

in the name of
'childhood innocence'

*A Discursive Exploration of the
Moral Panic Associated with Childhood
and Sexuality*

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'I noticed that (Tinky Winky) has a lady's purse, but I didn't realise he's a boy ... At first I thought the purse would be a burden for this Teletubby ... Later I learned that this may have a homosexual undertone'. These are the comments made in 2007 by Ewa Sowinska, the conservative Polish government-appointed children's rights' watchdog.¹ Sowinska's comments were reported around the world and reflected a national concern in Poland with the perceived public perpetuation of the 'homosexual lifestyle' to children. This was not the first time that the Teletubby Tinky Winky had become the target of right-wing political and religious attacks that accused the character of being a gay icon—based on the character's purple colour and the perception that this signifies gay pride. Further, Tinky Winky carries a red purse and has a triangle-shaped antenna, which are also seen as symbols of gay subjectivity. Sowinska's comments are reminiscent of concerns held by the late United States evangelist Jerry Falwell.²

Interestingly, Ewa Sowinska's initial concern was the burden Tinky Winky (portrayed by a small adult or a child actor in a Teletubby suit) might experience carrying a large handbag during the program's filming. However, this overreaction to the possible burden soon escalated into homophobic fear when Tinky Winky was understood to be a boy carrying a red handbag. Public outcries such as this one over Tinky Winky and others about other children's television characters—including Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street* and their infamous late-1940's predecessors, Noddy and Big Ears—seem ludicrous and laughable at first. However, they are signifiers of a serious international moral panic that has continued to rise, peak and subside around children and sexuality, particularly in relation to the

child and the figure of 'the homosexual'.³ These children's television characters have been perceived as representing the homosexual, who historically has been discursively constituted as a 'folk devil'. This folk devil is constructed as preying on and corrupting young, vulnerable, 'innocent' children. It is one seen to challenge, through the perceived hedonistic 'homosexual lifestyle', the 'natural' and 'normal' moral social order founded upon the values and practices of the hegemonic heterosexual family. In the Polish example above, Tinky Winky became the 'irrational' public representation of a moral panic. This panic resulted in a 'rational' and directed social and institutional agenda of 'sexual cleansing' through homophobic violence and the dismissal of gays' and lesbians' civil liberties. That Polish Education Minister Roman Giertych proposed legislation enabling the sacking of teachers who promote the 'homosexual lifestyle', and the banning of 'homo-agitation' in schools, exemplifies this agenda.⁴ Such a response is reminiscent of similar political, social and educational responses—from early childhood to secondary education—to moral panics associated with children and homosexuality in other parts of the world. An example is the controversial Section 28 of the *British Local Government Act 1988* which stated that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.⁵ As a result of this clause, teachers feared they would lose their job, or their schools would lose public funding, if they discussed gay issues with students. This had a significant impact on the civil liberties of gay and lesbian students and teachers, and on the educational ethos of a 'duty of care' for all.

This essay critically examines how moral panics are used as a political strategy for maintaining the hegemony of the nuclear family, the sanctity of heterosexual relationships and the heteronormative social order. It focuses on the moral panic associated with children and sexuality, particularly that which is manifested around non-heterosexual subjectivities. The discussion is based on a discursive analysis of media representations of the moral panics that occurred in Australia during the period 2004 to 2006 around the following issues: a *Play School* episode, the *Learn to Include* booklets,⁶ and the *We're Here* resource. The hegemonic discourses around childhood innocence, sexuality and the construction of the homosexual as folk devil are explored. I show how these discourses are mobilised by right-wing politicians and moral entrepreneurs to strategically instigate a moral panic at critical points in time, in order to reassert conservative values within a heteronormative social order. It is notable that each of the moral panics explored here arose at times when the Australian government was lobbying to exclude legal recognition of same-sex marriages or civil unions. Foucault's concept of the technologies of power provides a useful mechanism through which to examine the role of the media, politicians and moral entrepreneurs in reinscribing the heteronormative status quo and reaffirming the hegemony of the nuclear family.

Early childhood education is a critical field of enquiry in terms of understanding how this sort of moral panic is not just perpetuated, but also counteracted, by individuals. It is in my roles as an educator of pre-service teachers and as a perceived 'expert' in the area of childhood and sexuality that I have come to experience and know the affects of a moral panic. McRobbie and Thornton point out that counteraction by the expert is a normative part of the process of moral panic.⁷ Moral panic fosters notions of personal and professional 'risk' in challenging hegemonic discourses, which act as a powerful social control mechanism, maintaining the dominant power relations that operate within cultural binaries such as adult/child, parent/educator, teacher/student, heterosexual/homosexual, familial/extra-familial sexual abuse.

— CHILDHOOD, SEXUALITY AND CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

Understandings of childhood as a natural, universal and biologically inherent period of human development have long underpinned the way that the child has been perceived. However, this hegemonic reading of childhood has recently become the focus of critique by educational and socio-cultural theorists who consider 'childhood' to be a social construction that is experienced in multiple ways across different historical periods of time, geographies, cultures and subjectivities.⁸ It is within these new critical readings of childhood that my own work on the relationship between childhood and sexuality is located. To provide some foundation for the arguments I raise in this essay I will here briefly outline the main issues in this relationship, which I have examined in depth elsewhere.⁹

Psychological discourses of child development, such as those espoused by Piaget, underpin hegemonic understandings of 'childhood'. These perspectives perpetuate a view of the 'universal child'—a state of nature—in which understandings of what it means to be a child are viewed to be a shared 'human' experience. Within Piagetian developmentalist theory, children are perceived to proceed through a biologically predetermined set of linear cognitive developments, which correlate with chronological age, to reach the ultimate goal of adulthood—which is signified by the ability to engage in abstract and hypothetical thinking. These discourses constitute the child in opposition to the adult and perpetuate a cultural binary between adult and child. As pointed out above, this perspective has recently been critiqued, particularly because these traditional readings of childhood have been largely founded on fixed, adultcentric, white, Eurocentric, gendered, middle-class values. These readings are challenged by a counter-discourse that argues that meanings of childhood have been constituted and defined by adults, for adults, who thus determine how a child should behave, what a child should know and how and when they should come to know it. Thus, the defining boundary between adults and children, and the ultimate signifier of the child—childhood innocence—is a constructed social and moral concept. It is a signifier constituted

in historical Christian discourses and Romantic philosophical writings, such as those of Rousseau and Wordsworth (epitomising the 'age of innocence'), and reflects an adult state of preoccupation with a longing for something lost and forever unattainable. The notion of childhood innocence has continued unabated to define the child and its place in the world today. Any challenge to the sacrosanct concept of childhood innocence generally leads to a heightened level of concern in society.

The notion of childhood innocence has been inherently enshrined within traditional theories of human development, which have also constituted understandings of sexuality. In terms of hegemonic discourses of sexuality, physiological sexual maturity is constructed as a distinguishing point between adulthood and childhood. Sexuality is generally represented as beginning at puberty and maturing in adulthood, correlating with developmentalist theories of the human, which reinforce biologically determined understandings of childhood and sexuality. Children's sexuality within this discourse is read as nonexistent or immature at the most. Thus, sexual immaturity is equated with 'innocence'—considered inherent in the child. Consequently, sexuality becomes the exclusive realm of adults; a space in which children are constructed as the asexual, naive and innocent 'other' and perceived to be vulnerable and in need of protection. Sexuality is narrowly defined by the physical sexual act rather than as an integral part of a person's identity, which is socially constructed and constantly reviewed and renegotiated by individuals, including children, as sexual agents throughout their lives. This point is also articulated by Louise Jackson, who argues that 'the concepts of childhood, youth and adolescence have underpinned the construction of modern sexualities: through their positioning as formative stages in the growth of sexual and self awareness as well as their construction as periods of susceptibility to sexual danger'.¹⁰ There is a permanent state of alert around children, because of their perceived vulnerability to sexual danger. This has intensified since the emergence in the 1980s of child sexual abuse as a major social problem. Children today have become the most 'watched' of all generations, their lives increasingly regulated by adults.

It is important to point out here that as a community we need to be concerned and proactive about children's vulnerability to abuse and exploitation from adults and older children—this is undeniable. However, it is, ironically, in the name of the protection of children (including the protection of childhood innocence) that children's vulnerability and exploitation is actually intensified.¹¹ This occurs in several ways: through denying children knowledge of sexuality that has become signified as 'adult's only' information, which hinders children becoming aware and competent beings; through the commodification and fetishisation of childhood innocence, which constructs children as erotic and desirable; and through the discursive construction of the sexual predator 'folk devil'—especially 'the homosexual'—as Other. The discursive construction of the sexual predator as 'the homosexual

Other', provides a critical foundation on which moral panic can be fostered, operating to render invisible the practices of real sexual predators, that is, the 'ordinary' man or woman living in the sacrosanct heterosexual nuclear family.

Childhood innocence and purity have become representations of sexual desire and eroticism; as Kincaid points out, we have culturally manufactured the erotic child.¹² This representation of the child is a commodity exploited in both child pornography and mainstream commercial advertising. The perceived sexual danger to children has been located outside the home and associated with the predatory and psychologically disturbed Other, which is considered to include 'the homosexual'. The current concerns of paedophilia and its links to homosexuality can be traced back to the nineteenth-century desire to 'enforce children's sexual innocence'.¹³ Paedophilia incorporated the discourse of homosexual abuse of innocent young boys, which was also linked to societal anxieties about male prostitution. The fetishisation of childhood innocence was considered to be a specific quality of the paedophile, constituted through the figure of the predatory homosexual.¹⁴ Foucault pointed out that the repressive discourses that were taken up around sexuality in the Victorian era only intensified the focus on the sexual:

The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and the extension of the domain controlled; but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure.¹⁵

Kincaid, taking up this Foucauldian position, argues that by 'insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism'.¹⁶ Consequently childhood innocence, a contradictory concept constructed by adults for adults, who fear its 'corruption' in terms of loss, has become a focus on which moral panic has been legitimated.

— CHILDREN, SEXUALITY AND 'GOOD OLD FASHIONED HETEROSEXUAL FAMILY VALUES':
THE 'KINDY COPS' SPIN A MORAL PANIC

In recent years, in Australia and elsewhere in the world, there have been a number of dramatic public moral outcries associated with children and sexuality, especially relating to 'the homosexual' and the child. Not surprisingly, children's early education has become a context in which 'moral entrepreneurs'—those who can access public arenas—have focused their critical attentions and directed their conservative political and social criticisms.¹⁷ Schooling is a site where technologies of power operate to perpetuate 'regimes of truth' that uphold the

hegemonic social, political and moral values of dominant and powerful groups; it is also an unstable site, where differing discourses operate in tension with each other, vying for a position of authority. Because it is compulsory and schools have access to large populations of children for extensive periods of time, over what is considered the critical malleable period of children's moral and social development, schooling is viewed, and feared, by conservatives as a site where more liberal ('politically correct') ideals and values can potentially be aired unabated. Thus, schooling becomes a critical area perceived to require close surveillance to stabilise and reinforce the status quo. Children's learning is generally highly regulated and monitored by adults—teachers, parents and other community members.¹⁸

The public panic around Tinky Winky in Poland is an example of the close surveillance of children's early educational experiences and the use of moral panic to maintain the hegemony of heteronormative values that have become commonplace. Other critical examples of this process occurring in Australia can be seen in the *Play School* saga (2004), the *We're Here* booklet incident (2005) and the Tillman Park Child Care Centre controversy (2006), which are discussed in the following section. Each of these examples is also related to fears that young children's learning might be transgressing what is generally considered appropriate and 'normal' knowledge for minors, thus potentially compromising their childhood innocence. Each incident involved the perception that young children were being taught about the 'homosexual lifestyle' in preschools. The discourses associated with such public moral outcries are often those constituted and perpetuated by a small group of conservative individuals, who seize the moment, utilising particular media and political resources to gain public attention for an incident. These individuals largely exaggerate, sensationalise and distort the 'facts' about the issues at hand—all the main ingredients of a moral panic. Each of these controversies is best viewed in terms of Watney's framework for understanding moral panic associated with representation, discourse and the Other—particularly in terms of queer subjects. Watney highlights the multiplicity of institutional regulations and controls operating at the everyday endorsement of ideological norms that work to exclude queer subjects.¹⁹ Such incidents become sites of 'local intensification' or 'the current front line', rather than the sudden, unpleasant and unexpected developments perceived in the works of McRobbie and Thornton.²⁰ The incidents gain momentum, turning into dramatic public debates at salient political points in time and when cherished values are seen to be threatened by a group of identifiable people, or the 'evil Other', who need to be stopped. The process causes communal anxiety. This form of moral panic, though expected and anticipated, can still have a sense of suddenness, and can be as unpleasant as the form identified by McRobbie and Thornton, severely affecting those caught in its fallout each time it peaks. In fact, the accumulation of the effects of these incidences can ultimately lead to immobilisation and total withdrawal from the debate.

Play School is an Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) television production and the longest running children's program in Australia. It has screened for two half-hour periods (starting at 9.30 am and 3.30 pm) every weekday since 1966. Each episode of *Play School* includes a 'through the window' film about thirty seconds long, which aims to reflect the diversity of the contemporary world. Various activities and segments follow the film. The episode that sparked a prolonged public moral panic in 2004 made reference to lesbian mothers. In the 'through the window' segment there was an image of two young girls at an amusement park, with two women waving and smiling at the girls; the voice-over in this scene features one of the young girls saying, 'I'm Brenna. That's me in the blue. My mums are taking me and my friend Meryn to an amusement park.' At this point, the film ends and the show moves on to other activities that have no relevance to the segment.

Interestingly, this was not the first time this particular episode of *Play School* was shown. The first screening occurred a year earlier and received one complaint, but did not attract any media attention. However, the second screening in 2004 resulted in a major media and political backlash and a community frenzy that lasted many weeks. One journalist, Amanda Meade from *The Australian*, aptly pointed out that the *Play School* saga highlighted 'three elements that conservatives love to hate: the ABC, gays and political correctness'.²¹ The escalation in panic associated with children and 'the homosexual' was not just evoked by a fear of children learning about the 'homosexual lifestyle', but was fed and perpetuated by national political events, involving high-profile Australian politicians. The second screening of the *Play School* episode occurred when the federal government was introducing a bill to parliament to amend the *Marriage Act 1961* to exclude gay and lesbian marriages. Then prime minister, John Howard, took advantage of the strong media profile sparked by the episode, and the intensified climate of homophobia and heterosexism stemming from the public debate, to publicly campaign to reassert the hegemony of marriage as strictly heterosexual. He claimed the issue to be a matter of urgency because of community concerns that the sanctity of marriage was threatened (concerns which were not substantiated). Simultaneously, he was championing changes to antidiscrimination legislation that would enforce motherhood as a right only for heterosexual, married women.

Howard was successful in winning majority bipartisan support for the bill, which was passed in August as the *Marriage Amendment Act 2004*.²² This amendment redefined marriage as 'the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life', as well as excluding recognition of all same-sex marriages legally entered into in other countries. Right-wing politicians and lobby groups, dubbed the 'kindy cops', used the controversy around the *Play School* episode to spin the discourse that the ABC was attempting to 'soften' up the public for the debate about gay marriage.²³ However, the focus of their political spin-doctoring, aimed at reinforcing the status of gays and lesbians as folk devils,

was that *Play School* had been infiltrated by minorities who were unabashedly exposing young children to the 'homosexual lifestyle' and indoctrinating preschoolers with political correctness. Additionally, the ABC was accused of using taxpayers' money to push their own social, political and moral agendas on young, 'innocent' children, influencing them to see homosexuality as a legitimate alternative to heterosexuality. The *Play School* controversy is a significant example of how moral panic can be used as a strategy in fear mongering at critical political points in time. The Howard government skilfully used moral panic around the vulnerability of children to reassert the heteronormative social order. Supported by right-wing individuals, the government successfully maintained the exclusivity of marriage for heterosexuals and reinforced the sanctity of the nuclear family.

The Australian Family Association spokesman, Bill Muehlenberg, who was a particularly vocal 'moral entrepreneur' during this debate, was 'outraged' that *Play School* did not issue a warning prior to screening the segment in question and was concerned that it pushed a social agenda that perpetuated the discourse that all relationships were equal and that there was nothing special about heterosexual parents and their families.²⁴ Previous episodes of *Play School* that had rarely, if ever, raised public concern, focused on a range of contemporary social issues associated with family diversity, particularly related to ethnicity. However, 'alternative lifestyles' related to sexual preferences were perceived to be far removed from 'reasonable' boundaries of acceptable acknowledgements of socio-cultural diversity for young children.²⁵ This perspective was similarly espoused in other public discourses and prevailed in letters to the editor in various newspapers; some letter writers considered the *Play School* episode to be 'depraved' and not a true reflection of 'reality'. Equating homosexuality with a list of antisocial lifestyles, one person wrote:

The ABC is being disingenuous when it says *Play School* must represent the range of Australian families. For example, I do not recall episodes displaying parents who are heavy drinkers or smokers or gamblers (all legal, and more popular than the other lifestyle choice being discussed).²⁶

The discourses of parental rights, children's rights and childhood 'innocence' were commonly mobilised by politicians and other conservative individuals and lobby groups throughout the debate. The dominant discourse—that it is a parent's right to determine what knowledge their children should have and when they should receive it—intersected with other discourses that uphold that children's rights need to be protected from minorities pushing their own agendas on 'vulnerable and innocent children'.²⁷ This perspective was reinforced in another letter to an editor, the writer commenting:

Shame on you *Play School*—taking away our children’s innocence. You have placed adult themes before innocent eyes and removed a parent’s right to introduce social issues to their children at the appropriate time. Generations of preschool children have enjoyed watching *Play School*, but your reputation has been damaged by this shallow attempt at social engineering.²⁸

The discourse of childhood innocence was a critical foundation for right-wing arguments in this public debate and was reinforced through developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), stemming from psychological developmentalist theory, as outlined earlier. Exposing children to knowledge about families headed by gay and lesbian parents is regarded as developmentally inappropriate. Communications Minister Daryl Williams commented that the ‘Government believed parents expected a program like *Play School* to deal with issues that were appropriate for the age of its audience’.²⁹

As argued previously, the binary power relationship between adult and child, combined with other discourses of the child and developmentalist perspectives, has underpinned the construction of certain knowledge as ‘adults only’.³⁰ Sexuality is considered an ‘adults only’ site of knowledge, from which children, perceived to be ‘too young’ to understand such knowledge, should be protected through the denial of access. This misconception denies the fact that children encounter knowledge about sexuality in their everyday lives through the media and interaction with peers, and some through queer family members and friends. The presumption that children are asexual, ‘too young’ and ‘too innocent’ to understand sexuality is contradicted by the fact that the construction of heterosexuality and heterosexual desire is integral to children’s everyday experiences, including their early education.³¹ For example, children’s literature and games constantly reinforce a heterosexual narrative. As I have argued elsewhere, this ‘process of heterosexualisation continues largely unabated, only acknowledged when it is perceived to not be working effectively, that is, when the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality seem to be transgressed, when children’s hetero-gendered constructions seem to be unacceptably and inappropriately slipping beyond the norms’.³² Significant numbers of children are living in families headed by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer parents; interestingly, their rights were not acknowledged at all in this public debate. As Mayall argues, ‘Children’s lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children are and should be’.³³ Echoing these sentiments, the ABC’s children’s programmer, Claire Henderson, denied there was any focus on any social issue in the episode and pointed out that ‘any such constructions are adult constructions’.³⁴

McRobbie and Thornton point out in their analysis of moral panic that there are actually a diversity of voices that contribute to the debate at these times, and that 'folk devils' do fight back, gaining access to some mainstream media and developing their own media sources.³⁵ The 'expert' also plays a critical role in providing different opinions, often perpetuating counter-discourses to those upheld by the government or other conservative individuals or groups. In the *Play School* controversy, some newspaper editorials and letters to the editor did reflect more supportive and positive responses to the screening of diverse family relationships, including queer families, in children's shows. An editorial in the *Age* made the following comments:

This program, a favourite with generations of Australians, has long striven to cultivate the notion of this country as a diverse and caring community. In this respect, its reflection of a multiplicity of parent-child relationships is arguably closer to reality than the ideal espoused by the Government ministers ... The permutations of parent-child relationships are many. That won't be news or reason for angst to many children, but it is politicians, not children, who are upset by the *Play School* episode.³⁶

This perspective was further supported by more left-wing political discourses, such as those espoused by the Australian Democrats. Brian Greig, an Australian Democrat, indicated that the ABC had a mandate to reflect modern life and culture, commenting, 'Gay and lesbian taxpayers, who pay their eight cents a day to the ABC, have a right to have their family structure seen in local content just like everybody else'.³⁷ The civil rights of queer families, including those of young children living in these families, was a discourse that tended to remain marginalised in this public debate, with very few political representatives of any political persuasions taking it up as an important social justice issue.

Since the *Play School* controversy there have been several other significant 'local intensifications' or 'sites of the current front line' associated with the continuous moral panic related to 'the homosexual' and the child. They have continued to shift, rise and submerge with conservative social and political agendas. In 2005 in the Australian state of Victoria, the Australian Family Association, campaigning against the recognition of same-sex families, used conservative media sources to target *We're Here*, a booklet that provides strategies for counteracting homophobia and heteronormativity in early childhood education. The development of the booklet was funded by a City of Darebin community grant and supported by the Free Kindergarten Association (FKA) Children's Services, a state and federal government-sponsored organisation. Using the same political rhetoric that he used in the *Play School* controversy, Muehlenberg slammed the booklets as 'propaganda designed to brainwash children', produced with taxpayers' money. Additionally, he commented that the 'idea that same-sex couples are on par with a mum and dad family is a real assault on children'.³⁸

However, the most extensive public debate since the controversial *Play School* episode occurred in 2006 over the use of anti-homophobia resources developed for educators working with young children. This new controversy centred on the use in early childhood centres of a series of children's booklets titled *Learn to Include*. The series, funded by the New South Wales Attorney-General's Department, represents same-sex families in a range of everyday domestic contexts and is aimed at increasing young children's awareness of same-sex families in order to reduce homophobia. The moral panic surrounding these booklets was sparked by the public acknowledgement that early childhood centres, managed and funded by a city council in the inner-western suburbs of Sydney, were using the *Learn to Include* booklets with toddlers and young children. Like the *Play School* saga, this new media frenzy was dramatic, highly emotive and seemed to emerge 'out of the blue', but was in fact also politically very timely. This panic was not sustained with the same level of intensity that was associated with the *Play School* episode and was virtually over in a week. The debate arose in May 2006 at a time when the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Legislative Assembly voted to introduce civil unions for same-sex couples. However, the federal government, headed by John Howard, moved quickly to quash the civil union bill through utilising the powers of the Governor-General to disallow it. Under the ACT Self-government Act, the Governor-General has the right to disallow a law passed by the Legislative Assembly within six months of it coming into effect. The federal government upheld that the civil union bill contravened the federal *Marriage Amendment Act 2004*.

— MORAL PANIC AS POLITICAL STRATEGY

Sean Hier's work on moral panic is critical for understanding this phenomenon as a political strategy of social ordering in a society challenged by and changing through processes of globalisation and through increasing awareness and articulation of identity politics. To repeat McRobbie and Thornton's point, folk devils do fight back. In the ten-year period leading up to the moral panics of 2004 to 2006, significant gains were being made globally in relation to the recognition of same-sex marriages (in the United Kingdom and Canada, for example), of queer families, of single women's access to reproductive technologies and of the need to educate young children about family diversity, including the existence of queer families. All contributed to challenging the current hegemonic heteronormative social order. Hier, in his discussion of the heightened sense of moral panic in a risk-conscious society, commonly associated with the uncertainties of late modernity, comments that there has been a 'process of convergence, whereby discourses of risk have conjoined with discourses containing a strong moral dimension'.³⁹ Citing Bauman's arguments, Hier points out that 'throughout modernity the quest to establish a sense of existential security—community—has come at the expense of the de-legitimation of the Other: the criminalized, gendered or stigmatized'.⁴⁰

Queer identities can be seen to be a state-constructed threat to this sense of security or community. However, as Hier argues, 'while appearing on the surface to be constructions of the state, enemy stereotypes must be understood to originate with, or emerge from, everyday cultural stereotypes of the stranger'.⁴¹ In relation to this heightened sense of risk consciousness, insecurity and moral judgements, aligned with the process of Othering, Hier concludes that 'as anxieties endemic to the risk society converge with anxieties contained at the level of community, we should expect a proliferation of moral panics as *an ordering practice in late modernity*'.⁴² The proliferations of moral panic associated with children and queer sexualities can be viewed as primarily operating as an 'ordering' and regulating practice in society.

The discussion in this last section focused on the dominant discourses around children and queer sexualities that are continually mobilised by conservative politicians and lobby groups when it suits their social, moral and political agendas. The *Play School* controversy, Tillman Park Child Care Centre's use of the *Learn to Include* booklets, and the *We're Here* resource were all manipulated to fuel a moral panic in order to fulfil the Howard government's political agenda of social ordering—the social and legal reassertion of the superiority and sanctity of heterosexual relationships and the reconstitution of the non-heterosexual as the Other. On and off during the period from 2004 to 2006, the sanctity of the heterosexual family, marriage, childhood innocence and 'political correctness' became major discursive sites of moral panic within this agenda. Within this moral panic, old folk devils—the homosexual paedophile and the potential recruitment of innocent and vulnerable children to the 'homosexual lifestyle'—were utilised in the process of Othering. The heterosexual nuclear family, which is constituted as the only normal, stable, successful and Christian way of living family life, operates, in Foucault's terms, as a regime of truth, through the way that it is supported, normalised and regulated by other social and political institutions, and through the practices of individual subjects. Queer families are perceived as a threat to the stability of the nuclear family and to the society it underpins. It is through queer families and relationships that different performances of family, sexuality and gender are made possible—challenging and disrupting the hegemony of heterosexual subjectivity and relationships. This challenge results in a heightened level of concern from conservative groups and individuals who resort to igniting and fostering moral panic in order to reassert their own values and power.

— MORAL PANIC-NOIA: THE IMPACT OF MORAL PANIC ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND EDUCATORS

Not only are children's daily lives subjected to strict surveillance and regulation as a result of the heightened concern, or moral panic, around their potential vulnerability to sexual

danger from the stranger, especially 'the homosexual folk-devil', but their early school years have become a site to which these fears and concerns are also directed. In both contexts, the concept of childhood and the construction of knowledge perceived appropriate for children are hotly debated and have become highly regulated issues on political, legal, moral and social grounds. As a consequence, the field of early childhood education more broadly has become the focus of public and internal institutional scrutiny and surveillance. This is a result of regulatory technologies of power that operate to 'protect' the child from sexual predators and to stabilise and reinforce binary categories of the adult and child, while at the same time reinforcing heteronormative relationships and practices perceived to be under threat. This process has had significant effects on individuals, as well as on institutional policies and practices in children's early schooling years. Moral panic, with its dramatic fearmongering, personalised public castigations, exaggerated stereotyping and mythologising of the folk-devil, is often successful in immobilising individuals and institutions. Those who challenge heteronormativity and the social order become the targets of right-wing wrath or get caught in the extensive fall out, on the peripheries of such public debates.

Since the 1980s, early childhood classrooms have become precarious spaces, seen as potentially dangerous and threatening to children. This is largely the result of an international moral panic fueled by numerous claims of satanic ritual abuse and other forms of child sexual abuse.⁴³ This panic is exemplified by the highly publicised Cleveland case in the United States and the Mr Bubbles case in Australia.⁴⁴ Though most of the claims of sexual abuse and satanic ritual abuse relating to these cases were never substantiated, they significantly contributed to the strict regulatory practices operating in many early childhood education settings today. The links between paedophilia and 'the homosexual' proliferated during these moral panics, with early childhood settings viewed as potential sites of sexual exploitation and recruitment of young children to the 'homosexual lifestyle'.⁴⁵ Moral panic incorporates extreme views and has generally resulted in extreme counter-reactions from policy makers and regulators. Many preschools, kindergartens and child-care centres have become sites of paranoia and panoptic surveillance; they incorporate strict regulations determining which, when, how and how often, adults can touch children; which and how many workers are present when children's nappies or clothes are changed or when children are taken to the toilet. In some cases, children's privacy is compromised for 'their own safety' through the removal of toilet doors, so they can be observed at all times. Some settings have taken up 'no touch' policies.⁴⁶ In terms of the early childhood curriculum, or institutional policies and practices, there is a prevalent fear of parental and community backlash if gay and lesbian family issues are included in social justice agendas related to family diversity; or if inclusive policies and practices are incorporated into daily institutional and pedagogical practices; or

if children's questions about sexuality are answered openly and honestly; or even, in some contexts, if young boys are allowed to cross-dress while playing dress-ups.⁴⁷

Moral panic around children and sexuality has resulted in teachers and child-care workers developing personal fears and paranoia about falling victim to false allegations of inappropriate behaviour—which can destroy careers—and about potential individual and organisational litigation, which has seen soaring insurance costs for institutions. Joseph Tobin has also argued that the moral panic around child abuse has impacted significantly on the type of professional care given to young children, and on the quality of life of children and their teachers.⁴⁸ Tobin believes that early childhood educators have been unsure how to stand up to the moral panic and that the institutionalised responses to the potential child abuse problem, such as 'surveying, prohibiting and proscribing interactions among children and their teachers', are for the most part 'misguided, wrong-headed, and counterproductive'.⁴⁹ These policies are in complete contrast to the dominant discourses that have traditionally constituted 'good practice' in the development of adult and child bonding, such as the importance of stimulation and touch for children's healthy development.⁵⁰ The 'no touch policy' has continued to signify the prevailing moral panic associated with child abuse in educational settings from early childhood through to secondary schooling, regulating and defining the boundaries of appropriate interactions between children and carers, students and teachers. Men who have chosen to take up teaching careers in early childhood education or considered it as an option, have particularly felt the effects of this moral panic.⁵¹

As an educator of pre-service teachers, I have encountered the anxieties of the few male students who take the early childhood education course at my institution. Their practical experiences in early childhood settings often feel uneasy and they frequently feel watched by other, female, staff members. They are often aware of the uneasiness some parents have about having a male early childhood educator working with their children. This surveillance, whether real or imagined, results in self-regulation of their behaviour around children to extremes that their female colleagues do not tend to experience. The hegemonic discourse of masculinity, which feeds into the moral panic, constructs these men as 'gender and sexual suspects'.⁵² In taking up what is considered women's work in caring for and educating children in their early years, male early childhood workers transgress accepted hegemonic performances of heterosexualised masculinity; they become feminised and simultaneously read as 'gay' and, by association, as potential 'perverts'.

— CONCLUSION

In relation to moral panic, Stanley Cohen makes the critical point that social reaction is *misplaced* or *displaced* towards a target that is not the 'real' problem.⁵³ As pointed out throughout this essay, moral panic is used as a political strategy by individuals and governments to

manipulate social reaction in favour of their own conservative political agendas. Media frenzies redirect social reaction away from critical issues that warrant public debate, such as human rights and citizenship, towards manufactured ‘folk devils’ that become the focus of public scaremongering. Consequently, the real problems lie in the lack of civil and human rights extended to non-heterosexuals in a heteronormative social order and the social position of children in society—a position that often renders them powerless and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from any adult or older person. Significantly, child abuse by known perpetrators, such as relatives, friends and carers—often those in the family home—is experienced more frequently than child sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers.⁵⁴ The strategic effects of moral panic, as well as the construction of the homosexual as the sexual predator stranger to be feared, operate to shift the public and private focus away from the everyday dangers that occur in the family home or in other social institutions, such as the church.⁵⁵ In these contexts, the perpetrator becomes the ‘ordinary’ man or woman—those with authority who constitute the very fabric underpinning heteronormative societal structures and social morality.

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