The Importance of Identity in Policy: The case for and of children

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Introduction

In the year 2000 Moss, Dillon and Statham (p. 251) asked a fundamental question which goes to the heart of the matter I raise here. Their question - "Who do we think children are?" - problematises the image, or as I suggest here, the identity of the (putative) child constituted and propelled in social policy. Policies are, amongst other things, discursive practices which, in their development and in their applications and operations, promote particular subject identities – a notion which serves as the foundational premise of this paper. Before I turn to that, it is appropriate to nominate what I mean by the notion of 'discursive practices.' In their many forms and permutations, they are structures of knowledge, of claims and of interventions through which we understand things and through which we decide to do things. Discourses, for example policy discourses, define all sorts of phenomena and all sorts of identities – for example, supporting parents, the unemployed, people with disabilities (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; O'Brien and Penna, 1998). And as Hockey and James (2003: p. 90) note, childhood and children are shaped by policy – as a 'conceptual category and social identity [that] is given material form in everyday life'.

Further, social policies are deeply implicated in creating and sustaining both positively and negatively valued identities (Taylor, 1998). Unfortunately, Taylor's claim is easily affirmed in the negative by reference, for example, to the identity of 'welfare queen' promoted by welfare reform policy in the United States of America (De Parle, 2004), or more recently and locally, by the comments of the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Joe Hockey, as reported in the Sunday Tasmanian on 23 September this year. In the press release informing the article, Minister Hockey called the unemployed 'beach bums' who apparently inhabit Victoria's surf coast around Torquay and the South Coast of NSW (Wright, 2007), an appellation which also permeates the contemporary policy regime surrounding unemployed Australians.

Fortunately, most policy relating to and targeting children is rarely as overtly negative in the identities promoted. Nevertheless, policy developed about and for children does promote identities which may or may not reflect those taken up and/or valued by children. Furthermore (and I suggest, more worryingly), a policy discourse also acts as a framework or grid of social organization that makes some forms of social action possible while excluding others. My previous examples illustrate that identity categories perform particular roles in policy – these may be disciplinary (as they are in relation to American 'welfare queens' and Australian 'beach bums') which in turn authorise a range of punitive interventions, or they may be legitimising in that they endorse entitlements. In this way, social policies as identity-constituting discourses serve as a foundational influential context for state-mediated inclusion and exclusion (Taylor, 1998). As I shall demonstrate it is this latter point which is – or should be - of concern to the policy community concerned with promoting the wellbeing of children.

In this paper I wish to articulate one part of an overarching theoretical framework designed to inform, shape and underpin research into children's lived experience of poverty[1].

[1] This paper is the second in a two part series. Part One *Children and Poverty: Why their experience of their lives matter for policy* makes the case for why children's perceptions and experiences of poverty are key

Here, I focus on the role of policy itself in shaping the identities of those who are its objects. Several reasons can be nominated for developing such an explicit theoretically-informed approach to policy research, particularly in regard to the issue of interest here. That is, this paper is an attempt to understand the less obvious, usually unstated and perhaps unintended consequences of policy development and application. I tend to think about such consequences as operating on different levels – ranging from the technical, to the epistemological and finally, at the ontological level. Not surprisingly, all of the 'levels' are implicated in the other. At the simplest level - the 'technical' level - policy which fails to engage with children may miss the point of who children think they are and what children want. It may, for example, imagine identities which do not or at best, partially exist. Re-stated epistemologically, such misidentification in policy underscores what the 'new' sociologists of childhood have been trying so hard to tell us – that policy knowledge 'misreads' children, in particular in regard to children's competence and children's' agency (Prout and Hallett, 2003). More importantly (and shifting to the higher order ontological level), failure to understand how policies operating as welfare discourses shape identity also contributes to failure to understand how they shape the materiality of children's lives (Williams, 1996). Misrecognition at this level can have a range of consequences. It may, for example, inadvertently and inappropriately totalise the social category of children and constrain our capacity to acknowledge and respond to difference (as has happened – disastrously – to Australia's indigenous peoples and Australia's unemployed). Further, as Hunter (2003) elaborates, ontological recognition of identity enables subjects (in this case children) to enter into /take up/develop a form of political agency otherwise (and hitherto) largely denied them. Again, this is the point made by the 'new' sociologists of childhood who argue for recognition of children's agency and competence – as subjects who can – as the title of this seminar suggests – be active agents.

The purpose of this paper is to explore these issues and their implications in some depth. As my title suggests, it makes a case about *(of)* children (an ontological case about their identities) as well as a case *for* children – a case which attempts to address the political imperative of giving children voice over and above just listening to them, but 'voice' in the sense that it destabilises any objectifying tendencies that may be present in contemporary social policy developed in response to children. The paper is presented as follows. In Part Two, I locate the rise in interest in social welfare service user movements and the identity (recognition) claims they make. Following Taylor (1998) and Hunter (2003) I do this to distinguish between the political and ethical intent of this movement – an important issue with obvious relevance to children - with the (different) issue of recognising children's (ontological) identity and the implications of this. In Part Three I discuss the 'new' sociology of childhood in more depth and what it has to offer. In Part Four I engage deliberately with several related strands of social theory to further build my case about why a theoretically informed appreciation of identity is so important in policy analysis. Finally, I conclude with the implications of this for research in social policy.

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concerns for policy. That paper outlines in theoretical terms why children's voices matter. Invoking the new sociology of childhood and the sociology of identity, it begins to sketch a conceptual framework for understanding why policy scholars and makers should carefully attend to the voices of their subjects – in this case, those of children. Finally, it outlines some of the methodological implications of this for undertaking policy research informed by this approach.

Part Two – The Ethics and Politics of Recognition

Of the many developments over the past three decades, perhaps the most destabilising (and yet, perhaps the most interesting) have been the challenges posed to traditional policy practices and policy scholarship by the rise of the service user movements. These developments are, I suggest, essentially ethical and political claims by groups of people misidentified in traditional practices and analyses. In many ways, Nancy Fraser (2003) captures the import of this when she argues that the traditional concerns for re-distribution, most often articulated in the post-World War 2 expansionary period of welfare statism in terms of unitary citizenship rights and social justice, have to be balanced by recognition. By this, she means that in many instances and for many groups of people, misrecognition can also lead to maldistribution and/or social exclusion.

Recently, Ruth Lister (2007) published an article in *Policy and Politics* about including marginalised (excluded) citizens in policy making – using the examples of people living in poverty and, interestingly for our purposes here, of children. In doing so, she explicitly nominates the ethics of citizenship as a legitimising framework; an ethics which has developed from the traditional notions developed by T.H. Marshall (1950). This latest version explicitly nominates a form of inclusive citizenship resonant with the notion of 'participatory parity' (Fraser, 2003: 36) which in turn 'calls for a social justice politics of both redistribution and recognition' (Lister, 2007: 439). Such calls are increasingly heard in the policy literature. Barnes, Newman and Sullivan (2004: 270), for example, claim that the contemporary interest in participation by marginalised groups reflects an increasing capacity for the policy community to hear and recognise their political claims – ostensibly to promote political renewal and community capacity building, but also to promote improvement in the performance of policies and associated programmes.

User movements such as the disability movement (Shakespeare, 2006; Oliver and Barnes, 1998) however have mounted a sustained and trenchant critique of what are understood as the regressive and oppressive tendencies inherent in traditional policy (Beresford, 2001; Sayce, 2000). Within that, identity is a key construct deployed in the literature emanating from the various user movements; often noting the tendencies of policy processes and practices to propel particular, negatively characterised identities which culminate in social exclusion, marginalisation and often, impoverishment. Oliver (1996),for example, describes how this occurs:

> *The production of disability in one sense, therefore, is nothing more nor less than a set of activities specifically geared towards producing a good – the category disability – supported by a range of political actions which create the conditions to allow these productive activities to take place and underpinned by a discourse which gives legitimacy to the whole enterprise (p 126).*

While clearly asserting identity as a key construct, it is nevertheless a particular usage of the notion in the interests of making an ethical and political claim. As such it is, in Taylor's (1998) terms, 'identity' as category – in other words, a particular type of person who is like other people within a category (shaped, for example, by race, gender, disability, age) whose claims

stack up alongside other categories of identity which may or may not make similar claims to recognition. This, he suggests, can be contrasted to a conceptualisation of 'identity' which is ontological in nature – one which intends to assert some inherent sense of unique self. And as Taylor (1998) and Hunter (2003) suggest, the categorical deployment of identity becomes problematic in social policy when it is treated synonymously with the notion of difference, especially when there are many categories of difference to which policy is supposed to attend. In these instances and in the general clamour of claims trying to be heard, categorical identity can subsume ontological identity. The end result of this is that the different identity or identities again become totalising in themselves, overwhelming other dimensions and/or phenomena which may shape experience. In effect, categorical identity operates structurally, and may, in the process overwhelm agency. As Taylor suggests:

> *The key, then, is the recognition that difference categories do not represent the totality of identity and that the formation of identity is both an historical process and an individual project. It is one which takes place, none the less, within relations of power which construct categories of identity as dominate and subordinate (1998: 346).*(Emphasis in original)

While categorical forms of identity are clearly important for social policy, particularly in the political and ethical sense, so to is ontological identity. And as Taylor suggests, we need both to achieve a sufficiently nuanced appreciation of why understanding identity – in this case, that of children – is important for policy. This appreciation is strengthened by turning to the theoretical richness of the 'new' sociology of childhood.

Part Three: The 'New' Sociology of Childhood

At the risk of oversimplifying what is a robust and complex body of interdisciplinary work (see, for example, Jenks, 2005; Prout, 2005; Corsaro, 2003; Mayall, 2002; James, 1993; James and Prout, 1990), there are two key themes raised by the 'new' sociology of childhood relevant to our purposes here. First, it has developed as a corrective to what were, in studies of childhood, the dominant biologically-informed theoretical approaches, for example those promoted by the broad corpus of development psychology (Prout, 2005). In this respect, it is a reaction to tendencies in developmental perspectives to objectify children, rendering them as immature adults in the making, captured and propelled by an inevitable telos of cognitive, physical, emotional and social development towards some idealised and imagined end. The 'new' approach, while not rejecting the notion that children develop and mature biologically and cognitively, suggests instead that any approach which conceptualises childhood as a universal biologically-determined condition misses the nuance and difference arising from temporal, historical and social variance in the lives of children. As such, the 'new' sociology attempts to overcome the totalising impetus embedded in traditional accounts in an effort to respond to the contingent nature of difference. Furthermore, as Qvortrup (1994, p. 3) suggests, while developmental approaches position children as ontologically different from adults, that 'difference' is couched in terms of children being somehow incomplete. Ultimately, this justifies a lowered regard for children's status in respect of adults and legitimises the exertion of adult power over children.

It is an approach which is also critical of the adult-centric tendencies embedded in traditional accounts which suggest that childhood is merely a period of socialisation, wherein children are drawn along a trajectory leading them to the (preferred and dominant status) of adult. The 'future-ism' or 'futurity' inherent in such perspectives under-appreciates, or more accurately, obscures the importance of the ongoing present. Childhood, this body of theory suggests, is a social and cultural institution and children themselves must, logically, be understood as social actors in their own right. Accordingly, their agency is important. Second, it is an approach which argues that generation and the generational order is central to understanding childhood. Here, 'generation' is conceptualised as social structure. Children, it is argued, constitute a social group, an institution, a permanent feature of society, a part of the social order. Children's daily lives are structured by adults and by adult views of how their lives should be lived (Mayall, 2000), social reproductive processes which are very much taken-for-granted and rendered invisible in much the same way as women's subjection was/is rendered invisible by the gender order of patriarchy. Here it is important to note that both of these notions are congruent with the comments made by Taylor (1998) discussed in Part Two of this paper: that identity – in this case children's identity - is both categorical (structural) and ontological (recognising children's agency).

Further to the above, the 'new' sociology of childhood has much more to offer us in our quest to understand children's identity and to evaluate and develop policy which attempts to respond to their experiences. While acknowledging that there are many implications of the genre, here I draw out two more points of interest. First, it informs our understanding of the ethics and politics of engaging children as a categorical identity. Second, it speaks to potential efficacy and/or impact of policy. This, in turn, justifies the 'technological' reason identified in Part One as to why thinking theoretically about identity in relation to social policy is important. In drawing our attention to the futurity in traditional conceptions of childhood, the 'new' sociology highlights the connections between traditional accounts and modernist policy assumptions promoting the 'promise' of childhood, for example, in the manner in which policy responses to poverty are predicated upon assumptions about the impact on individual and collective futures, and on children as a form of human capital investment. Such assumptions are, suggests Prout (2000: 306) 'unbalanced', and need to be accompanied by a 'concern for the present well-being of children'. In other words, children have rights to human self-realisation as *children*, not as embryonic adults. Such futurity has the capacity to render us deaf and blind to issues experienced in the present *and* their impact in the present (much less the future). The present is, in effect, a hostage to the future – a future imagined by adults and imposed on the present of the daily lives of children. Put at its most stark, a futuristic orientation is not about children *qua* children at all. By contrast, the 'new' sociology of childhood renders children as people today, and in an infinite series of consecutive 'todays'.

Accordingly, the 'new' sociology of childhood not only allows us to appreciate the logic (and ethics) of attending to the present, it also *allows us to do so* in that it emphasises the competence of children as social actors and as informants about their lives. Children are 'keen, constructive and thoughtful commentators on their everyday lives at home, at school and in the wider community' and as such, have a richness of knowledge to offer that would be senseless to neglect (Prout, 2002: 71). Further, by encouraging an approach to children as competent, groups

of children normally excluded from giving authentic lived accounts of the impact of particular policy domains are given voice.

Taken seriously, the insights of the 'new' sociology of childhood impose particular technical, epistemological and ontological imperatives on the undertaking of policy research, encapsulated perhaps in the notion that such research is *with* children not about children. This suggests that: a) children are competent social actors, b) enmeshed in power relations emanating out and through generation as social structure, and c) that children's knowledge is (at a minimum) as valuable, authentic and significant as any other form of social scientific knowledge. In summary, the contribution of the 'new' sociology of childhood is one which suggests a particular ethic in that children represent (or should represent) a categorical identity which has legitimate political integrity and capacity *in the present*. Further, it illustrates that children and childhood should be located in a generationally-engendered matrix of social relations which produces and reproduces unacceptable sets of social relations. Finally, it is also a theoretical approach which roundly endorses my thesis that children's identity has ontological dimensions (and thus considerable agency), especially as constituted in the present. This, I suggest is central to our appreciation of the impact and outcomes of policy oriented towards them.

Part Four: Discourse and Identity

In this penultimate section, I draw selectively on three additional (yet clearly related) bodies of theory which, in addition to the 'new' sociology of childhood, inform the stance taken here. These are discourse theory, identity theory and governmentality. Taken together, each reinforces the thesis argued in this paper that focusing on identity – in this case that of children - has a significant role to play in appreciating the actual and potential impact of social policy, both in the negative *and* in the affirmative. By turning to the notion of discourse, I overtly signal what I have discussed previously – that the notion of 'child' and 'children' operate ontologically as well as technically, and that policies are important discursive contexts central to their constitution. Put simply, policies and their associated programs shape the people who are their objects, including children, in fundamental ways. The invocation of identities in policies shape how we actually *think* about people and which, as has been suggested previously, shapes in turn their material experiences. While I cannot here do justice to the complexity of the three bodies of theory and associated analytic methods, I can nevertheless take some of the ideas generated within those bodies of work to assist appreciation of the constitutive effects of language – in this case, policy language. My purpose for doing so is to destabilise policy, particularly that which is developed in relation to children. This destabilisation, in turn, opens up the possibility for envisaging alternatives.

Discourse is language-in-use, in written and spoken forms. It is writing and talking which, in both instances, acts upon the world and both constructs and is constructed by it (Candlin, 1997). The very words used to describe children in policies, for example, act as *signs*. Signs stand between the object (the child) and the interpreter (the people writing and implementing policy). When a sign is affixed to a child, for example, that child is known 'through the sign *and not by any other means*' (Boden, 1994, p. 55, italics in original). The signing process is achieved *through* language. It is a process which is, paradoxically, so

transparent that it is invisible, and hence taken for granted. When social policy is developed and implemented, the signs for example of 'child', 'mother' and 'family' in for example, child protection policy, are brought to life with actual, material consequences for all. The labels affixed to children, for example 'children at risk', are categorization devices – that is, they are means of determining who is who, and what characteristics adhere to the various categories invoked. Discourses which employ such signs inevitably reproduce and reinforce ideologies (Van Dijk, 1998). Ideology operates at conceptually distinct levels (although in practice, the levels are interwoven) – for example at an intellectual level (an overall, coherent system of thought), and at a lived level of presentation of self and 'other' (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999). These ideologies, in turn, authorise actions and interventions.

The actual identity formation discursively offered via policy and accepted when people engage with the implementation of policy varies. The 'child' as a mode of representation can be contested, because it is an attempt (usually but not always successful) to position different categories of children into differently valued identities. I suggested in the introduction to this paper that two classic examples of these processes are the promotion via social policy of the identity categories of the welfare-dependent mother and the long-term unemployed person. When applied, each mode of representation defines both the person making the representation and the individual or group so constituted. In addition, it conditions interaction. Further, the identity of 'the indigenous child living in a remote Northern Territory community' constitutes another pressing example. In all of these instances, the identity constituted within policy authorizes specific types of (often intrusive) intervention. The various identities of children promoted in policies similarly authorise a range of actions, depending on the policy and depending on the identities promoted. In summary, the identities discursively constituted by and through policies clearly have greater significance than is immediately apparent. Because of this, a key task for those wishing to promote the wellbeing of children is to appreciate how these processes play out in policy making and implementation processes. This, in turn, poses an imperative to critically interrogate, for example, extant policies as well as policy proposals informing the institutions through which children live their lives. These insights drawn explicitly from discourse theory can be further reinforced and enriched by explicit reference to the sociology of identity itself.

I focus on that part of identity theory which directs attention to the social relations, practices and techniques through which human beings acquire the characteristics and attributes of a particular type of person. It is a body of theory which draws upon such classical authors as Norbert Elias (1978), and particularly for my purposes here, the work of Erving Goffman (1969; 1968). It also relies on contemporary theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1987) and Nikolas Rose (1998; 1996; 1989). Specifically, the sociology of identity also captures, for want of a better term, 'active' agency on the part of, for example, children. Further, it allows us to think about the potential outcomes of identity categorisation, particularly for, for example, the identity category of 'poor children'.

Furthermore, and as suggested above, through acknowledging the dialectical and interactional nature of the process of identity formation, the sociology of identity provides us with a conceptual framework for fuller appreciation of the centrality of children's agency. Goffman's (1969) notion of impression management encapsulates this. We all, children included,

engage in active negotiation of our identities. This suggests that, as policy makers and researchers interested in formulating policy relevant to children, we need to attend to the strategies children pursue in negotiating constitutive social relations in the contexts and institutional settings central to their lives – in this case, those created, shaped and maintained by policies. This, in turn, is reflected in the notion promoted by McLaughlin (2007: 72) specifically in relation to social policy; that of *assumed identity* – that is, 'the social traits or group memberships we ascribe to ourselves'. And it is these assumed identities, the manner in which they are both informed and taken up, and the consequences of being taken up that should be of core interest to those who would like policy - in the technical sense suggested earlier in the paper – to speak authentically and effectively to those who are its central subjects.

Further, as McLaughlin notes, assumed identity can be contrasted with *ascribed identity* - 'that which is attributed to individuals by others' (op cit). All identities are consequential (Bourdieu 1988; Rose (1999; 1989), but unlike assumed identities, ascribed identities are not necessarily (or at a minimum, less) susceptible to manipulation by individuals. In this way, they have serious consequences for material outcomes in and on people's lives, including those of children. In similar manner to the notion of Goffman's 'spoiled identity' (1968), Rose (in the tradition of Foucault) pointedly illustrates that certain identities ('subject identities' in his terms), constituted discursively within particular regimes of power and 'truth', are subsequently authorised by those same regimes to inhabit social spaces and locations in which they access very particular sets of experiences. He specifically nominates particular regimes of discipline and attendant forms of intervention, in for example, institutional settings such as those associated with the business of psychiatry. His insights however, are equally applicable to the experiences of particular childhood subject identities to the regimes of discipline and intervention in, for example, educational settings, and in child welfare and child protection policies and associated practices. For Rose (2003), a key question to be asked is 'what is the self proffered by policy? And what practices or techniques of the 'psy' for shaping and reforming selves are authorised within and by policy (2003: 173)?

Bourdieu (1988) on the other hand, illustrates the material outcomes of 'habitus' – that constellation of personal attributes, dispositions, and characteristics which constitute an identity. In many ways, 'habitus' reflects a curious mix of both assumed and ascribed identity, acknowledging that the agency invoked via assumed identity is, nevertheless, bounded. In particular, it is bounded by social structures which moderate access to different forms (and quantities) of economic, cultural and social capital. His work suggests, for example, that cultural capital would moderate the manner of children's engagement with forms of recreation and leisure which, in turn and in combination with differential access to the other forms of capital, would 'fix' children in particular class locations. As Jenkins (2004: 50) suggests: 'The world is not really *everyone's* oyster….some identities systematically enhance or diminish an individual's opportunities…The materiality of identification in this respect, and its stratified deprivation or affluence, cannot be underestimated (italics in original)'.

It should be acknowledged that, while policy research in this genre (or more accurately of with this type of theoretical orientation and analytical intent) is not particularly widespread in the overall oeuvre of policy studies, it nevertheless exists. I refer, for example, to Kessl (2006) who, citing the experience of Germany, illustrates how the overarching social policy framework

known there as ‘social pedagogy’, shaped the dispositions of children and young people; to Chen (2003) who in the Canadian context, illustrates how child welfare policies and programs ‘cultivate’ children; and to Smith (2003) who shows how policy debate about reproductive technologies in Australia creates the (highly political salient) identity of the ‘unborn’ child. My point in referring to these is not necessarily to incorporate their insights into the argument made here, but to illustrate that an analytical focus such as that suggested here is possible, appropriate and informative in the overall genre of policy studies. This is particularly the case when the purpose of policy analysis is – as suggested here – to unearth and bring to the surface outcomes and consequences of policy which can (and do) escape the traditional lens applied in policy research. In the next and final section of this paper, I indicate what I suggest are the implications of adopting this type of analytical orientation to policy research – particularly to research into children.

Conclusion

Appreciating the importance of identity – how it is constituted and understood at both the technological and ontological levels – clearly has implications for the impact and outcomes of policy on and for children. First – on the technical level and at its starkest – the argument made here suggests that policy has the capacity to speak to a child that may not exist. Or, and perhaps more likely, we may speak to a ‘child’ which is an artefact of the people engaged in making and implementing policy. Hunter (2003) makes this point well when she suggests that too often, we fail to include the identities of policy makers (and the implications of that failure) particularly when we are attempting to uncover identities proffered and constituted. It is possible that policy and indeed policy makers may imagine a child whose habitus, dispositions and desires may be quite different and maybe even at odds with that propelled in policies and associated programs. This potential slippage or mismatch may then account, in part, for why policy made with the best of intentions achieves only partial success. This appreciation suggests that an imperative exists to undertake research – possibly through (critical) discourse analysis – of the identity and identities promoted by various policies. I stress the notion of ‘critical’ to emphasise that policies can be understood as central to the ‘(re)production and challenge of dominance…the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality’ (Van Dijk, 1993: 249). On another level, I have suggested here that policy also operates ontologically to constitute the materiality of children’s identities and lives. This latter insight, while often remarked in the negative, can also, if acknowledged, operate in the positive. That is, and as the ‘new’ sociology of childhood suggests, policy can and should appreciate that children, while ‘governed’ objects, are also active subjects who can speak to their lives, their experiences and their futures as knowing and informed agents. Again, this insight suggests a particular research agenda – one which foregrounds children as competent participants. Both types of research suggested here operate as a type of corrective to the dominant mode of policy analysis which positions those it purports to attend to as objects rather than subjects. As the title of this seminar suggests – developing research which attends to both the technical and ontological levels allows children to be both seen and heard.

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