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Journal Item

How to cite:

O'Dell, Lindsay (2008). Suffering children, dead babies and the appeal of the universal child. Annual Review of Critical Psychology, 6

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

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Suffering children, dead babies and the appeal of the universal child

(1865 words)

Images of vulnerable or damaged children are common in media invocations of 'natural' disasters and military conflicts around the world. The suffering of children invokes strong feelings in those witnessing the image, where the face of the injured or damaged child 'personifies injustice' (Thorne, 2003:261). For example in anti-war demonstrations during the 2003 Iraqi war, a commonly used image was of a badly injured child with the text '*This is the face of collateral damage*' (Thorne, 2003). The increasing (but partially experienced) effects of globalisation and mass media serve to compress time-space (Harvey, 1989, in Ackroyd and Pilkington, 1999) so that events around the world become experienced as immediate. In this short paper I will discuss the British media's daily reporting of the elevated 'Middle East' crisis at the end of July 2006, and the ways in which dead and damaged children were powerfully used in the reporting. I will illustrate some of the arguments of critical psychology in the construction of childhood to discuss my concerns with representing universal childhoods to explain contextualised children.

Whilst it can be argued that 'Globalization tends to dislocate traditional identities with alternative representations competing for our attention "in a world of dissolving boundaries and disrupted continuities" (Robins, 1991:41)' (Ackroyd and Pilkington, 1999: 449), the notion of childhood as a singular identity independent of cultural context persists. The mainstream psychological research and practice towards children has (to some limited extent) engaged with 'difference' and occasionally with issues of 'culture', but largely, the dominant research and practice base either excludes issues of culture or treats difference in highly simplified ways (Chua and Bhavnani, 2001; Burman, 2006). In understanding children in their particular geo-political contexts 'culture' is, thus, operationalised either as simplified 'independent variables' of gender or 'race' or excluded entirely from analyses. Whilst there may be superficial differences between children, the essential aspects of identity and subjectivity are assumed to be universal.

The dominant construction of universal childhood positions children as in a state of becoming in which their (assumed to be natural) immaturity develops through a series of (bio)logical stages towards the rationality assumed of adulthood (Burman, 1994). The taken for granted assumptions about childhood bolsters the notion of a biological basis for vulnerability and hence a need for protection (Meyer, 2007). A key aspect of our concern for children is in what we imagine will be their future, we protect children, largely, to prevent the development of damaged adults (Kitzinger, 1997; O'Dell, 2003).

Walkerdine (1993), amongst others, suggests that children who stand outside the taken for granted construction of childhood are seen to stand outside of the category of 'child' and to have lost out on childhood. This has been evident in discussions, in the West, of sexually abused children (Kitzinger, 1997; Meyer, 2007); children who care for a disabled parent (O'Dell, Abreu, Cline and Crafter, 2005) and child criminals (Meyer, 2007). It is also evident in representations of children in the 'developing' world particularly in critical work on representations of children used in charity advertisements (see Holland 1992). In all of these instances a (fictional) universal child is invoked against which 'different' children are judged to have lost out on childhood. 'Lost children' and 'stolen childhood' are common imagery and icons of children both domestically and 'abroad' in liberal western imagery.

Having briefly set a context of mainstream understandings of childhood and some of the critical work in interrogating this taken for granted knowledge, I will illustrate my concerns with the construction of the universal child in a discussion of media reporting of the 'Middle East' crisis that escalated last year. I offer a textual analysis of the text of newspaper reports with comments about pictures where relevant.

Texts

The front pages of British newspapers at the end of July 2006 were dominated by the escalating violence and elevated international attention on the Palestinian Israeli conflict. The conflict was rapidly developing and reported with a sense of urgency in the UK. My intention here is not to discuss the political dimensions of the conflict but to examine the

ways in which images of children have been mobilised and invoked to represent the distressing conditions of the conflict. Neither is it my intention to claim this as a representative sample of newspaper reports, but it is illustrative of reports circulating at the time. The newspapers I have chosen to discuss here all depicted the 'Middle East Crisis' on their front pages using some text but also striking visual imagery. The newspapers were:

27th July: The Independent, the text is "*Another tragic day*"

The picture is of two dead children, both very young, possibly less than a year old, and both wrapped in white sheets/shrouds with only their faces (partially) shown.

28th July: The Daily Mirror, the text is:

"END IT.. FOR THEIR SAKES

These are the faces of innocence- an Israeli mum and kids rushed to hospital after a rocket attack, a Lebanese tot hugging her beloved doll as she flees an air strike. Today, as Tony Blair meets President Bush, the Mirror begs the two to end the Middle East madness"

The picture is of a mother and her two very distressed small children and an inset picture of another small child clutching her doll.

31st July The Daily Mirror,

The text:

"As 37 kids die in an Israeli air strike and still Britain won't call for an immediate ceasefire. We say

STOP.. NOW"

And inside the newspaper the story continues with the following headline "*Suffer the children. Missiles came in the night to take 37 little lives*"

The picture is of a dead young child being carried by two rescue workers.

31st July The Daily Mail,

The text:

“CEASEFIRE

After missile attack that killed 37 children, Israel halts aerial bombardment for 48 hours”

The picture is of a dead young child being carried by her father. It is the same child on the front page of the Daily Mirror on the 31st July.

I will discuss 2 areas of concern I have with the newspaper reports; developmental trajectory and the world of children and the appeal of child saving.

The constructed-as-natural world of children and their pathologised context

The construction of childhood as vulnerable and in need of protection is powerfully symbolised by the portrayal of dead children (seen on the front page of three of the newspapers, The Independent, The Daily Mail and The Daily Mirror on the 31st July). The texts accentuate the world of childhood “a Lebanese tot hugging *her beloved doll*” alongside a view of children as vulnerable and diminutive:

“Suffer the children. Missiles came in the night to take 37 little lives”

Patricia Holland’s (1992) view that representing ‘other’ childhoods abstracts the child from their environment is evident in the portrayal of the two dead babies in the front cover of The Independent, seen wrapped in white shrouds with no other people or objects around them. However the other dead child (portrayed on the covers of The Daily Mail and The Daily Mirror) is seen in context, being carried from scene of devastation. Thus where contextual information is given it is one of mortal danger to children.

The appeal of child saving

Where there are photographs of the dead child in context, the girl is seen in one photograph with rescue workers and in another image in the arms of her father. In the image of the dead girl with her father we view an intensely private moment that provides, for me and perhaps for other viewers, a strong urge to act. The reporting invokes strong feelings of child saving which the text echoes:

“We say

STOP.. NOW”

“END IT.. FOR THEIR SAKES”

The call to ‘end it’ is warranted by the constructed, but strongly material, vulnerability of children portrayed in the images of the three dead children. The number of children who died over one night of the conflict is reported (figures for adults killed in the same night are not evident in the text). Some of the reporting calls on the West to intervene (drawing on the perceived benign superiority of European and North American authority, Leinaweaver and Fonseca 2007):

“Today, as Tony Blair meets President Bush, the Mirror begs the two to end the Middle East madness” (Daily Mirror 28th July)

“As 37 kids die in an Israeli air strike and still Britain won’t call for an immediate ceasefire.” (Daily Mail 31st July).

Inconclusions

The dominant construction of universal childhood is drawn on to offer powerful images of children suffering and dying in the ‘Middle East conflict’ last year. Images of the constructed-as-natural worlds of children are invoked through the use of artefacts such as the child’s doll and through textual devices such as emphasising the physical and psychological diminutiveness of children. As viewers/voyeurs we are subject to the intensely private grief of a father holding his dead child and of two dead babies lying in a (what appears to be) makeshift morgue. I was greatly moved by these images and kept the newspapers with a view to writing about the images represented in them.

However, is this enough? Is my analysis of the taken-for-granted construction of childhood part of a critical, political agenda? The view that critical psychology is a purely oppositional force whose work it is to hold traditional, mainstream psychology, (in this instance the role of developmental psychology in the promotion and reification of children’s ‘natural’ vulnerabilities) to account needs further interrogation. If critical psychology’s brief is to ‘offer a space of contest between psychological and other forms of practice’ (Burman 2006: 10), then surely there is a need to do more? The task here is not just to engage in an academic exercise to illustrate the constructions of childhood and demonstrate the persistence of constructed-as-natural childhood vulnerability and need

for protection. I would argue that the task for critical psychologists is to find ways in which we can work with others outside of the academy to highlight the conditions, not just for children, but all those attempting to live in situations where there is military conflict. There is also a role for critical psychology in helping us to understand that the urge to help, to 'save' children such as these, is laden with imperialist and colonialist assumptions and that, 'we shouldn't *presume* that these others want our help' (Burman 2006:21).

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