

Performing childhood:

Media, childhood and identity

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Abstract

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

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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