

# The Gender Neglect and Textual Abuse of Children in the Print Media

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In recent years the relationship between the media and child abuse has been subjected to closer scrutiny. Research at Monash University into the media portrayal of child abuse has led the researchers to examine the language used by the print media to represent both children who have been abused or neglected and the offences committed against them. This paper presents two findings from this research. The analysis firstly found that a child who has been abused or neglected may be objectified in print media language even when the child's gender is previously identified. Secondly, the analysis found that the language used to describe the sexual abuse of children may serve to reduce the seriousness of offences. These phenomena, termed 'gender neglect' and 'textual abuse', are highlighted by examples from UK and Australian print media. The authors argue that 'critical language awareness' is important for children, just as it has been identified in research that examines the representation of women in print media. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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**T**he relationship between child abuse and the media is now a long and complex one (Goddard and Liddell, 1995). Media representations of child abuse have increasingly become an important area of study for those interested in child protection and children's rights (see 'Special Issue' of *Child Abuse Review*, 1996).

The very 'discovery' or 'rediscovery' of child abuse by Dr Henry Kempe is an interesting example of that relationship. According to Barbara Nelson, it was media attention that transformed:

'... the once-minor charity concern called "cruelty to children" into an important social issue ...' (Nelson, 1984, p. 54)

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***'The published work on child protection and the media has developed substantially'***

The power of the media occupies:

'... the boundary between the private and the public. Their task is to discover, unveil, and create what is "public". To do so they often wrench "private deviance" from the confines of the home. In the case of child abuse the media also helped establish a new area of public policy.' (Nelson, 1984, p. 51)

It is Nelson's argument that the media not only responded to the problem of child abuse but also, in part, 'created' the problem and the public's sense of the urgent need to respond to it. Clearly there were many factors at work. As early as 1940, Hughes noted a major increase in what are called 'human interest' stories. Nelson acknowledges this factor, but also stresses that, in the USA, legislation concerning mandatory reporting gave the politicians in turn a position of 'no-cost rectitude' (Nelson, 1984, p. 75).

In the last 10 years in particular, the published work on child protection and the media has developed substantially (see, for example, Aldridge, 1994; Franklin and Parton, 1991). Kitlinger (1996) suggests that the UK media descriptions of the risks associated with child sexual abuse do not concentrate on the abuse of children within their homes. Instead, the media focus in recent years has turned to abuse outside the home, inaccurate diagnoses, and suggestions of 'false memories' to the extent that the major risks can be perceived to be to fathers rather than to children.

Atmore (1996) examines media coverage of child sexual abuse in New Zealand/Aotearoa from a cultural studies perspective. While her analysis of two conflictual cases exposed some hostility to feminist representations of child sexual abuse, Atmore acknowledges some changes in the public discourse on child protection that are clearly based on feminist perspectives. Goddard and Liddell (1993, 1995) describe significant changes in child protection policies in Australia created by intensive media campaigns that resulted from the death of a child.

Franklin and Horwath (1996) suggest, in their analysis of the UK media, that the media coverage of child abuse and child protection may in itself be abusive. Media representations of children and childhood, they argue, have undergone a shift since the killing of James Bulger from a construction of childhood as innocent to one that is more sinister.

### **The Importance of Language**

While much of the scholarly analysis of child abuse, child protection and the media has considered what has been called the

‘unevenness’ of reporting (Franklin and Parton, 1991, p. 9), little attention has been paid to detailed analysis of the language used to describe child abuse and child victims in media texts.

The failure to closely analyse language may, in part at least, be due to the complexity of the area. Discourse analysis involves a number of disciplines, including literary studies, philosophy, sociology, social and cognitive psychology, linguistics and others. There is, according to Bell and Garrett (1998), lack of agreement about the definitions of ‘text’ and ‘discourse’. Such debates, at first sight, may appear to have little to do with protecting children.

The importance of the language used to represent social issues, however, has been widely recognized in other fields. The news, according to Fowler (1991, p. 222), is not ‘a natural phenomenon’ but ‘a product’. The media, for example, have been described as projecting and perpetuating racism (Smitherman-Donaldson and Van Dijk, 1988). Language has been described as a major issue for feminists (Cameron, 1990). Sexist features of language have been very widely documented, for example the generic use of ‘he’ and ‘man’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 205). Benedict argues that myths about rape are perpetuated by gender bias in language, and the ‘subtle’ but ‘powerful’ effects of media language (Benedict, 1992, p. 21).

Fairclough (1995) argues that textual analysis should play an important role in all social science research. He cites four major reasons: theoretical, methodological, historical and political. In theoretical terms, texts are part of social action:

‘... the language is widely misperceived as transparent, so that social and ideological “work” that language does in producing, reproducing or transforming social structures, relations and identities is routinely “overlooked”’. (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 208–209)

Thus, in methodological terms, texts can provide evidence about social structures, processes and relationships. Historical analysis can similarly provide evidence of social change. Finally, in political terms, Fairclough states that social control and domination are exercised through texts.

All these foundations are important for examining social constructions of childhood and child abuse. The research that follows can be seen as applying textual analysis to media representations of children and child abuse.

## The Research

The research started with a serendipitous discovery during another research project. Research at Monash University’s

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***‘Texts can provide evidence about social structures, processes and relationships’***

***‘The research involves the examination of the coverage of child abuse cases in three major Australian newspapers’***

***‘The word ‘it’ may be associated with a ‘lack of emotional involvement’***

Child Abuse and Family Violence Research Unit is examining how children’s rights and parents’ rights are represented in contested cases. The media coverage of one case (see ‘A babe in whose arms?’ below) prompted a closer analysis of the language used in the media coverage of child abuse cases more broadly (Goddard and Saunders, in press).

## **Methodology**

The research in progress involves the examination of the coverage of child abuse cases in three major Australian newspapers. The findings reported on here, however, also draw upon a limited analysis of UK newspapers, undertaken specifically to ascertain whether the Australian findings could be replicated elsewhere.

The research loosely followed Robinson’s (1996) approach to exploratory analysis by posing the following questions:

- ‘1. Is the representation of events the only plausible explanation of what happened?
2. Is any account apparently neutral or are evaluative terms used to discredit some of the actors?
3. Are the reports of other . . . papers all in agreement in other countries as well as within a country?’ (Robinson, 1996, p. 186)

## **The Child Identified as ‘It’**

The use of the word ‘it’ in reference to an infant appears to be acceptable in everyday English usage. ‘It’, as defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* in 1989, describes:

‘. . . the proper neuter pronoun of the third person sing. Used orig. instead of any neuter sb. [substantive]; now only of things without life, and of animals when sex is not particularized, hence usually of all the lower animals, and sometimes of infants.’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989, p. 140)<sup>1</sup>

Wales (1996), in a study of pronouns, suggests that it is surprising how rarely grammarians refer to or analyse the use of ‘it’ in referring to a child in their broader discussions of gender. The use of ‘it’ for a baby or infant is justified, according to Wales, on the grounds that the baby is not yet born, that the sex is not known, or that babies ‘lack reason and speech’ (Wales, 1996, p. 159).

Wales, however, cautions that the use of the word ‘it’ may be associated with a ‘lack of emotional involvement’ and notes

that the use of 'it' for adults is 'dehumanising' (Wales, 1996, p. 160). Grammarians appear to vary in their judgement as to precisely when 'it' is acceptable. Greenbaum, for example, states that an 'exceptional use of *it* is for babies whose sex is unknown to the speaker' (Greenbaum, 1991, p. 86, emphasis in original).

Grammarians and linguists examine the use of 'he' and 'she' in far greater detail. Muhlhausler and Harre (1990, pp. 228–230) report that the generic use of 'he' to include women causes 'indexical offence' to, and the 'marginalization' of, women. We return to this aspect of gender in the discussion below.

The use of the pronoun 'it' in reference to a child is common in both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. 'It' presumably avoids what is judged to be the awkward use of 'he or she' or 'his or her'. The following example is taken from the respected Australian broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald*:

*'Children in care crisis "worsens"*

The Department of Community Services had squandered millions of dollars while doing little to improve a State care system in which one child could have as many as 1,000 people making decisions about *its* welfare ...' (Bernoth, 1997, emphasis added)

Closer examination of the print media coverage of child abuse, however, drew our attention to a phenomenon that, to our knowledge, has not been documented elsewhere. In some circumstances, the gender of a child who has been abused or a child at risk is clearly identified and then lost. The pronoun 'it' is substituted and, as a result, the child becomes an object. The following excerpt from the *Herald Sun* (an Australian tabloid newspaper, similar to the *Daily Mail* in the UK) is taken from an editorial that followed a widely publicised case in which the newspaper claimed that child protection workers had 'snatched' a newborn baby from her mother:

*'A babe in whose arms?*

The issue of who will be given the care and custody of this infant can only be determined by an informed Supreme Court, after hearing and testing all of the available evidence.

But disturbing issues, far broader than those affecting the rights of the infant and *her* handicapped mother, have emerged in this young woman's battle to keep her child ...

Other issues involve whether the Department of Human Services erred in not advising the woman earlier of its plans to

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take her child immediately *it* was born'. (*Herald Sun*, 1997, emphases added)

This example is cited because the gender of the baby was not only clearly identified in the editorial itself, but also in front page coverage the previous day and in follow-up stories on the same day. Examples of such 'gender slippage' or 'gender neglect' have been found in news stories about both boys and girls.

*'Baby's death probed*

NSW welfare officers are being investigated over the death of a four-month-old Victorian baby whose decomposing body was found strapped to *his* car seat . . .

The baby, from Ballarat, is believed to have died two weeks before *his* mother burst into a northern NSW church on September 20 begging for help.

A pastor from the Tweed Heads church found the baby's body still in *its* seat. Also in the car were the dead baby's twin brother and another brother aged 5.' (Webber, 1997, emphases added)

Examples have also been found in broadsheet newspapers. *The Age* is an Australian broadsheet similar to *The Guardian* in the UK:

*'Lobbyists back ruling to take child*

The baby *girl* born at a country hospital on Wednesday, is the 23-year-old woman's third child . . .

Child protection workers took the baby from *its* mother at the hospital after a local magistrate conducted a bedside hearing granting interim custody to the department'. (Kermond and Boreham, 1997, emphases added).

Another example of gender slippage was discovered in a book entitled *The Language of Newspapers*. Reah (1998) presents an analysis of the language used in an article in the UK *Daily Mail* about the singer/actress Madonna and her newborn baby daughter, Lourdes Maria. The newspaper article speculates that, for various reasons associated with the impact of her mother Madonna, 'Poor little Lourdes . . . is . . . likely to grow up the unluckiest girl in the world' (Roberts, 1996). Reah's analysis, however, fails to highlight Roberts' reference to Lourdes, the newborn female child, as 'it':

'Madonna . . . reportedly wants an English [nanny] . . . with her hair in a bun who speaks Spanish so the child can bond with *its* Spanish speaking father . . . ' (Roberts, 1996, emphasis added, cited in Reah, 1998, p. 93)

It is interesting to note that the only examples of gender slippage or neglect that we have found have been confined to descriptions of cases where children have been abused, neglected or are described as at risk. No examples have been found where young children are the subject of other types of stories, for example surgical operations for rare medical conditions. Wales' caution (noted above), that the use of 'it' may be associated with 'a lack of emotional involvement', suggests to us that the gender slippage may be an emotional, perhaps unconscious, response to unpleasant situations.

### **Lexical Redescription: When Abuse Becomes Consensual and the Textual Abuse of Children**

Close analysis of gender in child abuse stories in the print media led to textual analysis of child sexual abuse reports. It was discovered that the words used to describe child sexual abuse may dramatically reduce the seriousness of the offences. The following excerpts are taken from a news story in the liberal UK broadsheet *The Guardian*:

*'Man jailed for sex with girl, 10*

A man was jailed for seven years yesterday after an *affair* with his step-daughter which began when she was 10 and led to her becoming pregnant and giving birth at the age of 11.

The man first attempted having sex with the girl during a trip to the seaside in 1995 when he gave her a half a pint of beer, Teeside crown court was told. A *relationship* developed until they were having sex every week.

In January this year, the girl was found to be six months pregnant ...

The man's wife suspected the truth when she looked out of an upstairs window and saw them kissing. When confronted they both denied a *relationship*. Later a neighbour saw them kissing at a bus stop and the police intervened.

The social services were called and again *the couple* denied having sexual intercourse.

The man was arrested after the girl was found to be pregnant. She decided to keep the child and is bringing *it* up at home ...' (Sheffield, 1997, emphases added)

Although the headline clearly states the offence, close examination of this story reveals that the serious, repeated sexual assault of a young girl has been represented in a way that reduces the impact of the events. In the first paragraph, the sexual assault is called an 'affair'. In the second and fourth paragraphs, the perpetrator and victim are described as having a 'relationship'. In the fifth paragraph, the perpetrator and victim are called a 'couple'. As Butterworth (1997) pointed

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***‘Such redescription amounts to textual abuse of the child’***

out in a spirited letter to the offending newspaper, perpetrators of abuse routinely use this sort of language to rationalize their violence against, and sexual abuse of, children. In effect, this serious sexual abuse of a child by an adult male has been reframed as a consensual relationship between adults.

Analysis of headlines for stories of child sexual abuse has also been undertaken. There appear to be three types of headlines: those that name the offences; those that ignore the offences; and those that redefine or reframe the offences. All of the headlines cited below appeared in UK newspapers on the same day. They appeared above news reports of a female scout leader found guilty of indecently assaulting a 14-year-old boy scout, a story most newspapers found newsworthy.

Some headlines clearly identify the offence:

‘Scout mistress guilty of indecent assault’ (Rees, 1998)

In other newspapers, the headlines ignore the actual offence but nonetheless ascribe guilt:

‘Scout leader may face jail’ (Hall, 1998)

Some headlines in some newspapers, however, completely rename or reframe the offence:

‘Tears from seductress of Scout, 14’ (Anon, 1998)

‘Tearful Scout leader faces jail over her affair with boy of 14’ (Davies, 1998)

It is our contention that the use of the words ‘seductress’ and ‘affair’ once again reduces the criminal offence to a consensual relationship between adults. Such lexical redescription amounts to textual abuse of the child. Some preliminary work on newspapers in the US confirms that similar news reports and headlines appear there (see, for example, ‘Jailed teacher afraid lover boy will dump her’; O’Mahony, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

The early stages of our research have confirmed two findings. Firstly, in some stories in tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, a child who is identified as abused, neglected or at risk may lose his or her gender as the story is reported. Secondly, some stories in tabloid and broadsheet newspapers may, through the language chosen, redefine child sexual abuse as a less serious, almost consensual relationship between adults. Examples of both these phenomena have been found in



Australian and UK print media. It is suggested that these phenomena, which we have termed 'gender neglect' and lexical redescription or 'textual abuse', may serve to reduce the impact of abuse on the reader.

Women have long recognized that language can exclude. Robin Lakoff (1975) demonstrated forcefully that women suffer 'linguistic discrimination' by the way they are taught to use language and in the way language uses them:

'Linguistic imbalances are worthy of study because they bring into sharper focus real-world imbalances and inequities.' (Lakoff, 1975, p. 43)

Lakoff's work was extremely influential and has been followed by a number of books examining gender bias in our language. These have grown out of a recognition that:

'Language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas ...' (Spender, 1980, p. 139)

Fairclough (1992, p. 205) argues that there are 'asymmetries' between men and women in language use. It appears that there are also asymmetries in media representations of adults and children.

According to Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987), journalists strive for objectivity, accuracy and balance in the stories that they write. Journalists recognize that they need to be attentive to the possible impact of their work:

'Since journalists are interpreters of other people's lives and organizational arrangements, they must strive to be fair with these people and offer an objective and balanced view ...' (Ericson *et al.*, 1987, p. 104)

Janks and Ivanic (1992, pp. 311–315) argue that we need to be critically aware of the language we use. In striving for what they call 'critical language awareness', they suggest we have two clear responsibilities. The first responsibility is to the people *about* whom we speak and write. The second responsibility is to the people *to* whom we speak and write. Janks and Ivanic propose that we need an 'emancipatory discourse', which fundamentally means to use language:

'... in a way which works towards greater freedom and respect for all people.' (Janks and Ivanic, 1992, p. 305)

Our early research has found examples of print media descriptions of children who have been abused and of sexual abuse that may contribute to the minimization of such offences and reduce their impact on audiences. The role of

***'Gender neglect' and lexical redescription or 'textual abuse' may serve to reduce the impact of abuse on the reader'***

***'There are asymmetries in media representations of adults and children'***

***'The media have obligations to show greater respect to children who have been abused'***

***'Historically 'it' was written 'hit' which once meant: an inanimate thing, abstraction, etc. an animal; also, a devil ...; a child'***

the print media in drawing public attention to child abuse has been widely acknowledged (Nelson, 1984). The media, however, also have obligations to show greater respect to children who have been abused. They should neither reduce children to objects nor minimize the offences committed against them. As Fowler (1991, p. 231) argues, we need to examine more closely how language works in the news media. If children's rights are to have any real meaning, we need to pay close attention to the language used to describe both the child who has been abused or neglected and the offences committed against him or her.

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### **Note**

1. It is interesting to note that historically (see, for example, Baron (1986) and Diamond (1970)), 'it' was written 'hit'. The 'h' was lost in the Middle English period. 'Hit' once meant: (a) an inanimate thing, abstraction, etc.; (b) an animal; also, a devil ...; (c) a child ... (Kuhn and Reidy, 1965, p. 812).

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