus on identity and childhood necessitated familiarity with scholarly works in these fields and lead eventually to the project's conceptualisation of childhood as performative. My background in media studies, particularly traditions which make use of linguistic forms of discourse analysis for studying media texts (e.g. Eldridge 1999; Fairclough 1995; Fowler 1991) and analysing empirical audience research (e.g. Buckingham 1993a; Buckingham 1993b; 1996; Davies, et al. 2000) suggested the usefulness of this approach for analysing the transcribed focus group 'texts'. Finally, my work shares many of the assumptions and concerns associated with 'poststructuralism' or 'postmodernism', often characterised as Critical Theory, including: interest in the analysis of texts (in this project, transcription 'texts'), language and issues of representation; a recognition that claims to truth are 'discursively situated and implicated in relations of power' (Kincheloe & McLaren 2008: 434); disciplinary 'borrowings' (Denzin & Lincoln 2008: 4); an awareness of the problematic and constructed nature of categories such as gender, class, race, society, culture and, of course, childhood; and the problematising of empirical research methods.

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The ongoing challenges to qualitative research (and empirical research, more generally) that have been mounted, particularly from within poststructuralism (e.g. as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (1998; 2008) in their history and Tulloch (2000) in his work on audience), have exerted their own influences on this project. Denzin and Lincoln say that the current moment in qualitative research is defined by a ‘triple crisis of representation and legitimation and praxis’ (2008: 26). They argue that the structuralist/linguistic turn in social theory has challenged two key assumptions of qualitative research. The first is the belief that qualitative researchers can ‘directly capture lived experience’ (2008: 26); so that, ‘representation’ of the experiences of the Other becomes highly problematic. The second challenge is to the legitimacy of traditional criteria such as validity, generalisability and reliability for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research, and thus to the ‘authority we claim for our texts’ (Denzin & Lincoln 1998: 409). These two crises, they argue, shape the third, the question of how to bring about social change.

Like other empirical research studies, this project struggles with and is shaped by these insights and challenges. They have influenced, for example, from the outset, the project’s orientation and the type of research questions that could have been developed. Hence, I am more interested in exploring the participants’ performance of their identities in the context of the focus group discussions than in uncovering ‘truths’ about children’s engagement with the media. An additional consequence is that the research has fairly modest aims. Adapting Denzin and Lincoln’s (2008) characterisation of the ‘eighth moment’ in qualitative research, I would similarly characterise this research as a site for ‘critical conversations’ (2008: 3)—conversations that are motivated by the project’s use of ‘scavenger methodologies’ (Halberstam 1998; Plummer 2008) and mix of interpretative practices. The research uses various linguistic forms of ‘critical discourse analysis’ to

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conduct an empirical investigation of issues that Butler's work on performativity may raise for the study of childhood. Thus, I offer my research as a 'reading' or interpretation of the focus group discussions rather than as an authoritative or objective account. Finally, the research actively interrogates the category 'child', calling into question the 'self-evident' meanings or presuppositions by which the child is recognised. As such, the research uses focus group materials to *explore* the potential of conceptualising 'child' as an identity, as performative, rather than as evidence of the reality or truth of the child.

The Harm research materials and the methods by which the materials were collected also shaped and constrained the development of this project. The wide-angled, fixed camera position that was adopted as part of the original Harm project, for example, limited the possibilities of examining non-verbal practices within the focus group discussions. The use of focus groups rather than interviews or ethnographic methods for generating the Harm data/materials shaped the data that could be collected, and ensured that group dynamics formed part of that data (Meyer 2008: 71). Focus groups as a method of data collection also proved advantageous for this project; focus groups being recognised as well suited to researching shared norms and meanings—the central concern of this project—and less well suited for researching individual behaviour (Boor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson 2001: 90).

## Ethics approval

Ethics approval was sought and gained for this project from the Macquarie University

Ethics Review Committee (Human Research). Ethics approval number: HE26MAR2004-D02807.

## **‘Data’ collection and strategies of ‘analysis’**

To characterise this research as a project founded on the *re-analysis* rather than the generation of data is to assume a too easy distinction between ‘data’ and ‘analysis’. As previously discussed, the ‘representational crisis’ confronting qualitative research has made the traditional distinction between data collection and data analysis less clear by challenging the assumption that qualitative researchers can ‘directly capture lived experience’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2008: 26). In other words, the representational crisis poses a challenge to the notion of ‘pure data’ by asserting instead that all data is mediated by a researcher’s experiences and assumptions. The problematic nature of the distinction between data and analysis became an issue almost immediately in my research when forced to consider the status of the Harm focus group transcripts as ‘data’ or ‘analysis’.

In the literature on focus group research, evidence of this ‘representational crisis’ can be seen in the disagreement in the literature about the point at which the analysis of focus group data begins: Morgan (1988) sees the creation of field notes as the first step in the analysis of focus group data, since field notes involve ‘interpretation’; Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) say that, in general, transcription is the first step of the analysis; while Krueger (1988) sees analysis as beginning during the pre-session small talk when the moderator is observing the levels of familiarity between the participants. Fundamental to identifying the point at which analysis begins for each of the authors is the construction of

a ‘text’—whether it be field notes, the transcribed focus group discussions or the pre-session moderator observations—and the interpretation and creativity involved in creating this text. In Denzin and Lincoln’s terms, rather than being ‘captured’ by the research, ‘experience’ is created in the social text written by the researcher.

Unlike the situation in disciplines such as social history and certain types of quantitative sociology, the re-use of earlier data or materials in qualitative research, despite its many advantages,<sup>5</sup> is less common (Thompson 2000) and relatively little has been written on the subject. This hesitance on the part of qualitative researchers to re-use ‘data’ appears more frequently to be due to valorisation of researcher involvement in the research process (Qualidata research cited in Thompson 2000) than discomfort with the data/analysis distinction. In my own research, the distinction between ‘data’ and ‘analysis’ was an issue that needed to be faced early in my project in relation to the status of the Harm transcription ‘text’ in its duality as both ‘object’ of analysis of the Harm research and as an ‘act’ of analysis. One of the first decisions, therefore, necessitated by my project was to determine whether the Harm transcripts would be the object of analysis of my research or whether I would need return to the video and audio recordings of the focus group discussions to construct a new research ‘text’.

### **‘Owning’ the project: Transcription as ‘analysis’**

Although the exact point at which the project analysis ‘began’ is arguable, the creation of my own research text in some sense signalled ‘ownership’ of the project. In this sense, I ‘began’ the analysis by reading through the Harm transcripts and then re-reading them in conjunction with the video and the audio recordings of the focus group discussions and my own notes. As a result of this process, I found that there were a number of characteristics

of the Harm transcripts which were incompatible with the orientation of my own project and this convinced me of the need to create my own transcription text. These features included, the lack of word-for-word transcription of the discussions; the moderators' questions and interjections often being absent or considerably abbreviated; the transcripts rarely differentiating between the individual young people who spoke; and no link being made in the transcription texts to observational data or the video recordings.

It became clear that the final shape of my own transcription text would differ from that of the Harm project, each transcription text being the result of differing research aims, contexts and constraints. In contrast to my own involvement in the Harm project and access to the video as well as the audio recordings of the focus group discussions, the Harm transcripts were created by a professional agency typist, who worked from the audio recordings alone and who had no other involvement in the original research. The typist's reliance on the audio recordings, the Harm project's time constraints and the emphasis of the Harm project on Australian *children* (as a category), perhaps explains the low priority given to identification of the individual participants in the transcripts. Instead, the project was more interested in identifying the participants broadly through their categorisation as 'girls' or 'boys', 'younger children' or 'older children', information that was readily available as a consequence of the participants' placement in the focus groups (see chapter 5 for a discussion of this aspect of the Harm research). Finally, the Harm project's motivation to 'explore' children's everyday media *experiences* differs from my own project's interest in the focus group interactions themselves and, perhaps explains why a word-for-word transcription of the discussions was not perceived as a necessary part in the Harm project.



Having broadly determined what was missing from the original Harm transcripts from the perspective of my own project, I next had to make decisions about how to transcribe the focus group discussions.

### ***Transcription conventions***

Since writing is not a direct representation of speech, transcription itself can be considered an act of interpretation because it requires decisions about how to use textual conventions to represent speech (Cameron 2001: 43). There are many decisions demanded of the researcher when transcribing speech which may not be readily apparent. These include, the extent to which the transcripts should use spelling to attempt to capture how people speak, both in relation to fillers (um, ah, mm, etc.) and for representing pronunciation (e.g. ‘nah’ versus ‘no’); whether paralinguistic or non-verbal information should be included, such as gestures and laughter; and whether punctuation should be used to structure or organise stretches of speech. In addition, the research itself may demand a certain level of detail in the transcription which may conflict with the researcher’s competing desire to produce a highly accessible and readable text.

My own approach to transcribing the focus group discussions can perhaps be best characterised using Deborah Cameron’s words as, a ‘trade-off between accuracy and detail on the one hand and clarity and readability on the other’ (Cameron 2001: 39). There were many factors which guided my decision about how to approach the task. My desire to accurately and fairly represent the words of the participants and to capture the linguistic and non-linguistic qualities of the focus group discussions, necessary for the further analysis of the focus group discussions, had to be balanced against my equally strong desire to create transcripts from which I could liberally quote in the body of my thesis.

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This required that the transcripts be not only detailed and accurate but also highly readable. Since there is no single or standard approach to the transcription of spoken discourse (Cameron 2001: 4), I followed a modified version of the transcription conventions described by Eggins and Slade (1997: 1-5); an approach which appeared to come closest to sharing similar aims to my own. Details of the transcription conventions used to transcribe the focus group discussions can be found in Appendix I.

### **Organising the research materials**

The methods and interpretative frames used for analysing the focus group discussions emerged during the research process as the project developed. The analysis began broadly around the research focus on 'identity' and became narrower and more defined as the research continued. In this sense, the analysis could be considered a continuous and reflexive process (Sarantakos 1993: 300).

The transcripts were read and re-read in conjunction with the audio and video recordings to identify segments of interest, patterns, themes and contradictions. These passages were then coded to bring together sections of the transcripts that might be relevant to the research. The project made use of QSR NVivo® to manage and code the transcripts but, given the research emphasis on the problematic and constructed nature of categories, no pre-established categories or codes were used. Rather, the categories and codes emerged from the research materials during the analysis.

Initially, the codes assigned were broad and fairly descriptive; for example, simple identification of segments of the transcript where 'kids' or 'children' were explicitly discussed. New codes and categories were established as the project and my own thinking

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progressed; for example, coding of the participants' use of 'young kids' and 'older teenagers', and later coding of the attributes and activities ascribed to these groups at various points in the focus group discussions. In this way, the process of coding functioned not simply as a means of 'data' reduction or merely as a management tool but also as part of the process of analysis and interpretation. The complications faced and the decisions that needed to be made during the coding process exposed many of the complexities of the focus group discussions that might otherwise have been missed, opening the research up to further 'analytical possibilities' (Coffey & Atkinson 1996: 29). For example, the process of coding proved instrumental in highlighting the semiotic complexity and situational meanings of the identity 'child' as the concept was employed within the interactional context of the focus group discussions.

As outlined earlier, my decisions about which interpretative practices to employ were not made in advance but emerged during the course of my research. The creation of the transcription 'text', the ongoing process of coding and emergent focus on childhood 'identity' lead to my interest in exploring the possibilities of applying Judith Butler's work on performativity (Butler 1990/2006; 1993) to the study of childhood.

## **Ways of knowing, scavenger methods and critical reading practices**

The more places you have from which to look, the more you are likely to see and the more you are likely to unsettle the habits of your own corporeal ways of knowing. (Threadgold 2003: 32)

Terry Threadgold in the quote above from a paper discussing the possibilities for constructively bringing together critical discourse analysis and cultural studies, advocates

the use of multiple modes of analysis or ‘critical reading practices’ to ‘unsettle’ our habitual ways of knowing. Judith Halberstam (1998: 13) in her discussion of queer methodology coins the term ‘scavenger methodologies’ to describe how queer theory ‘refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence’, instead freely borrowing and combining methods and interpretative frameworks, even those which may be considered to be ‘at odds with each other’. Judith Butler similarly comments on her own ‘eclectic’ use of scholarly works, saying:

I make eclectic use of various philosophers and critical theorists in this inquiry. Not all of their positions are compatible with one another, and I do not attempt to synthesise them here. (Butler 2006: 21)

The idea that research is an active rather than passive process in which the researcher can actively construct his/her research methods ‘from the tools at hand’ (Kincheloe & McLaren 2005: 317) and partake in disciplinary borrowings is characteristic of the contemporary moment in qualitative research.

Butler’s work provided my research an important interpretative frame through which to view or ‘read’ the focus group interactions. Her work, however, as many have observed (e.g. Barker & Galasiński 2001; Hey 2006; Threadgold 2003), is largely philosophical and, as such, has not been directly concerned with ‘empirical “bodies that matter”’ (Hey 2006: 448). It does not provide a ready-made ‘methodology’ for researchers interested in observing and analysing the specificity of the processes Butler describes. Nonetheless, Butler’s work has inspired many empirical studies (see for example, the special edition of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (2006) 27(4) and the edited collection by

Davies (2008)) which have the potential to provide models for how such work might be carried out. The emphasis of such studies, however, even those with children at their centre, has been primarily on gender, sex and sexuality (although Butler's work has also been used to examine race and ethnic identity). Therefore, although instructive, there have been no studies upon which I could directly model my own research.

### **Critical discourse analysis**

Critical discourse analysis provided me a second 'critical reading practice' (Threadgold 2003: 31), or mode of analysis, for interpreting the focus group interactions; specifically, to explore in detail how the abstract concept of performativity operated in the focus group interactions. My work is not unique in employing critical discourse analysis for this purpose. The possibilities for utilising critical discourse analysis to explore in empirical research some of the issues of concern to Butler have been argued by Threadgold (2003) and realised in some empirical studies of sex and sexuality (e.g. McInnes, Bradley & Prestage 2009).

Critical discourse analysis is a label commonly used to describe a form of textual analysis which 'borrows its conceptual and analytic apparatus from both structural linguistics and critical theory' (Cameron 2001: 50). There have been many accounts of the development of the field (e.g. Poynton 2000; Threadgold 2000; Threadgold 2003; Toolan 2002; Wodak 2002; Wodak & Meyer 2009) and the possibility or impossibility of reconciling linguistic and poststructuralist forms of discourse analysis (e.g. Barker & Galasiński 2001; Fairclough 1992; Pennycook 1994; Threadgold 1997). In this thesis, the structuralism underpinning critical discourse analysis and the post-structuralism which drives the theoretical work of those like Butler exist in a productive tension that allow for an

engagement with the dynamic and iterative relationship between language and the systems of meaning/value which shape the discursive fields under examination.

In their accounts of the development of critical discourse analysis, Toolan (2002) and Poynton and Lee (2000) note that the emergence and elaboration of critical discourse analysis coincided with the 'linguistic' or textualist turn in the human sciences and the refusal to accept 'texts' at face value. They link the exploration of different forms of discourse/textual analysis, and the eventual development of what came to be known as critical discourse analysis, to the increased interest in 'the significance of language and discourse in the construction of knowledge and the formation of person and subjects' (Poynton & Lee 2000: 1). In addition, in most accounts, critical discourse analysis is also linked to concerns about discourse as an instrument of power and control. Toolan (2002: xxii), for example, highlights the pairing of terms in many key critical discourse analysis publications: language and control, language and ideology, language and power. He goes on to say that an assumption that runs through much of the work of leading proponents of critical discourse analysis, such as Fairclough and van Dijk, is that 'the phenomena in need of scrutiny are in some respects masked, or covered, or embedded, or made so ordinary and everyday as to escape question or critique' (Toolan 2002: xxii). Much critical discourse analysis, then, aims to 'describe' and 'deconstruct' texts which might otherwise 'wield power uncritiqued' (Toolan 2002: xxii). This critique of existing power relations as well as its agenda for social change, leads Poynton (2000: 37) to describe critical discourse analysis as 'the most overtly political form of discourse analysis'. In assuming an overtly political stance, critical discourse analysis also shares a politics with many forms of poststructuralist analysis (Threadgold 2003: 31).

Despite and because of its political stance, researchers using critical discourse analysis have been criticised. Cameron (2001: 137), for example, cites instances of analysts being accused of ‘imposing’ meanings on the text because of their ‘ideological commitments (e.g. socialism, feminism, anti-racism, and so on)’. Lee (2000), on the other hand, criticises the positivist stance of much linguistically oriented discourse analysis and Threadgold (2003: 10) disputes claims (e.g. by Barker & Galasiński 2001) that critical discourse can provide a methodology which is ‘replicable, systematic and verifiable’. Instead, Threadgold makes a similar point to that of Denzin and Lincoln (1998; 2008), saying that critical discourse analysis like all research involves ‘interpretative choices’ and ‘context-bound decisions’ (Threadgold 2003: 10). As a ‘methodology’, critical discourse analysis does not allow the researcher to side-step the central issues of representation and legitimisation characteristic of the current moment in qualitative research.

Most accounts of critical discourse analysis agree that critical discourse analysis is neither a ‘specific methodology’ nor ‘a single or specific theory’ (Wodak & Meyer 2009: 5) and, as Toolan (2002: xxvi) points out, critical discourse analysis continues to be developed and reinterpreted by its leading proponents. Threadgold prefers to follow van Dijk in describing critical discourse analysis as a ‘set of creative potentials’ (Threadgold 2003: 31) rather than a ‘fixed method’, saying that critical discourse analysis provides no clear-cut method for analysing texts. There is an array of different forms of discourse analysis and tools that may be used, depending on the aims or purpose of the analysis. Typically, however, critical discourse analysis involves close, often highly detailed, analysis of a text or set of texts, including features such as lexis, grammar, modes of address, and ‘an interpretation of the pattern, an account of its meaning and ideological significance’ (Cameron 2001: 137). Critical discourse analysis frequently uses Hallidayan or systemic-

functional grammar but other forms of linguistic analysis are also used (Toolan 2002: xxv) and these analytical tools may be critiqued and refashioned as necessary (Toolan 2002: xxv). The lack of a set 'method', the diversity of approaches and the flexibility of critical discourse analysis allowed me considerable freedom in adapting critical discourse analysis for the purposes of my project.

In a discussion of the potential critical discourse analysis holds for cultural studies research, Threadgold argues that when used in ethnographic and empirical research, particularly research employing poststructuralist concepts, critical discourse analysis 'makes it possible to see what is happening at a level of detail that the poststructuralist categories cannot accomplish because of the levels of abstraction at which they work' (Threadgold 2003: 31). Poynton and Lee make a similar point in relation to empirical research employing poststructuralist frameworks, arguing that critical discourse analysis can provide the 'textual analytics', frequently lacking in poststructuralist analysis, with which to ground these empirical studies (Poynton & Lee 2000: 6).

In this respect and in relation to my own research, critical discourse was immensely useful for exploring the abstract concept of performativity, making possible detailed analysis of the processes through which 'the child' is achieved in the interactional context of the Harm focus group discussions.

### **The 'tools at hand': methodological negotiations**

Underlying critical discourse analysis are two important assumptions: that reality is socially constructed and that language plays a role in constituting identities and social relations (Fairclough 1992). These assumptions ensured the availability of an array of



analytical tools for a project such as mine. My choice of which linguistic/textual technologies to employ was strategic, determined very much by the changing demands of the project, my application Butler's work to the study of childhood and my research materials. A brief discussion of some of the discourse analytic tools I use is provided below.

### ***Identity categories and the norms of childhood***

Following Butler, the identity category 'child' is conceptualised in this project as an effect of institutions, practices and discourses (Butler 1990/2006: viii-ix) rather than as the origin or cause of certain activities, attributes and behaviours. One of the aims of the thesis is to attempt to analyse the reiteration of the norms of childhood and to render problematic the stability and coherence of the identity category, 'child'. To explore the identity categories deployed in the interactional context of the focus group discussions, insights from membership categorisation analysis were used. While lacking the performative dimension of Butler's theorisation, membership categorisation analysis similarly asserts that to have an identity is to be cast into a category that is conventionally associated with certain 'activities, attributes, motives and so on' (Widdicombe 1998: 53) and so provides a useful analytical tool for interrogating the way key identity categories are constructed in conversational interactions.

Membership categorisation analysis is a key analytical subfield of conversation analysis that developed out of ethnomethodology through the work of Harvey Sacks in the 1960s (Baker 2000; Francis & Hester 2004). Membership categorisation analysis understands membership categories and other cultural resources as being constituted in their use rather than as pre-existing (Hester & Eglin 1997). It thereby offers an analytical approach 'for

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understanding how speakers constitute themselves as members of a particular culture through the categories they invoke and the ways in which they use them' (Poynton 2000: 33). Such conversation analytic/ethnomethodological perspectives on identity are elaborated in Antaki and Widdicombe's (1998a) edited collection, *Identities in Talk* and, specifically in relation to age categories, in Nikander's (2002) *Age in Action: Membership Work and Stage of Life Categories in Talk* and Baker's (1984) 'The "search for adulthood": membership work in adolescent-adult talk'.

In their introduction Antaki and Widdicombe (1998b) outline five general principles central to ethnomethodological conversation analytic approaches to analysing identity, summarised as: category name and features; indexicality; relevance; procedural consequentiality; and use of conversation regularities. Given the focus of this chapter on identity categories, the analysis makes use of the first three of these principles, briefly outlined below, rather than an analysis of the more formal characteristics of talk, such as conversation structures. Neither does the analysis specifically deal with procedural consequentiality except as a principle in the selection of the key identities for analysis.

The analysis considers how the identity category 'child' is constructed during the focus group discussions by examining the activities and attributes the participants and moderators associate with the identity category 'child'; the activities and attributes that are deemed appropriate or legitimate for the people to whom the category term is applied; and the way certain activities invoke certain identity categories.

To display/perform/take on the identity of child can have a diversity of meanings and have different consequences depending on the temporal and situational context. The analysis

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examines the salience of the identity ‘child’ and other associated identity categories at various points in the discussions and in relation to different contexts.

In conversations certain identities are made relevant. The analysis considers how the participants and moderators categorise themselves and others: which things are picked out by the moderators as most relevant about the participants and those they discuss; and which things are proffered by the participants as relevant about themselves or others. For example, at certain points in the discussion the orientation may be towards the participants’ location in social networks (Hadden & Lester 1978) such as the family (as younger brother, older brother, sister etc.) or school (as classmate or teacher); their gender identity (as boy, guy or girl); or their positioning in the stage of life device (as child, young child, teenager, etc.).

The analysis combines membership categorisation analysis with an analysis of ideational or representational meanings; that is, analysis of the way language represents or constructs reality (Halliday 1985; 1994; 2004) to examine how the identity ‘child’ is discursively constructed at key points in the discussion. This dimension of the grammar of the clause is referred to as transitivity (Halliday 1985; 1994; 2004). Analysis of transitivity focuses on the types of processes encoded in clauses and the participants involved in them (Fairclough 1992: 178).

### ***Interpersonal relations, identity and interpellation***

The thesis draws on Butler’s work on interpellation and the dialectic of recognition to examine the discourse strategies used by the moderators to position the participants as ‘children’. The analysis also examines the shifts and changes in this positioning and the

focus group participants' negotiation and/or performance of these identities by analysing the participants' acceptance, rejection or modification of their positioning. To explore these dimensions of the focus group interactions, the analysis focuses on the interpersonal meanings in the interactions (Halliday 2004), exploring the register variable of tenor, using insights from systemic functional linguistics and conversation analysis. Eggins and Slade's (1997) *Analysing Casual Conversation* and Poynton's (1985) chapter on 'Social relations through grammar' were particularly useful for my analysis, as were more general accounts of the methods of critical discourse analysis by Fairclough (1992; 1995), Barker and Galasiński (2001) and Paltridge (2006).

### ***Distancing strategies and performance of self***

Hadden and Lester's (1978: 331) study of the verbal practices 'through which persons assemble and display who they are while in the presence of, and interaction with others', proved a particularly useful approach for analysing the strategies by which the participants distance themselves from the identity 'child'.

Given the date of publication of their paper, it is revealing and significant for this project that the authors position their work as a challenge to static models of identity, saying instead they see identity as 'continually open for negotiation, refinement, elaboration' (Hadden & Lester 1978: 332). While they align their conceptualisation of identity most closely with that of Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967, 1969) and his followers (e.g. Stone 1962; Stone & Gross 1964; Weinberg 1968), they distance themselves from the distinction made in such work between public and private identities; and between 'manipulative' displays of identity and the display of a 'real' identity (Hadden & Lester 1978: 332). Nevertheless, they retain from Goffman's work a strong sense of the self-determining subject in their conceptualisation of identity which is notably absent from that of Butler (see chapter two).

Hadden and Lester (1978) distinguish three identifying practices: locating, retrospecting and prospecting. All three practices are useful for this study of children's sense of themselves as children. Locating is described by Hadden and Lester as a person's account of who they are at a particular point in time. The account may be linked to autobiographical details, which they refer to as retrospecting—'an account of 'how I became who I am'' (Hadden & Lester 1978: 338), or to 'the production of anticipated or aspired-to identities' (Hadden & Lester 1978: 338), which they designate prospecting. While all three identifying practices are used within the focus group discussions by the participants, 'distancing' is by far the most frequently used strategy (see especially chapter six).

## Writing tactics

I will finish this chapter with a brief discussion of some of the decisions I made in writing up my research and in imposing a particular the structure on the research.

One of the early decisions I was forced to reflect upon when writing up my research was how to refer collectively to the original 'research subjects' of the Harm research. Given that the thesis problematises the identity 'child' and the research participants themselves frequently distance themselves from this identity, I decided to use the terms 'participants' and 'moderators' to refer respectively to the original Harm research 'subjects' and Harm 'researchers'. Of course, such naming to some extent reveals the limits of language, since both groups 'participated' in the research and both became in my project, 'research subjects'.

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A second decision that arose was how and to what extent the participants' and moderators' voices should (or could) be heard in my research. The analysis chapters of the thesis interweave the voices of the research participants with my own observations and interpretative frameworks.

My decision to provide extended excerpts from the focus group discussions was both an attempt to present the participants' and moderators' voices in the text and, to provide an opportunity for the audience of my thesis to position their readings of the focus group interactions alongside my own. However, as discussed earlier, the extended quotations from the transcripts do not directly capture the lived experience of the focus group interactions but are researcher constructed texts. The extended quotations do not capture the 'unadulterated voices' of children but can be described as 'simply another form of ventriloquy or speaking for the other' (Fine 1994: 21 cited in Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002: 28).

Additionally, the examples have been selected for the purpose of my project and, to some extent, decontextualised by being extracted from the interactions, even though I have attempted to frame each quotation by providing the contextual information. Finally, the participants' and moderators' words should not be taken at face value; should not be read as direct 'evidence' of what they 'think' or of their attitudes or beliefs (Buckingham 1993b: 53). Not are the excerpts unable to directly capture lived experience but language as Halliday (2004) has shown performs a variety of functions.

I would like to finish this chapter with a comment about my decision to switch between first person and third person modes of address. Although the majority of the thesis is

written fairly conventionally as a third person account, I elected to write in first person in the introductory, concluding and methodology chapters since, in comparison to the remaining chapters, these chapters more directly involve or discuss my presence and participation in the research (Gray 2003).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> On 1 July 2005, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) and the Australian Communications Authority (ACA) were merged to form the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

<sup>2</sup> Objective 3(j) of *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*

<sup>3</sup> *Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act 1999*

<sup>4</sup> One of the stated objectives of the Children's Television Standards is for the provision of diverse, quality Australian programming, specifically made for children.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson (2000) points out that the reanalysis of earlier data has a number of advantages. These include: the opportunity to study topics and issues that emerge spontaneously from data, multiplying the outcomes from any given research project, providing useful comparative data, and providing useful information for pilot projects. The one most relevant to this thesis is spontaneity. The material on identity was 'spontaneous' it was not something that deliberately interrogated/drawn out of the discussions. Thompson also says the research material is 'most likely to be useful when the original words of the informants were recorded; rather than summarised' [para 47].

## Chapter 5

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### Constructing the ‘child’

#### Introduction

This chapter provides the groundwork for the exploration of the participants’ ‘performance of childhood’, which is developed in Chapters 6 and 7, by providing an analysis of how ‘the child’ is constructed through the research design of the original Harm project and subsequently negotiated within the interactional context of the focus group discussions. In so doing, the chapter examines the normative presuppositions about childhood that inform both the research aims of the Harm project and the moderators’ practices within the focus group discussions and which together position the participants in relation to the collective stage of life identities, ‘adult’ and ‘child’. It is in relation to this interpellating address that the participants’ deployment of the identity categories ‘child’ and ‘adult’ and their performance of self are examined in the later chapters.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, according to Butler the reality of gender is created by ‘sustained social performances’ (Butler 1990/2006: 192). As such, Butler’s work contains a radical critique of identity categories, seeing them as ‘effects’ of these compulsory performances. Therefore, the attributes and acts that are conventionally considered to be *expressions* of a given identity category instead ‘effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal’ (Butler 1990/2006: 192). This chapter uses these insights from Butler as well as analytical insights from membership categorisation analysis and critical



discourse analysis to examine: the key identity categories assumed in the Harm research design; the identities the moderators ascribe to the participants; and the identity categories the moderators employ in the questions they ask about young people. The methods of discourse analysis provide the means for detailed analysis of the interpersonal dimension of the interactions, particularly the structures or modes of address, which set the stage for 'the scene of recognition' (Butler 2005: 35).

The chapter begins by examining how the semiotic complexity of the identity 'child' is constructed in the research design of the original Harm project. The chapter argues that the identity 'child', as it is constructed through the research design of the Harm project, functions to negotiate a number of competing discourses about media harm; to navigate the difficult terrain between the emancipatory and protectionist ideals of both contemporary Australian broadcasting legislation and the media research traditions, discussed in Chapter 3; and to fulfil the research aims of the Harm project; that is, to uncover the differences between adult and child views of harm while 'giving children a voice' in the debates about media harm.

The chapter next examines how these aims and ideas about the child are operationalised within the context of the focus group discussions themselves. It begins by examining the discourse strategies used by the moderators to position the participants. Butler explains interpellation as an address that 'confers identity' (Butler 1997a: 117). Social norms structure the subject's interpellation by determining who counts as or is recognised as a subject (Butler 2005: 30). In Butler's adaption of the concept, interpellation operates both through 'proximate and living exchanges' (Butler 2005: 30) *and* through institutional and other types of practices, 'on bureaucratic forms, the census, adoption papers, employment

applications' (Butler 1997a: 34).

The chapter shows how the research aims of the Harm project and the subsequent design of the study played a significant part in the moderators' interpellation or positioning of the participants. Of primary significance was the aim of identifying key differences between 'child' and 'adult' understandings of media harm, and further of identifying age-based and gender-based differences between children. Informed by the emancipatory ideals of the research, to give the child a voice and to place children's understanding of media harm alongside that of adults', while simultaneously operating within a protectionist regulatory environment dominated by 'adult' discourses about the harmful effects of certain types of media content on children, the moderators construct the participants as actively engaging with the media and the identity category 'child' as importantly different from 'adult'.

The chapter next examines the discursive strategies employed by the moderators to fulfill the research aim of giving children 'a voice'. The chapter evaluates the moderators' attempts to reduce the power differences and increase the closeness or 'contact' (Poynton 1985) of the interactions between the 'adult' moderators and the 'child' participants.

The remainder of the chapter examines the activities and attributes the moderators link to the identity category 'child'; the activities and attributes that are deemed appropriate or legitimate for the people to whom the category term is applied; and the way certain activities invoke certain identity categories. The chapter shows that while the category child brings together the participants under a common identity, 'gender' and 'age' subdivide the category and were deployed as 'explanatory devices' to account for differences in children's media experiences and to counter or rationalise perceived inadequacies in the

participants' responses.

## Key identity categories in the research design

At the outset, the research objectives and design of the Harm project established a number of key identity categories, notably the paired categories: adult-child; younger child-older child; and boy-girl.

The social category 'child' is the most significant category in the research given that one of the key aims of the Harm project was to explore *children's* understanding of media harm. The introduction to the final report, *Children's Views of Media Harm* (Australian Broadcasting Authority 2000), explains the research focus on children:

The focus on children aims to place their understanding of media harm alongside adult concepts of harm ... [since] ... it is not known whether the images that adults imagine as likely to be harmful to children are in fact the types of materials children find most troubling. (ABA 2000: 2)

In its expression of the centrality of children to the research alongside the stated aim of 'giving children a voice' (ABA 2000: 2), the study clearly mobilises the emancipatory discourses (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992) discussed in Chapter 3, which typify much cultural studies audience research on children. This can further be seen in the liberatory motivations embodied in the hope that the research will in some measure counter the absence of children's perspectives in debates about the potential harmful effects of the media and accord children's views equal status to those of adults (to 'place their understanding ... alongside adult concepts of harm'). Evidence of the emancipatory

discourse can also be seen in the dominant construction of the child that informs the research: the research focus on children's 'activity' in meaning making rather than on media 'effects' or 'influences' signals that its construction of the child is an active one. However, in its aim of identifying key differences between 'adult' and 'child' understandings of media harm, and in the necessity for the research to meet university Human Ethics Committee guidelines as they pertain specifically to research on 'children', the research is also founded upon the more traditional opposition between the paired identity categories, adult and child.

The category 'child' in the research is a pre-given, externally imposed category that unites the individual disparate research participants through their membership of a single social category. It is the taken-for-granted, primary identity of all the participants in the research. Although no adults, other than the moderators, participated in the focus group discussions, 'adult' as the second term in the pairing adult-child, is strongly implied, as the quote above suggests, through 'our'—the report's readers' and the broader adult community's—shared familiarity and understanding of adult views of media harm, variously articulated by the media, lobby groups, educationalists, parents and researchers. In this, in common with 'traditionalist' discourses, the child's identity is constructed in terms of its *difference* in relation to adult identity (De Castro 2004).

However, while the participants' identities as 'children' is unquestioned in the research, what is rendered problematic in this discourse, unlike more 'traditionalist' discourses, and hence legitimately the subject of study, are some of the 'attributes' of the category child; specifically, those aspects which mark children out as 'different' from adults: children's 'understanding' of media harm, the nature of children's difficulties or 'troubles' with

certain types of media content, and the media content that children themselves identify as troubling. Therefore, while the identity of the participants *as* children is unproblematic—the participants' membership status being defined exclusively by age—it is the attributes and activities of the agentive, active child as he/she engages with media which are problematised by the research. In this, the research presupposes that the 'truth' of 'the child' is expressed through his/her attributes and activities and that, therefore, by uncovering the attributes and activities of the agentive 'child', the child will be 'revealed'. This stands in contrast to popular and academic discourse about the harmful effects of the media on children, where the attributes of the child are largely 'known' and it is the nature and extent of the effects of the media on the child and the variables which impact on these effects which are subject to scrutiny. Both positions, however, stand in contrast to a performative construction of the child which would understand the attributes and activities as constituting 'the identity they are said to reveal or express' (Butler 1990/2006: 192).

The latter two identity category pairings established in the research—younger child-older child and boy-girl—were employed to identify age-based and gender-based differences *between* children; and were explicitly expressed in the composition of the focus groups. Participants in the research were allocated to one of the six focus groups on the basis of their age and gender, resulting in single gender focus groups of either younger (10-12 years) or older (13-15 years) participants. Gender and age-based identity category distinctions were highlighted in the subsequent report into the research in its comparison of the views of younger children versus older children; and boys versus girls.

While the category child brings together the participants under a common identity, the latter two identity pairings sub-divide the category by ascribing to the participants

identities as either: younger children or older children; boy children or girl children. When combined, these subcategories create four co-hyponymic identity categories—younger boys, older boys, younger girls and older girls—of the superordinate category: children. These identity categories are operationalised in the focus group composition and further construct the shared identities of the focus group members. In the same way that child as an identity category assumes an identifiable set of shared attributes and activities, the subdivisions, based on gender and age differences, similarly suggest members of these (sub)identity categories are united by a common set of as yet unidentified attributes that are in some way linked to age and gender. In other words, the research carries the assumption of the possibility that variations in children's understandings of media harm may be linked to gender and age.

Having examined the identity categories established by the research objectives and design of the Harm project in this section, the chapter will now examine the moderators' use of these key identity categories in the interactional context of the focus groups.

### **Positioning and repositioning the child—the interpellatory address**

As discussed in Chapter 4, although identity is not the topic of the focus group discussions, the privileging of the participants' identities as children and/or particular kinds of children in the Harm research aims and design, as discussed above, means that the focus group interactions provide occasions where the participants' identities as children (rather than their ethnic, class, socioeconomic or other identities) are foregrounded. The focus group interactions themselves, then, provide an opportunity to analyse how the identity 'child' is constructed through discursive practice, specifically in the context of discussions about

children's engagement with the media, and to examine the meanings deployed by both the participants and moderators as they speak into and through discourse (McInnes, et al. 2009).

Drawing on Butler's later work on interpellation and the dialectic of recognition, and Hall's (1996a) notion of multiple, shifting identities, this section will examine how the participants are positioned—or 'invited' to perform—as children, the shifts and changes in this positioning and the focus group participants' negotiation and/or performance of these identities, in their acceptance, rejection or modification of their positioning. Focusing on the interpersonal meanings of the interactions, the analysis will explore the register variable of tenor using insights from systemic functional linguistics and conversation analysis in order to begin to map the discursive terrain of 'childhood' as it is constructed and negotiated within the interactive context of the focus group discussions.

### **Positioning the child: stage of life—'children', 'young people' and 'kids'**

Despite the centrality of the identity 'child' to the research, the terms 'child' and 'children' are used very rarely in the discussions: 'children' is used in the moderators' questions a total of seven times across all the focus groups and, in the case of the participants, 'children' is used only as a premodifier (on two occasions in their discussion of 'children's television' and the 'children's section' of the library) while 'child' is used to modify 'abuse' (in 'child abusing') and 'molesters' (in 'child molesters'). The negative collocation of 'child' with 'abusing' and 'molesters' and the positive association of 'children's' with the provision of services suggests the extent of the 'infecting' (Benwell & Stokoe 2006) of the identity category 'child' with emancipatory and protectionist discourses. However, the strength of the negative collocation, such that it is difficult to consider 'abuse' and

'molestation' without recourse to the lexical item 'child', suggests how internalised is the association—even for those who are themselves identified as children—of the identity category child with forms of harm, especially sexual harm.

'Child' as an identity category is used just one time across all the discussions and this is by one of the participants, Michelle, in her explanation of how hypothetical parents might use the program classifications in order to gauge whether a hypothetical and to some extent universalised child should be permitted to view a particular program ('so the parents can sort of know (...) like, what to expect in the movie and they'll know whether the child is, like, allowed to see it or not'). Instead, it is more common for the moderators to refer to 'young people' or 'kids', or to further subdivide the category on the basis of gender, relative age and/or family relationship (for example, 'little sister' or 'younger brother'). As will be shown in the example below, the moderators' use of 'kids' and 'young people' refers in most instances to the same semantic field and is synonymous in most contexts with the identity category 'children'. In the case of the participants, however, mapping of the discursive terrain of the identity category 'child' is more complex and this will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

The participants' interpellation as 'children', 'young people' or 'kids' is generally made explicit at the start of each focus group discussion in the moderators' opening comments about the research and the participants' involvement in the research. In the example below, which comes from the moderator's opening comments to the first focus group, comprising girls aged 10 to 12 years of age, the participants' identities as 'young people' or 'kids' is explicitly stated in the moderator's preamble about the importance of 'young people's' views for the ABA to effectively formulate media regulations ('to make our rules') in the



interests of children (to know 'what's the best for kids'):

We often do these kind of--get young people together and just talk and hear their views, when we try to make our rules about what ... is right and good on TV and what's the, you know, best for kids and ... it's not that often we can get the views from the horse's mouth. You're the horses today.

The moderator's statement 'We often (...) get young people together' and the following 'it's not that often we can get the views from the horse's mouth' explicitly ascribe to the participants at the very outset of the focus groups, through the subsequent identifying relational process ('You're the horses'), 'speaking identities' (Baker 1997; Nikander 2002) as 'young people', 'kids' or 'children'. It also signals that the moderators will be using 'young people' and 'kids' to refer to the same referent in the semantic field; that is, to 'children'. The inclusion of the temporal circumstance 'today' in 'You're the horses today' suggests the broader representative status of the participants' contributions; that they are not speaking as individuals or even as individual children, members of the class or category 'children' (in a relationship of hyponymy), but at this instant, they are called on to speak metonymically *as* and *for* the class 'children'. Positioned in such a way, the participants can then be asked for insights into those attributes and behaviours of children as a class which mark them as different from adults in terms of their engagement with the media and their understanding of media harm; for example: 'What ... are the bad things or ... harmful things that might happen to kids if they ARE watching things that are not for kids on TV?'; 'Do you think children shouldn't know about things like people taking drugs and there being dope dealers?'; 'Do you think, though, that things are getting--that TV is making kids rougher in that way?'; 'Do you think there should be any rules about what

kids watch on TV and do on the internet?'; 'What age kids do you think believe [fictional TV] and when they start to begin to tell the difference [between reality and fiction]?'

In the moderators' opening comments to the first focus group, the reference to the ABA's, the moderators' and perhaps adults' role (through the somewhat ambiguous use of the pronoun 'we') in making rules for the benefit of children ('we try to make rules about what ... is best for kids'), not only positions the children within protectionist discourse, but also constructs them as the beneficiaries of the process of rule making, while simultaneously providing the adult moderators identities as rule makers and arbiters of what is 'right' and 'best' for children.

Despite this clear initial positioning as 'children', the participants are never directly addressed as 'children', or even 'younger' or 'older' children and only on two occasions directly as 'kids'. Rather, than being directly addressed as 'children', the participants are positioned hyponymically as children through their shared membership of the category 'kids'. This creation of a shared identity is most frequently achieved through reference to *other* members of the category; that is, by referring to 'other kids' (e.g. 'Do you talk yourselves much about the programs you've watched with other kids at school') or to 'kids your age' (e.g. '... what do you think it does to people or kids like your age watching that kind of thing?'). Through this positioning, the participants are ascribed a type of 'expert informant' status, as they are asked for insights into the attributes of other members of the class child and its sub-classes: boys and girls, younger children and older children. For example, the participants are asked: whether 'violence is worse than the sex stuff ... for young kids?'; whether 'little kids [will] grow out of it [copying violence]?' and whether 'younger kids, say kids under 14, need rules about TV watching?'.

Primarily, however, the participants are addressed individually, by their first names, or collectively or singularly through non-specific pronouns; for example, 'you' ('Have any of you got [the] Internet at home?'), 'anyone' ('Does anyone actually enjoy it because it adds drama ...?'), 'everyone' ('Does everyone see the ... the point?').

### **Positioning the child: gender identity—boys and girls**

In contrast to the participants' identities as children, the participants' gender identities are much more frequently foregrounded. At points in the discussions, the participants are collectively addressed by their gender identities. Perhaps, facilitated by the single gender composition of the focus groups, the moderators ascribe gendered identities to the participants through their collective naming and hailing of the participants as 'girls' in the first example, and as 'boys' or 'guys' in the second example:

Moderator: We're kicking off with a question about the rules and what if any kind of rules are in your house about TV ... watching. What you can watch or when or how long or ... Anyone can start ... Come on girls, go for it!

Moderator: Just hold on, let's just hear--we'll come back to you ... but I want to hear from some of these ... quieter boys that are here just to [laugh] take up-- What about you guys at the end, David or Ben or Marcus? Do you--what do your mum or dad say about violence to you? Do they say anything about it on TV?

This collective hailing of the participants as 'boys/guys' or 'girls' in the examples above does not appear to suggest that gender identity is more significant at these points in the discussion; the first example, coming immediately after the opening comments from the

moderator and not related to any discussion of gender and the second example, occurring during talk about the participants' parents' views about TV violence. Rather, it seems that the moderators appear more comfortable in collectively addressing the participants in relation to their gender identities than in relation to their identities as children, perhaps as a consequence of the negative connotations of the identity 'child' embodied, for example, in dominant psychological discourses which constructs the child as 'lacking' or 'incomplete' (Buckingham 2000) and in normative understandings of state of being 'childish'. The identity categories 'girls' and 'boys' do, however, carry conventional associations with childhood, in ways that other gender-based identity categories; for example, 'guys' in the second excerpt, above, does not. Although gender does not seem of particular relevance or importance to the discussion in the examples above, as will be discussed later in the chapter, there are points in the discussions where the participants' gender identities are made salient as a device for explaining variations in children's media-related activities.

There are also points in the discussion where the participants, although not directly addressed as 'boys/guys' or 'girls', are nonetheless still strongly positioned according to their gender. This occurs most frequently when, in the context of the single-gendered focus groups, the participants are collectively ascribed shared gendered speaking identities through being asked to speak (metonymically) on behalf of their gender class (for example, one group of girls is asked, whether 'girls' ever buy downloaded pornography and another whether 'girls' ever 'copy' swearing from television) or, alternatively, they are asked to talk about the opposing class (for example, a group of boys is asked, 'Do you think girls are more likely to be affected by [horror] than boys?'). Unlike in the first two examples above, in addition to being positioned by their gender, here gender is also made salient in the discussions as a device for identifying gender *differences* in children's

engagement with the media and for exploring children's media-related gendered preferences and behaviours. Further examples will be discussed later in the chapter in relation to how 'age' and 'gender' are used as explanatory devices for explaining differences in children's engagement with the media.

### **'Giving children a voice'—power and social distance**

Consistent with the emancipatory discourse which is typical of cultural studies audience research on children, its construction of an 'active child' and the Harm research aim of 'giving children a voice', substantial efforts appear to be expended in the focus group interactions to 'minimize the distance between adults and children' (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002: 30). Having explicitly positioned the participants as 'children', the introductory moves by the moderators in the discussions appear to acknowledge the multiple power differences operating in the focus group interactions between the adult moderators and the child participants and numerous attempts follow to diminish the power differences between the moderators and the participants and to increase the intimacy or closeness of the contact (Poynton 1985). The following extract again comes from the introductory comments made by the moderators to the first focus group, comprising girls aged 10 to 12 years:

So the only--it's a very casual sort of discussion. Like, it's not like school where you have to put your hand up, or wait to be asked you can just pitch in with anything you'd like to say. There are no right or wrong answers it's just what you think. The only rule is that we want to hear from EVERYONE ... So if I see you being very quiet back there I might say, 'What do you think?' and, and feel free to disagree with each other and, an' ... and all we

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are really asking is very ... sort of straightforward things. The questions might look a bit tricky but we just want to hear a little bit more about ... what's behind those questions.

In the extract above, first, can be identified an attempt by the moderators to reduce the potential formality of the focus group interactions, by describing them as 'a very casual sort of discussion' rather than likening them to interviews or other more formal exchanges. A direct comparison is made and rejected to an interactive mode with which the participants, as a consequence of their identities as children, are assumed to be familiar—that of the school classroom. The participants are told that they do not have to follow the usual conversational exchange rules of the school classroom: they do not have to raise their hands to speak, or wait to be invited to speak and that 'there are no right or wrong answers'. There are also various attempts to reduce social distance/increase contact by creating a more relaxed casual interaction, through use of contractions ('what's', 'it's', 'you'd'), colloquial expressions ('sort of', 'kind of', 'pitch in') and 'childlike' language ('The questions might look a bit tricky', and later the use of 'yucky' and 'stuff').

Modality (Halliday 2004: 143) is used to diminish unequal power relations by softening the force of demands; for example, by firstly tempering the directness (Eggins & Slade 1997) of the demand that the participants actively participate in the focus group discussions, by use of the modal *can* in 'you can just pitch in'. Modality is also used to diminish the possibility of the threat of sanctions for breaking the 'only rule' of the focus group ('If I see you being very quiet back there')—the existence of rules and sanctions having the potential to undermine the earlier attempt to diminish the power differential between the 'adult' moderators and the 'child' participants and to distance the focus group discussions from rule-bound class room discourse. This is achieved through the use of the

modal *might* in the moderator's expression of her possible course of action should the participants fail to participate, 'I might say, "What do you think?"', rather than being expressed as an unmodulated statement of the consequence for non-compliance, through use of Finite element *will* (as in 'I *will* say ...'). The expression of the consequence as a verbal process of *saying* with no target ('you'), also contributes to this tempering of the severity of the sanction since the participants are removed from the position of the affected participant (*you*), as would otherwise be the case in the unmodulated form, 'I will say to *you*' or more directly still, 'I will ask *you*'.

Nevertheless, the power differences between the moderators and the participants is clear in the lack of reciprocity of linguistic choices (Poynton 1985). Despite the suggestion of communal endeavour or cooperation encompassed in the moderator's invitation to the participants to 'just pitch in with anything you'd like to say', the control the moderators exert on the conversational interactions, is clear; not only in terms of topic choice and the formulation of questions, but also in their management of turn-taking, interruptions, length of turn and other aspects of the interaction. An instance of this control can be seen in attempts to restrain the contributions of the more vocal participants in some of the focus groups. For example, the extract below, again from the first focus group, comprising girls aged 10 to 12 years, shows one of the moderators' attempts to control the contributions of Sam:

Moderator: Let someone else have a go, Sam [laugh]. I love your ideas but we'll have to let someone else talk

Sam: No one wants to talk

Moderator: I know, we'll have to whip them into it, though

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Despite the moderator's initial invitation in her introductory comments to the participants to 'just pitch in with anything' that they would like to contribute, as the extract above shows, the moderators attempt to exert quite explicit control over the participants when they feel that they have said enough. Additionally, the moderator's acknowledgement of truth of Sam's rejoinder that 'No one wants to talk'—through her reply that the other participants will have to 'whipped' into responding—is now a much stronger, although light-hearted, re-statement of the consequence for participants who break the 'only rule' by failing to actively participate. Additionally, the act of enforcing the rules is now one in which the other participants are co-opted through the moderator's use of the inclusive pronoun 'we'. Further, the promised informality of the discussions, expressed in the moderator's opening comments in which she describes them as 'a very casual sort of discussion' and distances them from classroom interactions, diminishes at times with the moderators directly inviting the views of some participants rather than others. An example of this can be seen in another section of the same focus group discussion, again incorporating an attempt to control Sam's contributions:

Moderator: == Let someone else have a go [laugh] Sam. What do you others think?

Moderator 2: Heather, do you have some ideas? You've been a bit quiet there.

In this case, after again curtailing Sam's contribution and failing to get a response from any of the other participants, the second moderator directly names Heather and asks for her response.

The moderators regularly exert control over both the topics of discussion and the length of the participants' turns. In the extract below, the moderator interrupts Javid's response to



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her question with an invitation to other participants to respond:

Moderator: (...) so, the first thing I [am] going ask about is rules at your house about ... um, what you're allowed to watch and who gets to watch what and for how long and anything like that. Anyone got those kind of rules?

Javid: Um, I can watch 'M' but ... like ... if the--like, I got little brothers and sisters and they just join in so my parents don't know and so if they--if it gets, like, too violent for the little, you know, the little kids well my Dad just says, 'Turn it off' and then we usually go to the other room and watch it and the little kids will just stay in that other room and == ( )

Moderator: == Mmm. Anybody else got younger brothers and sisters that have got == ( )?

Like Sam in the first group, Javid also is a frequent contributor to the discussions, his answers often lengthy and involving narratives rather than succinct responses to the moderators' questions. The moderator's use of 'Mmm' both acknowledges and interrupts Javid's narrative. Although the moderator provides no indication of how satisfactory she finds Javid's response, that she interrupts and quickly follows her interruption with an invitation to 'anybody else' to speak suggests that Javid's response is in some respect unsatisfactory. This more or less implicit evaluation of the adequacy of the participants' responses can be seen more strongly in a second extract involving Javid where the moderator again interrupts one of Javid's narratives:

Javid: At my school we got like two girls they're doing witchcraft kind of thing and, um, now they quit it but this girl said, like, I don't believe her but she said she was ... she had the lights off and she was facing the mirror and then the lights just went on and she was fighting a demon. She turned on the light--her mum turned on the lights and she was looking into a mirror ==

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Moderator: ==Let's get back to the TV for a minute before we all get scared but, um, 'cause, I'm more--that's interesting about the kind of witchcraft ideas but I'm just wondering, back to that question of just anything that you've seen movie or TV-wise that you think ... you know, is not on?

The extract comes from a discussion about media violence and whether the participants had ever watched anything that they thought had 'gone too far'. The discussion begins on the topic of horror but quickly deviates from media violence to a fairly animated discussion of being scared more generally, traversing séances, games like *Atmosphere* and Javid's discussion of witchcraft. The moderator's directive, 'Let's get back to TV', although tempered and moderated by the suggestion of concern about them 'all' becoming scared, exerts control over the direction of the discussion and indicates that the participants' responses, particularly Javid's, have been unsatisfactory in answering her initial question about media violence ('that's interesting about the kind of witchcraft ideas *but ...*' quickly followed by the command expressed elliptically to get 'back to that question'). Javid's repeated inability to stay on topic and answer questions directly could be seen as a display of conversational 'incompetence' (Baker 1984) which marks him out as more 'childlike' than some of the other participants in this group of 'older boys'; an attribute which becomes a recurring issue in this focus group in relation to Javid's performance of his identity.

Another instance of the positioning of some of the participants as childlike through their conversational performance can be seen in occasions where the moderator reformulates the participants' responses. In the extract below the participants describe or name the television programs they choose to view:

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Moderator: When you get to choose the programs, what programs do you choose?

Rebecca: I choose *Home and Away*.

Moderator: Rebecca chooses *Home and Away*

Sam: I choose *Drew Carey* and *Friends* and stuff like really stupid comedies

Group: laughter

Moderator: You like the situation comedies, what about Louise, what do you like? [pause]

Louise: Funny shows

Moderator: Comedies of some sort, hmm, mm. Any in particular that you can think of?

Louise: *Seinfeld*

In the extract above, while the moderator's response to Rebecca could be seen as a simple restating of Rebecca's answer, perhaps to check or confirm what she has heard, the subsequent moves do more than this. Rather, than simple restating, they reformulate the participants' responses so as to express them in a more linguistically competent, a more adult register so that Sam's '*Drew Carey* and *Friends* and stuff like really stupid comedies' is reformulated as 'situation comedies' and Louise's 'funny shows' becomes 'comedies of some sort'.

Despite attempts to lessen the power differences between the adult moderators and the child participants, the focus group discussions nevertheless express the power differences between adult interviewer and child participant, reinforcing implicitly, in so far as the discussions are expressions of 'relations of difference' (Kress 1985: 52), the participants' initial and explicit positioning as 'children'. However, as will be discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7 the participants themselves are not entirely powerless in the discussions

as can be seen in the examples above and those that follow, where some of participants fail to comply with the directive to actively participate; others, such as Sam, repeatedly challenge the moderator's attempts to reign in and constrain their contributions; and a number of participants continue to raise their hands when they want to respond, despite repeated reminders that there is no need to do so. Rather, the interactions can be conceptualised in terms of shifting power relations negotiated through a number of competing discourses.

### **Constructing 'difference'—gender and age as explanatory devices**

Having ascribed to the participants speaking identities as 'young people' or 'kids', the participants at various points in the discussion are invited by the moderators to draw comparisons between themselves and 'other children'. They are also asked for insights into the attributes, actions, thoughts and behaviours of individual children, sub-categories of children—specifically, younger children and older children, and boys and girls—and children as a class. At certain points in these discussions, the participants' identities as 'boys' or 'girls'; 'younger' children or 'older' children; or children of particular ages, rather than their shared identities as 'kids' or 'children', are made relevant to the discussion. Following from the earlier discussion of the key identity categories established in research design of the Harm project, this section will continue to map the discursive terrain of 'childhood' as it is constructed and negotiated within the interactive context of the focus group discussions by examining how gender identity and age/stage of life function as explanatory devices to account for *differences* in both children's engagement with the media and their understandings of media harm.

### **Gender identity: gender as an explanatory device**

As mentioned, with 'boy' and 'girl' established as key identity categories in the research design, gender becomes a key axis within the interactional context of the focus groups around which to explore *differences* in children's engagement with the media and a key explanatory device to account for these differences. As was seen earlier in this chapter's discussion of gender, one strategy employed by the moderators is to make relevant the participants' gender identities by positioning them to speak *as* a 'girl' or *as* a 'boy' and thereby inviting them to perform their gender identities. This can be seen in the excerpt below, from a discussion with a group of boys about media violence:

Moderator: == What about just forgetting those really extreme acts but just violence in general, the shooting and the cutting and the maiming and the guts, and the, you know. Do you reckon, I mean--it's said often to people like us that boys like you really love that == sort of stuff.

Jason: == Yeah

Anthony: Well, I think ... in the movies, like, violence and all that is overdone.

Moderator: Too much of it

Anthony: Yep. Like, they just over do it, like

In this example, the participants' gender identity is made explicit through the moderator's inclusion of the participants in the gendered category, 'boys like you'. Having ascribed the participants gendered speaking identities as 'boys', the participants are then asked for insights into the attributes of 'boys' as a class; specifically, about whether 'love' of violence is a gender-bound attribute. In addition to being positioned as boys, the participants appear to be positioned metonymically, being asked to provide insights not

just about themselves but also about boys more generally ('boys like you'). While Jason's, elliptical 'Yeah', seems to accept the moderator's metonymic positioning ('Yeah, [boys like us, love that stuff]'), Anthony's shift to a first-person response ('Well, I think ...') appears to both challenge or confront this positioning and the accompanying assumption that 'love' of violence is a gender-bound attribute. Anthony's response may also be read as a rejection of his positioning as a 'child' and a performance of himself as more adult (see Chapter 7) through his adoption of an 'individualist' perspective, his deployment of a more critical ('adult') discourse about the way violence is depicted in the media ('violence and all that is overdone') and his distancing of himself from the identity category 'boy' with its conventional association with childhood.

In attempting to identify gender differences in the media-related activities of boys and girls, the moderators' questions begin to construct the identity child as one divided along gender lines. This is further emphasised through the salience imparted by the moderators to gender in the focus group discussions. In the discussion below, for example, the moderator attempts to ascertain whether collecting Pokémon spin-off products is a gender bound activity:

Moderator: Do girls, little girls, get into Pokémon or is it a boy thing?

Rochelle: I think it's both

Brittany: Yeah

Alyson: I think boys (do it more than) girls

Rochelle: But I don't know any girls who have got it [laugh] I only know boys

Moderator: Are there fads among girls at the moment? Are there?

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By making gender identity categories salient at this point in the discussion, the moderator draws the distinction between 'boy things' and by inference 'girl things': gender-differentiated media-related activities. By far, the most frequent place, however, where gender difference is made salient in the discussions is in relation to media violence. For example, in the passage below a group of 'older girls' discusses the viewing of programs depicting a violent event, in this case, the Vietnam War, in the context of a school history lesson. Interrupting the discussion, the moderator asks about the impact of the program:

Moderator: But what about dealing with the violence? Do you think the violence in that context, the violence has the same sort of impact ... on ... not necessarily you but say on the boys in ... in the group?

Rochelle: I think that because it's, I don't know, it was ... They wouldn't go out and act the movie, you know what I mean, but because it's not, like--for it to be acted it has to be something ... that, I don't know, they aspire to or something, you know what I mean?

In asking about the impact of violent programs in a school context, the moderator distinguishes between the opposing gender identities, boy and girl, making salient Rochelle's gender identity as 'girl' in the comment 'not necessarily you but ... the boys in the group'. This question appears to be in keeping with the research aim of identifying gender-based differences in children's engagement with the media and understanding of media harm. A similar exchange occurs among a group of boys when, after providing numerous examples of individual children being frightened by what they had viewed on television, the moderator similarly asks, 'Do you think girls are more affected by things like that than boys?'. In attempting to draw out the participants' views on whether vulnerability to media violence is a gender bound attribute, the moderators construct the

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identity child as divided along gender lines and gender as a key device for explaining differences in children's engagement with violence in the media. This is further emphasised in the salience imparted to gender by the moderators in the focus group discussions.

Again, in another example in which media violence is the topic of discussion, gender differences appear to be made salient but this time as a device to counter the participants' deployment and acceptance of 'adult' discourses about the harmful effects of the media on children. The propensity to partake in violence or rough play, in the example below, is cast by the moderators as almost a 'natural' attribute of boys rather than as a result of 'exposure' to media violence:

Moderator: == Mmm. So what do you, Heather or um, Jenny, or anyone--do you think, though that things are getting--that TV is making kids rougher in that way?

Group: Yeah. Yeah, probably

Melissa: I reckon that the little kids should only be able to watch the ABC 'cause that doesn't have much violence on it

Heather: Or, like the, you know, the *Power Rangers*, how all the little kids could go running around kicking everyone and hitting everyone with the like--pretending they have guns and trying to hit everyone.

Rebecca: My cousin really wants to fight and he like really kicks me but I don't want to hurt him but, like, he goes, 'I'm tougher than you' and he keeps thinking he's tougher than me == and he's not

Moderator: == But maybe would he as a little boy do that anyway? I mean, I'm just saying, you know, the same as the *Power Rangers* even though they're still the *Power*



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*Rangers* if they weren't, maybe little boys would be like that anyway

Group: Mmm

Louise: I don't (think so)

The extract above follows a discussion in which a number of the participants offer accounts of violent behaviour by 'kids' that they appear to associate with television viewing. This prompts the moderator to directly ask whether the participants believe there is a link between certain TV programs and children's violent behaviour. To the moderator's question, the participants respond that they do believe that there is a connection between TV violence and children's 'rough' play. Melissa suggests that young kids should only be able to watch the ABC because of its low level of violent content. Heather then gives a general account of the impact of the program *Power Rangers* on the behaviour of 'little kids'. Rebecca elaborates, supporting Heather's assertion about the impact of violent TV by providing an example from her own life: the violent behaviour of her cousin. Although Rebecca does not emphasise the gender identity of her cousin, she does use the male pronouns 'him' and 'he' in her comments. The moderator then makes Rebecca's cousin's gender salient and employs it as an explanatory device to account for his violent behaviour.

The saliency given to Rebecca's cousin's gender identity could be seen as an attempt by the moderator to challenge the causal relationship being drawn by the participants between TV violence and real life violence. Using the cousin's gender as an alternative explanation for his behaviour through the suggestion that violence or rough play may be a natural attribute of 'little boys' rather than the result of TV viewing, could be read as an outcome of the competing discourses and aims which inform this research: the research focus on

children's involvement in meaning-making and the subsequent rejection of models of 'effects' or 'influences'; the search for *differences* in children's understandings of media harm vis-à-vis adults' understandings (rather than the identification of shared discursive constructions); and the aim of identifying age-based and gender-based differences between children. The combined impact of these competing discourses and the research aims of the Harm project on the discursive practices of the focus group interactions is explored further below in relation to the moderators' deployment of 'stage of life' as an explanatory device.

### **Stage of life—age as an explanatory device**

As has been discussed earlier in the chapter, age or stage of life is the second axis around which differences in children's engagement with media is explored in the Harm research. Coupled with dominant discourses which construct childhood as a process of 'becoming', stage of life subdivides the category 'child' into a series of 'ages and stages' (Buckingham 2000: 14), on to which differences in children's media engagement and experiences can be mapped. This section provides a number of examples of the different ways age or 'stage of life' functions within the interactional context of the focus groups to account for differences in children's engagement with the media.

Hester (1998) and Francis and Hester (2004) discuss stage of life membership categorisation devices as a type of positioned-category device which includes 'membership categories which occupy, or are arranged in, different positions, higher and lower, relative to one another' (Hester 1998: 138). The 'stage of life' membership categorisation device can be 'organised in terms of several different orders of positioned categories' (Hester 1998: 138). Hester gives the example of the positioned age terms, 'one year old', 'six years old', 'forty years old'; the membership categories, 'baby', 'toddler',

'child', 'adolescent', 'teenager'; and the age classes, including 'young', 'old' and 'oldest' (Hester 1998: 138).

In addition to their association with gender, the identity categories 'boys' and 'girls', in the examples discussed in the previous section, potentially carry conventional associations with age, in ways that other gender-based identity categories; for example, 'guys' in one of the earlier excerpts, does not. In the last example discussed above, the moderator's use of '*little* boys' ('maybe little boys would be like that anyway') explicitly makes relevant relative age or stage of life, in this case, combined with a gender categorisation, through the use of 'little' to overtly signify a stage of life membership categorisation device: 'little' boys, could be positioned alongside 'big' boys as an imprecise stage of life category that to some extent refers to relative age and to some extent competency or ability. In the example, not only does the moderator make relevant Rebecca's cousin's gender as an alternative explanation for his behaviour, as has been discussed above, but also his relative age. Violence or rough play, the moderator implies is not naturally an attribute of *all* boys. Rather, it is an attribute of the identity category 'little boys'.

### ***'Little' boys and younger brothers***

As has been discussed earlier in the chapter, the participants are frequently invited by the moderators to position themselves in relation to other children and age/stage of life is another means by which this is achieved. 'Big' and 'little', and 'older' and 'younger', for example, are used by the moderators in the discussions to establish the age class of other children, particularly the participants' siblings, relative to the participant. In doing so, the moderators position the participants via their relative age and give age or stage of life salience in the discussions. For example, in the discussion below of home television rules,

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the moderator asks for clarification of the relative age of the participant's brother— 'is he a big brother?' On learning that the participant is referring to a younger or 'little' brother, the moderator draws on this categorisation to explain the child's ability to get around the family TV viewing rules:

Melissa: Umm, well, in the mornings we're not really allowed to watch TV but my brother puts it on anyway.

Moderator: And is he a big brother?

Melissa: Oh no, he's only little.

Moderator: Ah right, so he gets away with it?

Melissa: Yeah, basically, [small laugh] 'cause my Mum doesn't like to fight with him

According to Widdicombe (1998: 53) identity categories are 'powerful cultural resources' for 'warranting, explaining and justifying behaviour' because they 'are conventionally associated with activities, attributes, motives and so on'. Butler explains this a 'congealing' over time of the acts and attributes that 'effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal' (Butler 1990/2006: 192). It is in relation to these norms and practices that Butler says that social recognition occurs, 'what we are is a function of the discursive categories that are available for recognition' (Butler interview in More 1999: 287).

In interpreting Melissa's younger brother's ability to break the rules, the moderator invokes what might be considered to be a conventional characteristic or feature of the identity category ascribed to him—the ability of little or younger children (or younger brothers) to 'get away with' more than their older siblings. In a similar way, in the earlier

example, the identity category, 'little boys', perhaps because of its conventional association with rough and unruly play, offers an alternate explanation for the 'violent' behaviour that Rebecca and other members of the group attribute to children's viewing of certain types of television content. Stage of life and age categories then, in this context, in addition to constructing childhood as a process of 'becoming', function to provide the moderators with a mechanism with which to counter the participants' deployment of media effects discourse.

***'Older' kids: staying up late and internet pornography***

There are numerous locations in the discussions where the moderators similarly seek clarification of the age or relative age of siblings or other children as a way of making relevant age as an explanatory device for interpreting the behaviour the participants describe and/or for suggesting possible links between age and media related behaviour. For example, in this discussion of TV-viewing rules the moderator's enquiry about the participant's brother's age seems to be motivated by an attempt to explain the disparity in rules about how long the two siblings can view TV:

Heather: I'm not allowed to stay up too late [small laugh] ... Um ... I have to stop watching the TV at 8 o'clock but my brother gets to stay up pretty late ... still

[pause]

Moderator: How old is he?

Heather: He's 12

Moderator: He's 12

Moderator 2: He's about your age then, a little bit older

Heather: I'm 10

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In this example, the moderator makes age-based identity categories rather than gender-based identity categories salient to the discussions. After Heather describes the different television viewing rules for herself and her brother, the moderator makes Heather's brother's age relevant to the discussion in her question, 'How old is he?' Following Heather's response, the moderator initially ascribes to Heather and her brother a shared age-based identity which she quickly corrects, differentiating between them on the basis of relative age, 'He's about your age then, a little bit older'.

While in the example above the moderator appears to be using relative age to interpret Heather's account of the differences in the two siblings' television viewing rules, in the example below, the moderator directly asks about the possibility of a link between relative age and involvement with internet pornography. The excerpt comes from a discussion about 'kids' downloading pornography from the internet and selling it to other 'kids':

Moderator: (...) we've a couple--some kids here other days talking about this, some kids older than you and some your age, and they were saying it happens quite a lot. Some kids were saying that they actually have kids at school selling stuff--pictures off. Have you heard of that?

Group: Yes, yeah

Moderator: Is that--but these are rude sites or nude ==

Andrew: == Yeah, they download (them) 'cause I knew one person that he downloaded them off the Internet onto the disc and then sell them for like ten bucks ... so I just said == 'Go away'

Moderator: == And ... at your age == or does that happen more to older kids do you think? Have others of you heard of that?

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Andrew: == Yeah

As in the previous example, the moderator makes age salient to the discussion; in this case, by ascribing an age-based identity to the participants and positioning them alongside other participants who the moderator labels as 'older kids'. Although not explicitly addressed as 'young' or 'younger' children, they are implicitly positioned as younger children, through the moderator's reference to 'older children'. The moderator asks the participants to consider whether 'older kids' are more likely to download and sell pornography than 'kids' their age. The moderator's question suggests the possibility that certain media related activities, in this case the downloading and selling of pornography, may be mapped onto age or stage of life and that an interest in pornography is an attribute conventionally associated with the identity category 'older' kids, perhaps as a result of their proximity to adulthood (see also section in Chapter 6 where the participants discuss children's views of pornography).

### ***Mapping age to media practices***

In the discussion below, the moderator similarly appears to attempt to map age to certain media-related activities; in this case, TV viewing by asking the participants to consider at what age children should be able to have greater viewing freedom. In the example below, age is again made relevant to the discussions and an age-based identity, expressed as a range—'you're all from 10-12'—is ascribed to all the participants in the group:

Moderator: And, so what sort of age, like you're all from 10 to 12--what sort of age do you think then it's OK for kids to start watching ... more kinds of things and not be too ==

Emily: == When they're about 20 [laugh]

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Sam: When they realise its wrong

Louise: 13 == or 14

Melissa: == About eight, seven--seven, eight and nine

Sam: My sister watches dogs and stuff on TV and she acts like one. I don't know if that's given her an influence or my real dog

Melissa: I reckon eight, nine, and 10

Jenny: Yeah

This extract follows the excerpt discussed earlier in relation to gender in which the group responds to a question about whether TV is making children 'rougher' and Melissa asserts that, 'little kids should only be able to watch the ABC' because of its low level of violence. As was argued in relation the earlier excerpt, the moderator's reference to 'little boys' makes both age and gender salient to the discussions as a challenge to the causal relationship being drawn by the participants between TV violence and real life violence. The follow-up question in the extract above, again makes age salient by deploying it as a device for explaining shifts in children's media access. Given the discussion that went before and the salience given to age by both the participants and the moderator, it is unsurprising that Melissa, Louise, Emily and Jenny's responses appear to accept this construction by offering suggestions of appropriate ages for children to have greater viewing freedom. Emily's laughter, however, distances herself from her response (Eggins & Slade 1997: 166), intimating that her suggestion that 'about 20' is the appropriate age for more independent television viewing is to some extent a facetious response to the moderator's question. Her refusal to take the question seriously could also be read as something of a challenge to age-based explanations or, perhaps, to the authority of the moderators themselves.



Sam alone explicitly refuses the link to age, instead suggesting that children's capacity to recognise when television content is 'wrong' is a better measure. Sam's second turn appears tangential to the discussion and, in keeping with the moderators' repeated attempts to limit or control Sam's contributions, is unacknowledged. At one level, Sam's contribution can be read as another humorous interjection into the discussion, albeit one which potentially challenges the control of the moderators over the direction and the gravity of the discussion. But on another level, Sam's humorous dilemma over what has influenced her sister's behaviour—her sister's viewing of media representations of dogs or her sister's engagement with the 'real' family dog—creatively encapsulates a problem inherent in all media effects research; that is, the difficulty of demonstrating an association between media 'exposure and behaviour under naturalistic conditions' (Hargrave & Livingstone 2006: 44).

The framing of the focus group discussions of children's media involvement in terms of the explanatory potential of the age- and gender-based attributes of children potentially reduces opportunities for certain types of discussions to occur. While not foreclosing alternate responses, such as Sam's or even Emily's, such framing, nonetheless, sets limits on such discussions and, in this case, serves to further ensure that Sam's interjection is unremarked upon by either the moderators or the other participants.

### ***Stage of life: Countering media effects discourse***

As discussed earlier, at certain moments in the discussions, stage of life identity categories, sometimes in conjunction with gender, function to counter the participants' deployment of media effects discourse by providing an alternative explanation for some of the 'effects' or 'influences' the participants attribute to the media. In the excerpt below, Jenny suggests a

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link between her brother's viewing of war movies and his behaviour the next morning.

Before she can finish, the moderator makes relevant the age of Jenny's brother by interrupting with a question to this effect:

Jenny: When my brother watches movies that have fighting and that he always, the next morning like pretends he's in the war and ==

Moderator: == How old's he?

Jenny: He's 7

Moderator: Oh.

Sam: He's my sister's age

Moderator: So do you think that's more likely that sort of pretending you're the hero when you're little?

After learning that Jenny's brother is seven years old, the moderator's next question suggests a possible explanation for Jenny's brother's behaviour—'pretending' may be an attribute of those who are 'little', rather than, as Jenny suggests, a more general consequence of viewing violent television. Again, as in the earlier discussion of gender, the moderator effectively challenges Jenny's assertion of a link between TV viewing and violence in her account, in this case by employing a stage of life category to re-categorise Jenny's 'brother' as a 'little' or younger child rather than as simply a male sibling, and suggesting that 'pretending' is an attribute of young children rather than a behavioural effect of television viewing.

In a second example, the moderator asks the participants whether they know or have heard of anyone who has been harmed or disturbed by what they have seen on TV. The shift to

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questions about 'known' children appears to be another strategy employed by the moderators to avoid or, in some cases, challenge the participants' assertions about a direct link between the media and children's behaviour, by asking for concrete examples of what might otherwise be expressed as more general effects—violent behaviour, swearing, and so on. In the example below, two participants offer instances of siblings who they believe were affected by what they had seen on TV. After both examples, the moderator again makes age-based identity salient to the discussion by enquiring about the ages of the siblings: in one case, directly asking about age and in the other, asking whether the participant's sister is a 'little sister':

Moderator: Just going back to-- I'm jumping around between TV and internet but with the TV--with stuff say you've seen on TV, have you heard anyone been harmed or ... disturbed by stuff they've seen on TV, or have you? ... Do ==?

Mark: == Yeah, my sister saw *Jaws* once and then she wouldn't go swimming any more

Moderator: [Laugh]

Mark: Yeah, for a long time

Moderator: Is she a little sister?

Mark: Yeah, she's only nine

Moderator: Oh right. Anyone else got stories like that?

Adam: My sister saw *Scream* == and she didn't want to go out at night or anything. She just wanted to stay home.

Thomas: == Ahh

Moderator: Hmm. How old was she?

Adam: I think she's ... ssseven or eight

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The moderators' repeated questions about age or relative age give considerable salience to age/stage of life in the focus group discussions and to the potential for relative age to explain a number of aspects of children's engagement with the media. In this example, the moderator uses stage of life categories to re-categorise the participants' 'sisters' as 'little sisters' or 'younger children' by making their age and/or stage of life salient to the discussion. In this context, as was similarly the case for gender, age/stage of life functions as an explanatory device to account for differences in children's engagement with the media. The stage of life device coupled with dominant discourses which construct childhood as a process of 'becoming' enable the moderators to challenge the participants' apparent acceptance of 'adult' discourses of media effects by providing an alternative explanation for the 'behaviours' the participants describe, suggesting instead a link between a child's development and his/her engagement with the media.

### ***Stage of life, media effects and interpellation: re-positioning and re-constructing the 'child'***

The previous section has shown how moderators use of stage of life or age attributes to suggest alternative explanations for the media 'effects' the participants identify. It could be argued that this furthers the research aim of identifying a distinctive *children's* understanding of media harm by challenging the 'adult' discourses articulated by the participants, while simultaneously sustaining a view of the child, and particularly the 'young child', as importantly different from the adult. However, in doing so, the participants themselves are to some extent positioned in these moments in the discussion as naïve, 'childlike' and deficient in their uncritical acceptance of 'adult' media effects discourse. Two additional examples, both discussing the negative effects of the television program, *Power Rangers*, are provided below. In the examples, the moderators' use of questions ('But don't you think ...'; 'But maybe ...'; 'Don't little boys punch?'), not

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unlike the scaffolding techniques employed in instructional or classroom discourse (Slade & Thornbury 2006), to prompt the participants to consider alternative explanations for the behaviours they describe appears to function more as a process of 'demystification', a means of facilitating the participants' *learning* than as a means of eliciting information from them:

Adam: Yeah, he [Adam's cousin] watched *Power Rangers* and he wanted to be one == So he went around punching everyone

Moderator: But do you think he might have been punching everyone anyway even if he hadn't seen *Power Rangers*? Don't little boys punch?

Heather: Or, like the, you know, the *Power Rangers*, how all the little kids would go running around kicking everyone and hitting everyone with the like--pretending they have guns and trying to hit everyone.

Rebecca: My cousin really to want to fight and he like really kicks me but I don't want to hurt him but, like, he goes, 'I'm tougher than you' and he keeps thinking he's tougher than me == and he's not

Moderator: But maybe would he as a little boy do that anyway? I mean, I'm just saying, you know (...) maybe little boys would be like that anyway.

Despite the moderators' initial assurances that the focus group discussions were not like school and the multiple attempts by the moderators to diminish the power differences within the focus groups, the moderators appear in these locations in the discussion to assume the role of teacher-authority, both in terms of their control of the interactions and their possession of legitimised forms of knowledge (Buzzelli & Johnston 2001). The

moderators' questions and responses although not explicitly evaluative and often heavily modalised (e.g. use of 'maybe', 'might', 'just' in the examples above), nevertheless provide 'corrective feedback' (Anton 1999: 310) and mark the participants' responses as unsatisfactory. Rather than being positioned as expert informants, here the participants' accounts, in their reliance on adult media effects discourses, appear to be regarded by the moderators as less trustworthy or less reliable.

The moderators' questions and comments in the examples above appear to be designed to attain an '*unadulterated*' (Fine 1994: 21 cited in Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002: 28, italics added) child's view untainted by adult discourse prompting the participants to think more critically about their answers and providing them with opportunities to elaborate or modify their contributions. Again, it is 'shared' knowledge of the natural attributes of '*little boys*' that is drawn upon to prompt the participants to reconsider or evaluate belief in the ability of the program *Power Rangers* to cause violent behaviour.

## Constructing 'sameness'—'the child' as an explanatory device

As discussed earlier, 'child' is the shared, taken-for-granted, primary identity of all the participants in the research, constructed in terms of the child's difference in respect to its opposite, the 'adult', and the focus of the Harm research was to identify the attributes and activities of the child in his or her engagement with the media which children share and that mark children out as interestingly different from adults. This final section of the chapter will examine how the shared identity 'child' is used by the moderators in the discussions as a device to account for and identify the distinctive characteristics of children's engagement with the media and understanding of media harm.

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As has been discussed, having ascribed to the participants at the outset of the focus speaking identities as 'young people' or 'kids', the participants in their discussion of the media are, at various points in the discussion, invited by the moderators to speak metonymically *for* children; that is, to speak *as* a child rather than being positioned as 'boys' or 'girls', 'younger' children or 'older' children. This is consistent with the research aim of attempting to identify the attributes and behaviours which children as a class share and which mark them out as different from adults in their interactions with the media and their understanding of media harm.

As noted earlier, the moderators' questions about individual children or sub-categories of children often challenge the participants' acceptance of 'adult' discourses about direct media effects on children by suggesting alternative explanations for the behaviours the participants describe. The moderators' questions about 'children', however, rather than younger or older children, boy or girl children, and the salience of this identity appears to often function as a mechanism for challenging the participants' apparent denial of harm or, more precisely, their failure to construct media harm according to adult norms; that is, in relation to the harmful consequences of *media content* for children.

### **Media content and media practices: The 'bad things' that might happen to 'children'**

In the example below, the moderator attempts to satisfy one of the project's key objectives, to explore children's understanding of media harm; specifically, to identify the nature of the harm that the participants believe may result from the viewing of more 'adult' content ('things that are not for kids'). Following on from an early discussion about the types of programs that their parents were concerned about them viewing, the moderator begins by

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asking how the participants think 'kids' may be harmed by viewing adult content on television:

Moderator: (...) What ... are the bad things or ... harmful things that might happen to kids if they ARE watching things that are not for kids on TV? Do you think--you know, you talked earlier about guts everywhere or being scared or, what ==

Sam: ==You might introduce it to another kid.

Moderator: If they were seeing things that, yeah?

Rebecca: They might tell their parents about something that they don't know what it means or something and then they might get in trouble, and things like that

Moderator: They might get into trouble ... from their parents == for seeing something they didn't want them to watch

Rebecca: Yeah

Melissa: Sometimes at school they say to, like, the other kids, they say, 'Oh, did you watch this', and then they say, 'Oh no, I wasn't allowed to watch that' and then she--and then the other person says, 'Oh, um ... I wasn't allowed to watch it either but I just watched it anyway'.

Moderator: Oh right [small laugh] and then do they tell you what it is about?

Melissa: Yes

Moderator: And so do you think that by watching that there's anything that's ... that's not so good for THEM or do you think in the end it doesn't matter very much, or

[pause]

Melissa: I think it was really bad that they did that behind their parents' back.

Moderator: So their parents didn't know about it, kind of thing



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Melissa: Yeah

Moderator: But apart from ... apart from the side of what your parents would like, what do you think yourselves. I'm not saying there is a sort of right or wrong answer here but what do you think ... would happen, or change if you were seeing stuff that was not really ... good for kids or ... have you seen things on TV, when you were saying that you turn it off yourself, that you think, 'Ohh, I shouldn't be watching that' ... or in a movie

[pause]

In this discussion the participants do not answer the questions in terms of the impacts or effects of media content on children. In each instance, the kinds of harms the participants suggest are not harms that could be considered to result from children's viewing of 'harmful' media *content*. Instead, the participants discuss how the *act* of viewing certain television content may 'harm' children's relationship with their parents since it may result in them getting into trouble, or may occur as a consequence of them deceiving their parents by going 'behind their backs'. In other words, it is not the harmful effects of media content that they discuss but rather the harmful consequences that may result from certain media related actions or practices; in this case, watching something of which their parents may not approve. The moderator's early responses to the participants' answers appear to function as little more than verifying or confirming moves but, towards the end of the excerpt, the moderator attempts two restatements of the initial question.

The moderator's need to restate, elaborate and recast the initial question suggests dissatisfaction with the participants' answers. This dissatisfaction is most likely based on a conscious or unconscious expectation that the participants' answers would be framed in terms of likely harmful impacts of television *content* on children. It is likely that the

moderator interprets the participants' responses as a misunderstanding of the question, given that the debate about the harmful effects of the media on children is primarily constructed in terms of the effects of media content on children. Coupled with the binary between 'adult' and 'child' understandings of media harm that underpins the research, this means that the search for a distinctive child's understanding of media harm becomes limited to a search for children's views on the nature of the harm which may result from children's engagement with media content.

This focus on television content can be seen initially in the moderator's very general reference to the 'things' that children may view on television. That she is not referring to television programs more generally but instead to a particular type of television content, content that adults have expressed concerns about children viewing—'adult' program content—is signified through the postmodifying embedded clause, which identifies the programs of interest as being those 'that are not for kids'.

The Harm research's critique of media effects discourse and focus on children's views of media harm perhaps explains why the question is expressed as a process of 'happening', expressing relatively weak causal links between TV programs, the process of watching and what may 'happen' to children as a consequence. Avoiding the language of media effects which attributes causality (agency) to media, the moderator instead expresses the consequences for children as 'bad things' or 'harmful things' that might 'happen' to them without explicitly mentioning the agent or what it is that might cause these harmful 'things'. Instead, the act of watching television is introduced in the second clause to describe the conditions (causal-conditional: condition—relationship of enhancement) under which these 'bad' or 'harmful things' might occur.

However, the moderator appears to feel that further elaboration or clarification is required and this is achieved through exemplification: the nature of the harmful things she is interested in is elaborated in the example, 'being scared', while her expectation that the participants will discuss television *content* is signaled in the example of programs with 'guts everywhere'. This emphasis on television program content (represented as a 'thing') rather than television viewing practices (the process) can again be seen in the two further restatements of the question; the first, signaling an interest in television content through its reference to whether there is 'anything' on television that is 'not so good' for children and the second, through its reference to the participants seeing 'stuff' on television that was 'not really good' for kids. In the moderator's final move the binary expressed in the alternatives 'what your parents would like' and what 'you think yourselves' is used to contrast the moderator's view of what the participants' accounts have so far expressed—'what [their] parents would like'—with what the moderator requires—what 'you think yourselves'—suggesting that the moderator has not interpreted the earlier discussion as an authentic account of 'children's' views of media harm. Rather, the implication seems to be that the participants have simply been articulating adult—in this case, parent—perspectives.

Again in this excerpt, can be seen the tension in the alternate discursive constructions of the child which inform the discussions. Here the participants appear to be positioned as both naïve and incompetent in comparison to adults and the opportunity of opening up the discussion of media harm beyond a discussion of the impacts of media content is diminished. It is at this point the moderator makes the participants' identities as children relevant to the discussion in an attempt to get the participants to express their ideas about the likely harmful impacts of media content on children. Changing tack, the moderator no

longer asks the participants about children as a class but rather makes relevant the participants' own identities as children by asking them to consider what might happen to *them* if they were to view media content that was 'not really ... good for kids'. Using a similar strategy to that discussed earlier where the moderator attempts to challenge the participants' belief in media effects by asking the participants for concrete examples of children they 'know' who have been effected by the media, the moderator shifts her questioning from a focus on children as a class to one on individual children; in this case, to the participants themselves. However, this strategy fails initially to elicit any response at all and when Sam finally breaks the silence it is to recount a story about watching the television program *Neighbours*.

### **Media content and media practices: Does it matter if 'kids' look at pornography?**

The second example, from a group of 'younger boys', is similar to the first in that it also comes out of a discussion of media effects. The discussion up to this point has been about internet pornography. Again, the extract begins with the moderators attempting to explore whether the participants think that viewing adult content, initially nudity, is harmful for children:

Moderator: Do you think it matters looking at that sort of--well, lets say, nude people. Do you think it sort of matters to you or for kids to be looking at that stuff or do you think it's not that important?

Robert: It's important

Moderator: You think it is.

Moderator 2: Does everyone?

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Mark: Yeah

Christopher: Yeah it matters ... 'cause like, um, you're supporting them for them to do that

Moderator: Oh, right

Robert: And then you influence other people to go and they tell other people and they go as well ... it keeps going

Moderator: So in your mind, if you're watching or if you were talking about someone else's kids, what do you think's sort of the worst for you in terms of watching bad language or watching violence or sex? Is there one that you think stands out as being-- you'd stay, you'd say steer clear of if you were talking to another kid? [no response from group] ... Or, do you think it's all, you know--I'm just trying to work out what you think about say kids that are watching violence. Do you think if they are watching violence that it does after a while make a difference to them that they change == or that it has a long term bad effect?

In the excerpt above, the question, 'Do you think it matters to *you or for kids* to be looking at that stuff?', while not explicitly ascribing the participants identities as 'kids', suggests to the participants that in referring to themselves they should answer from their position as children. The question, however, elicits a response not unlike that given by the participants in the earlier example. The participants again do not discuss harm in terms of the effects of pornographic *content* on children but, in this case, in terms of how the act of viewing pornography may support and even encourage the growth of the pornography industry. The moderator again makes the participants' identity as 'kids' salient in a further attempt to explore the participants' understanding of harm by asking them to consider which is worse for 'them' or 'someone else's kids'— watching bad language, violence or sex. The participants' identities as 'kids' is further reinforced in the following question about

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whether there was any type of media content about which the participants would warn 'another kid'. The questions elicit no responses from the participants so the moderator shifts to again ask about questions about kids as a class.

The discussion begun in the example above continues in the next excerpt with the participants answering that violent television may influence 'younger people', those under ten years of age:

Moderator: And what were you going to say, Chris?

Christopher: Um, yeah, younger people. They can be influenced easier

Moderator: But not so much your age?

Christopher: Nah

Moderator: So when do you reckon that you stop being so easily influenced?

Robert: When you, um, turn 10

Thomas: Yeah

Moderator: Ten but then, even, if you talked about say, you know, 12 year olds, if you were a 12-year-old boy and you're watching pretty violent stuff on TV or videos, do you think that that would make a difference to you, or matter? [group shake heads] Not, you don't think so?

Christopher: Nah

Adam: Nah

Moderator: It's just entertainment?

Mark: Yeah, well, as you get older you get more mature, so ... you can

Moderator: But then, for you guys say, Adam and Chris, you're saying it's not that

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important either way. Then what sort of things do you think--does that mean, that mean you can be watching more and more violent things or it's just? I'm just trying to get an idea of where's the limit, if you like, you know where do you start saying, this is not good for me or kids my age?

Christopher: I don't really think about it in that way

Adam: Yeah, neither do I

Moderator: But do you figure, 'cause a lot of people are, you know parents, it's a real big worry to a lot of parents.

After Chris and Robert's suggestion that 'younger people' are more likely to be influenced by violent television, the moderator asks the participants to consider the impact of violence on '12-year-olds' as a class but then recasts the question, asking the participants instead to consider the impact on themselves if they were 12-year-old boys. Given that the participants in the group are aged from ten to 12 years of age, the moderator is in effect again attempting to focus the participants' thinking on harm by shifting them from a discussion of the effects of television violence on a class of children—children over ten years of age—to a discussion of the potential effects on themselves of 'watching pretty violent stuff'.

On obtaining another denial of any effects, the moderator asks first whether the participants' position in respect of television violence means that they can watch 'more and more violent things'. Then, once more, the moderator ascribes to the participants' identities as children—in this case children of a particular age—asking them to articulate the 'limits' to what they would view: when would they 'start saying this is not good for me or kids my age?' To which question, Christopher's response, 'I don't really think about it

in that way', perhaps aptly encapsulates the difference between participants' positions and that of the moderators.

Given the research focus on identifying key differences between child and adult concepts of harm, the moderators appear to experience some difficulty in grappling with the views of a group of children who appear to have no concept of media harm for children over ten—at least when harm is defined in terms of the effects of media content. This puzzle is perhaps what prompts the moderator to follow by explicitly contrasting the participants' attitude to television violence with that of another category—adults—specifically 'parents', in the comment: 'But ... it's a real big worry to a lot of parents'.

## Conclusion—mapping the discursive terrain of childhood

Butler emphasises the role of discourse in subject formation, in structuring the subject's interpellation and determining 'the specific ways in which the intersubjective encounter can take place' (Magnus 2006: 100). This chapter has examined concrete instances of these processes in the Harm focus group interactions by analysing the key discursive categories and the structures of address through which the participants are 'recognised'.

'Child' is the shared, taken-for-granted, primary identity of all the participants in the research. The attributes of gender and age, however, function both to sub-divide the category, creating four co-hyponymic identity categories—younger boys, younger girls, older boy and older girls—and as explanatory devices to account for *differences* in children's engagement with the media. These key identity categories and the discourses



which frame the research and construct the 'child' provide the norms which condition how the participants are recognised in the focus group discussions.

The research aims of the Harm project, particularly of identifying an 'authentic' children's understanding of media harm, in a broader social context of concern *for* children, played a significant part in the moderators' positioning of the participants and in constructing 'the child' of the research. The emancipatory ideals which informed the research—to give the child a voice and place the child's understanding of media harm alongside that of adults—and the rejection of media effects discourse also played a part in structuring how the participants were addressed. The participants were positioned not only as children but as self-conscious, agentic beings.

The chapter has also highlighted the contradictions and tensions that can be identified in the interplay of these emancipatory discourses, the research aims of the project and more traditional protectionist discourses. Protectionist discourses and practices not only played a role in determining how the research could be conducted—the university ethics requirements as they pertained specifically to the child, the participants' need for parental consent to be involved in the research, the constraint on the types of questions that could be raised and so on—but also, as this chapter has shown, in positioning the participants as 'childlike' in terms of their vulnerabilities, naivety and deficiencies.

In keeping with the emancipatory ideals of the research, the moderators expend substantial effort in attempting to minimise the power differences and distance between the 'adult' moderators and the 'child' participants, and in facilitating the focus group interactions. Despite these attempts, as the chapter has shown, the focus group discussions express the

real power differences between the adult moderators and child participants, reinforcing implicitly the participants' initial and explicit positioning as 'children'.

Shifting power relations negotiated through competing discourses can be mapped through the course of the interactions. In particular, the power exerted by the moderators on the interactions can be seen in their management of the interactions and the contributions of individual participants. The chapter also showed, as will be discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7, that the participants themselves were not entirely powerless in the discussions. The chapter provided examples of participants who failed to comply with the moderators' directives to actively participate; others who repeatedly challenged the moderators' attempts to reign in and constrain their contributions; and a number of participants who continued to raise their hands when they wanted to respond, despite repeated reminders that there was no need to do so.

Despite the moderators' early assurances that the focus group discussions were unlike classroom interactions, at certain locations the focus group discussions take on the discursive features of 'classroom' or pedagogical discourse with the moderators assuming the role of teacher-authority. The chapter found that the function of these discursive strategies appeared to be to facilitate the participants' learning rather than to elicit information by prompting the participants to reflect upon and to think more critically about their responses to the moderators' questions. As such, features of classroom discourse often occurred when the participants' answers were deemed by the moderators to be unsatisfactory; specifically, when the moderators considered the participants to be articulating 'adult' media effects discourse, or the views of parents or other adults rather than providing an 'authentic' child's perspective. Given the earlier recognition of the participants as self-conscious beings who because of their shared identities as children

could provide certain 'truths' about children, these features of classroom or educational discourse served to diminish the agency of the participants and increase the distance and power differential between the child-participants and the adult-moderators. Such discursive practices reinforced or reasserted the moderators' authority by endowing the moderators with status as transmitters of 'sanctioned forms of knowledge' (Buzzelli & Johnston 2001: 874) and positioned the participants as deficient when 'assessed against the competencies of an idealised adult' (Cromdal 2009: 1474).

The chapter also found that gender and age/stage of life attributes of the identity child were similarly used to counter the participants' deployment of media effects discourse. The attributes functioned as explanatory devices at points in the discussion, countering media effects discourse by providing an alternative explanation of some of the 'effects' or 'influences' that the participants attributed to the media. It could be argued that this strategy furthered the research aim of identifying a distinctive or 'authentic' children's understanding of media harm by challenging 'adult' media effects discourse, while simultaneously sustaining a view of the child, particularly the young child as importantly different from the adult. In doing so, however, the participants themselves are once more positioned as childlike and deficient in their uncritical acceptance of 'adult' media effects discourse. While emancipatory discourses position the child as 'agentive' and emphasise the child's voice, the participants' failure to adopt a more progressive discourse in relation to the media appears to result in the participants being positioned as naïve and childlike in their uncritical acceptance of 'adult' media effects discourse.

As discussed earlier, 'child' is the shared, taken-for-granted, primary identity of all the participants in the research, constructed in terms of the child's difference in respect to its

opposite, the 'adult', and the focus of the Harm research was to identify the attributes and activities of the child in his or her engagement with the media which children share and that mark children out as interestingly different from adults. The chapter found that the moderators' questions about 'children' in the focus group discussions, rather than younger or older children, boy or girl children, and the salience of this identity often functioned as a mechanism for challenging the participants' apparent denial of harm or, more frequently, their failure to construct media harm according to adult norms; that is, in relation to the harmful consequences of *media content* for children. Instead, the participants discussed media harm in terms of the broader potential harmful consequences of children's media practices; for example, damaging relationships with parents or supporting the pornography industry.

Judith Butler (2009: 5) states that what we are able to apprehend is facilitated by norms of recognition. In the context of the focus group discussions it is concern about the potential harmful effects of *media content* on children which is the dominant frame through which the discussions take place. Such framing functions normatively to structure modes of recognition. It is unsurprising therefore that although the Harm research aimed at identifying or isolating 'children's' understanding of media harm, the moderators appear to fail to 'recognise' harm when harm is not constructed in accordance with the normative discourses which frame popular debate and discussions; that is, either in terms of the harms that may result from *media content* on children or in terms of the ability of the agentive child to resist or actively engage with such content.

This chapter has examined the discursive categories, norms and practices which shape the intersubjective encounters in the Harm focus group discussions and by which the

participants in the Harm research are recognised. The participants' own role in administering, negotiating and renegotiating the social norms and power differentials through which they are recognised (Thiem 2008: 247) will be more fully examined in Chapters 6 and 7.

## Chapter 6

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### ‘Recognising’ the child

#### Introduction

In its adaptation of Butler’s theory of performativity to the study of childhood, Chapter 2 argued that to see childhood as performative, is to see the child not as a bodily given but as an effect of the various discourses, institutions and practices by which ‘the child’ is named, regulated and constrained. Following Butler, the chapter argued that the child-subject is constructed and secured in its position as ‘child’ by repeatedly citing or assuming the cultural norms of childhood. It is the recitation of these norms that facilitates ‘recognition’ (Butler 2009: 3) of the child-subject. To be recognisable ‘as a child’, the child has to conform to certain conceptions of what a child is. Consequently, certain attributes and behaviours are recognised as ‘childlike’ because over time they have acquired a certain authority as indicators of the characteristics or condition of being a child—and, a child’s failure to conform to these norms potentially risks the child being ‘unintelligible’ to others.

Chapter 5 showed how media discourses, institutions and practices ‘frame’ (Butler 2009) childhood, and define the boundaries of adult and child. Drawing on Butler’s account of the intersubjective constitution of the subject (Butler 2004; 2005), the chapter analysed how the participants in the Harm research were interpellated as child-subjects. That chapter showed that the participants’ identities as children and/or particular kinds of children were foregrounded both by the aims of the Harm research and in through the

practices of the moderators in the ensuing focus group interactions. Additionally, the chapter showed how the research aims of the Harm project—in particular the aim of identifying key differences between child and adult understandings of media harm—in conjunction with competing discourses about the media’s impact on children played a significant part in the moderators’ positioning of the participants. Informed by the emancipatory ideals of the research, to give the child a voice and to place children’s understanding of media harm alongside that of adults, the moderators constructed the participants as ‘children’ importantly different from adults. Operating in the context of a broadcasting environment dominated by ‘adult’ discourses about the harmful effects of certain types of media content on children, the moderators then set about identifying how the participants’ ideas about media harm differed from those of adults.

This chapter builds on the analysis of the previous chapter, Chapter 5, by shifting the focus from the aims of the Harm research and the moderators’ practices within the focus groups to examine the activities of the research participants themselves. Having been positioned by the research as ‘children’ and asked to speak from their positions as ‘children’, the participants in the focus group discussions are then invited by the moderators to reflect upon themselves and others ‘as children’. To speak as children and to recognise others *as* children, required the participants to mobilise cultural knowledge about children and childhood. This chapter will examine how the participants in this study mobilise this cultural knowledge, particularly, given the context of the discussions, knowledge derived from media discourses, by analysing how the participants speak about and categorise those conventionally identified as ‘children’.

The chapter highlights the high degree of uncertainty about the situational meaning of

‘children’ or ‘kids’ in the participants’ contributions to the focus group discussions and the participants’ familiarity with popular discourses about media effects. The chapter argues that the participants’ ability to apprehend the discursive category, ‘child’, is conditioned by the normative ‘framing’ of the research.

## **Constructing childhood: the ‘culturally intelligible child’**

Butler understands intelligibility as: ‘that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms’ (Butler 2004: 3). In other words, the norms through which one recognises one’s self or another are social not individual in nature (Butler 2005: 24). The participants in their discussions make relevant both children’s gender and age, referring to ‘boys, guys and girls’ and ‘young/er kids, little kids and older kids’ but, in trying to map the participants’ assumptions about children, it quickly becomes apparent that the participants’ discussion is more complex than one based on these distinctions alone. The participants introduce to the discussions additional stage of life categories, such as ‘teenagers’ and ‘older teenagers’ and make specific mention of the category ‘adults’. They also use identity categories associated with key institutions, such as the family and school. These include identities that can be mapped to stage of life, including ‘adults’—parents, step-parents, teachers, adult siblings—and ‘children’ including, younger and older siblings, cousins and step-siblings, as well as, friends, and class mates.

A further complexity is the lack of clarity at times in the situational meaning of ‘child’ and ‘children’. The participants sometimes deploy the identity category ‘children’ as a universal identity category about which generalisations can be made, a category to which



they variously consider that they belong or do not belong, although which is the case is not always made clear. Conversely, sometimes the participants talk about individual children rather than children as a universal identity category. The discussion can be of children they know, or children they have never met, but rather have heard about through media or other reports. In these discussions it is not always clear whether the participants regard some or all of the attributes, motivations and activities of these individual children as generalisable to other children. A similar problem occurs in discussions about older and younger siblings, cousins, or parents, where it is often unclear whether the instance that the participant refers to is one that is considered ‘individual’, a function of an institutional role, or an attribute of someone’s identity as child or adult. The participants also discuss ‘hypothetical children’, for example, the hypothetical child who might watch a violent television program and as a consequence commit a violent act; individuals who would generally be considered as adults but have the attributes of children; and, conversely, individuals who would in most circumstances be considered children but who exhibit the attributes or engage in the activities of adults—who, borrowing from Butler’s (1990/2006: 17) work on gender, maybe considered examples of the ‘unintelligible child’.

The chapter will now examine in detail the key identity categories that the participants use in their discussions about children.

## **The universal child—children as a class**

The previous chapter showed how the moderators’ comments at the outset of the focus group discussions about the importance of young people’s views for the ABA to

effectively formulate media regulations ascribed to the participants’ primary identities as ‘children’, ‘kids’ or ‘young people’ who, by virtue of their shared identities, could act as expert informants and provide insights into the attributes, motivations and behaviours of children *as a class*. This section will discuss the participants’ use of the identity category ‘children’ by examining the shared activities and attributes that the participants ascribe to children as a class.

### **The shared activities of childhood**

There are very few activities that the participants explicitly express as being tied to the identity ‘child’. There seems to be a much greater tendency to identify category bound activities in relation to ‘young’ or ‘little’ children, as will be discussed later in the chapter, rather than in relation to children more generally. There is also a high degree of uncertainty about the situational meaning of ‘children’/‘kids’ in the discussions. In many of the examples that follow there is at least some possibility that ‘kids’ is used by the participants to refer not to children as a universal identity category, in the sense in which it was ascribed to the participants by both the moderators and through the assumptions of the research design; but rather, as either a shorthand reference to a sub-category, often ‘young’ or ‘younger children’ or alternatively, in some situations and/or for some participants, to be used to identify individuals with sufficiently different attributes—generally including being younger—to warrant the participants’ identification of themselves as belonging to an entirely different identity category.

There is only one activity foregrounded in all the discussions that is bound to the category ‘child’; that is, the collecting by children of items associated with fads—Pokémon cards, Barbie dolls, Tarzoes. There is a second activity that the participants discuss that appears to

set children apart from adults but in this case it is not an activity children participate in but an activity that children as a category generally are *not* involved in—the watching of television news. Interestingly, discussion of both activities occurs in the same focus group and the discussions are instigated by or strongly involve the same participant. As will be discussed, there is ambiguity and appears to be shifts in the meaning of ‘kids’; such that, it could be argued that ‘kids’ in both these discussions refers not to children as a class, as it was constructed by the research design, but to children who are younger than the research participants.

The final activity ascribed to children by the participants is the viewing of pornography. It is not discussed as a category bound activity—but rather an activity in which both adults and children engage.

***Kids are ‘always collecting something’***

The excerpt below occurs in the context of a discussion in which several of the participants criticise the television program Pokémon, for its hold on ‘young kids’ and for the costs involved in collecting Pokémon merchandise. Alyson changes the direction of the discussion by inviting the other participants to recall their own collecting experiences, using the elliptical polar interrogative clause, ‘Remember Tazos?’ During the ensuing discussion Sarah and Rochelle suggest not only that there is nothing new about Pokémon as a phenomenon but also that following fads and collecting the associated merchandise is a universal activity of children:

Alyson: Remember Tazos? ==

Sarah: == ( ) kids have always got something

## 'Recognising' the child

Rochelle: Yeah, you're always collecting something, always (...)

Sarah: (...) when you were a kid you would have had something that you would have, you know, begged your parents to get you, like how these kids == do

Rochelle: == You were always collecting. First there was dinosaurs, then there was Barbies and Tazos and Ninja Turtle ... cards, and == there's everything

Moderator == So there's nothing much different you're saying, Sarah ==

Sarah: == Yeah

The close association of the activity of collecting with the identity category 'kids' is underlined by the high modality given to children's collecting through the repetition of the mood adjunct, 'always', in Sarah's and Rochelle's contributions ('kids have *always* got something'; '*always* collecting'), which intensifies the frequency or 'usuality' (Eggins & Slade 1997) of the activity of collecting with the identity category 'child'. However, although Sarah's and Rochelle's contributions suggest that the collecting of spinoff products associated with cultural phenomena (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003) or 'fads' is a category bound activity—an activity that they identify as common to all children ('kids')—their use of 'kids' in the context of this discussion is closer to the semantic field of the category 'younger children' set up in the research design and, it is clearly not a category with which they identify (see Chapter 7 discussion of past self/distancing). This can be seen in Alyson's invitation to the other participants to 'remember' their earlier collecting experiences, Sarah's use of the temporal expression, 'when you were a kid', and the participants' deployment of the past tense in their discussion of their collecting experiences ('you were always collecting'). These linguistic strategies reinforce the temporality of childhood (James, et al. 1998) by firmly locating the identity 'child' in the participants' past. They also contribute to the participants'

construction of childhood as ‘timeless’ and ‘universal’ through the participants’ accounts of the enduring similarities of children’s experiences of childhood which is further reinforced through the repetition of attributive relational processes across time (‘kids have always got something’ and ‘when you were a kid/you would have had something’) such that the activity of collecting, of ‘having something that you would have (...) begged you parents to get you’, becomes a timeless indicator of one’s status as a ‘kid’ or membership of the class ‘children’.

Informed by dominant conceptions of childhood as the ‘embodiment of change over time’ (James & James 2004: 142), sequence in time is also an important organising principle (Halliday 2004) in Rochelle’s account of children’s collecting activities. This is achieved through her use of external, temporal, sequential conjunctive relations (Halliday & Hasan 1976) in her account of the temporal flow of children’s collecting activities, ‘First there were dinosaurs, then there was Barbies and Tazos and Ninja Turtle cards, and ... everything’. In Rochelle’s account these conjunctive relations create a narrative structure in which children’s collecting activities contribute to the ‘temporal shaping of children’s experiences of being children’ (James, et al. 1998: 59) with children progressing from the simple collecting of toys and figurines to more active participation in multi-faceted and increasingly commercial global phenomena, such as Pokémon.

***(Most) kids don’t watch the news***

The second activity that the participants highlight as setting apart children and adults is the watching of the television news. In a discussion about the likely differences between the effect or impact on children of the televising real versus fictional violence, Sarah asserts that watching the news is not an activity that children generally engage in and, it is for this

very pragmatic reason, that children are unlikely to be affected by the ‘real life’ violence depicted on the news:

Sarah: == Yeah, that’s right ... I was going to say, I never watched the news when I was a kid. Not much kids watch the news when most things come on anyway so they’re not going to really be that affected ==

Group==Yeah [nods]

In this example, as in the previous example, Sarah again distances herself from the category ‘child’ (see Chapter 7). Sarah’s reference to her past self in the temporal clause, ‘when I was a kid’, identifies her former self rather than her present self as a member of the class or category ‘children’. Her use of the identity category ‘child’ or ‘kid’ again overlaps with semantic field of ‘younger child’. The lexical relation of hyponymy that pertains between the child Sarah and the category ‘children’ creates an implicit conjunctive relationship between Sarah’s account of her own individual childhood activities in the clause, ‘when I was a kid ...’, and the adjacent sentence in which she refers to ‘kids’ in general. However, the precise nature of the semantic relationship is somewhat indeterminate. It is difficult to know whether Sarah offers her experiences as an example or instance of this general tendency of children or whether the relationship is one of ‘cause’ (Halliday 2004), with her memories of her own childhood experiences providing evidence for her assertion that few children watch the news. In either case, this example again emphasises the temporality of childhood and the enduring and universal nature of childhood experiences.

### ***Kids are viewing pornography***

In another discussion, the viewing of pornography is not seen as a category bound

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activity—it is not an activity tied to the category child but neither is it tied to the category adult. Rather, it is discussed as an activity that both children and adults are involved in. This is made explicit in relation to children in Alyson's statement about the difficulty of preventing children's access to pornography because inevitably 'kids are going to do it anyway'; a position further elaborated by Laura:

Alyson: == There's not much they can do about it [children viewing pornography]

Moderator: Oh, I see

(...)

Moderator: == But what--you were saying--but you were saying, Alyson, that there's not much you can do about it

Alyson: Yeah, there's not that much you can do about ... stuff like that 'cause ... kids are going to do it anyway, like, other kids ... or ... ==

Sarah: == You can make your parents

Alyson: Your parents can, like, say they sent send a letter to the company or whatever they ... want to do but they are not goin' to--the company's not goin' to do anything about it == You can't do anything about it. You can't do anything legal or anything

Laura: == Like, if ... if your parents tell you not to do it, they'll just do it anyway, like, they don't care. Like, they'll find a way. You know, they can ask their friend or something  
(...)

Moderator: And what were you going to say, Sarah about telling, telling parents ... or adults?

Sarah: Just making them more aware == that kids are doing that

Moderator: And do you--would you?

Sarah: Yeah, I'd tell, tell my aunties

Sarah's contribution to the discussion appears to imply that it is an adult presupposition that children as a class are not actively viewing pornography. This can be seen in Sarah's suggestion that if adults could be made aware that children are viewing pornography then perhaps children's viewing of it could be controlled/prevented, 'Just by making them more aware that kids are doing that'. Her view seems to be that by presupposing that the viewing of pornography is an activity of adults rather than children, adults, specifically parents, miss the opportunity to control this activity.

In the excerpt, while the moderator receives two different responses to the question of whether children's viewing of pornography can be controlled—a negative response from Alyson and an affirmative one from Sarah—both participants see the act of viewing pornography as an activity of children while implicitly recognising that it is not an activity that is normally associated with children (see discussion of pornography as an 'attribute of adults' later in this chapter). Alyson's position that there is not much that can be done, while accepting the legitimacy of trying to prevent children viewing pornography (see discussion of pornography as an 'attribute of adults') nevertheless regards the act of viewing pornography as something that children will inevitably be involved in. Sarah's contrary position is that if adults could be made aware of what children were doing then perhaps they would be able to stop or prevent it.

In this example, unlike the previous two examples, there is no explicit distancing of the participants from the identity categories, 'kids' or 'children'. However, it is interesting to note the distancing that occurs in Laura's contribution to the discussion above as she shifts



from the more generic and inclusive pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’ when she begins her contribution, ‘if your parents tell you not to do it’, to her use of the third person plural pronoun ‘they’ in her elaboration of Alyson’s earlier position that there’s not much that can be done to prevent ‘kids’ accessing pornography: ‘they’ll just do it anyway, like, they don’t care.’ In this case it is unclear whether Laura is distancing herself from the category ‘kids’ as in the earlier discussion of kids collecting where the category ‘kids’ appears to refer to individuals who are younger than the participants or, more expressly, from the subcategory ‘kids who view pornography’.

### **The shared attributes of children**

This section attempts to further identify some of the assumptions that the participants appear to have about children and to uncover to whom, for these participants, the category child refers. As in the discussion of category-bound ‘activities’, it is the case that the participants explicitly identify surprisingly few category-bound ‘attributes’ of the category ‘child’. At certain points of the focus groups in the context of the discussion of media harm, the participants draw on dominant constructions of the child, particularly from media effects discourse which see the child as ‘easily influenced’, unable to distinguish reality from television fiction and gullible—inclined to believe what they see on television. Additionally, they appear to construct the child according to normative presumptions, discussing the child in terms of his/her difference from the adult, as deficient vis-à-vis the adult and as legitimately subject to parental control. Further, it is clear that not only do the meanings of child vary among the participants but additionally that the meaning of child is both situational and negotiated in the context of the discussions. At certain points in the discussions the category seems to be used as a short-hand reference to the sub-category younger children in which case the participants implicitly also see themselves as having

shared membership of the superordinate identity category ‘children’ but as members of the sub-category ‘older children’. At other points, however, it appears that at least some of the participants, particularly the older participants, do not see themselves as belonging at all to the category ‘child’ but rather to some other category, such as ‘adolescents’ or the one mentioned by some of the participants, ‘older teenagers’. A further complication is that it is not always clear from the context whether a characteristic attributed to a child or children is one that a participant regards as being characteristic of children as a class or of only some children.

***It’s (just) not good for kids...***

The following two examples elaborated further below do not explicitly name the attributes that children share. It is clear, however, that the participants’ assertions about children are based on normative presuppositions about children that they consider require no explanation to either the moderators or the other participants in the focus groups. In these examples, the participants speak from the presumption that there are a set of attributes common to children from which certain things follow. In the first example, one of the participants asserts that it is not good for children to have access to certain kinds of media content; contextually, sexual content, presumably because of some unstated but uncontroversial attribute of children. The lack of explanation or justification for why sexual content is not good for children suggests an underlying presupposition that this attribute of children, which perhaps could be expressed as a vulnerability to sexual content, is uncontroversial and therefore not in need of any further elaboration. In the second example, the participant’s statement that ‘you’ don’t want children thinking certain things is again offered as unproblematic and uncontroversial and, although what it is that ‘you don’t want kids thinking’ is in this case explicitly elaborated, the specific attributes of

children that justify this assertion are not.

**Example 1: It's not a good thing for kids to have access to certain types of content ...**

In the excerpt below Louise responds somewhat indirectly to a question from the moderator about whether her parents have ever warned her against watching certain things on television:

Louise: My Mum thinks that I'm really wise. [small laugh] She just lets me go ... um, I've got TV in my room. Not permanently, though, just temporarily 'cause, um ... like, my sister wants a TV in her room as well and she is only seven, so. There's lots of TV going around and, my brother's got Optus, and ... like, 'cause he lives in a different house but we're usually like, like next door and [small breathy laugh] my sister likes watching it but, like, 'cause, there's too many channels and, you don't know what to watch, and sometimes there's really lame channels an', like, sometimes the movie, um, the movie channels, like ... there are really like ... gruesome things like [small breathy laugh]. You change the channel and you find all these people all over each other and its like, 'Oohh, ahhh' [laugh]

Group: [laugh]

Louise: It's not like--it's not really a good thing to have kids, like [clears throat] access to ... that kind of channel.

Louise's response suggests that her parents' assessment of her as 'wise' means that they do not feel the need to warn her about what she might see on television. Nevertheless, she provides an account—albeit one that is somewhat distanced from herself and generalised (through her shift from using the personal pronoun 'I' to the generic unspecified 'you')—of how easily one may come to accidentally view unpleasant or confronting sexual content on Pay TV, which she euphemistically refers to as 'gruesome things' in which people are

‘all over each other’.

In her summing up, Louise’s statement that it is ‘not really a good thing’ for ‘kids’ to have ‘access to that kind of channel’ coupled with the absence of any justification for or explanation of her view suggests, as discussed above, that Louise sees her assumptions about children as widely shared and unproblematic. In this, Louise appears to share normative adult assumptions about the vulnerability of children or the unsuitability of sexual content for children.

In the context of the discussion about her sister who is ‘only seven’, however, what is unclear is whether Louise is using the identity category ‘kids’ narrowly to refer to young children such as her seven-year-old sister or more broadly to refer to kids in general and, further still, whether she considers herself as belonging to category ‘kids’ or ‘children’. In either case, Louise does appear to make a firm distinction between her own identity and that of those who are younger than herself, such as her seven-year-old sister. This is largely achieved through the use of relational processes which highlight the specific attributes that appear to distinguish Louise from her younger sister: Louise’s mother’s evaluation of her as ‘wise’, Louise’s possession of a television in her bedroom and her sister’s age (‘only seven’). Louise’s sister’s age is emphasised through Louise’s use of ‘only’ and provides the ‘logical’ explanation for why Louise’s possession of the television is only temporary. While Louise’s maturity (‘wisdom’) appears to be offered as the justification for her being permitted to have a television in her bedroom, the causal conjunction, ‘*cause*’, suggests that it is her younger sister’s desire to similarly have a television in her room coupled with her age that prevents this being a permanent arrangement. The emphasis given to her sister’s age (‘*only* seven’) provides a logical

connection between age and certain types of media rights and activities; a connection that Louise appears to assume does not warrant any further explanation, demonstrating how in these discussions media related discourses and practices intersect with dominant constructions of the child to give shape to and define the identity ‘child’.

**Example 2: You don’t want kids thinking sex is so cool**

In the excerpt below the moderator tries to ascertain whether the participants regard the viewing of sexual content ever to be harmful for children. The excerpt continues a discussion of what type of sexual content the participants are themselves prepared to watch on television and how they respond when confronted with something they may not want to view. The participants’ earlier statements, such as, ‘it’s OK to (...) see, like, a woman’s breasts but ... if they show, like BELOW things, like, (...) it’s sort of porno’ and ‘you don’t need to watch it (...)’ seem to suggest that the participants are relatively unperturbed by viewing sexual content on television and that they respond fairly pragmatically if they happen to view content they do not like—even when they may be viewing content that many adults may consider harmful. The moderator’s question in the passage below about the possible harm in watching sexual content appears to aim to shift the discussion from personalised recounts of the participants’ own attitudes and behaviours to a consideration of the viewing of sexual content by children *as a class*, specifically in relation to the possible harms it may inflict:

Moderator: But do you think by watching say ... you know, by watching sex there’s any harm in it?

Kristina: Nah

Mel: Nah ==

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Kiralee: (You don't want) kids thinking, 'Oh, that's so cool, maybe I'll try it out on my boyfriend' or something and see if he's interested or, like, bribe him into it and ... like, going around picking up guys, saying, ah, you know, 'Do you want to go and do this' or something silly dirty things.

(...)

Lesia: Well, the little kids they shouldn't watch it but for, like, people like, you know, like, older teenagers and that, they already know what sex is and that, you know. They don't mind watching it and that ==

In the discussion above after two dismissals of any consequential harm by Kristina and Mel comes Kiralee's statement that a possible harm may be that the viewing of sexual content may result in kids coming to regard sex as 'so cool'. Her formulation of the statement as, 'You don't want kids thinking ...' shifts the status of her comment from one that is an individual personalised opinion (as in 'I don't want ...'), or the opinion of a group (e.g. 'Parents/adults don't want ...') to a statement of a universally held principle; again, as in the first example, presumably based on some presupposition about the attributes of children; perhaps, their vulnerability to media influence and/or an assumption about what it is appropriate knowledge for children. Again it is unclear contextually to whom 'kids' here refers—children as a class or, given the participants' preceding discussion of their own resilience to harm, the sub-category younger children or even whether 'kids' for Kiralee is a category to which she feels she belongs. Lesia, however, makes it clear in her contribution, in which she juxtaposes the identity categories, 'little kids' and 'older teenagers' ('Well, the little kids they shouldn't watch it but for (...) older teenagers'), that for her concern should only be for 'little kids'. While not explicitly stated by Lesia, it would appear in the context of the group's discussion of their own control of

their viewing of sexual content, that Lesia’s comments suggest that she sees herself as belonging to the category ‘older teenagers’, those who ‘already know what sex is’ (see the later discussion of the categories ‘young(er)’ and ‘old(er)’ kids).

***Kids are different from adults/parents***

The dependence of the identity ‘child’ for its meaning on its binary opposite, ‘adult’ is demonstrated in the participants’ use of child as a universal identity category. There are moments in the discussion where the participants, sometimes indirectly, highlight the attributes of children by emphasising children’s differences from adults. In this, the participants appear to share normative understandings of childhood in which the child’s identity is constructed in terms of its *difference* from the adult. In the examples below the participants construct adults and children as having different interests, different rights and different understandings. While the examples highlight the participants’ acceptance of difference between adult and child, the basis or origin of the difference between adult and child, is less clear.

**Example 1: Good for parents but not for kids**

The first example, demonstrates that some of the participants believe adults and children or, more specifically parents and their children, have at least some opposing interests. As part of a discussion of internet pornography the conversation moves to parental attempts to monitor their children’s internet use and, in particular, their access to internet pornography:

Aiden: They can catch you out as well == your parents

(...)

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Javid: How do they catch you out?

Aiden: Your parents can catch you out, like, um, just say, like, you've, ah, you've typed up something and it comes up as a porno kind of thing, then they can just, ah == get the history and it shows all the sites you've visited. Then they click on it, just say if they're curious, and it comes up and then they give you ( ) for looking at the stuff

Jason: == Go back to it

Moderator: What do they say to you then?

Aiden: I haven't--lucky I haven't been, haven't been in that situation

Anthony: But kids have found that ... you can clear the history

Moderator: Ah ha

Daniel: Yeah, and my dad's found how to get that back up == I don't have the internet, right. Like he tells me

(...)

Javid: But it would be--I hope not, but a good thing would be for the parents, but not for kids, is to bring like a bill and of all the sites they've visited and then they just look it up and yeah, == ( )

Daniel: == Like a telephone

This excerpt shows how children's media activities become the site for the playing out of power struggles between children and their parents. Expressed as a series of moves and counter moves with parents attempting to monitor their children's internet access and children attempting to block their parents' attempts, Aiden, Anthony and Matt explain how parents can use the Microsoft Internet Explorer History function to track the internet sites their children have visited, how children have countered this monitoring by learning how



to clear the History log and finally how some parents have responded by learning how to recover the information. Javid finishes, by suggesting a solution which would shift the power from children to adults by enabling parents to more easily monitor their children's internet use. In doing so, he clearly expresses his view that parents and children have different interests by offering a solution for parents which he clearly identifies as being in the interests of parents rather than children: 'a good thing for the parents, but not for kids'. To avoid appearing to side with the interests of parents over children, Javid prefaces his suggestion by offering his opinion of it as something that he 'hopes' will not occur. In doing so, Javid appears to identify and align himself with the category 'kids'.

### **Example 2: Pornography is for adults, not for children**

The second example outlines another attribute or characteristic that marks a difference between adults and children—adults' legitimate 'ownership' of or right to pornography. The excerpt comes from the focus group discussion of pornography described previously and is a continuation of the earlier discussion in which the participants describe how children are actively engaged in the viewing of pornography:

Moderator: (...) Does anyone think government should be doing something?

Renee: [shakes head]

Nadine: Nah

Alyson: About some stuff

Sarah: I don't think so

Moderator: What kind of stuff?

Alyson: Like ... really, really ... ah, bad porno stuff an'--that they send == to you

## 'Recognising' the child

Nadine: == But see I don't think it's any of their business == It's a personal thing

Rochelle: == Yeah, and I mean, porno isn't there for kids. It's there for the adults, you know. That's why the magazines are there. That's why the video tapes are there. The kids are looking at it ... well then, you know, if they knock it off, then the adults are the ones who are losing out as well

Clare: Yeah

In this excerpt, following the earlier discussion about children accessing pornography, the moderator attempts to ascertain whether the participants think that some form of government regulation of the internet is necessary to protect children from accidentally or intentionally viewing pornography. Alyson is the only participant who expresses the view that some regulation is necessary, specifically in relation to unsolicited graphic or 'bad' pornographic email. In this excerpt, although it is clear from the earlier discussion that the participants see the viewing of pornography as an activity in which both children and adults are engaged, Rochelle expresses the view that nevertheless pornography is created or meant for adults rather than children and therefore any attempt to restrict or ban internet pornography ('knock it off') would just mean that adults'/the government's attempt to control children's access to pornography would result in adults, the very people the pornography is produced for, 'losing out', that is, result in adults losing or having diminished their ability to access this adult content.

Given that the participants have earlier indicated that both adults and children are engaged in actively viewing pornography, it is unclear from Rochelle's statements why and in what sense pornography is "for adults" and not "for children"; whether this refers just to the intentions of the producers of porn or whether it refers to some different and unspecified

attributes of adults compared to children which mean that pornography is suited to or appropriate for adults rather than children.

Rochelle’s reference to magazines and videos suggests that she considers internet pornography as simply another form of pornography with equal legitimacy. There is no condemnation of pornography itself from Rochelle but more an acceptance of its importance for adults and hence the almost inevitability of its availability in a variety of forms. For Rochelle, stricter controls on pornography in an attempt to restrict children’s access to it make no sense since they would primarily hurt those it is intended for and presumably those who enjoy, need or desire it most.

### **Example 3: Things that only adults can understand**

In this example, Louise asserts the existence of differences in adult and child knowledge or understandings. Again, the basis for these differences is left unspecified.

The excerpt forms part of a discussion initiated by the moderator asking whether the participants have ever seen anything on TV that think may have been ‘bad’ or harmful for them to have watched. Louise’s initial response is that much of what she sees on television she considers to be ‘pointless’. She then elaborates explaining that she is referring to pointless and violent deaths, ‘(...) there’s people that die all over the floor and all the people that try an’ drink themselves to death and you think, ahhh ... this is pathetic’. After the moderator asks where the participants have seen this type of content, the participants offer a number of program names and program genres. It is at this point that Joanna contributes to the discussion, the movie *Romeo and Juliet*, perhaps as an instance of ‘violent’ and ‘pointless’ death:

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Joanna: == In *Romeo and Juliet*, they killed themselves for each other ==

Corina: == (He) shoots himself == because (he loves) Juliet

Louise: == [laugh] But then there's--then there's things that, like, only adults can understand [small laugh] 'cause ... that's what my mum said 'cause I go--well I go, you know, that's just, you know ... I don't know ... I don't understand. She goes ==

Joanna: == I don't understand *Romeo and Juliet*, they just say too many words

Louise's response seems to suggest that Joanna's assessment of the violence and deaths in *Romeo and Juliet* as 'pointlessness' might be due to her lack of 'adult' understanding of the content. In this context, Louise's acceptance of her mother's assertion of differences in adult and child understandings suggests that she sees herself and the other participants as *different* from adults, as 'non-adults', perhaps, as children.

Louise's acceptance of the existence of adult content, 'things that, (...) only adults can understand', also echoes the Australian system of television program classification in which the classification of program content and the presence of consumer advice text, such as 'adult themes', similarly sets up the category, 'adult content', and by extension 'adult knowledge' (discussed further in Chapter 7). Louise's point is perhaps made in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*, rather than the Australian television series, *Water Rats* or the 'late night movies' discussed earlier by the participants, because of its status as high culture: dominant discourses about unnecessary, pointless or excessive violence are more readily employed in relation to popular television programs rather than Shakespearean tragedies. Joanna's response, 'I don't understand *Romeo and Juliet*, they just say too many words', however, undercuts the basis for Louise's response, suggesting instead that her lack of understanding is based on something akin to the lexical density or linguistic complexity of

the text. Such a move shifts the location of the cause of Joanna’s lack of understanding from herself to the text itself. In doing so, Joanna also rejects her positioning as childlike or, as lacking ‘adult’ understanding.

***Kids are ... but are NOT me***

The discussion of the attributes and activities of children in the examples above has in some instances highlighted a degree of uncertainty about the situational meaning of kids and children. In many of the examples, there is at least some possibility that the category ‘kids’ or ‘children’ is used at times by the participants to refer not to children as a universal identity category, in the sense in which it was ascribed to the participants by both the moderators and through the assumptions of the research design; but rather, as either a shorthand reference to a sub-category, often ‘young’ or ‘younger children’ or alternatively, in some situations and/or for some participants, to be used to identify individuals with sufficiently different attributes—generally being younger—to warrant the participants’ identification of themselves as belonging to an entirely different identity category. Three examples are provided below. All provide evidence for this latter position.

The first example shows the participants using the identity category ‘kids’ to refer to someone who is much younger than the participants—six or seven years old. The second example does not explicitly link age to the category ‘kids’, but similarly the category is used to refer to individuals other than the participants. In the third example, a number of the participants again distance themselves from the category ‘kid’ and the attributes they ascribe to it. The examples also show that a number of other attributes or norms in addition to age are mapped to the identity child. These include: vulnerability to negative influences of television; a propensity for children to copy what they see and hear; and an inability to

distinguish reality from fiction.

**Example 1: Kids are young and easily influenced**

The excerpt below follows an attempt by the moderators to uncover why the participants think that their parents impose rules on them about their television viewing. After responding that many of their parents think that swearing on television has a bad influence on them the moderators then ask whether the participants share this view. In Ethan's interjection into Mark's response to the moderator he explicitly uses 'kid' to refer to someone different from the participants—someone who is 'young' while Mark, simultaneously, clarifies his own understanding of young as meaning someone who is six or seven years of age.

Moderator: And, do you think it is? Like if you see somebody swearing on the TV ... does that sort of--do you think it is a bad influence?

Group : Yeah, yes [emphatic]

Mark: Yeah, because if, um, you saw too much of it and you're ... young, like ==... 6 or 7 you might walk around just yelling the words out all the time

Ethan: == A kid (or something)

Robert: (Bart) [laugh]

Moderator: Mmm, mm. At what age do you think you would be ... sort of wise enough not to do that?

Robert: Ten

Adam: Yeah

Moderator: About ten

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In this example, in addition to the association/linking of age/relative age ('young' / 'six or seven') to the category child, other attributes are also linked, in this case attributes commonly ascribed by adults to the category child understood more broadly and frequently encompassing individuals of the same ages as the participants. The additional attributes mapped on to the category child are vulnerability to the negative influences of television; in particular, a propensity to copy what they see and hear, specifically in relation to offensive language. Additionally, the moderator's ascription of wisdom to those who do not partake in such behaviour further ties to the category child the attributes: naivety, lack of wisdom or ignorance of social convention. In this light, Robert's response that ten years of age—the minimum age of the participants in his focus group—is the age at which someone would be 'wise enough' not to copy swearing from television, serves to distance himself and the other participants from the category 'kid' or 'young child' (see Chapter 7).

### **Example 2: Kids (not me) believe what they see on television**

In this example, the moderator attempts to find out from the participants what they think their parents are worried about in relation to their viewing of television violence. In the discussion that follows, the identity category kids is not as explicitly linked to being young as in the previous example although this might be inferred from the context of the discussion. What is much more explicit is that for Mel, the category 'kids' does not include herself and by implication the other members of the focus group:

Moderator: What about with violence, though? What ( ) parents--did you think that they were worried that you'd start thumping other people

Bianca: Cause when you watch, like some movies that've got all these stars being, like,

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bashed up or getting hurt and then, like, you see them at the ARIAs or something and they're OK so you think, 'Oh, if I bash up someone, they'll be OK'. I think that's what some parents think will happen but it doesn't, so

Kiralee: [laugh] It's only a movie. You know it's not real

Bianca: Yeah

Mel: But kids, when there are kids == they kind of believe it

Group: ==Yeah [nods]

In a similar way to the first example, a number of normative attributes in addition to age are mapped on to the category child; that is, the inability to distinguish reality from television fiction and a propensity to naively accept as true what is presented to them on television. Through her categorisation of herself as other than a child—using the third person plural pronoun, 'they', to refer to members of the category, rather than the more inclusive second person pronoun, 'we' or first person, 'I'—Mel manages to avoid attributing to herself the many negative presumptions adults hold about children's vulnerability to television representations of violence, central to media effects discourse.

### **Example 3: Kids/crazy people learn from the media**

This example shows both ambiguity about the situational meaning of 'kid' and a similar distancing by the participants of themselves from the attributes they ascribe to the category (see Chapter 7 for further discussion of distancing).

After a question from the moderator about whether the participants' teachers ever caution them about the likely consequences of viewing violent media content, the passage below begins with Michelle's account of her maths teacher's warning of the possible



consequences of viewing a horror movie. In Michelle’s account of the conversation, the maths teacher presents in the form of a question, which she addresses directly to Michelle and anyone else involved in the conversation, her assertion of a direct link between children viewing horror and their subsequently growing up to become serial killers, ‘What if you grow up to be (...) a serial killer?’:

Michelle: (...) once my Maths teacher was talking about, like, a horror film and she said, like, ‘What if you turn’ like, ‘What if you grow up to be, like, a serial killer?’ I don’t know if she was joking or not but, like, someone could actually try and imitate what happened in a movie, I suppose

Moderator: And do you think that happens ... much?

Michelle: Maybe ... [shrugs]

Kiralee: Some movies ... They imitated something. It’s probably ‘cause ... I remember (people) saying things like video games and movies, like, kids have been learning how to shoot and ... they learn from the movies and stuff, like, things like that

Moderator: And do you think that it is true?

Kiralee: It’s been happening alright. There’s been shootings in the high schools

Group: Yeah, America

Bianca: Some--some crazy people only, like, want to be--be, like, in the movie (that they might have seen) as though they were, like, really tough. Like, if they (don’t) like getting hassled at school ... and so they, like, try and imitate it ( ) crazy, but

Michelle: Yeah, like, if they try and get away from reality and ... they want to be the star in a film and get all the attention

Michelle’s formulation of the teacher’s question suggests that those to whom the teacher is

referring are not yet ‘grown up’ and are those we would typically categorise as children. In Michelle’s evaluation of the truth value of the implicit assertion, she immediately begins to distance herself from the ‘you’ addressed by the question. First, she questions the sincerity of the teacher’s comment, ‘I don’t know if she was joking or not’. Next she refuses to be positioned as the ‘you’ of the question, metaphorically turning her back in her refusal of its direct address. Instead, in her response Michelle transforms the second-person ‘you’ into the more impersonal third-person ‘someone’ in her exploration of the link between viewing horror and its relationship to actual acts of violence: ‘someone could actually try to imitate what happened in a movie, I suppose’. The choice of ‘someone’ also creates ambiguity about whether for Michelle the possibility of a causal relationship between viewing horror and committing actual acts of violence extends to adults as well as children. The distancing is further emphasised by the uncertainty expressed in Michelle’s response through her addition of the modal, ‘I suppose’, and again in her verbal response, ‘Maybe’ reinforced by her physical/non-verbal shrug to the moderator’s follow up question.

Kiralee, however, while quite definite about the link between media violence and real life violence, explicitly links this attribute to the category ‘kids’ while also distancing herself from the category—using the third person plural pronoun, ‘they’, to refer to members of the category, rather than the more inclusive second person pronoun, ‘we’. The category ‘kids’ nevertheless still retains some ambiguity. It is unclear, for example, whether the category here refers to children generally or to just some children but it appears that Kiralee does not see herself as a member of the same category. Her subsequent contribution, ‘It’s been happening alright. There’s been shootings in the high schools’, however, suggests that in this context ‘kids’ does not refer to younger children.

Bianca’s contribution, that it is ‘some crazy people only’ who imitate what they see in movies, suggests that for her the propensity to imitate that both she and Kiralee refer to is not a universal attribute of children but rather an attribute of a select group, of children, ‘crazy people’. Again, as in the earlier examples discussed above, the propensity to copy or imitate is mapped on the category child and linked to another attribute of children or at least of some children, a confusion or inability to distinguish reality from television fiction: ‘they want to be—be, like, in the movie (...) like, really tough (...) so they try and imitate it’. Michelle’s next comment also suggests that she too sees confusion about television fiction and real life as an attribute of children or some children in her assertion of a link between imitation and escapism: ‘they try and get away from reality and ... they want to be the star in a film’ and imitation and attention seeking: ‘they want to (...) get all the attention’.

The examples above show that the participants in these focus group discussions share many of the adult normative presumptions about children which are typical of media effects discourse; such as, children’s vulnerability to the influences of television, their propensity to naively copy what they see, their inability to distinguish reality from fiction and to accept television’s construction of reality as truth. However, it might be argued that when the participants’ individual experience or sense of self comes into conflict with these presuppositions about children, the participants are left with no options other than to reject the presuppositions or to classify themselves as something other than a child. It would seem that such is the strength of dominant discourses that construct contemporary views of childhood that for many of the participants constructing themselves as other than a child is an easier option.

***Children are (legitimately) subject to parental control***

Another attribute of children, mentioned by some of the participants, is that they are subject to parental control. In both examples below parental control is discussed in relation to media rules and regulations. In the first example, the moderator attempts to discover whether the other participants share the views of several of the focus group members who said that, although they did not understand it at the time, they now believe that the rules that their parents made when they were young about the type of content they could view on television were appropriate. In her response, Michelle discusses the role program classification can play in facilitating parental control over their children so that, 'they'll know whether the child is, like allowed to' view certain television content 'or not'. That her comment goes unchallenged and that she appears to feel no need to justify it, suggests that this attribute of children, that they are subject to the control of parents, is unproblematic for both Michelle and other members of the focus group:

Moderator: So do most of you agree that, um ...what, um, Lara, was saying that you, um-- that you can see a point in the rules ... looking back, or do you think, you know? What about you, Vanessa?

Vanessa: Yeah

[pause]

Moderator: What do you think that they are designed to do then? You talked about sort of nightmares? Can you--anything else that you think that you're kind of protecting people from by having such rules?

Michelle: Well, it's sort of like, um, if it's, like, an MA movie, they'll, like, say what's in it, sort of like, coarse language and all that sort of stuff and so the parents can sort of know what's goin'--like, what to expect in the movie and so they'll know whether the child is, like, allowed to see it or not.

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Perhaps even more strongly than in the previous example, the next example expresses the strength of some of the participants' belief in the legitimacy of parental control over children. After a discussion of internet pornography and in particular of boys' use of it, the moderator attempts to ascertain whether, therefore, the participants would support some form of government regulation of internet content:

Rochelle: == I think that, um, it should be up to the parents ... ==

Laura: == Yeah, probably

Rochelle: to decide what they think is right for their child or what they think is not right for their child and ... I mean, because ... in the end they ... bought the internet, they're allowing their children to use it so I really think it has nothing to do with the == ( )

Moderator: == Do you think the Government has a role to play or they should just butt out?

Rochelle: I think they should butt out

Laura: Yeah, they should butt out

Brittany: [nods]

Renee: Or educate the parents about it ==

Rochelle: == 'Cause, I know that I wouldn't like somebody, you know, coming in saying, 'OK, well you can't do this and you can't do that because you're only this ... == old', you know what I mean?

In this case, Rochelle opposes the call for state intervention to protect children by deploying a traditional discourse of parental rights. Thus the primacy of the rights of parents to make determinations about what is appropriate ('right') for their child provides

the legitimisation (Van Leeuwen 2008) for Rochelle’s rejection of the need for greater government involvement in the regulation of the internet. However, Rochelle then shifts to a personalised (*‘I know’*) but more abstracted and hypothetical (*‘I wouldn’t like’*) account of her objection to age being used as the basis for regulating actions or practices in general. She no longer refers to ‘the government’ but to an unspecified generalised ‘somebody’ or *anybody*, and appears to have shifted from a discussion of government regulation of children’s access to the internet to attempts to regulate actions or practices more broadly, ‘you can’t do this and you can’t do that’. The net result of this process of abstraction and generalisation is that her final contribution reads like the expression of a principled objection to the use of age to legitimise the regulation and control of children more generally. It is unclear, however, how Rochelle would reconcile this position with her acceptance of the legitimacy of discourses of parental rights given the participants’ accounts of the importance of children’s age in parents’ decision making; that is, unless, her reference to ‘somebody ... coming in’ refers metaphorically to outside (government/not legitimate) intrusion or interference into what is properly the private realm of the family.

## **Young(er) kids and old(er) kids**

One of the most dominant pairings in the discussions is that of younger children and older children. This section will discuss these two categories, paying particular attention to the category-bound attributes, activities and motivations ascribed to the members of these categories. Discussion of the category ‘younger kids’ will include those individuals that the participants refer to as ‘young kids’ or ‘little kids’ while discussion of the category

‘older kids’ will include ‘big’ and ‘bigger’ kids as well as ‘teenagers’ and ‘older teenagers’. The participants’ construction of the categories younger children and older children sheds light on their conceptualisation of the transition from one stage of life to another—and ultimately on their ideas about childhood and its relationship to adulthood; especially, the contrast between those attributes, behaviours and motivations which mark the boundaries between the two categories.

### **The ‘fictitious unity’ of the (young) child: the activities attributes and motivations of younger kids**

Following Foucault, Chapter 2 argued that there were good grounds for viewing the ‘natural child’ as a ‘fiction of coherence and unity’. This section will explore the fictitious unity of the category ‘young child’, a category defined by relative age, by examining the activities, attributes and motivations that are mapped by the participants on to the category so that one’s identity as a young child becomes a causal explanation for a whole range of media related behaviours and effects. Some of these activities, attributes and motivations are expressed explicitly while others exist as underlying assumptions in the participants’ discussion of the likely impacts and harms of the media on children. Note also, as discussed earlier in this chapter, there is within certain situations some overlap between the domains of meaning associated with the participants’ use of the categories ‘child’/‘children’ and their use of ‘young’/ ‘younger’/‘little’ child.

Despite the moderators’ pronouncement that they want ‘to get the views from the horse’s mouth’, in the context of the focus group discussions particularly in relation to media harm one of the main identity categories the participants refer to is one which the participants distance themselves from; that is, the category ‘younger children’. The participants

frequently discuss younger children rather than themselves or children their own age; or alternatively, they compare themselves and others to younger children.

While the category ‘younger kids’ is a situational category, in that its meaning depends on who is doing the categorising (Nikander 2002), in all cases, in the focus group discussions the participants use both the categories ‘younger children’ and ‘young children’ to categorise individuals, generally defined by chronological age, who are younger than themselves. In this, the category is one against which the participants define themselves. In other words, in saying what they are not, the participants are also marking out the boundaries of who they are, or, as Bourdieu (1984: 174) so aptly puts it, the work of classification classifies the classifier (this will be discussed more fully in next chapter).

Perhaps what is most notable about the participants’ comments about younger children is the extent to which many of the participants appear to share adult presuppositions about children, albeit in this case expressed in relation to those they categorise as ‘young’ or ‘younger’ children—children younger than themselves<sup>1</sup>. In the context of the focus group discussions these shared presuppositions are overwhelmingly those which provide the basis for adult concerns about the harmful effects of the media on children expressed in dominant media discourses.

The discussion below explores a number of examples from the focus groups in which the participants put forward certain ‘truths’ about young children. The discussion shows how typically ‘childlike’ characteristics—such as, age, lack of maturity and vulnerability—are mapped onto the identity ‘young’ child in order to negotiate dominant discourses about the harmful effects of the media on children.



***Media, age and maturity—developmental discourses***

At many locations in the discussions the participants deploy developmental discourses in their characterisations of the differences between younger children and older children or between younger children and themselves. In the participants' accounts of their own and others' relationships with media, these interactions are frequently used as significant indicators or measures of an individual's stage of development and maturity. For example, vulnerability to media influence is frequently interpreted by the participants as an indication of immaturity, which in turn is linked to age and a 'truth' about young children; that is, that they have not yet developed certain (adult) abilities.

The extract below forms part of a discussion among a group of boys aged between 10 and 12 years. The discussion occurs in response to a question from the moderator about whether the participants feel that watching television violence causes 'kids' to change in anyway or has any type of 'long term bad effect' on children. In the discussions, being vulnerable to the influence of the media is identified as an attribute of 'younger people' who Robert defines by age—as those who are younger than ten years—that is, younger than any of the participants in the group:

Moderator: (...) I'm just trying to work out what you think about, say, kids that are watching violence. Do you think if they are watching violence that it does after a while make a difference to them, that they change == or that it has a long term bad effect?

Christopher: Um, yeah, younger people. They can be influenced easier

Moderator: But not so much your age?

Christopher: Nah

Moderator: So when do you reckon that you stop being so easily influenced?

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Robert: When you, um, turn 10

Thomas: Yeah

Moderator: Ten but then, even if you talked about say, you know, 12-year-olds, if you were a 12-year-old boy and you're watching pretty violent stuff on TV or videos, do you think that that would make a difference to you, or matter? [group shake heads] Not, you don't think so?

Christopher: Nah

Adam: Nah

Moderator: It's just entertainment?

Mark: Yeah, well, as you get older you get more mature, so ... you can

( ... )

At the end of the extract Mark links the development of maturity to increasing age ('as you get older you get more mature'). It is this maturity that he asserts enables individuals to avoid media influence, allowing them to view media violence without any harmful effects. The participants are also clearly distancing themselves (discussed in more detail in Chapter 7) from the identity younger child/person to which they attribute the characteristics of immaturity and vulnerability to media influence, through their use of chronological age—10 years of age—to mark the boundary of those 'younger' than themselves.

For many of the participants in the Harm study, it is children's developing ability to distinguish between fictional media representations of violence (presumably those that are 'just entertainment') and 'real' violence, that both enables them to resist the media's influence and distinguishes younger children from older children. This connection can be

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seen in the second extract below, which continues the participants' discussion above:

Thomas: The wrestling's all fake, you can see it

Robert: Yeah

Thomas: It's just, um, entertainment

Robert: Yeah, entertainment ... and they make it look real, so

Moderator: But, um, what, um, Chris was saying earlier was that some of the stuff that you see if it's a violent blood and guts kind of thing doesn't look that real but have others of you seen stuff that does look very real == in terms of

Robert: == Yeah

Mark: Yeah

Moderator: But do you say to yourself it's not real or do you think it looks ...

Christopher: If you're mature, you're looking == you don't believe it. You can watch the movie but you know not to believe it

Adam: == You can tell

Moderator: And at what point--when do you think maturity might start.

Adam: About 13, 12.

Moderator: About 12 or 13. Okey dokey.

The participants offer no account of how children develop the ability to recognise fictional violence as 'unreal' or on what basis children decide whether something is 'real' or 'fictional': the grounding for children's knowledge does not appear to be based in learning, enhanced media literacy skills or media experience. Instead the ability to distinguish between fictional ('fake') media violence and 'real' violence is mapped to both age (in this

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case, according to Adam about 12 or 13 years of age) and maturity in a linear model of development in which increasing age is associated with increased maturity and where maturity is causally related to the ability to distinguish fictional violence from real violence, expressed in somewhat abstract cognitive mental processes of believing ('If you're mature ... you don't believe it') and knowing/recognising ('You can tell').

The extract below, from a group of 'older' boys, provides a second example of how the participants map maturity and the ability to resist media influence on to age. This extract follows an account by Javid of his younger brother's response to a violent movie. The moderator asks whether the brother's response was 'just pretending' or whether the viewing of violent content, 'could get dangerous':

Moderator: But is he just pretending, like, I mean, or do you think that's really--could, could get dangerous?

Daniel: == It's dangerous.

Josh: Like, you know, for little people, like, you know, they get == it can be dangerous

Ben: == They take it seriously

Aiden: Like, older people they just know == ( )

Anthony: == Yeah, they know ( )

Moderator: At what stage do you start knowing ... the difference or?

Daniel: I reckon from 10 ==

Anthony: ==10 or 12

Aiden: When you stop believing in Santa Claus

Jarred: 8 for ( )

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Anthony: It depends if they're mature as well

Jason: Depends on the person if they've been influenced

Moderator: Mature, at what--at what age do you reckon, Jake?

Javid: Twelve for boys and 10 for girls

Moderator: Well, that's an interesting point

Aiden: It depends on puberty

Vulnerability, in this case to media violence, is linked in the discussion above to the identity category young(er) children ('little people'). The participants assert that viewing violent media is dangerous for young children because of attributes which set them apart from 'older people'. The boundary between younger children and 'older people' is marked not only in terms of relative age (eight, 10 or 12 years of age) but by a number of other attributes; for example, the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality ('when you stop believing in Santa Claus'), sexual/biological maturity ('puberty') and emotional maturity. As in the previous extended example, the participants describe the ability of 'older people' to avoid the potential harmful effects of the media as being grounded in their knowledge, expressed in the cognitive mental processes of 'knowing' ('older people ... just know') which again is linked to age and maturity. Javid's contribution to the discussion—his proposition that the age at which someone may be able to distinguish real violence from media violence may be gender dependent, with differing ages for boys and girls—additionally suggests the possibility that for him the category 'young child' may not be strictly bound by age but also by gender.

### ***Young children, reality and horror***

As the examples so far have shown, many of participants refer directly or indirectly to an

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assumed 'truth' about young children; that is, that young children lack the ability to know what is true or real and what is not. Following from this truth about young children, the participants appear to reason that it is this attribute of young children that intensifies the impact of the media on them, compared to older children; consequently, young children are more prone to copy what they see, to be more severely affected by horror or media violence and so on.

In the excerpts below, both from the same group of 'older' girls, the participants suggest that the effects of televised horror are more intense for younger children and longer lasting because of younger children's inability to 'know' what is real and what is not. The first extract is a response to moderator's question about whether the participants think that the viewing of horror has any long term effects:

Renee: For young kids it really affects them ==

Rochelle: == Yeah, really, == ahhh

Renee: == Like Rochelle said they get nightmares and it's just too much for them to handle but, like, when you're older I think that ... you understand == it's not real and you're able to handle it

Rochelle: == It's just, you know it's not real ==

Again, relative age, being 'older', is linked to the cognitive mental processes of 'understanding' and 'knowing' and it is this knowledge about what is real and what is not that the participants assert enables older children to be able to 'handle' horror. Younger children, then, the participants appear to reason, are more strongly affected by televised horror because they do not have the ability to make these modality judgements. As in

previous examples, there is no account of how children develop these abilities; rather the ability to handle horror is constructed as a consequence of the possession of certain kinds of knowledge or understanding and this attribute is mapped to relative age.

In the second extract after a discussion of horror, the moderator seeks clarification about whether the participants consider that being frightened is harmful for children:

Nadine: Um, I don’t know, it’s just, like, if you see something then you’re just scared for a little while and then you get over it (...)

Laura: Probably for little kids ... like

Renee: It effects them for a lot longer until they realise that’s not real

Group: Yeah

Laura: Cause they don’t understand

Moderator: So you think there’s a difference between very young children and?

Renee: Yes, definitely

Nadine: Yeah

Brittany: [nods]

Laura: [nods]

Moderator: Where would you put that difference? At what age ... would you think? (...)

Laura: Probably seven. Like for young kids probably seven or even younger, six, five

Laura and then Renee contrast the vulnerability of ‘little kids’ with Nadine’s more generalised account (through her use of the unspecified personal pronoun ‘you’) of the fairly minimal effects of viewing horror. The participants once more assert that it is the ability to make modality judgements—to ‘realise’ or ‘understand’ that television horror is

not real—that minimises the impact of horror on children. Again, in their account, the ability to make these judgements appears to be based on a young person’s age (‘seven or even younger, five, six’) or stage of development rather than, for instance, on children learning to recognise the modality markers in the media texts they view which cue ‘the truth or factuality’ of these texts (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 159). In making such assertions about young children, the participants draw on normative (adult) presuppositions about young children and the impact of the media on them. An important difference, of course, is that as this chapter has shown, there is a wide variation in who, precisely is ‘recognised’ as belonging to the category ‘young’/‘younger’ child.

***Childhood and identity: the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of younger children***

In the excerpts below childhood is discussed as a period of growth—not just in terms of increasing age (‘grow[ing] older’)—but also in relation to the development of other attributes, which the participants associate with growing maturity. Key among these is the formation of one’s identity or sense of self.

In the first example, the participants again map a child’s ability to resist media influence to increasing age (‘growing older’) and to maturity. Although the participants clearly link maturity to age (12, 13 or 14 years of age), maturity is also linked to specific attributes, realised through relational attributive processes, which enable children to resist the media influences: possessing a ‘social life’ so that television is of less importance and being an ‘individual’:

Moderator: Do you think you’re influenced by the things you watch on TV?

(...)



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Renee: Nah, I reckon, younger kids, they're influenced a lot. Once you grow older it just doesn't have a big effect on you any more [head shake]

Moderator: At what sort of point?

[pause]

Renee: Um, depends, like, once you're mature and you're == (over all the) TV

Laura: == Cause you've got, like, a social life now and

Group: [laugh] ==

Moderator:== And you've got the telephone

Laura: Yeah, you got a ( )

Moderator: So, what age for you girls, then, would you say that's?

Renee: Mmm, maybe, like, ==

Nadine: == 14

Renee: Yeah, 14

Laura: 13

Moderator: About now

Alyson: About 13

Clare: 13

Rochelle: It depends when == you figure out your own identity

Laura: == 12 even

Rochelle: because when you're younger everybody wants to be the same, like, you know, because you want to look like your friends and you all--you don't want to be different but ... as you get older you, sort of ... say, well, 'I'm an individual. I want to do this', you know, so you do. You don't care what everyone else thinks ... like, as when you were

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younger you were ==

Moderator: == Mmm, that's == interesting

The participants' discussion of childhood is consistent with traditional discourses of adolescent development which highlight adolescence as, among other things, a period of emotional/psychological development (of identity formation) and social development.

Renee and Laura, for example, explain how when you are older television no longer has 'a big effect on you any more'. They do this by linking growing older with becoming more mature and maturity with social development (having 'a social life'). Television has less effect on older children they reason because competing social interests mean that television no longer plays such an important part in older children's lives.

Rochelle, in her response to the moderator's question, resists a strictly age-based explanation of older children's ability to withstand the influences of television. Instead, Rochelle suggests that such abilities are dependent on young people's emotional and psychological development, specifically their growing individuality and sense of self. Rochelle's construction of identity as developmental and unfolding, a process that begins in childhood (with immature identifications with others) and presumably ends at adulthood (with a strong and coherent sense of self), is consistent with Hall's (1991) 'old logics of identity', discussed in Chapter 1. Rochelle expresses young children's lack of a coherent sense of self using desiderative cognitive mental processes to describe their desires ('wants') to be like others (wanting to 'be the same'/not 'be different', to 'look like your friends'). Rochelle then describes the shift that occurs as children 'get older'. For Rochelle, becoming older is associated with the acquisition of self knowledge, which she expresses through a cognitive mental process ('you figure out your own identity'). The

older child’s recognition that he or she is uniquely different ‘individual’ is proclaimed in the verbal process, ‘I’m an individual.’ In this way, Rochelle employs traditional notions of identity derived from philosophical and psychological discourse (see Chapter 1) as an explanatory device to account for younger children’s vulnerability to media influence. In her account, the possession of an autonomous, stable identity becomes synonymous with being grown up. Younger children, who have not yet discovered their true inner selves, are therefore easily influenced since their lack of a coherent identity results in their identification with others. This in turn, makes them more inclined to copy those around them and presumably through a similar process of identification and copying leaves them vulnerable to media influence.

The excerpt below is a continuation of the discussion above. In this excerpt, however, the younger children’s identifications with others are explicitly discussed in relation to the media and there is a clear attempt to link these identifications with dominant discourses about the harmful effects of the media on children. Alyson begins her turn, as Rochelle concluded, by similarly suggesting that young children ‘want to be like’ others but in contrast to Rochelle discusses this desire in relation to young children’s admiration for their media idols rather than their fear of being different from their peers. Alyson then shifts her description of the process from one articulated through mental processes of desire—that of ‘wanting’ to be like their idols—to one expressed in terms of material processes—specifically the ‘copying’ or ‘imitating’ of the behaviours and attributes of their idols and other media characters. Shortly after, the discussion moves on to catalogue many of the ‘bad influences’ that may eventuate as a consequence of young children’s copying, including, dangers to self (trying to fly, jumping ‘out of windows’ or off cliffs) and dangers to others (‘hyperactivity’, ‘pushing’, ‘kicking’ and ‘punching’):

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Alyson: Um, I think that there's lots of, like, kids when they're younger they, like, look up to idols and stuff like--like little kids--little girls might look up to, like, the Spice Girls and stuff and then they want to be like them and then they do stuff like them and their parents don't like it and then the kids, um ... yeah, they just copy what they do and sometimes it's a bad influence ... Like boys, they want to be Batman or whatever

Moderator: But, is that particularly bad, boys wanting to be Batman?

Alyson: Um, it depends, like, what they do, like ... for some boys, might, I don't know--they might try to == fly or something

Rochelle: == Jump out of windows ( ) or something

Moderator: Would they want to hurt someone necessarily or not?

Renee: It just makes them == hyperactive and want to, like, push people and, I don't know, like, get annoyed

Alyson:

== Ah, they just probably copy it

Moderator: So it's other children ==

Brittany: My cousin, he's a big fan of the *Power Rangers*, and so he starts imitating them and he starts kicking my cousin and everything and she's got all, like, sores all over her from that and everything. He starts kicking me [gestures to self] when I hug him or something

Renee: Yeah, that got taken off TV

Moderator: But do you don't think he'd be like that whether there were Power Rangers or not? I mean, I just wonder--some kids are hyperactive ==

Brittany: == Well, if, um

Moderator: But, you're saying you think that TV is an ingredient ... in that do you?

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Alyson: Yeah because when they're younger they don't know ... like, all the different ... like, say ... there's, like, different kinds of punches or whatever. They don't know the different kinds until they see it ... until somebody shows them and then they try to be like that

Moderator: So, Laura?

Laura: Oh, like, if, like, they're--like, a boy doesn't like that boy he pretends, ah, like, 'I'm a Power Ranger', you know, 'I've gotta do what he's doing' and yeah ==

Nadine: Like in cartoons too, like, Bugs Bunny. Like, the coyote that runs off the hill ... and cliff, falls down and bounces back up again and then, like, little kids'll think, 'Oh, that's cool. Let's do that. Let's jump off a cliff == and bounce back up'

The participants' linking of media, children's propensity to copy what they see and dangerous behaviour in the discussion is typical of certain adult discourses about harmful effects of the media on children. In the discussions it is suggested that young children's lack of identity or lack of a stable identity coupled with their admiration for their idols motivates them to try out new identities or to seek 'to be'/'be like' their idols. Thus, in the discussion, the search for identity is intertwined with young children's media experiences and never far away from the discussion of media violence. In addition, it is young children's desire to be like their idols which leads them to copy their idol's behaviour and results, in turn, in their gaining something that they would otherwise lack—knowledge. Absence of violence, then, is linked to young children's lack of knowledge—which Alyson expresses as a type of innocence or naivety that prevents young children from engaging in violence simply because they lack specific knowledge about the acts of violence themselves--'the different kinds of punches or whatever ...until someone shows them and then they try to be like that'.

## Older teenagers

There are a few locations in the discussions where the participants introduce the additional category 'teenager' or 'older teenager'. The extract below, the beginning of which was explored earlier in the chapter, is interesting for its comparatively clear delineation of differences between younger children and teenagers in relation to the viewing of sexual content. In much the same way that the concept 'child' depends for its meaning on its binary opposite 'adult', the pairing of young or 'little kids' and teenager in the extract below brings into focus what is for the participants one of the key differences between young or 'little kids' and 'teenagers'—a category which these participants clearly feel much closer to (discussed further in the next chapter).

The extract below follows a discussion, explored earlier in this chapter, of what type of sexual content the participants were prepared to view and their response to content they found unpleasant. The extract arguably shows an attempt by the moderators to shift the participants from personalised accounts of their own attitudes to and behaviours in relation to the viewing of sexual content to a consideration of the viewing by children, as a class, of sexual content specifically in relation to the harms it might inflict:

Moderator: But do you think by watching say ... you know, by watching sex there's any harm in it?

Kristina: Nah

Mel: Nah ==

Kiralee: (You don't want) kids thinking, 'Oh, that's so cool, maybe I'll try it out on my boyfriend' or something and see if he's interested or, like, bribe him into it and ... like, going around picking up guys, saying, ah, you know, 'Do you want to go and do this' or

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something silly dirty things.

(...)

Lesia: Well, the little kids they shouldn't watch it but for, like, people like, you know, like, older teenagers and that, they already know what sex is and that, you know. They don't mind watching it and that == but

Michelle: == And it helps you to learn about it == and stuff

Lesia: == Yeah, but, you know, mostly == ( )

Mel: == How to do a back flip for your lover [laugh]

Lesia: Teenagers, like, know ==

Moderator: == One at a time so

Lesia: Yeah, like, teenagers know what it is and that, you know, so ... you know, they don't really care if they watch it or not, you know, but for little kids ...== they shouldn't be watching it unless you

Moderator: == How little? ... About what age?

Lesia: I don't really == know

Mel: == Probably before high school, like, when you == hit high school you've kind of had the sex, drug education and stuff

Lesia:== Yeah

Moderator: Mmm and what would your folks say about it, though? If you were watching sexy movies, do they care?

Lesia: At the moment, nah. My mum doesn't care

Lara: My mum wanted to see *American Pie* with me [laugh]

In the comments immediately prior the extract above, the participants discuss their lack of

discomfort and their somewhat pragmatic approach to viewing sexual content. When coupled Kiralee’s assertion that ‘You don’t want ‘kids’ thinking’ that sex is ‘cool’ it seems likely that Kiralee does not include herself in the category ‘kids’. However, Kiralee’s more generalised use of ‘kids’ rather than ‘younger kids’ leaves open the possibility that the category may implicitly encompass some of the other group members. In this light, Lesia’s use of the category ‘little kids’ in her comment which follows could be interpreted as a clarification of or corrective to Kiralee’s assertion about ‘kids’, making it clear that in Lesia’s view the concerns are for ‘younger kids’ rather than for ‘older teenagers’, such as herself.

Following the formulation begun by Kiralee, Lesia expresses her view as another generalised, uncontroversial assertion or ‘truth’ about, in this case, the subcategory ‘little kids’; quite simply, that ‘little kids’ should not view sexual content. As has been the case elsewhere in the discussions, in its lack of further explanation or justification Lesia’s comments can be interpreted as a shared normative presumption about young children that she presumably feels do not warrant justification or as an indication of her acceptance of the reasoning put forward by Kiralee. However, further light is shed on the basis for this presumption in the participants’ elaboration of the category bound attributes of teenagers—attributes they share with adults and that set them apart from younger children. Lesia’s discussion of teenagers continues in the same mode as she began; referring to teenagers using the third-person pronoun ‘they’ and providing an account of one of the attributes of teenagers ‘as a class’; that is, that teenagers ‘already know what sex is’. However, in contrast to the discussion of the attributes of younger children, the participants appear to consider that these attributes of teenagers warrant some justification. Lesia continues, saying that additionally, or perhaps as a consequence of this knowledge,



teenagers ‘don’t mind watching’ sexual content. Michelle’s contribution, through her use of the generic and more inclusive ‘you’, that viewing sexual content ‘helps you learn about it and stuff’—shifts the conversation from discussion of teenagers as class back to a more personal account which, through her use of the inclusive ‘you’, potentially embraces the other group members. Lesia’s interruption, ‘Yeah, but, you know, mostly... teenagers, like, know...’ with which, while initially appearing to agree (‘yeah’), she nonetheless expresses her disagreement (‘but’), could be interpreted as a somewhat guarded reaffirmation of her point that teenagers such as herself already ‘know what sex is’ and therefore, do not need to seek out sexual content on television; a position which she elaborates more fully in her next move: ‘Yeah, like teenagers know what it is and that, you know, so ... you know, they don’t really care if they watch it or not...’.

Mel’s light-hearted and more risqué contribution about what older teenagers might learn from watching adult content—‘How to do a back flip for your lover’—avoids disagreeing with Michelle’s contribution that viewing sexual content ‘helps you learn’ while simultaneously reaffirming the truth of Lesia’s statement in relation to herself that teenagers already know what sex is.

It is the absence of this attribute in young children—their lack of knowledge about sex—that is presented as the underlying justification for why they should not watch sexual content on television. When the moderator pushes for the participants to specify an age under which a child should not view sex on television, Mel responds not in terms of age but again in terms of knowledge, whether or not the child has had sex and drug education, which she links not to age but to the education level achieved.

## Explaining the unexplainable: the 'unintelligible child'

Chapter 2 borrowed Butler's notion of 'unintelligible gender', which she describes as a failure to 'institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire' (Butler 1990/2006: 17), to coin the concept of the 'unintelligible child' to refer to those children for whom there is a disjuncture between the biological materiality of the child's body and the activities and behaviours that the child engages in.

The extract below is from a conversation among one of the groups of younger girls. They are discussing a widely reported news story about a 10-year-old Australian boy who drowned a younger child. In this discussion, the actions of the 10-year-old 'child' appear to challenge normative ideals of childhood and, media effects discourse becomes the means of resolving this apparent disjuncture between the actions of the child and the norms of childhood:

Sam: There was this 10-year-old who drowned a little kid and they said it was because of TV.

Moderator: Do you think that's true?

Sam: It could have been 'cause, like, where else would a little kid get that idea to drown somebody?

Melissa: 'cause he *was* 10

Sam: Yeah, he was 10, so like, he must of seen heaps of TV to like, be that stupid, and do something like that 'cause no one's going to go and say, "Awh, go drown that little kid over there".

As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, many of the participants seemed to be aware of and to accept the legitimacy of dominant discourses about the harmful effects of the media on children. They could cite now classic stories of children committing acts of violence or being injured as a result of something they viewed. In this context, the discussion above could be read as another example of young people’s acceptance of the vulnerability of children to the power of the media. However, it also suggests that that this group of young people do not appear to consider children to be ‘naturally’ capable of a violent act such as drowning another child.

Butler (2004: 41) discusses how social norms govern the ‘intelligibility of action’. In Butler’s terms, in the example above, the 10-year-old child’s actions appear to be viewed by the participants as an ‘impossibility’; as breaching the norms of childhood. The participants clearly assume a young child (‘little kid’) incapable of intentionally drowning another child. Sam’s acceptance of reports that television was to blame appears to be based upon this assumption, in that she seeks an explanation ‘outside’ of the child, as evidenced in her question, ‘where else would a little kid get that idea to drown somebody?’ Melissa reinforces the ‘impossibility’ of the child’s act by restating his age, ‘he *was* ten’, which is repeated by Sam, thereby further emphasising the child’s identity as a ‘little kid’. In locating the source of the idea ‘outside’ of the child, the only other possible explanation of the child’s behaviour that the participants appear to be able to imagine is that someone (presumably an adult) ‘instructed’ the child to perform the act, realised in the elliptical verbal command, ‘[You] go drown that little kid over there’. This option they reject as unlikely, which leaves them with one option, that the outside source of the idea must have been TV. There is such a disjunction between accepted norms of what constitutes a child and the act of murder that such a child appears as ‘unintelligible’, such a ‘paradox for

thinking’ (Butler 2004: 42) that Sam can only rationalise that the child ‘must have seen heaps of TV to (...) be that stupid and do something like that’. In other words, Sam concludes that the child in the news story must have been influenced by some powerful outside source and, as such, the media become the only possible way of accounting for, the ‘unintelligible child’.

## **Conclusion—Who counts as a child?**

This chapter has attempted to uncover to whom, for these participants, the identity ‘child’ refers. The chapter has examined how the participants in the Harm research, having been positioned by the research as children, talk about ‘the child’ in the context of discussions about their media experiences. The chapter has shown how the participants mobilise cultural knowledge about children and childhood in their discussions about children’s media practices and identified some of the assumptions that the participants appear to hold about children.

In the context of these discussions, media discourses provide the frames through which the participants apprehend the child. The participants draw on dominant constructions of the child particularly from media effects discourse. In so doing, they construct the child’s identity in terms of its difference from the adult. Although they often do not explicitly articulate the attributes that children as a class share, it is clear that much of what the participants assert about children and their engagement with the media is based on certain normative presuppositions about children that the participants consider do not require any explanation. The chapter has shown that these include, the construction of childhood as

timeless, transitional and universal; and the child as deficient vis-à-vis the adult—easily influenced, unable to distinguish reality from fiction, gullible and legitimately subject to parental control.

However, the chapter has also shown that within these discussions the meaning of ‘child’ is situational, shifting and negotiated. There is considerable ambiguity about who counts as a child. In contrast to the moderators’ relatively unproblematic ‘identification’ of the child as object of the research—primarily defined by age—there appears to be shifts in the participants’ use and understanding of the identity child. The participants sometimes deploy the identity category ‘child’ as a universal identity category about which generalisations can be made, a category to which they variously consider that they belong or do not belong, although which is the case is not always made clear. Conversely, sometimes the participants talk about individual children rather than children as a universal identity category: children they know, hypothetical children or children they have learnt about through media reporting.

There is also a high degree of uncertainty about the situational meaning of ‘children’ or ‘kids’ in the discussions. In many of the examples discussed there was at least some possibility that ‘kids’ was being deployed by the participants to refer not to children as a class in the sense in which the identity category was ascribed to the participants by both the moderators and through the assumptions of the research design. Rather, the category appeared to be used as either a shorthand reference to a sub-category, often ‘young’ or ‘younger children’ or alternatively, in some situations and/or for some participants, to be used to identify individuals with sufficiently different attributes—generally including being younger—to warrant the participants’ identification of themselves as belonging to an

entirely different identity category.

Despite the moderators’ positioning of the participants ‘as children’ and their expressed desire to learn about children’s media experiences directly ‘from the horse’s mouth’, the category ‘young/little’ or ‘younger’ child is the dominant identity category deployed by the participants—a category with which the participants clearly do *not* identify. That the category ‘young(er) child’ is a situational or relational category, its meaning dependent on who does the classifying, can be seen in the variable ages ascribed to its members, ‘under 10’, ‘seven or even younger’, 12, 13 or 14. Yet despite these different age attributes, the participants apprehend the young child in remarkably similar ways.

The associated activities, behaviours and attributes of the identity category ‘young(er) child’ are more explicitly articulated than was the case for the category ‘child’ although, as mentioned above, at times there appears to be overlap or merging of the semantic fields of the two categories. In articulating these qualities, the participants express, in relation to ‘young children’, many (adult) normative presumptions about children which are typical of media effects discourse and popular discourse about children’s engagement with the media; such as, children’s vulnerability to the influences of television, children’s propensity to naively copy what they see, children’s inability to distinguish reality from fiction and children’s tendency to accept television’s construction of reality as truth. An important difference, of course, is that, as this chapter has shown, there is a wide variation in who, precisely is recognised as belonging to the category ‘young’/‘younger’ child.

There are a few locations in the discussions where the participants introduce the additional category, teenager or older teenager. This is a category which many of the participants

appear to identify with. The pairing of ‘young’ children and ‘teenagers’ in the discussions brings into focus some of the attributes that the participants appear to consider set teenagers apart from younger children—attributes that teenagers also appear to share with adults. Additionally, the participants’ contrasting ideas about younger children and older children, shed light on the participants’ conceptualisation of childhood as a transition from one stage of life to another—and ultimately on their ideas about childhood and its relationship to adulthood; especially, the contrast between those attributes, behaviours and motivations which mark the boundaries between the two categories.

The original Harm research aimed at identifying key differences between ‘adult’ and ‘child’ understandings of media harm. Instead, as this chapter has shown, the research has revealed many areas of similarity, not just in the way ‘adult’ and ‘child’ understand media harm but also in how they apprehend ‘the child’. In *Frames of War* Judith Butler states that what we are able to apprehend is facilitated by norms of recognition (2009: 5). Therefore, for a child to be intelligible as a child, he/she has to conform to certain conceptions of what a child is. Although Butler states that there are ‘shifting schemas of intelligibility’ (2009: 5), in the context of the focus group discussions it is concern about the media’s potential to harm children which is the dominant frame through which the discussions take place. Such framing functions normatively to structure modes of recognition; such that, the participants’ very ‘capacity to discern and name’ (2009: 4) the being ‘child’ is dependent on the norms that facilitate that recognition. It is unsurprising then that the participants conceive the identity ‘child’ as vulnerable, naïve and deficient given the normative discourses which frame popular debate and discussions about media harm. However, Butler also argues that although the frame functions normatively, it can ‘call certain fields of normativity into question’ (2009: 24). The semantic slippage that occurs between the

identities ‘child’ and ‘young child’ and the participants’ distancing of themselves from the identity ‘child’ are perhaps examples which expose the limits of this framing. Together they challenge the static nature of such constructions by demonstrating the dynamic, shifting and social character of the terms through which ‘the child’ is made intelligible.

The next chapter will continue this discussion by examining in more detail how the participants distance themselves from the identity child when their individual experiences or sense of self comes into conflict with the norms operative in establishing who counts a child.

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<sup>1</sup> This may be interpreted as a variation of the ‘third-person’ effect—the idea that people tend to assume that the media has a greater effect on others than on themselves—hypothesised by Davison (1983). Buckingham (1993b) and others have cited similar findings in their own research on children.



## Chapter 7

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### Distancing the ‘child’

#### Introduction

Chapter 5 examined the normative presumptions about childhood that informed both the research aims of the Harm project and the moderators’ activities within the focus groups. The chapter showed how these norms structured the interpellating address of the participants as ‘children’. Chapter 6 then went on to examine how the participants having been positioned by the research as ‘children’ and asked to speak from their positions as children, mobilised cultural knowledge about children and childhood in their discussions; in particular, given the framing of the discussions, knowledge derived from public discourse about the media’s potential to harm children. Chapter 6 showed that within these discussions there was a high degree of uncertainty about the situational meaning of ‘children’ (or ‘kids’), especially in relation to the participants themselves and that, rather than identifying as children, the participants more often attempted to *distance* themselves from the identity category, child.

This chapter builds on the work done in the previous two chapters, exploring the participants’ performance of self through a closer examination of the distancing strategies employed by the participants. The chapter makes use of discursive approaches to identity such as Butler’s (1990/2006; 1993) that see identification as always an unstable and ambivalent process (the ‘identification with a set of norms that are not realizable’, an

'internally unstable affair' (Butler 1993: 126)) , as multiple, never completed, always in process and incessantly reconstituted, to explain the participants' distancing of themselves from childhood and performance of themselves as 'closer to adulthood'.

Drawing on Butler's work on intersubjective recognition (Butler 2004; 2005), this chapter interprets the focus group discussions as sites where the participants engage in a 'struggle for recognition'. In an extension of the analysis of the previous two chapters, the chapter demonstrates that the participants do not 'recognise' themselves in the discursive categories which frame the research. Rather, interpellated as children in the context of discussions framed by normative discourses which construct the identity 'child' as vulnerable, naïve and deficient, the participants' distancing strategies can be viewed as both a repudiation of childhood and part of the participants' struggle for affirmation of their existence as 'self-conscious and autonomous' beings (Lloyd 2007: 16).

The chapter is broadly divided into two parts. The chapter begins its exploration of the participants' performance of self by examining the variety of strategies the participants employ to distance themselves from the identity child. This follows with a brief discussion of the participants' construction of future anticipated or aspired to adult identities. The chapter concludes with the suggestion that childhood identifications may be even more unstable and the norms of childhood even less 'realisable' than those that characterise gender. Such instability may be the result of childhood identity being at the intersection of contradictory discourses (protectionist and emancipatory discourses, developmental discourses) and the child being constructed as both a 'being' and a 'becoming'; that is, both as a social subject and as a 'potential subject'. As such, the shifting and situational meaning of child in the discussions coupled with the participants' distancing of themselves

from childhood can be viewed as attempts by the participants to affirm their existence as subjects by repudiating the identity 'child' and assuming more 'adult' identity positions.

## **Distancing childhood: the child who is not a child**

The analysis has thus far demonstrated the participants' knowledge of the cultural norms of childhood particularly in relation to discourses *about* children and the media. It has also highlighted the participants' frequent attempts to distance themselves from these cultural norms. The participants' attempts to distance themselves from the cultural norms of childhood are unsurprising given the predominant Western view of children as 'incomplete', essentially lacking specific adult qualities, and childhood as a journey with adulthood as its goal:

Children are defined principally in terms of what they are *not* and in terms of what they *cannot* do. Children are not adults and hence they cannot be allowed access to the things which adults define as 'theirs', and which adults believe they are uniquely able to comprehend and to control. (Buckingham 2000: 14)

Consistent with this view of children is the dominant psychological view of childhood as 'a process of becoming' in which children change over time 'through a logical sequence of 'ages and stages' toward the achievement of adult maturity and rationality' (Buckingham 2000: 14). Within this discourse 'adulthood' and the achievement of specifically adult qualities becomes the final goal, the 'finished state'.

Distancing childhood then is a device by which the participants 'claim a biographical position somewhat closer to the adult' (Baker 1984: 311); an indication of how far they

have progressed along the road to adulthood. While not using the same terminology, Buckingham (1993b; 1996) has noted a similar tendency in his research, arguing that children's efforts to displace adult concerns about the media onto younger children may be an attempt to construct themselves as having moved beyond that stage and therefore to be 'too mature to be seriously affected' (Buckingham 1996: 40).

In the context of the focus group discussions, distancing is brought about through a number of related strategies. These include: establishing maximal distance from childhood by interpreting 'childhood' as *early* childhood and 'children' as *young* children; the participants' refusal of the moderators' categorisation and positioning of them as 'children'; retrospectively (Hadden & Lester 1978), a self-identifying practice whereby proximity to adulthood is signalled by the participants through their autobiographical accounts of their past identities as children; establishing closeness to the adult moderators by behaving in 'linguistically parallel or symmetrical ways' (Poynton 1985: 79); and the participants' untying of certain attributes and activities from the category child so that their engagement with these childhood-bound activities or their embodiment of these attributes is not perceived as 'childish' (Baker 1984).

### **Childhood as *early* childhood and children as *young* children**

The previous chapter showed that the participants appeared generally to accept normative views about what a child is; particularly, in relation to discourses about children and the media. The category-bound activities the participants identified with children included the collecting of commercial products associated with fads, and a lack of interest in watching the television news. The attributes associated with children—being easily influenced and copying what they see on television; being unable to distinguish reality from fantasy; being

dependent on parents and legitimately subject to parental control; and being vulnerable to sexual content and television violence—are consistent with a view of children as 'incomplete'; that is, lacking specific adult qualities; such as, knowledge, experience, maturity and a sense of self. Chapter 6 also argued that there was some basis for considering that the situational meaning of child/kid at many locations in the discussion was frequently synonymous with 'young' or 'little' child, where 'young' was invariably used to refer to individuals, generally defined by chronological age, who were younger than the participants themselves. In this way, the identity child is one against which the participants define themselves. In other words, in saying what they are not, the participants are also marking out the boundaries of who they are, or, as Bourdieu (1984: 174) so aptly puts it, the work of classification classifies the classifier.

In the excerpt below Robert distances himself from the identity 'child' by describing *children's* television programs as boring:

Moderator: What do you think of programs that are made specifically for children? ==

Robert: == Boring

Moderator: You know, I'm not meaning the really little—little kids, but ==

Thomas: == Oh right, *Play School*

Group: [Laughter]

Moderator: No, not *Play School* but you know, some of the—there are programs, um, like—those of you have had, um—has any of you had Nickelodeon at all? ==

Robert's single-word dismal of children's programming leads the moderator to assume that

he may have understood 'children' as 'young children' prompting her to clarify her question, explaining that she's not referring to programs for 'little kids'. To which, Thomas's response, 'Oh right, *Play School*' is a somewhat joking affirmation of the moderator's assumption that for the participants 'children' refers to pre-school aged children and, therefore, 'little kids' to even younger children.

The second example below, from a group of older girls, again shows the category child/kid being used by the participants to refer to children younger than themselves; in this case, children who are primary-school aged or younger:

Moderator: What about with violence, though? What (did your) parents—did you think that they were worried that you'd start thumping other people

(...)

Kiralee: [laugh] It's only a movie. You know it's not real

Bianca: Yeah

Mel: But kids, when there are kids == they kind of believe it?

Group: ==Yeah [nods]

Moderator: And what age kids do you think believe it and when they start to begin to tell the difference?

Kiralee: Like, about five or six. My little five-year-old cousin she's like—she'll see ==

(...)

Kiralee: My five-year-old cousin, if she sees something, like, on the TV, like fairies, she goes, 'Oh, do you know, I can do that and my dog can talk', and, like, she starts saying all these things and when, like—if it doesn't happen, she'll start crying. She gets really influenced by every cartoon, or something.

## Distancing the 'child'

Michelle: Mmm. That's like my 10-year-old cousin. We were watching == We were watching *Titanic* on video and she, like, got really scared with ... like, all the people falling off and everything 'cause she thought they were really, like ... seriously getting hurt and we had to, sort of, explain they were just like stunt people and they ... knew how to ... like, fall so they didn't get hurt and everything and so she always thinks, like, if a boat crashes, like ... that everyone will get hurt and, like, so she was, like, afraid to go on boats for a while and ... stuff like that

Lara: == [laughter]

Moderator: But, and she's 10?

Michelle: Yeah, and she, like, still thinks everything is real

In the excerpt the participants contrast their own ability to distinguish reality from televised fiction with the inability of 'kids' to do the same. The subsequent discussion of a number of specific incidents in relation to 'kids' aged from five to 10 years shows that 'kids' is synonymous with children younger than the participants. In contrasting their own ability to know the difference between reality and fiction from that of (younger) children, the participants achieve maximal distance from childhood and the attributes of children.

## Refusing to be identified and positioned as children

Chapter 5 discussed how the research aims of the project and the moderators' conversational practices positioned the participants as 'children'. The second type of distancing strategy discussed in this chapter involves the participants' attempts to refuse this positioning by ignoring or negotiating the moderators' positioning of them as children. Some examples have already been discussed in Chapter 6 in relation to the attributes that the participants associate with the category child but that they do not believe they share;

for example, the inability to distinguish reality from televised fiction and the naïve acceptance of the truthfulness of television. Three further examples are discussed below.

***Ignoring and renegotiating positioning***

In the example below, the distancing strategy used by the participants is to simply ignore their positioning as children or 'kids'. Sam then renegotiates her positioning, reorienting the discussion through the frame of gender:

Moderator: (...) Do you talk yourselves much about the programs you've watched with other kids at school?

Rebecca: My cousin has to go to bed at 6.30 and then he has—and then, when *South Park* is on, he gets up and he goes and watches it but he's not allowed to ... So == ( ) like their parents go to bed early. And one time they stayed up late 'cause they'd just gone to a wedding or something. And he went out to watch it and he got busted. [laugh]

Moderator: == And why does he try to do that? [laugh] Snuck out. Then, but, do you discuss the things you've seen much with other kids at school?

Emily: Mmm

Sam: All the boys talk about the Extreme Games on at 11 o'clock on a Sunday with all the skateboarding and rollerblading, and ... we just like == I don't understand.

Emily: == They just trying to kill themselves

Sam: Yeah, I watched a 360 and I know two people who have been skateboarding, and, like, trying to do what they've seen on TV or something. And ... Miles broke his arm and he's still got it broken and Sean's broke his leg or something. I don't know how they did it and what influenced them but they just sort of tried to do a trick and sort of hurt themselves.



The moderator positions the participants as 'kids' through her use of the inclusive 'other kids' in her question, 'Do you talk yourselves much about the programs you've watched with other kids at school?' Rebecca's response fails to address the moderator's question and, after a brief acknowledgement of what Rebecca has said, the moderator proceeds to restate the question, 'Then, but, do you discuss the things you've seen much with other kids at school?' Emily responds with a non-committal 'Mmm' while Sam, like Rebecca, ignoring both the question and its positioning, begins a seemingly unrelated discussion of what boys at school talk about.

Hadden and Lester (1978: 336-337) say that identifying practices in conversation are more explicit when there is less reciprocity of perspectives between those talking. The repetition of the question by the moderator is a breach of reciprocity and reaffirms the moderator's power through her control of the interaction (see Chapter 5) since it indicates that the group's answers are not deemed satisfactory. It is at this point that Sam begins more explicit identifying practices; not in relation to her positioning as 'child', but rather, in relation to her gender. This occurs through the introduction of the identity category 'boys' with Sam's use of the nominal group, 'all the boys' and Emily's use of the exclusive pronoun, 'they'. By providing examples of what boys *do* ('*talk* about the Extreme Games', '*trying to kill* themselves', '*trying to do* what they've seen on TV', '*tried to do* a trick', '*hurt* themselves') as well as what individual boys do ('Miles *broke* his arm ... and Sean's *broke* his leg'), Sam and Emily, identify certain category-bound activities that appear to set boys apart from girls. However, the agency or activity of the boys is diminished by Sam's suggestion that there is some unknown causative initiator behind the boys' actions ('I don't know ... what influenced them'). In so doing, she implicitly constructs boys as more easily influenced into undertaking dangerous behaviour than girls.

***Refusing positioning***

In this second example of how the participants challenge their positioning as children, Rebecca distances herself from the category child by directly refusing her positioning. The excerpt below forms part of a discussion about whether the use of internet filters is of benefit to children. The moderator begins by describing the function of internet filters as being to block 'things that are not suitable for kids':

Moderator: Hmm hmmm. And, um ... so has any or you heard of um, maybe the ones that haven't had much internet use haven't, but have you heard about, um, filters that you can put on the internet in order so that things that are not suitable for kids not to come up?

(...)

Have you heard of that? ==What do you think of that as an idea?

Rebecca: It's good for naughty little kids

Group: [laughter]

Moderator: Not like, naughty little kids, not like ==

Moderator 2: == Do you think you're a naughty little kid?

Rebecca: No, I'm a very good girl

Moderator 2: You're a very good girl [laugh] so you don't need one, is that it?

Rebecca: Yes

Underlying the moderator's opening statement is an assumption that there is identifiable content that can be deemed unsuitable for children, 'things that are not suitable for kids'. Rebecca playfully responds to the moderator's question, saying that such precautions are good, not for all kids, but rather for 'naughty little kids'. This presumably is because it is

only those who can be categorised as 'naughty little kids' who cannot be trusted with such content. The second moderator then asks Rebecca whether she considers herself a 'naughty little kid'. In her response that she is 'a very good girl' Rebecca not only refuses to be identified as 'naughty' but additionally as 'little' and finally as a 'kid'.

***Refusal and renegotiation of positioning***

This final example shows the participants refusing and renegotiating their positioning as children. The moderator begins by attempting to establish the type of television content the participants consider to be most harmful for children—bad language, violence or sexual content:

Moderator: So in your mind, if you're watching or if you were talking about someone else's kids, what do you think's sort of the worst for you in terms of watching bad language or watching violence or sex? Is there one that you think stands out as being—you'd stay, you'd say steer clear of if you were talking to another kid? [no response from group] ... Or, do you think it's all, you know—I'm just trying to work out what you think about say kids that are watching violence. Do you think if they are watching violence that it does after a while make a difference to them that they change == or that it has a long term bad effect?

Thomas: ==Yeah

Mark: It really depends how old they are

Moderator: In what—in what way?

Mark: Well, say you have a little brother or sister and they saw a violence or language movie ( )

Moderator: Then you think ... but not you?

## Distancing the 'child'

Mark: Yeah

Moderator: And what were you going to say, Chris?

Christopher: Um, yeah, younger people. They can be influenced easier

Moderator: But not so much your age?

Christopher: Nah

Moderator: So when do you reckon that you stop being so easily influenced?

Robert: When you, um, turn 10

Thomas: Yeah

Moderator: Ten but then, even, if you talked about say, you know, 12-year-olds, if you were a 12 year old boy and you're watching pretty violent stuff on TV or videos, do you think that that would make a difference to you, or matter? [group shake heads] Not, you don't think so?

Christopher: Nah

Adam: Nah

As with the first example, in this excerpt the participants ignore their positioning as 'kids'. However, in this case, the participants refuse to even answer the moderator's question about whether what they would advise 'another kid' to stay away from bad language, violence or sexual content. In an attempt to elicit a response, the moderator explains the purpose behind her question, 'I'm just trying to work out what you think about say kids that are watching violence'. In doing so, the moderator herself begins to distance the participants from the category 'kids' by no longer directly including them in the category, referring instead to unspecified 'kids' who are watching violence, and later as 'they' and 'them'. When the participants respond, it is to distance themselves from vulnerability to

television violence—the attribute that the moderator suggests is implicitly tied to the category 'kids'—by instead linking such vulnerability to 'younger people', those who are more easily influenced. Even a series of direct questions— 'but not you?', 'but not so much your age?' and 'do you think that that would make a difference to you, or matter?'—does not shift their belief that vulnerability to television violence is an attribute tied to the category *young* child.

### **Retrospecting: maximising distance from childhood**

As discussed earlier, Hadden and Lester (1978: 338) describe the practice of constructing one's identity through recourse to autobiographical details as retrospecting—'an account of 'how I became who I am''—a historical interpretative schema for making sense of one's self. Through retrospecting the focus group participants achieve distance from childhood—and their former childlike selves—and proximity to adulthood. Lovell-Smith (2003), in her discussion of the pleasures children gain from reading series fiction, describes a similar process of remembering through which the child reader recalls his/her former reading self. This process she also links to identity, similarly describing it as an act of 'self-recognition' by which the child achieves proximity to adulthood, saying that 'it is by remembering that the child recognizes its new status, knowing that it is more adult than in the past' (Lovell-Smith 2003: 33).

The main examples of retrospecting in the transcripts seem to be of what Hadden and Lester refer to as 'explicating' rather than 'warranting'; that is, the connection between participants' accounts of past events and their present self is sequential rather than causal in nature. This would be consistent with a view of childhood as a process of becoming in which children change over time through a series of ages and stages toward adulthood. By

making a point of emphasising the differences between the child he/she *was* and who he/she *is* now the participants achieve a sense of progression, positioning themselves as more adult than their former selves.

The participants' knowledge of the cultural norms of childhood particularly in relation to discourses of concern about children and the media, as discussed in the previous chapter, provide a series of attributes—being easily influenced and copying what they see on television; being unable to distinguish reality from fantasy; being dependent on parents and legitimately subject to parental control; and being vulnerable to sexual content and television violence—which, by defining the child, effectively mark the boundaries between adult and child. It is against these attributes that the participants can measure their own proximity to adulthood and it is by distancing themselves from these attributes that they can perform themselves as more adult than their younger selves:

Proclaiming one's own tastes, and thereby defining oneself as more or less 'mature', represents a form of 'identity work', in a context in which being a 'child' is effectively to be seen as vulnerable and powerless ... it is through such negotiations and performances that the meanings of 'childhood' are constructed and defined. (Davies, et al. 2000: 11)

In the examples discussed below the participants associate with their former 'younger' selves, attributes—such as, being scared of certain types of television content, copying behaviour seen on television, needing rules about television viewing—and behaviours—such as, following fads, not watching the news—which, as discussed in the previous chapter, they tie to the categories young/er or little children. Examples of retrospecting occur most frequently in the discussions of participants, aged between 13 and 15 years of age; that is, in the groups classified in the research design as 'older children'. Interestingly,

when the participants attribute an age to their younger selves, it is not very far removed from their current age; most often 10 to 11 years of age.

***Feeling scared: 'When I was little I was really scared ...'***

By far the most common characteristic that the participants tie to their younger selves is a tendency to be scared by certain types of content in movies or television programs. In doing so, they contrast the vulnerability of their former selves with their current maturity and resilience. Interestingly most of the accounts are handled with humour and a certain delight seems to be experienced in their retelling, a finding which has been noted in relation to children's viewing of horror in previous research (e.g. Buckingham 1996).

Other than Rochelle's account of six years of nightmares, between the ages of four and 10, as a result of viewing *Poltergeist*, there are no claims of long-term harmful effects even though, as seen in the previous chapter, many of the participants appear to be quite convinced of the detrimental effects on young children of viewing horror.

All the examples are of 'explicating' (Hadden & Lester 1978) rather than 'warranting'; the connection between their accounts of the past events and their present self is sequential rather than causal. The participants' current ability to cope with adult content is presented as part of their 'natural development' from child to adult. Not only is this consistent with a view of childhood as a process of becoming but it also shows that the participants do not see, at least in relation to themselves, a causal link between their experiences of viewing frightening content and any long-term harm; in other words, they do not use their earlier experiences of being frightened as an explanation to justify or warrant any aspect of their present-day identities. Hadden and Lester (1978) argue that warranting is more frequently

used in identity work when someone's identity is deemed to be relatively devalued; that is, when one's identification, for example, as alcoholic or serial killer, necessitates an explanation. In these cases, retrospecting provides the justification for how or why someone came to be the person they are. The participants appear to see the propensity to be scared as an attribute tied to being young and their own childhood experiences of being scared as a natural and unsurprising part of their childhood rather than as the possible justification for any flaws in their current identities.

The excerpt below is part of a lengthy discussion of the participants' viewing of horror and violence. During the conversation the moderator attempts firstly to discover whether the participants believe there are any harmful effects that result from children viewing media violence or horror and, then, as the discussion progresses, she questions the participants more directly about the likely effects in relation to themselves. It is in their discussion of their own viewing that three of the participants—Kiralee, Mel and Bianca—use retrospecting to distance themselves from childhood and one of the attributes of childhood, being scared:

Moderator: Have you watched something that you thought afterwards, 'Ah, I would have been better off not seeing it'

Kiralee: Freddie Kruger. It freaked me out after a while, like, I used to ...—'cause I was only, I was only, like, 10 or something and ... when you're with your group of friends you watch it and you, like, you think someone's behind you or something and it really spooks you out and stuff

(...)

Mel: == I remember I used to be really scared of the *X Files*



## Distancing the 'child'

Group: [laugh]

Cass: Same

Moderator: When was that?

(...)

Mel: I don't know, I was, like, eight or nine and I was, like, 'Noooo, aliens are all around me', yeah

Moderator: And, then would you have stopped being scared?

Mel: When I got tired of—I never understood the show.

(...)

Bianca: When I was little, like 10, going on 11, I think I saw ... ( ) a movie and I was like really scared when ever the phone rang when I was, like, at home alone. I'd be like—if I answered it there might not be any one there or there might be some kind of stalker or someone coming to murder me == I'd get really freaked out.

The participants create distance from their former childlike selves not only by referring to themselves in the past tense but also by emphasising their age, 'I was only, like 10', by classifying their former selves as 'young' or 'little' children and by amplification, 'repetition of identical or functionally equivalent elements of structure' (Poynton 1985: 80), for example, 'When I was little, like 10, going on 11'. In addition, Mel uses humour as a distancing device, perhaps in response to the laughter from the rest of the group that greets her account of her former fear of the *X Files*. In doing so, she distances herself from her younger self and performs in the context of the focus group as more adult by making light of and to some extent dismissing her childish fears through her parody of her former self, 'Noooo, aliens are all around me'.

## Distancing the 'child'

In the example below, Ethan similarly uses retrospecting to perform as more adult than his younger self:

Ethan: When I was little I saw *Scream* at a friend's house, right and I was ... freaked out. I kept on—I ( ) and I looked up 'cause they've got this big window in the room—I looked out and I was like, oh shivering. I was really frightened

Moderator: That's 'cause you were—you don't think that would happen now?

Ethan: No [emphatically expressed with head shake]

Ethan distances himself from his earlier fears by referring to his former self as 'little' and by making this even more explicit in his response, a resounding 'No' with an accompanying head shake, to the moderator's question, 'you don't think that would happen now?' Ethan is categorised by the research as one of the 'younger children', aged 10 to 12 years; therefore, the situational meaning of his 'when I was little', although no age is attached, is presumably younger than Bianca's above which she elaborates as '10, going on 11'.

The final example discussed below again forms part of a long and animated discussion of the participants' viewing and, in most cases, enjoyment of horror movies. It also involves retrospecting identity work that serves to differentiate the participants' present-day selves from their former child selves:

Renee: I don't mind it. I can fully watch, like, heaps of horror movies

Laura: She does [gestures to Brittany]

Brittany: [laughs]

## Distancing the 'child'

(...)

Renee: == A lot of my friends, like, 'No, I can't watch it. Tell me when the bad bit's over' and stuff like that ==

Nadine: You just sit there laughing at it all the time

Moderator: You find it funny?

Renee: No, I don't find it funny

Group: [laugh]

Renee: No, no

Rochelle: I found Chuckie funny == *Child's Play* that was

Renee: == Actually, == I do a bit

Rochelle: == No, *Bride of Chuckie*. That was funny == That was the most hilarious movie I've ever seen

Renee: == Because you know that it's not real and you just think it's funny because ==

(...)

Moderator: And do you think, Renee, that it has any bad eff'—long term ==

Renee: == Hope not

Moderator: You don't have any nightmares, or ==

Rochelle: == I used to when I was little. I remember ==

Moderator: == Just one at time. Go ahead, Rochelle

Rochelle: I remember I saw *Poltergeist* when I was, like, four. I had nightmares until I was, like, 10 or something == I couldn't lose my nightmares

Moderator: == Really ... That's a lot of years of nightmares

Rochelle: == I know I couldn't leave my room. I had to, like—every time I had to go to

## Distancing the 'child'

toilet, when I was little, I had to scream out to mum == to come and turn the light on. It was so bad. I hated that movie. When my older sister had, like, a birthday party and so we just watched the movie too and oh, my god, bad mistake and I never used to be able to watch Freddie Kruger 'cause he always used to come back at the end of the movie so I couldn't watch that

Group : == [laughter]

In this excerpt a clear contrast is drawn between Rochelle, Renee and Brittany's performance of themselves in the context of the focus group discussion and Rochelle's representation of her younger self. Rochelle, Renee and Brittany construct themselves as relatively sophisticated viewers who are not only unworried by horror but who additionally find humour in what they view. Renee explains that it is the development of adult understanding that the program is 'not real' that allows her to experience the humour of horror rather than to experience fear. In her account she also differentiates herself from some of her peers, presumably those who lack her maturity, who are unable to watch horror movies without covering their eyes and who must rely on her to tell them 'when the bad bit's over'.

Another interesting point in the transcript is the moderator's attempt to ascertain whether the participants believe that there is a causal relationship between viewing horror and long-term negative effects; in short, asking the participants to partake in prospecting (Hadden & Lester 1978), to consider their future (adult) identities; the potentially flawed or devalued identities that may result as a consequence of their current unimpeded viewing of horror. It is again the moderator's attempt to shift the participants to consider the likely effects of viewing violence on themselves that triggers, in this case, Rochelle's retrospecting.

Retrospecting allows Rochelle to respond to the moderator's question about the long-term effects of viewing horror without implicating her present-day, more adult self. Her tendering of her experience of six years of nightmares between the ages of four and 10 as evidence of long-term effects remains consistent with the view expressed by the participants that vulnerability to television violence or horror is an attribute of 'little' children rather than those like herself who are more adult.

***Copying television content—'When we were little ...'***

In this excerpt the participants associate copying what they have seen on television with their younger selves:

Moderator: Do any of your friends ever, or you ever act out characters of things that you've seen, or?

Group: When we were little

Moderator: When you were little but not now

In this example, the moderator again attempts to direct discussion away from a more general discussion of media effects by asking whether the participants actually know personally of anyone who has been affected by something that they have viewed on television. The accounts offered are of the effects on younger siblings and cousins of viewing certain content; namely, that they copy what they have seen on television. The moderator then asks whether the participants themselves ever 'act out' things that they have seen on television. The group as a whole then distances themselves from this attribute that they associate with young children by retrospecting, saying that copying was something they did when they 'were little'.

***Needing rules—'It was better for me not to see all that ... at such a young age'***

In the previous chapter it was seen that many of the participants believed that 'children' were rightfully subject to parental control and that parental rules about their children's television viewing were legitimate. The legitimacy of these rules is further warranted given that vulnerability to certain types of media content has been identified by the participants as a key attribute of children. In the two examples below, the participants discuss parental rules about television viewing, distancing themselves from childhood by explaining how the rules have been relaxed as they have become older.

In the first example, Rochelle uses repositing to explain how her parents rigidly applied the program classifications, particularly age-related classifications, when she was younger:

Rochelle: == Just like, um, you know with the ... um ... the ratings of movies and stuff. That used to be a problem. Like, when I was little it was, 'You're not allowed to watch this until you're 15' where now my parents don't really care ... what I watch, um, and my sister, they don't really care what she watches either now but ... when we were littler [hand gesture indicating height] it was, if—you know, 'You're 10, you only watch G and PG' if you're like that, so yeah

Moderator: Hmm

Rochelle contrasts the past with the situation now where her parents 'don't really care' what their children view, suggesting either a softening on her parents' part to regulating their two daughters' viewing and/or a recognition of their children's increased maturity.

In the second example, Lara argues that she needed rules when she was younger even

## Distancing the 'child'

though she did not think so at the time because there were certain things that she now believes that she should not have viewed at a young age:

Moderator: ... and the rules that we were talking about earlier, do you think as a younger ... girl that you needed them? That they were a good idea, or do you think, waste of time?

[pause]

Lara: Looking back at it now I think it ... was a waste of time but, no, hang on [laugh] I needed it but then I == I thought it was a waste of time.

Moderator: == You thought it was a waste of time but now you look back on it you think ==

Lara: == That it was better for me not to see all that, like ... at such a young age

Michelle: Yeah, 'cause you, like, get scared at night and things like ... ah, Freddie Kruger or something

Bianca: Yeah [laugh] ==

Lara: == I'd (definitely) have nightmares

After Lara's contribution, Michelle elaborates with the suggestion that frightening content is one such example. Through this process of retrospecting, not only does Lara present her present self as more mature, no longer needing adult rules about what she should view, but additionally, she demonstrates a more 'adult' perspective in her judgement that, although as a child she did not understand the purpose of the rules, she now can see their benefit.

### ***Changes in parental attitudes to viewing sex: 'When I was little she used to try to make me shut my eyes'***

In this excerpt Michelle uses retrospecting to contrast her mother's current attitude to her

## Distancing the 'child'

viewing sex on television with the attitude her mother had when Michelle was a 'little' child:

Moderator: Would your parents worry, Vanessa? Do they suggest not seeing that sort of  
==

Vanessa: == Yeah, sometimes [nods]

Moderator: And do they say, 'why', or?

Vanessa: Um, yeah, they just don't want me seeing it

Moderator: If your parents are saying no to things, or suggesting or advising, do they give reasons or do they just say, 'This isn't for you'?

Kiralee: I always ask, 'Why?' and they go, 'Oh, too much sex for you' like, well, 'I'm eventually going to see it, anyway so, like, what's the point?'

Moderator: And what do they say then?

Kiralee: Oh, it's still the same. They say, 'It's not for you'. I say, 'Fine' and then I go ask someone about it and they tell me all the details

Michelle: == Yeah, that's like my mum when I was little she like, used to try and make me shut my eyes, like, when we were watching == TV and there was, like, sex or something. Now she doesn't mind because, like, it helps me understand what, like, certain ... phrases mean and, stuff like that ... and so she doesn't really mind 'cause she knows, like, I won't go and ... do it

Lara: == Yeah

Michelle's distancing of her present self from her younger self shows not only how far she has come and hence her closeness to adulthood but also, as in the earlier contribution from Rochelle, her mother's recognition that her daughter is no longer a young child who is



easily influenced by what she views on television and, therefore, in need of protection. Rather, Rochelle claims her mother now acknowledges the educational benefits of her viewing sexual content, 'it helps me understand what, like, certain ... phrases mean and, stuff like that that' and is comfortable that her daughter has sufficient maturity to resist its influences, 'she knows ... I won't go and ... do it'.

Michelle's contribution also allows her to perform as more adult than some of the other girls in the group who admit to still being subject to parental restrictions about viewing sexual content. The parallel she draws between Vanessa's and Kiralee's present-day experiences and those of her younger self, 'Yeah, that's like my mum when I was little', aligns the present-day attitude of Vanessa's and Kiralee's parents with those of her own mother to her younger self, and potentially constructs Vanessa and Kiralee as more childlike than herself. Kiralee's account of her response to her parents in relation to sexual content, 'I'm eventually going to see it, anyway so, like, what's the point?' and "'Fine'" and then I go ask someone about it and they tell me all the details', by demonstrating her ability to cope with sexual content, could then be interpreted as a face-saving move by Kiralee which allows her to perform in the context of the focus group as more adult than her parents credit her as being.

***Growing up: 'you feel really big'***

In the previous examples of retrospecting, the participants drew on discourses of concern about children and the media to distance themselves from childhood, attributing to their younger selves a set of characteristics—that have been frequently articulated through these discourses—which effectively mark them as more vulnerable, less mature and hence more in need of regulation than their present-day more adult selves. In the following examples,

the participants not only distinguish their younger selves from their present-day more adult selves but do so in the explicit context of 'growing up'. In these two examples, being grown up is linked to the viewing or rejection of certain types of media content.

In the first example, Jason uses retrospecting to account for his change in attitude to the television program, *South Park*, a program which he and a number of the other group members have earlier in the discussion labelled 'stupid':

Jason: (...) we were watching TV and my dad was flicking through the channels during the ads and we found *South Park* a year before everyone knew about it and we thought it was actually quite funny then but then when it come out now we watched two or three times and I think we've grown up by then == like, you watch a couple and you just can't be bothered—f'-this and f'-that

Daniel: == I watched it with my brother ( ) I thought that was so funny and I watched it three years ago, four years ago

Jason attributes his and his sibling's changed attitude to the *South Park* to the siblings now being more 'grown up' and, therefore, no longer as easily amused by the program's humour, repetitiveness and bad language. Being grown up or more adult is aligned with growing out of what could be considered more juvenile forms of humour. Daniel's contribution similarly distances his present-day self from his younger self by situating the amusement he gained from the program as firmly located in the past, emphasised through his amplification of the length of time since he last enjoyed the program, 'three years ago, four years ago'.

## Distancing the 'child'

The second example follows from a discussion of the participants' ideas about the possible harmful effects of viewing various types of television content. During this discussion the participants have dismissed any possible harm to themselves and have indicated that their parents have few rules about the content they are permitted to view. This leads the moderators to conclude, 'So (...) there's nothing much on the TV side that you'd be thinking is not suitable for you'. In the extract that follows, included below, the moderators shift to questions, such as—'Was it like this when you were younger?', 'What did they [the participants' parents] do when you were littler that they don't do now?' In doing so, the moderators explicitly ask the participants to partake in retrospecting, to reflect on their younger selves, suggesting an acknowledgement of the distance most of the participants have put between their present-day, more mature, media savvy selves and their younger more vulnerable selves. In their responses, the participants explicitly position themselves as more grown up than their younger selves:

Moderator: == Was it like this when you were younger, was it, or, you know, have your parents changed == as you've got a bit older?

Javid: No

Jason: Yeah

Josh: Yes, a little bit, yeah

Jason: They're starting to be

Moderator: Josh says, 'Yes' and Jason says 'Yes'

Jason: Oh, yeah, definitely changed with what I can watch now

Moderator: So, how has it changed? What did they do when you were littler that they don't do now?

## Distancing the 'child'

Jason: Oh just, I—when I was little I probably preference over what I wanted to watch so if so, like, if Dad wanted to watch a more violent movie, instead of having to send me out, I'd get ==

Moderator: He'd turn it== off and put it on something you could watch

Jason: Yeah ... Yeah

Aiden: When I as younger, um, anything that was 'M' I couldn't get at the mov—at the video store. All we could get was PG == ( )

Ben: == Yeah, um, when I was

Daniel: That was a big thing for me. Going to the movies and seeing an "M" movie

Ben: Yeah

Moderator: Why was it a big thing? Explain it to me

Daniel: Because, just like I'm the eldest in my family and, like, my parents were—I don't know if they weren't sure when they wanted me to ... grow up or whatever ... and then I was allowed and ... now I'm happy

Group: == [laugh]

Moderator: == Mmm [laugh]

Moderator: But how old were you when—do you remember what the first 'M' movie you were allowed to see?

Jarred: Ahh ...

Javid: *The Terminator*

Jason: Thirteen, twelve, thirteen.

Moderator: Oh right

Ben: It's always a big thing because, like, it says that M's restric'—oh, like, it's 15 and over and you sort of feel really big when you're ... little if you go get to see this "M"

movie. You feel really good about yourself

Significantly for this study, the extract above makes clear the importance of the media to the participants' understanding of growing up and to the performance of themselves as more 'adult'. Jason begins his turn by discussing how when he was a young child his father felt compelled to moderate his own viewing of violence by, for example, turning off a violent program he was watching when his son came into the room and replacing it with a program he considered more suitable for his son to view. The conversation then turns to a more direct discussion of growing up which highlights the participants' use of the Australian television, film and video classificatory codes as both expressions of and a means of measuring their growing maturity and proximity to adulthood.

Aiden continues by explaining that when he was younger his parents would not allow him to view videos rated above PG. Daniel continues, explaining that being permitted to view an M-rated movie was an important milestone, 'a big thing', for him. Following prompting from the moderator to elaborate on the significance of viewing M-rated content, Daniel explicitly links children's viewing of programs, movies or videos rated 'M' and above—and parental attempts to control their children's access to this type of content—to growing up. Specifically in relation to his own experiences, Daniel expresses his belief that his parents restricted his viewing of M-rated content because of their uncertainty about whether it was time for their eldest son to grow up, 'Because, just like I'm the eldest in my family and, like, my parents were—I don't know if they weren't sure when they wanted me to ... grow up or whatever'. The significance of one's first experience of viewing of an M-rated program is confirmed by Ben when he expresses his view that watching an M-rated program makes you feel more adult—'really big'—especially if you are younger

than the recommended viewing age of 15 years and over, 'you feel really big when you're ... little if you get to see this "M" movie. You feel really good about yourself'.

The significance of program classification and hence program content as an indicator of maturity and proximity to adulthood as expressed by these participants in the excerpt above perhaps comes about because the Australian system of program classification and film and video classification explicitly links program content to both maturity and age. For example, a film or video that is R-rated is restricted to adults 18 years and older; a television program classified 'M' is described as the 'Mature' classification and is recommended for viewing 'only by persons aged 15 years and over' because of its content or the nature of its treatment (Free TV Australia 2004: 25). In addition, all television programs classified MA and AV (Adult Violent), and those classified M and PG under certain conditions, are also required to display consumer advice text that indicates the intensity or frequency of the principal elements that contribute to the program's classification, for example 'frequent coarse language', 'strong sex scenes', 'some violence'. In so doing, the classificatory system implicitly associates a set of attributes with increasing age, increasing maturity and ultimately with the category 'adult'.

This conflation of the elements of the program classification system that define 'mature' and 'adult' viewing with attributes of adulthood can be seen in a short a comment by Melissa in the example below. In this passage, Melissa clearly shows her use of the program classifications to not only predict program content and avoid programs that she may not enjoy but also to define the attributes of the adult. Adults, it would appear, have the ability to view programs containing strong violence, sex, nudity, obscene language and 'adult themes' and emerge unscathed from the experience:

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Melissa: (...) when it (...) like comes up with 'Violence' you know there's going to be blood everywhere so you just change the channel and see if can find something else good and stuff like that

Moderator: Well who are the people that you think like watching that kind of stuff?

Melissa: Adults

By defining the parameters of adult content and, implicitly, adult knowledge, the Australian classificatory system also, therefore, defines children as lacking these specific adult qualities; that is, defines them in terms of what they are *not* (Buckingham 2000), what they do not know and therefore, what they should not be able to access. In its association of increasing age with increasing maturity and the ability to view increasingly explicit amounts of sex, violence, nudity etc. in a kind of linear progression—beginning with program content considered suitable for all ages and culminating in the case of film and video, in R-rated programs which are restricted to adults 18 years and older—the Australian system of program, film and video classification would seem to provide a scale against which 'children' can measure their development. The excerpts above show that the classificatory codes appear to be used by many of the participants not only as an indicator of the likely content of the programs—levels of violence, frequency of coarse language, etc.—but also as an measurement or expression of their growing maturity and proximity to adulthood. Ben's concluding comment about the significance of his first viewing of an M-rated movie expresses this, 'It's always a big thing because, like, it says that M's restric'—oh, like, it's 15 and over and you sort of feel really big when you're ... little if you go get to see this "M" movie. You feel really good about yourself'.

### **Minimising the category-boundedness of activities**

The earlier section on retrospectively argued that by attributing to their younger selves characteristics that they tie to the category 'child', especially young children, the participants achieve distance from childhood and signal their own increased maturity and proximity to adulthood. The most common attribute that the participants tie to their younger selves is the propensity to be scared by certain types of media content, particularly horror. The participants, however, do not entirely disassociate this attribute from their present-day selves; rather, at various points in the discussions they freely admit to still being scared or disturbed by certain types of media content. Baker (1984) in her research on adolescent identity makes a similar finding in relation to her participants' admissions about their involvement in 'child-like' behaviour, such as playing with Lego or collecting dolls, while simultaneously maintaining their claim to be 'beyond childhood'. She argues that they do this by reducing the 'category-boundedness' of participating in 'childish' activities (Baker 1984: 308); in other words, by to some extent 'untying' these child-like activities (or attributes) from the category child and 'thereby reducing the criterial value of these admissions for membership of the category "child"' (Baker 1984: 309). In doing so, the participants manage to maintain 'a sense of "distance from childhood"' (Baker 1984: 310) despite their 'engagement with childhood-bound activities' (Baker 1984: 309). This section will examine the strategies employed by the participants in this study to reduce or modify the 'category boundedness' of 'being scared'.

#### ***'You gotta to know what you can handle'***

In the passage below Aiden begins by admitting that some media violence and horror, such as that in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, does have an impact on him. A number of the other boys in group agree about the long term impact on them of viewing media depictions



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of cruelty and suffering. Jason next recounts a story of how one of his friends at a recent party decided to leave the room rather than watch a program that scared him. Then follows a discussion in which two groups of people are contrasted. The first is a group of people consisting of those who like Daniel, Ben, Jason and Jason's friend *know* what kinds of media content they 'can handle' and therefore are mature enough to 'stay away' from the content that disturbs them. In contrast, the second group consists of people who are 'not game enough to stick up for themselves' and who therefore, simply 'follow the trends' in order to 'look good in front of their friends', and as a result 'have nightmares' while proclaiming the opposite in order to look 'cool':

Aiden:== Some movies, like, on violence and like, horror—some of them, like, stick, ah, with yah. Like, they, they give an impact on yah so in *Private Ryan*, like, it took me awhile, like, to get over that. Like, all the cruelty and stuff, like, all the ... suffering

Daniel: Like we're still talking about it now ==

Anthony: == Like how can people do it to ... other people, like, ( ) ==

Ben: == We're all human. What's the point? ==

Anthony: Like I couldn't even do it to a dog == like

(...)

Moderator: And so, what other—have you had—what sort of things, then, make you have those kind of nightmares == or ... thoughts long after it's over?

Javid: == Horror

Daniel: Reality

Jason: Yeah, reality (programs)

(...)

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Moderator: == Do you think, you know, what Aiden was saying about that stays with you for a few days—do you think that those kind of things have a longer term effect on you?

Javid: Some movies, ==

Jason: == Yeah

(...)

Jason: One of my friends (...) They were watching *Halloween H2O* and he went in another room. He knows what he can take but == I think that sort of puts

Moderator: == Do you know what you can take == generally?

(...)

Jason: == Yeah, I stay away from them 'cause I know == I don't like them much

Moderator: == And are there other things you stay away from for that reason? Do others think that you know what you—what your boundaries == are

Daniel: == Most people like to keep up with the trend and they want to be part of everything ==

Group: == [everyone speaks at once]

Moderator: Just one at a time or we'll not, we'll not

Daniel: Some people are not game enough to ... follow their—like, they have to follow the trends. They're not game enough to stick up for themselves and say, 'Look, I don't this. == I'm going'

Jason: ==Yeah, exactly ==

Josh: == Some people just watch it, like, you know, so they look good in front of their friends and that

Moderator: But they'd prefer not to == you think

Daniel: == The cool ones are the one's that sit there and go along with the trends and have,

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ah, nightmares == and stuff but you gotta to know what you can handle

Ben: == Yeah, exactly

Moderator: What were you going to say, Ben?

Ben: I was going to say the same, just about the same thing that Matthew said ==

Daniel: == About the friends

Ben: Yeah, you know, you're cool if, you know, the next day you've seen this movie just the same as everyone else and == and you can all talk about it.

Jason: == Something to talk about in the playground

Ben: Yeah, something you can always talk about in the playground and you're part of the group now == You're cool, you've seen this movie, you didn't have nightmares

Jason: == Yeah, I get ( )

Moderator: But do you get sort of sucked in by that, or do you mainly ==?

Group : No, not really

The discussion draws a fine distinction between the child-like attribute of being scared of certain types of media content and the more mature response admitted to by many of the group; that is, of being able to recognise one's own limits and thereby exercise control over one's viewing choices. While the earlier conversations discussed in this chapter attributed the characteristic of 'being scared' to young children, the discussion below, to some extent, unties this attribute from the category. Instead, being scared is no longer category bound, but knowing your own limits—being aware of the type of content you find too disturbing to view—is constructed as an attribute of being more adult. Maturity becomes linked to self knowledge—'knowing what you can handle', and one's ability to make choices on the basis of this knowledge, is a reflection of that maturity. In this

respect, the discussion below recalls the earlier discussion in Chapter 6 in which Rochelle contrasts children's desire to be like others with the increased comfort with one's own individuality that comes from growing maturity and adulthood.

The distinction between the child-like attribute of simply being scared and the more adult ability to know what you can handle and of being in control of your own viewing can be seen in the two examples below. The first excerpt is part of a discussion of family rules about television viewing. In the excerpt, Jason discusses his use of the program classifications and consumer advice text:

Moderator: What about you Jason, what's ==?

Jason: == Um, yeah, we use the guidelines, pretty much and I've got == a little

Moderator:== So how do you use them? What == what ( )

Jason: == Oh, nothing too high in sex scene or anything like that ... Violence, oh that's not really a problem. I know what I can handle and so do my parents. I have a little brother and ... he basically just watches any—violence doesn't matter with him he knows it's all ... just a movie so ==

Moderator: == When you say you know what you can handle, what do you mean by ... handling violence?

Jason: Oh, like, nothing too gory, or ...== that I can't

Moderator: == So nothing that would really scare you

Jason: Yeah, yeah ... yeah

Jason describes his use of program classifications and consumer advice text to ensure that he only views content that he is able to handle—'nothing too high in sex scene' and

'nothing too gory'. That he readily accepts the moderator's rephrasing of 'nothing too gory' as 'nothing that would really scare you' perhaps indicates that maturity, for Jason, is more strongly bound to being able to make rational choices about one's viewing than being scared is tied to being a child.

The second excerpt comes at the conclusion of a focus group discussion with a group of 'older girls' about their television viewing. After summing up what she believes the participants have said in the course of the discussion, 'It sounds to me as though you all feel ... fairly comfortable about deciding what it is you want to ... see and what it is you ... don't want to see', the moderator offers the group a final opportunity to indicate whether they have ever been in a situation in which they have been unable to exert this degree of control over what they have viewed and, as a consequence, viewed content that they would 'really rather not' have seen:

Moderator: It sounds to me as though you all feel ... fairly comfortable about deciding what it is you want to ... see and what it is you ... don't want to see. Do you think there are ever—you have ever been in situations where you have felt ... that you didn't have that sort of control?

Renee: Nah [shakes head]

Alyson: [shakes head]

Nadine: [shakes head]

Moderator: That you're getting to see stuff that you'd really rather not?

Renee: No, 'cause people don't force you to watch ...== things that you don't want to.

(...)

Laura: == Yeah

The participants almost unanimously deny that they have ever been in a situation where they have been unable to exert control over their television viewing. The denial by the group members and Renee's assertion of their ability to control what they view and make rational decisions about what they can and cannot handle is in keeping with their performance of themselves as more mature and closer to adulthood than the 'children' they have been discussing.

### ***'That's so scary ... because you know it's true'***

In the previous chapter, in addition to attributing to children the characteristic of being scared by certain types of media content, the participants also tied to the category child, particularly the young child, the inability to distinguish televised fiction from reality. In the examples that follow, the participants reduce the category boundedness of 'being scared' through their judgements about the reality or truth value of the disturbing content they discuss. It is their ability to make accurate judgements about what is real and what is not—an attribute of being more adult—which legitimises the fear or discomfort they feel in relation to content they perceive to be factual or having high modality. In this context being scared is not a child-like attribute but rather an indication of the participants' ability to distinguish between reality and fiction and the removal of the protection of childhood innocence through their engagement with the reality of the adult world.

In the first example, after acknowledging the participants' enjoyment of 'scary movies', the moderator asks whether there is any media content that the participants nevertheless find disturbing. In the discussion that follows the participants readily admit to being scared of content they perceive to be 'real' or 'true' especially if it has close proximity to them either on a personal level—concerning something that they may have been

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'personally...affected' by—or because an event has occurred close to home—for example, 'in Sydney' or close to where a participant had lived:

Moderator: But most, but most of you sound, though, that you really, alth—you quite enjoy—there a things that you quite enjoy about scary movies. Not so much Nadine but some of you. What are the things really, though, you have seen or have heard that you think are much—are genuinely disturbing?

Rochelle: I don't like seeing rape scenes on ... TV

Group: Mmm, yeah

Moderator: So, is there anything that you—that has prompted you to ... to turn off or look away?

Alyson: I think that if you ... um, hear about stuff in real life that is also in a movie

Group: == Yeah

Alyson: == then you think, well ...

Renee: == Like you're personally == been effected by it

Moderator: == That's sort of what Clare was saying too. What about you, Sarah?

Moderator 2: What makes you switch the channel?

Moderator: Yeah, is there anything that you ==

Sarah: == Only scary things like watching ... *Unsolved Mysteries* or == 'cause I know they're real and I don't want to see that

Group: == Ohhh [laugh]

Laura: Yes, I hate watching == *Australia's Most Wanted*

Alyson: == That's so scary

Nadine: Yeah, I don't like that, == ahhhh

## Distancing the 'child'

Clare: ==My mum won't let me watch that ==

Renee: == Cause you know it's true, as well. It's like real issues, yeah ==

Moderator: == So, when it's true and real that's when it has more impact

Alyson: And it happens, like, near us as well. Like stuff == happens in Sydney so it's

Nadine: == Yeah

Clare: When I went to Poland where my grandparents live, like, um, I was watching TV there was, like, a lot of violence there and, like, they're going, 'In this area three ladies were raped and some lady was taken'. It was, like, close to where I lived and I was just, like, staying in the house all the time. I never went out so I was really freaked.

The participants' modality judgements about the content they view are based on their assessment of both the formal or stylistic properties of the programs and the relationship of the programs to external criteria (Buckingham 1996: 214). Programs like *Australia's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* are perceived by the participants as factual, as true—'you know it's true ... It's like real issues', and it is for this reason they are seen as frightening or disturbing; whereas, movies with rape scenes, that are about 'stuff in real life', are disturbing despite their fictionality because of the truthfulness of their portrayal of reality or of the lessons they teach. This aspect is discussed by many of the participants in relation to the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, discussed in the second example.

As in the first example, the following discussion forms part of a group's response to the moderator's attempts to establish whether the participants consider any type of television content to be disturbing or to have had 'a bad influence or effect' on them. Many of the group similarly admit to being either scared or disturbed by certain types of media content. Again, the risk that their admissions could be interpreted as mere childish fears is



diminished by the strategy of reducing the category boundedness of 'being scared' through their modality judgements of the violent content they discuss. It is the participants' recognition of the proximity of the content they view to reality which justifies the discomfort they feel; as Ben says, 'It's the real life situations which sort of disturb you more because you know that ... it's reality':

Moderator: And, um, do you know then of any—have you seen anything, like, on TV or, I guess, on videos ... that you think might have had a bad influence or effect on you, or seen anything that you went, 'Yuck, I wish I hadn't' == or been—turned it off?

Jason: Yeah ... I reckon *Saving Private Ryan* was == a bit in-your-face and

Ben: == Yeah ==

Daniel: == I didn't—I didn't find that == one bit

Aiden: == Yeah, when the—when the, ah, ( ) thing hit his belly and it split open == (and his guts came out )

Jason: == Oh, no. Oh, not that. When that guy was driving a knife through one of the ... ( ) actually, I found that a bit disturbing ...== I reckon it was a bit in-your-face

Daniel: == Yeah, that was ... It was true, though. It did ==

Jason: == Yeah, that's the—that's—yeah, that was the worst thing.

Daniel: go on, things like—everyone thought war was just, 'Oh, look, there's a guy, bang, you're dead' ... but you saw ==

Anthony: == Suffering, yeah, suffering

(...)

Ben: It's all the real life situations which sort of disturb you more because you know that that's, you know ==

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Anthony: == It's happened

Ben: it's, it's reality == There's more of a chance of it can happening to you

Jason: Especially ... East Timor ==.

Moderator: == Yeah?

Jason: Yeah, East Timor. You keep hearing about people being cut down by machetes

Moderator: And what did you feel about that?

Jason: I don't know if it was sorrow == but, ah

Daniel: == What's the point?

Jason: == Yeah, exactly, pity. Like you can't think they're people. They're like savages like in real life. Something you see in the movies come true

Ben: == Yeah, ( ) who are the people doing this, you know. It's a big question

Javid: In my country, like, Afghanistan, there's this war there and, uchh, it's totally weird I don't know how they brought it up but, like, but if you don't have a beard, they shoot you and the ladies aren't allowed to come out. They just took over, like, my country, this group called the Taliban and like they chop off your hands and that

Moderator: Do you get to hear much of that when you're in Australia?

Javid: No, on the news—on the news and, like, in my own language

Moderator: Will you, will you watch it or would your parents == ( )

Javid: My parents would hear it and they say ( ) 'Oh, look what they've done' ( )

Moderator: Mmm so do others of you agree with it that the news is, 'cause like Ben and Javid's saying that it's got impact because it's, sort of, more believable? Do you reckon or do you not?

Jason: Yeah

Anthony: Yeah

## Distancing the 'child'

(...)

Anthony: Well, I think ... in the movies, like, violence and all that is overdone.

Moderator: Too much of it

Anthony: Yep. Like, they just over do it, like

Daniel: *Die Hard* == or James Bond, like he never dies

Anthony: One day, yeah, like they're all shooting, == killing. Like ... every day like ten people, the same guy kills them and the next day

Jason: == Yeah, not realistic

Daniel: ==Yeah, like, there's like there's like 50 machine guns going at his head and not one of them hit.

Anthony: Yeah

Daniel: He turns around and does behind his back and he gets them in the head and stuff like that == or kills them with one shot

Moderator: == So you don't see the kind of the real consequences? ==

Jason: == Yeah, that movie's == ( )

Daniel: In *Saving Private Ryan* that's different, though == you actually see it happen and the guy, Tom Hanks, ah, has anyone not seen it? Tom Hanks, that—like, you think he's goin' bring him back ... but, like, he dies

Jason: == Yeah, that's, yeah ... Yeah, it's more of a realistic feature of a movie

Moderator: It made a big impression on you ==

Daniel: And it shows sorrow. It shows the other side of war

Moderator: Is that one of the best movies you've seen?

Daniel: I reckon [nods]

## Distancing the 'child'

Jason: Yeah, in == different ways

Aiden: == All kind of ways

Like the girls in the previous example, these boys also attribute high modality to both fictional and factual programming. News reports of the violence in East Timor and Afghanistan, however, are disturbing but not only because they are 'true' and therefore, there is 'more a chance of it ... happening to you', but also because the acts and nature of the violence seem incomprehensible: 'it's weird', 'you can't think they're people', 'something in the movies come true', 'who are the people doing this?', 'what's the point?' The proximity of violent events in East Timor and, for Javid, Afghanistan, further increases their impact.

In their discussion of fictional violence and the significance of the difference between realistic and unrealistic portrayals of violence, the group make clear the fine distinction they draw between the more generic child-like attribute of being scared of violent content and their own more mature response to realistic depictions of violence. In making their point about the greater potential of realistic portrayals of violence to disturb them, they contrast the low modality violence of James Bond or *Die Hard* movies with the high modality violence of *Saving Private Ryan*. The violence in James Bond or *Die Hard* movies they argue is less disturbing because it is unbelievable: people emerge unscathed against incredible odds—James Bond 'never dies' despite there being '50 machine guns going at his head' while he succeeds in killing his enemies 'with one shot'. *Saving Private Ryan*, however, is more disturbing because it shows the realities of war, 'it shows sorrow. It shows the other side of war'. Daniel contrasts the reality of war as depicted in *Saving Private Ryan* with common misconceptions about war—that parallel the fictional

portrayals in low modality films like the ones they have discussed—which ignore ‘suffering’ and reduce killing to simply, ‘Oh, look, there’s a guy, bang, you’re dead’. Being frightened or disturbed by realistic accounts of violence is not then the same as the childish fears they have attributed to young children because it is based on mature assessments of the relationship between televised violence and reality.

Confirmation that being frightened or disturbed by realistic accounts of violence is not the same as the fears of young children can be seen in this next excerpt in which the group clearly distinguishes the fears of young children from their own, attributing the fear that young children feel when viewing disturbing content to a key attribute of young children: their inability to distinguish between reality and fiction:

Moderator: The only other thing I wanted to ask (...) was when you talked about being scared in relation to television, whether you saw that as harmful. Like, being scared, is that something that would harm you, as well?

Nadine: Um, I don’t know, it’s just, like, if you see something then you’re just scared for a little while and then you get over it ...

Laura: Probably for little kids ... like,

Renee: It effects them for a lot longer until they realise that’s not real

Group: Yeah

Laura: Cause they don’t understand

Moderator: So you think there’s a difference between very young children and?

Renee: Yes, definitely

Nadine: Yeah

## Distancing the 'child'

Brittany: [nods]

Laura: [nods]

Renee's comment that disturbing content, 'effects' young children 'for a lot longer until they realise that it's not real', suggests that for Renee, the ability to make modality judgements is a more adult attribute that develops with age.

### ***'The scarier the better'***

In this final example it is again the participants' ability to distinguish fantasy from reality that maintains the participants' distance from childhood despite their admission of being scared by certain types of media content:

Moderator: So, do you like scary stuff?

Group: Yeah, yep [said with enthusiasm]

Moderator: But then is there a limit that you say well I don't want to be too scared or do you think, the scarier the better?

Group: The scarier the better

Moderator: And you don't get sort of nightmares afterward?

Group: Nah, no

Robert: == It's only a movie

(...)

Moderator But, um, what, um, Chris was saying earlier was that some of the stuff that you see if it's a violent blood and guts kind of thing doesn't look that real but have others of you seen stuff that does look very real == in terms of

## Distancing the 'child'

Robert: == Yeah

Mark: Yeah

Moderator But do you say to yourself it's not real or do you think it looks ...

Christopher: If you're mature, you're looking == you don't believe it. You can watch the movie but you know not to believe it

Adam: == You can tell

Moderator And at what point—when do you think maturity might start.

Adam: About 13, 12.

In contrast to the previous examples, it is the participants' assessment of the low modality, the lack of reality, of the content they view that, in this case, enables them to both enjoy and to admit to being scared. Again, the participants maintain their distance from childhood and to some extent untie 'being scared' from the category 'young child' by linking the ability to make accurate modality judgements to maturity and age.

## Embracing adulthood: the future adult

Hadden and Lester (1978: 352) describe prospecting as a person's account of an 'anticipated or aspired to identity'. The identity work already accomplished by the participants provides the rationality for their discussions of their future identities; that is, their ideas about childhood and adulthood and the attributes of each can be found in their constructions of their future identities. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps given dominant constructions of childhood as a passage or journey toward adulthood, compared to the frequency of instances of retrospecting in the discussions there are relatively few instances

of prospecting, even where the moderators explicitly invite the participants to do so.

### **Making rules: 'If I had kids ...'**

The passage below comes out of a fairly lengthy attempt by the moderators to uncover the participants' ideas about the type of content/aspects of the media that they consider harmful and to obtain more information about what participants consider to be the nature of that harm. After trying a number of strategies to elicit the desired information with fairly limited success, the moderators ask the participants to hypothesise about the types of rules they would make, if they 'were making the rules about television'. Although the question does not explicitly ask her to do so, Rebecca responds using prospecting, constructing for herself a future identity as a parent through her opening move: 'If I had kids':

Moderator: So what kind of rules, if you were making the rules about TV ... what kind of rules do you think are the best type of rules to make about

Rebecca: If I had kids, I wouldn't let them watch over 'M'

Moderator: So you'd choose the 'M' classification and that == that's the one

Rebecca: ==Yeah. And, if I like the movie, like, if I don't think it's too bad I wouldn't change it. If it's too bad I'd change it—the channel

Rebecca's identification of her future self as a parent, is interesting but more notable is the close association in her mind between 'media rule making' and both 'parenthood' and 'adulthood'. Rebecca is not specifically invited by the moderators to engage in prospecting but is asked to answer hypothetically from the perspective of someone who makes the



rules ('if you were making the rules'). That Rebecca's response takes the moderator's question as an opportunity to speak from the perspective of an anticipated future identity; that of 'parent'—rather than speaking from a hypothetical alternative but contemporaneous identity, for example, as a child empowered to make rules—suggests a close association in her mind between the attribute 'rule making' and the category 'adult'. More specifically, the phrasing of her comment 'If I had kids, I wouldn't let them watch over 'M' which positions her future self as initiator/agent (Halliday 2004) in control of her children's media behaviour suggests acceptance of the legitimacy of media rule making by adults, specifically parents, for the protection and wellbeing of children.

It is worth comparing Rebecca's response with that of Robert in the example below to a similar question but one with a direct invitation to the participants to engage in prospecting, 'thinking about maybe when you grow up and you are making rules, what sort of rules will you make?':

Moderator: Do you think there should be rules for what children watch?

Group: Yeah, hmm mm

Moderator: What sort of rules? If you were making rules or, you know, thinking about maybe when you grow up and you are making rules, what sort of rules will you make?

Robert: Video Stores. They should check. Like ... check to see whether you're old enough to watch movies. Say, like ... you're 11 and you go to the video store. They don't even check. Like, you can borrow like the most scariest movie. They don't care.

Thomas: All they are interested in is the money

Robert: Yeah, they just give you the movie

That both Robert and Rebecca imagine their rules as being for the protection of children can be argued as further evidence of the participants' familiarity with 'adult' discourses about the harmful effects of the media on children. Noting a similar finding in his own research, Buckingham (1993b: 44) asserts that children are able to present themselves as more 'adult' by engaging in a critical adult discourse about the harmful effects of the media. Robert's and Rebecca's performance of themselves as more adult, however, is further strengthened through Rebecca's use of prospecting and, in Robert's case, by his response to the moderator's invitation for him to do so.

Rebecca bolsters her performance of herself as 'more adult' by constructing for herself an anticipated future adult identity as 'parent'; an identity which embodies and gives effect to critical discourse about the harmful effects of the media. Thus, Rebecca's projected future self performs as a 'good parent' by actively protecting *her* own children using the program classifications to restrict their viewing and by intervening in their viewing, changing the channel when she considers that the content is 'too bad' for them to watch.

Robert similarly proclaims his concern for the media's effects on children by invoking a future adult self, albeit one that is more abstract and less well defined than Rebecca's, who would protect *all* children by ensuring the tightening of rules about video rentals so that video retailers must enforce video classifications and prevent children from borrowing movies that are inappropriate for their age.

The projected future identities Robert and Rebecca construct for themselves are as members of the category 'good adults'. Good adults, it seems, share the desire to protect children. By contrast, Robert and Thomas's concluding comments about video retailers

who 'don't care' and are only 'interested' in 'the money' not only articulate another attribute of children expressed in critical adult discourse; namely, that children can be exploited by adults, but further constructs the opposing category 'bad adults'—the uncaring or unscrupulous adults who not only fail to protect children but also exploit them.

### **When I'm older ... I hope I can have one of those nice guys ...**

The excerpt below provides an instance of spontaneous prospecting and follows a question from the moderator asking the participants to explain where they 'draw the line' in terms of their media viewing and whether there is anything on television that would 'disturb' or 'disgust' them. In the subsequent discussion the group offer: child abuse, domestic violence and animal cruelty. There appears to be general agreement until Bianca suggests something quite different, 'sloppy kisses'. It is in response to Bianca's suggestion that Michelle employs prospecting:

Bianca: I don't like sloppy kissing

Mel: [To Bianca] What? [looks shocked/surprised]

Michelle: (...) I looove romantic == things

Mel: ==So do I

Bianca: There's always such long kisses and they just don't stop for like five minutes

Mel: No, I liiike that [laugh] soft and gooey stuff

Michelle: It's like, 'Oh, I wish I had a boyfriend like that when I'm older' ==

Group: ==[laughter]

Michelle: I always hope I can have one of those nice guys ==

Lara: == With dimples

Group: Yeah [laugh]

In contrast to the group's general agreement with the early suggestions that they would 'draw the line' at viewing child abuse, domestic violence and animal cruelty, the girls assume exaggerated expressions of shock at Bianca's suggestion that she does not like viewing 'sloppy kissing' or 'long kisses'. Instead, Michelle and Mel are quick to declare their enjoyment of 'romantic things' and 'soft and gooey stuff'. Michelle then employs prospecting to construct a future identity in which she hopes to have a 'boyfriend' like 'one of those nice guys' she has seen on television.

Various researchers (Buckingham 1993b; c; Davies, et al. 2000; Seiter 1995) have observed the importance of children's media viewing practices and their assertion of their viewing tastes in maintaining and establishing social relationships. In the context of normative constructions of childhood innocence and program classifications that link maturity and age to various types of program content, the rejection of Bianca's expressed dislike of media portrayals of mild sexual content could be read as an attempt by the other group members to claim a particular subject position, one closer to adulthood, and to effectively perform as more adult than Bianca by proclaiming their familiarity with and enjoyment of this type of 'adult' content.

The group's exaggerated expressions of shock and surprise further sets some of its members apart from Bianca and could be viewed as an attempt to 'police' the youngest member of the group by making light of and thereby undermining her view. This strategy appears successful because in Bianca's second turn she attempts to save face by elaborating that it is not so much the 'kissing' per se that she finds objectionable but the

length of the kissing, 'There's always such long kisses and they just don't stop for like five minutes', suggesting some recognition on her part that through her previous comment she has set herself apart from the other girls in the group. However, Mel's emphatic response to the contrary, 'No, I like that soft and gooey stuff', further undermines Bianca's position by offering a more 'adult' reading of the significance of such 'long kisses'.

Mel's and Michelle's attempts in the context of the focus group to perform as more adult through their professed enjoyment of adult content and through their construction of a future adult identity which embodies normative assumptions about adulthood and, indeed, about female heterosexuality, can be seen further on in the discussion when the moderator attempts to distinguish between the viewing of mild sexual content like kissing and stronger sexual content in an attempt to establish whether there is a limit to the group's comfort in viewing sexual content:

Moderator: So, in terms of ... well, in terms of sex is there things, again that you say, 'OK, the kissing's fine' but there's ... areas where you say, 'No, this isn't for me' or do you think (...) But do you think by watching say ... you know, by watching sex there's any harm in it?

Grace: Nah

Mel: Nah ==

Kiralee: (You don't want) kids thinking, 'Oh, that's so cool, maybe I'll try it out on my boyfriend' or something and see if he's interested or, like, bribe him into it and ... like, going around picking up guys, saying, ah, you know, 'Do you want to go and do this' or something silly dirty things.

(...)

## Distancing the 'child'

Elysha: Well, the little kids they shouldn't watch it but for, like, people like, you know, like, older teenagers and that, they already know what sex is and that, you know. They don't mind watching it and that == but

Michelle: == And it helps you to learn about it == and stuff

Mel: == How to do a back flip for your lover [laugh]

(...)

Michelle: Well, it just, sorta like ... shows you, like, what you could do when you're older, like

Group: [Laughter]

Michelle: It's a bit hard to explain, like ==

Moderator: == No, I think you're explaining it very well

Michelle: Cause ... it's just ... good information for later

Moderator: Good information, if you need it. Fair enough

In the above excerpts from the ensuing discussion Michelle and Mel use prospecting to construct future adult identities which are both firmly based on assumptions about the differences between adult and child and affirming of their performance of their present-day more adult selves. Michelle's and Mel's future identities as sexually active heterosexual women depend for their rationality not only on the participants' acceptance of the normative constructions of the differences between adult and child outlined in the previous chapter but also on their performance of themselves as actively progressing along the road to adulthood. Rather than being harmed by viewing sexual content as may be the case for younger children, 'older teenagers' like themselves are 'learning' from what they view, gaining useful information about what they can do when they are older, such as the

sexually suggestive but tongue-in-cheek, offering from Mel, that one thing you may learn is 'how to do a backflip for your lover'.

## Conclusion—childhood and the 'struggle for recognition'

The subject not only requires recognition, but ... a subject actually can't come into being without recognition of a certain kind. So ... one could say that recognition exercises a performative effect, one *is* to the degree one is recognized ... what we are is a function of the discursive categories that are available for recognition. (Butler interview in More 1999: 287)

With Butler's formulation of intersubjective recognition in mind, the various strategies outlined in the chapter that the participants use to *distance* themselves from childhood—including, establishing maximal distance from childhood, refusal of the moderators' interpellating address, 'retrospecting' (Hadden & Lester 1978), and the untying of certain attributes and activities from the category child—suggest that the participants do not 'recognise' themselves in the discursive categories (see Chapter 5) that frame the research. Their distancing strategies instead may be interpreted as part of a performed identification of themselves as 'more adult'. The focus group discussions then become sites where the participants engage in a struggle for affirmation or recognition of their existence as 'self-conscious and autonomous' beings (Lloyd 2007: 16).

As outlined in Chapter 1, Butler says that the process of assuming an identity simultaneously requires identification with an idealised set of norms and *dis*identification with the abjected or unintelligible. In her discussion of sexual identity, for example, Butler

says that 'becoming a man requires the repudiation of femininity' (Butler 1997c: 137). Unlike the male/female binary that defines gender identity, the terms 'adult' and 'child' are multi-relational (see Chapter 2). Most significantly for this research, the terms operate in both a binary relationship *and* as points on a continuum—the 'life course' (Hockey & James 2003).

As a binary opposite, the term 'child' is defined in relation to 'adult' primarily in terms of what the child is *not* and what the child *cannot* do. Chapter 6 has shown, given the framing of the discussions, that when they talk about children the participants draw on dominant constructions of the child particularly from media effects discourse. In doing so, they construct childhood as timeless, transitional and universal; and the child as deficient vis-à-vis the adult. The chapter provided many examples of attributes of children—being easily influenced and copying what they see on television; being unable to distinguish reality from fantasy; being dependent on parents; and being vulnerable to sexual content and television violence—which, by defining the child, effectively marked the boundaries between adult and child.

The participants' distancing of themselves from childhood and performed identification of themselves as 'more adult' could be interpreted, following Butler, as a *repudiation* of childhood. In a context in which one is interpellated as a child, to be recognised as 'adult-like' appears to require the repudiation and abjection of the attributes, activities and behaviours of childhood. In a binary relationship with 'child' then, the term 'adult' appears to operate in a similar way to Butler's account of the operation of 'masculinity' in the male/female binary or 'heterosexuality' in the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary; that is, the term 'sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines



the real' (Butler 1997b: 306). According to this formulation, the 'child' then is always a 'copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real' (Butler 1997b: 306).

Following Butler then, 'being' a child is always a kind of 'miming' of adulthood; that is, a series of 'displaced'—never entirely faithful—repetitions through which the child-subject is constituted (Butler 1997b: 304-308). In this light, as the chapter has shown, normative discourses about the media and the participants' own media practices provide opportunities for the participants to not only perform as more adult but, perhaps more importantly, provide them with 'measures' of their progress toward adulthood. This is particularly shown in the examples of retrospectively discussed in the chapter, where the participants' proximity to adulthood is signalled through their autobiographical accounts of their past identities as children. In these accounts, discourses of concern about children and the media effectively define the 'child'. It is against these discursive constructions of the child that the participants can measure their own proximity to adulthood and it is by distancing themselves from the attributes, behaviours and activities associated with children in these discourses that they can perform themselves as more adult than their younger selves. Further, the participants' accounts of their own 'more adult' media practices; for example, viewing more 'adult' content without being adversely effected, and the increasing recognition from their parents of their more grown up status, suggests the significance of the media in participants' performance of self in their everyday lives.

One of the stated tasks of *Gender Trouble* was to attempt to render problematic the stability and coherence of gender categories (Butler 1990/2006: 46), to reveal, through the theory of citational performativity, that the category woman, for example, is 'an ongoing discursive practice' (Butler 1990/2006: 45):

*Woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a construction that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end ... Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. Gender is repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigidly regulated frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Butler 1990/2006: 45)

The adult/child binary, as noted in Chapter 2, lacks the stability and coherence of the gender binary. Unlike the category, woman, the term 'child' does not require radical resignification as a 'term in process' or a 'becoming'. In everyday discourse the child is constructed, as both a 'being' and a 'becoming'. When constructed as a temporary subject position, the child, at some point in time, is expected to move from 'being' a child to 'being' an adult. When constructed as a 'non-subject' or a 'potential' subject, generally in association with traditional or conservative discursive constructions of the child as incomplete or deficient vis-à-vis the adult, the term 'child' comes closest to being apprehended as a 'a term in process, a becoming' (ibid). However, the association of such constructions with traditional discourses, often with age or developmentally based 'beginnings' and 'ends', strips away much of the radical potential of the formulation. This can most clearly be seen in the character of the attributes, activities and behaviours that 'congeal' to the identity 'child' in these 'traditional' discursive constructions.

While Chapters 6 and 7 have highlighted many examples where the participants construct childhood as a 'becoming' and children as 'incomplete', perhaps the most explicit construction of the child as a 'non-subject' or 'potential' subject can be seen in the example in Chapter 6 in which Rochelle argues that young children's lack of a coherent identity or sense of self makes them more inclined to copy those around them and thus

vulnerable to media influence. In this construction of the child as a 'becoming' or a 'potential' subject—which employs traditional notions of identity derived from philosophical and psychological discourse (see Chapter 1) as an explanatory device to account for younger children's vulnerability to media influence—the possession of an autonomous, stable identity is synonymous with being grown up.

The discursive construction of the child as a 'becoming' or 'potential' subject further underlines the significance of the participants' distancing strategies as a repudiation of childhood. For, if as Butler suggests, the subject comes into being through his/her relations with others, then the participants' subjectivity is secured through their repudiation and abjection of childhood *and* the recognition of their status as 'more adult'. Or, to reformulate Butler's (1997c: 137) words cited earlier, *becoming* an adult requires the repudiation and abjection of the attributes, behaviours and activities of childhood. The difference of course being that in the case of the 'child', at some point, or potentially at many conflicting points in time and space, an individual is expected to move from being a child to being an adult. To some extent, the success of the participants' distancing strategies can be seen in the examples in this chapter where the moderators are forced to change the structure of their address in recognition of the participants' refusal or renegotiation of their interpellation as children.

The repeated interpellation, both verbal and through institutional and everyday practice, of individuals as 'children'—around whom certain attributes, behaviours and activities 'congeal'—requires that those positioned as children repudiate childhood identifications in order to affirm their existence as subjects. As Butler says in relation to other types of identification, this is a process that must be constantly repeated:

## Distancing the 'child'

This is not a buried identification that is left behind in a forgotten past, but an identification that must be levelled and buried again and again, the compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his/her boundary. (Butler 1993: 114)

In the focus group discussions the participants describe how, as they become older, they increasingly receive recognition from their parents of their more 'grown-up' status, presumably through their successful performance of themselves as more adult; in the context of these discussions, by for example, being able to view increasingly adult content without suffering negative effects, or by demonstrating that they can make competent decisions about the type of content they can 'handle'. The success of such performances depends on the extent to which they conform to the norms of cultural intelligibility; the extent to which those who are 'biologically' identified as children engage in activities or behaviours that cohere with their status as children. Thus an 'adolescent's' performance of him/herself as 'more adult' is likely to be more intelligible, given the popular construction of adolescence as a kind of staggered 'limbo-state between childhood and adulthood' (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992: 147), than that of a younger child, where failure to maintain relations of coherence may at best be read as cute, as in the case of a child putting on a parent's shoes or makeup; as grotesque or 'unnatural', in the case of the heavily made-up American child beauty pageant contestants in documentaries like, Jane Treay's *Painted Babies* (1995)<sup>1</sup>, or Cookson's *Living Dolls* (2001) ; or at worst, dangerous to the child his/herself or to others, in the case, for example, of child models, child soldiers or children who kill (see Chapter 2). Yet, somewhat paradoxically, if as Butler says, 'gender reality is created through sustained social performances' (Butler 1990/2006: 180), it might be argued that the reality of childhood as a 'becoming' is created by the many performances by 'children' of themselves as 'more adult'.

These tensions inherent in the identity child suggest that childhood identifications may be even more unstable and the norms of childhood even less 'realisable' than those that characterise gender. Such instability may be the result of childhood identity being at the intersection of contradictory discourses (protectionist and emancipatory discourses, developmental discourses) and the child being constructed as both a 'being' and a 'becoming'; that is, both as a social subject and as a 'potential subject'. As such, the shifting and situational meaning of child in the discussions coupled with the participants' distancing of themselves from childhood can be viewed as attempts by the participants to affirm their existence as subjects by repudiating the identity 'child' and assuming more 'adult' identity positions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In their discussion of *Painted Babies*, Robinson and Davies (2008) use Butler's theory of gender performativity to liken the 'hypersexualisation' of the beauty pageant to a drag show.

## Conclusion

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In this concluding chapter I would like to return to the quote from Terry Threadgold, used in Chapter 4 where Threadgold argues the following:

The more places you have from which to look, the more you are likely to see and the more you are likely to unsettle the habits of your own corporeal ways of knowing. (Threadgold 2003: 32)

Threadgold's argument suggests what I consider to be one of the major contributions this thesis can make to popular debate and research on 'children'. In conceptualising childhood as performative, this thesis offers another critical reading practice—and accompanying tools and language (Threadgold 2003: 31)—with which to 'unsettle' our habitual ways of knowing the 'child'.

Chapter 2 explores parallels between the development of the feminist distinction between sex and gender and the distinction between the 'natural' child and the socially or culturally constructed child in social constructionist accounts of childhood. These parallel histories suggest the possibility that the 'child' like gender might similarly be conceptualised as performative. The chapter then offers key elements of a performative theory of childhood by adapting Butler's theory of performativity, introduced in Chapter 1, to the study of childhood.

## Conclusion

The three analysis chapters contribute further theoretical insights into what a performative theory of childhood might look like while also demonstrating in a concrete way the potential explanatory value of understanding the ‘child’ as performative. In attempting to apply Butler’s work in empirical research, the analysis reveals not only the ways in which a performative theory of childhood might resemble a performative theory of gender but the major ways in which the two may also differ.

The thesis argues that these differences come about because the adult/child binary lacks the stability and coherence of the gender binary. Unlike the male/female binary that defines gender, the terms ‘adult’ and ‘child’ are multi-relational. Of most significance for this thesis, given the aims of the original Harm research, is that the terms operate in both a binary relationship *and* as points on a continuum.

The analysis chapters show that the focus group discussions were framed by discourses of concern about the media’s potential to harm children; discourses with which the participants were clearly familiar. It is unsurprising then, given Butler’s (2009) assertion about the power of normative framing to structure modes of recognition, that these discourses provided the norms by which ‘the child’ was recognised in the focus group discussions. In such discourses, the child is defined in relation to its binary opposite, the adult, primarily in terms of what is not and what it cannot do; thus, the child is easily influenced, unable to distinguish between reality and fiction, vulnerable, and so on.

However, rather than reiterating these norms of childhood as a might be predicted by a mechanistic application of Butler’s theory of performativity, the empirical research instead showed the participants repudiating childhood. The participants’ attempts to distance

## Conclusion

themselves from the identity 'child' and their performed identifications as 'more adult', suggest that the participants do not 'recognise' *themselves* in the discursive categories that framed the research. This situation may in part be explained in relation to the discursive construction of the child as a 'becoming' or potential subject. It might be argued, following Butler, that the reality of the child as a 'becoming' adult is created through the many performances by 'children' of themselves as 'more adult', as 'grownup' or as 'becoming' adults. A child, in this sense is always a kind of 'miming' of adulthood, a series of displaced—never entirely faithful—repetitions through which childhood is constituted and by which the child is judged.

To be a 'child' is paradoxically both to be defined in opposition to the 'adult' *and* to perform as a 'becoming adult'—as 'more adult' or more 'grown up'. Yet, as evidenced by public concerns about 'the disappearance of childhood', articulated in discourses about contemporary children 'growing up too quickly' and the need for children to be permitted to '*be* children', there is a high degree of ambiguity and at times discomfort associated with the child as a 'becoming adult'. Much of the discomfort about contemporary childhood can be attributed to this tension between children's interpellation and performances of themselves as 'more adult' and the discursive constructions and practices which define and position the child in binary opposition to the 'adult'. For, if to be a child is *not* to be an adult, then a 'child's' interpellation or performance as 'more adult' signifies loss of childhood and the attributes and behaviours by the child is 'recognised'.

Additionally, as Chapter 1 has discussed, the process of iteration is also a process of change that can stabilise or destabilise signifying conventions. The act or even the risk of destabilisation is in itself a threat to traditional discourses of childhood which to vary extents construct childhood as unchanging and sacrosanct.



## Conclusion

Of course, as the thesis has demonstrated, what it means to be a child, or the norms of childhood, are situationally (as well as culturally and historically) specific and it is highly likely, given the resilience of the adult/child binary, that in other contexts ‘children’s’ (and, for that matter, adults’<sup>1</sup>) performances of self may more strongly involve a reiteration of the norms of childhood rather than a repudiation of them. Further research may shed light on the specific contexts or situations in which these performances occur.

The thesis is not intended as a critique of the Harm research. Instead it offers another way of ‘reading’ the Harm research; one which shifts the focus to a consideration of questions of identity. However, by actively interrogating or ‘unsettling’ the identity category ‘child’, the thesis calls into question the self-evident meanings or presuppositions by which the ‘child’ is recognised in not only the Harm research but in empirical research on children more generally. Chapter 5, for example, shows how the research design of the Harm project and the accompanying practices of the moderators within the focus group discussions position or interpellate the research participants as ‘child-subjects’. In doing so, the chapter reveals how the Harm research, in attempting to find out *about* the child, in effect constitutes the very identity it attempts to reveal.

Although not an aim of the thesis, this close analysis of the practices of the Harm research may be read as a concrete demonstration of the ongoing challenges of the ‘representational crisis’ to empirical research more generally by highlighting the creative or active role of the researcher in constituting the object of his or her own research, and therefore the impossibility of directly capturing lived experience. In addition, as an instance of the ‘reanalysis’ rather than ‘generation’ of research materials, the thesis I hope has highlighted what I consider to be one of the major advantages of this approach to research: the

## Conclusion

opportunity to study issues and questions that emerge, to some extent, ‘spontaneously’ out of the research process.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Certain types of pornography are an obvious example

## Appendix I

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### Transcription conventions

Symbol	Meaning
==	Overlapping talk
(...)	Section of transcript omitted
...	Short hesitation/pause
( )	Untranscribable talk
[words in square brackets ]	Non-verbal information
(words in parentheses)	Transcriber's guess
WORDS IN CAPITALS	Emphatic stress
[pause]	Long pause
Dash—then talk	False start/restart
.	Completion
,	Parcelling of talk
?	Wh-interrogative
!	Surprised intonation

Based on the transcription conventions of Eggins and Slade (1997: 1-5).

## Appendix II

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### Final Ethics Report approval



18 January 2008

**Ms Dianne Dickenson**  
**60A Pembroke Street**  
**Epping NSW 2121**

**Reference: HE26MAR2004-D02807**

Dear Ms Dickenson

#### **FINAL REPORT APPROVED**

**Title of project: *I know what I can handle: children, media and identity (PhD thesis)***

Your final report has been received and approved, effective 18 January 2008. The Committee is grateful for your cooperation and would like to wish you success in future research endeavours.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'F. Stuart'.

P-P

Dr Margaret Stuart  
Director of Research Ethics  
Chair, Ethics Review Committee [Human Research]

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