

*The politics of normative childhoods and non-normative parenting: a response to  
Cristyn Davies & Kerry Robinson*

*Abstract*

This paper offers a consideration of the ways that the politics of normative childhoods are shaped by discourses of happiness predicated on heteronormativity. Responding to the work of Cristyn Davies and Kerry Robinson (this issue), we argue that non-normative families and in particular, non-normative parenting, are obliged to secure, protect and police their children's perceived entitlements to normative 'happy' childhoods in order to achieve social legitimacy. Such obligations, we contend, locate non-normative parents and families, rather than societies, as responsible for the effects of discriminatory social norms to which they are subjected. Informed by the work of Jonathan Silin, we support a politics of childhood that gives discursive legitimacy to children's voice and experience regarding the ways in which normativity is enforced at their and their families' expense.

Childhood, parenting and family structures or constellations (Folgerø, 2008) are significant sites around which norms of gender and sexuality are constructed, maintained, resisted, regulated and policed. Discourses of childhood happiness, development, wellbeing, rights and entitlements, often framed by discussions of what is in 'the best interests of the child' are central to ongoing popular and political debates about non-normative families (Baird, 2008; Hosking & Ripper, 2012; Riggs, 2006). While the configurations and practices of non-normative families may actively contest a range of social norms, in our response to Cristyn Davies and Kerry Robinson's paper, we argue that pervasive discourses of normative childhoods, and what Barbara Baird refers to as both 'child politics' and 'child fundamentalism' (2008), operate in tension with alternative versions of parenting and of families. In particular, we consider the ways in which the discursive legitimacy of non-normative families appears to be contingent upon the extent to which parents are seen – and see themselves – as able to secure, protect and police their children's perceived entitlements to normative childhoods. We see non-normative parenting, in other words, as being subjugated by a politics of normative childhoods, and the compulsory obligation to hetero/normative childhood that parenting discourse currently implies.

In dialogue with Davies & Robinson's interview data and analysis (Davies & Robinson, this issue), we want to raise questions about the ways in which

parents whose intimate relationships, kinship ties and family constellations disrupt heteronormative familial conventions, but who are nonetheless obliged to align with and conform to normative childhood discourse in which:

- childhood is seen as a phase of life that is characterised by innocence, naiveté and goodness as characterized by the humanist philosophy of Rousseau (Hendrick, 1997; Robinson, 2012), and in relation to which happiness is constructed as at once pre-condition, outcome and entitlement

- discourses of children's needs (Woodhead, 1997) are predicated upon assumptions of the individual child's happiness (simultaneously constructed as always/already 'at risk') (Hosking & Ripper, 2012). In child politics (Baird, 2008), this presumed happiness is not to be complicated, diminished, compromised or violated by exposure to 'adult' or 'adult-like' concepts, choices, practices, representations, relationships or circumstances

- the role of parent is seen as 1) safeguarding their child's entitlements to the above through a continuous series of self-negation, self-sacrifice, and (paradoxically) self-actualization practices over a lifetime; and 2) policing children's moral/emotional development, other social relationships, organizational settings, and community contexts outside/beyond the family in order to secure their child's entitlements to the above; and 3) failing the child, and by extension the family, state and society wherever they enable, cause or allow breaches in these safeguards to occur. In each of these, there is an implicit assumption that appropriate parenting conforms to norms of what Riggs refers to as 'heteropatriarchy' (Riggs, 2006)

These normative discourses offer us a prevailing imaginary of contemporary childhood at the expense of expressions of the reality experienced by many children at some stage of their childhoods. As Kraftl argues, "popular ways of treating children in contemporary Anglo-European cultures rely on oft-

unacknowledged, yet simplistic, utopian ideals” (Kraftl, 2009, p. 71) and imply a considerable conceptual homogeneity in the face of multiple risks, challenges, and changing social circumstances seen as posing a potential threat to childhood happiness, some of which include; globalization, competition, declining birth rates, increased dependency on female economic labour, institutionalized childcare, and an escalation of behavioural and emotional diagnosis (Graham, 2008, p. 739). Further, not only are queer and single parent families perceived as posing challenges to the nature of family and society (Hosking & Ripper, 2012), they are also perceived as posing challenges to the very landscape of childhood itself, in which “children are innocent, incompetent and vulnerably dependent (on both parent(s) and the State); and that childhood is a happy and free time, lacking responsibilities” (Valentine, 2004, p. 5).

The challenges that non-normative families represent are in part challenges to norms of gender and sexuality. In contemporary societies, public and political debate regarding difficult or subjugated knowledges with respect to children and families are often couched in the rhetorics of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Butler, 1990) that implies particular forms of gender coherence (Butler, Segal & Osborne, 1994). As Butler points out, the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler, 1990), or ‘heterosexual hegemony’ (Butler, 1993) exerts considerable regulatory force, and in the context of non-normative families, powerful social discourses of children’s entitlements to grow up in heterosexual nuclear families inform much discussion and debate about what is perceived as being ‘in the best interests of the child’ (Hosking & Ripper, 2012; Riggs, 2006). While alternative family constellations provide both evidence of successful non-normative kinship relations and important counter-narratives about childhood experiences, parenting practices, and family relationships, child politics continues nonetheless to give voice to moralizing discourses that see childhood as poorly served by anything other than heteropatriarchal family arrangements, concurrently constituting the heteronormative nuclear family as site of privilege.

In the following sections of this paper, then, we consider two key aspects of the ways that childhood is positioned by and within non-normative families. Firstly,

we consider the discursive and subjective work being undertaken by participants in Davies and Robinson's study with respect to the reproduction of norms of childhood happiness. Secondly, drawing on the work of Jonathan Silin and others, we consider alternative positions predicated on unsettling assumptions that childhood should necessarily be safeguarded from experiencing the challenges and contestations to heteropatriarchal familial norms. Instead, we suggest that childhood agency necessitates engagement with and negotiation of heteronormative child politics, as well as activist discourse and transformative practice.

### *Non-normative families and 'appropriate' childhoods*

Despite a long history of contestation regarding the concept of 'family' (Hareven, 1991) normative discourses of childhood and family life are pervasive, and are a central feature of popular texts and political debates. The hegemonic belief family comprises a heterosexual mother and father nurturing heterosexual children together in the family home is a categorising norm that both enables and constrains how we view, raise and socialise children to become both subjects and citizens. In what Nikolas Rose refers to as the 'public habitat of images' (1999, p. 86), parents and families are incited to performatively produce these normative discourse through public displays of 'exemplary ordinariness' (Saltmarsh & North, 2010), while extra-ordinary or non-normative events, family structures, or circumstances fall under the rubric of challenges, tragedies or curiosities for public consumption, comment and critique, thus threatening the normative requisite of childhood 'happiness'.

Such a discourse has given way to corollary discourses on how this can and should be achieved. Parents are continually presented with instruction on the appropriate emotional quality of relationships between adults and children, the importance of ensuring safety, providing for needs and wants (from diet and sleep levels to computer use), building self-esteem and creativity, supplying appropriate games, toys and activities. The intense focus on children and their behaviours, skills and abilities as well as adults' responsibility for their

provision, forms part of vigorous discourse requiring children to be given certain kinds of knowledge and experiences. These are, in turn, represented as necessary for a normal and 'happy childhood' whilst also creating "a community that gazes at the children only to ultimately gaze at one another, seeing reflected in the children the parenting abilities of one another" (Blackford,2004, p. 228). In this way, a 'duty to happiness' is established as a norm to which parents and children alike are obliged (Ahmed, 2010).

For parents interviewed by Davies and Robinson, there is a complex negotiation of these dominant discourses at work—as parents endeavour to disrupt cultural imaginaries of heteronormative nuclear families, whilst simultaneously working to secure these discursive childhood norms for their children. Despite the significance of non-normative families and the alternative cultural and social imaginaries they are able to inaugurate, however, it is not to be assumed that they operate independently of a range of social norms. As Folgerø observes, "Although the structures of these families are different from those of the heterosexual nuclear family, their family practices and their ideals and principles do not necessarily represent a break with traditional norms that encompass family life in society" (2008: 146).

We are interested here in how parents find themselves interpellated as responsible for exercising continual vigilance, whilst simultaneously negotiating what they experience as multiple failures with regard to delivering normative childhoods. Successfully preventing and ameliorating such failures, in whatever form they take, is at once an individual and social undertaking, insofar as securing, or failure to secure, the happiness of childhood functions as a symbolic barometer for optimism/pessimism about the future for the individual child, for the nation state and for society more broadly.

In Davies and Robinson (this issue), we found this to be captured by the participant, Penny and her daughter Sarah, who became distressed at a Mother's day stall at her school when 'she could only purchase one gift and did not know which mother to give it to'. We understand parental and social expectations and

desires for happy childhoods in light of recent work by Sarah Ahmed, for whom “the desire for children’s happiness is...far from indifferent” (2010, p. 93). Such desires can function as a form of oppression of non-normative individuals and families (Frye, 1983; Ahmed, 2010), and are situated within broader discourses that obligate happiness as a social norm for which families have particular responsibilities. According to Ahmed, the family, “is after all ‘where’ the child is cultivated, where the child learns the right habits, which, in turn, render some objects as happy for the child.” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 48).

Similarly, in Davies and Robinson’s article (this issue), research participants Stephen and Cynthia describe the responses of friends and family to their decision to have a child together in the terms of positivity and naturalness, underscoring what Ahmed refers to as a ‘happiness duty’ to which families and children are obliged. Ahmed’s critique points out that the duty to happiness is part of a cultural script that makes certain demands on the subject, including the child for whom it is desired: “happiness is what follows being natural or good. Going along with happiness scripts is how we get along: to get along is to be willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things. The child thus has a happiness duty” (Ahmed, 2010, p 59). As described by participants’ in Davies’ and Robinson’s study, then, lived realities come into collision with a vision of childhood and parenting defined by a predominantly moral judgment of ‘happiness’ as a presumed and oppressive norm that is implicit in the discourse of the heteronormative nuclear family.

Emotional reactions to these positionings are stripped of their social and cultural elements, resulting in responses ‘limited to interiorized self-transformation rather than political or scientific action’ (Silin, 1995, p. 17) and often omit the “processes of governmentality [that] reinforce the privilege of heteronormative family units, with several notable issues arising around [...] laws, policies and practices that reveal discrimination’ (Davies and Robinson, this issue). These parents’ feelings of disappointment and guilt thus need to be read against the backdrop of pervasive parenting discourses that posit parents as fully responsible for safeguarding their children’s perceived entitlements to a happy

childhood, irrespective of the structural, systemic and societal conditions that actively undermine non-normative parents and families.

*Disrupting and reconfiguring normative childhood discourse*

By citing these inter-related and confounding social existences of modern life and suggesting that children be offered a subjectivity of worldly engagement, our aim is not to argue that childhood should be void of happiness. Rather it is to, consider the implications of expecting happiness to be an obligatory, dominant, and indeed overriding feature of childhood experience, as well as both precondition and measure of 'successful parenting' in much the way that Kratfl (2009) suggests a "juxtaposition between grand, fully-intending, adult hopes for children and more modest, concrete kinds of hoping enacted by young people themselves" (p. 71). Silin (1998) writes: "We have a responsibility to provide opportunities for children to know themselves as young community activists and to experience the power of a collective response to large and small social problems" (p. 249).

Jonathan Silin gestures toward the complexity of such negotiations when he asks:

"How do we balance our desire to protect the young and our responsibility to help them make sense of the disturbing realities of contemporary life? How do we represent a manageable world to children even as we feel powerless to influence the direction and speed of social change?" (Silin, 1998, p. 241)

Along with other queer theorists, Silin has highlighted the need "to accept greater rhetorical responsibility for our narratives and to cast aside safe stories for ones that provoke and unsettle" (Silin, p.241). Can discourses of 'childhood happiness' be reconciled with "children becoming socially informed citizens and politically active members of their communities who can participate in creating alternative futures"? (Davies and Robinson, this issue)

Beginning to extricate notion of childhoods from within the heteronormative paradigm may begin with acknowledging that while 'the child' is present, the

children remain absent. They are marginalized and invisibilised by discursive devices such as the 'best interests' rhetoric that requires the silence of children. The old adage that children should be seen and not heard is as much a part of childhood as it has been from times past, if not in individual families and homes. To include children's voices would be to acknowledge children's agency and individuality and in doing so would undermine the figure of the passive, innocent and powerless child which sustains the 'best interests' rhetoric (Hosking & Ripper, 2012, p. 176).

Tasker and Granville (2011) for example, investigate how children born to lesbian mothers via donor insemination represent their families. Their study discusses techniques for mapping children's family relationships that allows children to define their family in their own language "thus minimizing the influence of the dominant discourse of biological connection" (p. 195). Tasker and Granville demonstrate that "[c]hildren from as young as four years old were able to portray their families in a naturalistic way, and could draw attention to distinctions between different significant people in their lives and between their own and other families they knew" (p. 195). Their findings concur with other studies that demonstrate that young children are more than capable of expressing ways of 'doing family' (Perlsz et al. 2006 ) beyond the frameworks of taken-for-granted behaviour and expectations.

Yet Tasker and Granville also alert us to what this 'living difference' may inevitably entail for some children. Citing one parent from their study:

"I hope it gives him a slightly different world view, that he's able to as a boy, as a man in a full way, with a fuller self; that he'll have a sense of a family where "other" is celebrated. As a white male, to soften some of that arrogance. But it's a bloody cruel world and he will have to fight some battles not of his own choosing. I hope we have equipped them both, we try to explain as much as possible" (p. 196).

Such perspectives offer ways forward for attending to the complexities and painful experiences encountered in negotiating discourses within which some children, parents and families are positioned as other. In particular, they



acknowledge, rather than disavow, that childhood is neither free of nor diminished by experiences of pain and injustice.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, we have argued that dominant discourses of childhood happiness are implicated in the ways that non-normative families are positioned, and at times position themselves, as inadequately protecting their children's entitlements to happiness. The pain and distress expressed by some of the parents interviewed by Davies and Robinson, tied as it is to a perceived obligation to always ensure their children's happiness, locates families, rather than societies, as responsible for social norms and their effects. The burden of responsibility for children's difficult experiences of discriminatory social norms, in other words, is borne by individual parents and families. Meanwhile the myths of normative childhood are reinscribed as truths by societies willfully blind to the damaging effects of imaginaries that leave no room for childhood pain, confusion and anger. Yet as Silin remind us, "if we turn away from ...children's painful and confusing experiences, then we turn away from the possibility of relief as well" (Silin, 1998, p. 247). What is in children's 'best interests' we would suggest, lies in giving discursive legitimacy to children's voice and experience regarding the ways in which normativity is enforced at their and their families' expense. In this respect, the work of Davies and Robinson in this issue appears of tantamount importance in naming of obligatory 'heterogendered performances' (Robinson, 2010, p. 25) that are accessed and used to form oneself as a subject, mother, father, caregiver and child and which could in turn form part of a broader social and political project of reconfiguring, 'family', 'parenting' and 'childhood'.

## **References**

- Ahmed, S. (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Baird, B. (2008) Child politics, feminist analyses, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 23 (57): 291-305
- Blackford, H. (2004). Playground Panopticism: Ring-Around-the-Children, a Pocketful of Women. *Childhood*. 11, (2): 227-249
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge
- Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London: Routledge
- Butler, J., Segal, L. and Osborne, P. (1994) Gender as performance: an interview with Judith Butler, *Radical Philosophy*, 67 (summer 1994): 32-39
- Folgerø, T. (2008) Queer nuclear families? Reproducing and transgressing heteronormativity, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 54 (1-2): 124-149
- Frye, M. (1983) *The Politics of Reality: Essays In Feminist Theory*, Berkeley: Crossing Press
- Graham, L. (2008). Child-Rearing Inc.: On the perils of political paralysis Down Under. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 4 (6): 739-746.
- Hareven, T. (1991). The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change. *The American Historical Review*, 96 (1): 95-124
- Hendrick, H. (1997) Constructions and reconstructions of British childhood: an interpretative survey, 1800 to the present, in A. James and A. Prout (Eds.) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, London: Routledge Falmer, pp. 34-62
- Hosking, G. and Ripper, M. (2012) In the best interests of the (silenced) child: the mobilization of children of lesbian and gay parents to reinforce heteronormativity, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 27 (72): 171-188
- Kraftl, P. (2009) Utopia, Childhood and Intention. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 13(1): 69-88
- Perlesz, A., Brown, R., Lindsay, J., McNair, R., deVans, D., & Pitts, M. (2006). Family in transition: Parents, children and grandparents in lesbian families give meaning to "doing family." *Journal of Family Therapy*, 28, (2): 175-199.
- Riggs, D. (2006) Developmentalism and the rhetoric of best interests of the child, *Journal of GLTB Family Studies*, 2 (2): 57-73

- Robinson, K.H. (2010). 'Queering gender: Heteronormativity in early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 30 (2): 19-28.
- Robinson, K.H. (2012) 'Difficult citizenship': The precarious relationships between childhood, sexuality and access to knowledge, *Sexualities*, 15 (3/4): 257-276.
- Saltmarsh, S. and North, A. (2010) Economy's gaze: picturing extra/ordinary childhoods in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, paper presented at the *Australian Association of Research in Education*, Melbourne University, December 2010.
- Silin, J. (1995). *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our passion for ignorance in the Age of AIDS*. New York & London: Teachers College Press.
- Silin, J. G. (1998) When safety and joy are breached, in W. Ayers & J. Miller (Eds.) *A Light in Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation*, pp. 241-253. New York & London: Teachers' College Press
- Tasker, F. Granville, J. (2011). Children's Views of Family Relationships in Lesbian-Led Families, *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 7 (1-2): 182-199
- Valentine, G. (2004). *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood*. Hants, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Woodhead, M. (1997) Psychology and the cultural construction of children's needs, in A. James and A. Prout (Eds.) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London: Routledge Falmer, pp. 63-84