

Childhood, Public Inquiries and Late Modernity

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Abstract

This paper maps the background to a new Australian Research Council (ARC) funded cultural historical sociology of childhood and child maltreatment. The project takes as its central focus public inquiries from the 1970s to the present, which either explicitly examine child abuse and neglect, or consider this within a broader remit. Employing a comparative historical approach, informed by cultural sociological perspectives, the research examines the unfolding Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse alongside past inquiries. The central aim of the project is to explore how changing understandings of children's development, vulnerability and rights have shaped social policy, educational responses and public attitudes towards safeguarding children and promoting their wellbeing. In particular, it investigates how concepts of childhood and policy approaches are changing as a result of broader societal imperatives for openness and disclosure about matters that until recently were not publicly discussed, most notably, child sexual abuse. In this paper, I explicate the rationale for the focus on official inquiries as a framework for this research, while advancing a broader argument for the value of analysing inquiries as an important feature of late modernity and as a valuable lens through which to examine social change.

Keywords

childhood; culture of disclosure; historical injustices; public inquiries; social change

Introduction

From the late twentieth century into the present era, an imperative for openness and transparency – what might fruitfully be called a ‘culture of disclosure’ – has become increasingly evident across all spheres of social, political and personal life in the West. From confessional narratives and psychotherapy (Rose 2009) to the rise of whistleblowing as a recognised phenomenon (Wright 2011a) and exhortations of ‘transparency and open government’ (Obama 2009), this imperative finds expression in a multitude of ways and in disparate domains. It is discernible, for example, in the exposure of abuses of power in organisations, a willingness on the part of people to discuss experiences of victimization, and more broadly in societal acknowledgement of wrongdoing and past injustices, especially those involving children (Wright 2011b). Demands for transparency, openness and disclosure

in relation to childhood maltreatment, particularly historical instances of abuse and neglect, increasingly take shape in the form of public inquiries.

In this paper, I argue that the dramatic rise in the use of public inquiries since the 1970s (Prasser 2006) reflects an institutionalisation of wider cultural shifts in late modernity towards openness and disclosure. Importantly, inquiries also echo the complexities and contestations that have accompanied this. While developing some broader arguments about inquiries in general, the primary focus of my analysis is inquiries into childhood maltreatment. Drawing on a new Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study,¹ I explore below the changing social landscape in which a number of prominent Australian inquiries have taken place, leading up to the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. In the broader project, the analysis of past and present inquiries forms a key dimension of a wider exploration of how changing understandings of children's development, vulnerability and rights have shaped social policy, educational responses and public attitudes towards safeguarding children and promoting their wellbeing. In particular, the project investigates how concepts of childhood are changing as a result of social imperatives for openness and disclosure.

The project on which this paper draws is a cultural historical sociology of childhood and child maltreatment. Its core conceptual concerns are with changing constructions of childhood and the transformation of modernity (Adams et al 2005; Delanty & Isin 2003; van Krieken 2010). Temporal and historical perspectives (McLeod & Thomson 2009) thus form a vital component of analysis. Similarly, culture is not analysed as a 'dependent variable' but rather as a central dimension of social life, including its structural and material aspects (Alexander 2003: 7). This approach offers a powerful lens through which to assess the effects of changing expert knowledges of childhood, the pedagogical functions of inquiries, and the implications of these for social justice. The inquiries that form the cornerstone of this research are drawn upon both as important historical events in their own right, and as empirical exemplars that individually and in aggregate offer a prism through which to examine social change, educational reform and what appear to have been major democratic shifts in children's rights.

¹ 'Childhood Maltreatment and Late Modernity: Public Inquiries, Social Justice and Education', Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (ARC DECRA: K. Wright, DE140100060), 2014-17.

In what follows, I provide an overview of key dimensions of the project, tracing the rise of concerns with childhood vulnerability as reflected in key Australian inquiries.

Childhood Maltreatment and Public Inquiries

It is now widely accepted that people who have suffered abuse and neglect as children commonly face lifelong challenges, including poverty, social isolation and poor mental health, each of which, in turn, contribute to intergenerational cycles of disadvantage (COAG 2009). As a result, much policy and educational attention is now centred on safeguarding children and improving their wellbeing (Wright & McLeod 2015). In addition to the present and future oriented goals of fostering positive outcomes for young people today, recognition of the on-going effects of child abuse and neglect has also generated, over the last two decades, retrospective concerns about historical injustices. This has involved both a focus on past victims and, importantly, acknowledgment of the complicity of the state and key social institutions, such as churches, in perpetrating and covering up abuse and neglect.

A key way in which childhood maltreatment has been examined is through official inquiries. From 1945-1999, more than 80 public inquiries of this kind took place in the UK, with all but two from the 1970s onwards (Corby et al 2001: 7). This reflects both a dramatic rise in the use of public inquiries generally (Prasser 2006) and the emergence of child abuse as a recognised problem (Parton 2006). In Ireland, 14 reports published since the 1990s examined abuse in schools and institutions (O'Shea 2012). Similarly, in Australia, growing concern about the welfare of children in out-of-home 'care' has prompted similar investigations (Australia 2001), most notably the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (hereafter RC on Sexual Abuse). It is one of the largest Royal Commissions in Australia's history (Creagh 2013) and like the Irish Ryan Commission (Ireland 2009) before it, is likely to be one of the most significant inquiries into historical instances of child abuse internationally.

Official inquiries have a number of functions. In addition to developing policy and discharging legislative obligations, inquiries are charged with establishing facts, identifying wrongdoing and assigning blame; their primary function, however, is widely acknowledged as 'learning lessons' from past events in order to prevent future reoccurrence (Beer 2011: 2; Burgess 2009). Scholarly analysis of inquiries has focused predominantly on their role in

bringing about improvements in institutional and professional practice and on their function as an instrument of governance (Corby et al 2001; Prasser 2006). Yet inquiries also have important pedagogical and sociocultural functions. In seeking to learn lessons from the past, they play an explicitly educative role for both government and society. They also throw into sharp relief issues of major social concern: they are symbolic of an open and transparent society ‘where the voices of the powerless are heard’ and the powerful are held accountable, and importantly, they increasingly provide a cathartic function for victims/survivors and indeed for societies more broadly (Burgess 2009: 4). Official inquiries thus offer, I argue, a powerful lens through which to examine social change in late modernity.

While the 20th century is widely described as ‘the century of the child’ (James & Prout 1997), during the 1970s there was a considerable intensification of concerns with childhood (e.g. International Year of the Child, 1979). During this decade ‘the issue of child abuse exploded onto the professional, public and political agendas’ (Parton 2006: 29), programs of research were established (Starr & Wolfe 1991) and child protection services expanded (Krugman & Korbin 2012). Children’s legal status and rights came to the fore, reflected, for example, in the introduction of legislation to protect children (e.g. mandatory reporting) and the development of institutional responses for dealing with abuse and treatment programs for offenders (James 2000; McCallum 1999). More broadly, the 1970s was a period of rapid social change; it reflected new forms of individualism and egalitarianism and an increasing openness about private life that challenged traditional social mores (Borstelmann 2012).

The Royal Commission on Human Relationships (Australia 1977) arose within this context. The inquiry and its report were pivotal in bringing matters hitherto not disclosed to public attention, including child abuse. It played an important role in public debate and prompted legislative, social and educative reform (Arrow 2013, McLeod 1999; Wright 2011b). The report of this unique public inquiry – an examination of ‘*human relationships*’ – was described soon after its publication as ‘a long important essay in societal self-awareness’ (Bull 1978: 32).

Concerns about abuse and child protection have persisted since the 1970s. By the 1990s, however, there also emerged a focus on historical and systemic forms of abuse and neglect. Within a broader international context of increasing recognition of past injustices (Walker

2006), a number of Australian inquiries examined the effects of past laws, practices and policies on children. Three national inquiries stand out as exemplars: the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's inquiry into the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families (HREOC 1997), and two Senate Affairs Reference Committee inquiries, one into child migrants and another on children in institutional care (Australia 2001, 2004). The *Stolen Generations*, *Lost Innocents* and *Forgotten Australian* inquiries documented widespread experience of childhood maltreatment, particularly in institutions. While the findings and recommendations cannot be adequately summarised here, common to each report was the expressed importance of acknowledging the brutality of past treatment, the ongoing and often intergenerational legacy of ill-treatment, and the need for people to have opportunities to tell their stories (Wright 2011b).

In the last two decades, concerns about child abuse in general, and child sexual abuse in particular, have intensified. An accumulation of evidence has revealed sexual abuse to have been both prevalent and systemic, particularly in religious organisations. By the early 2000s it had become strikingly evident that clergy sexual abuse, particularly by Catholic priests, involved the complicity of the Church through institutional denials, cover-ups and the protection of offenders (John Jay Report 2004). Mounting evidence of the gravity of the problem, the failure of the Church to adequately deal with allegations of abuse, and increasing political pressure for a national inquiry led to the announcement late in 2012 of a Royal Commission. Then Prime Minister, Julie Gillard, commended the courage of past victims in speaking out and stated that: 'we must do everything we can to make sure that what has happened in the past is never allowed to happen again' (Prime Minister of Australia 2012).

While the Royal Commission is charged with investigating institutional failures to protect children, its ramifications, like those of many inquiries preceding it, will be broad ranging. In making recommendations to improve laws, policies and practices to prevent and better respond to institutional abuse, its impact in those areas will be directly felt. Yet the effects of inquiries are multi-layered, as much social and cultural as they are political and practical. It will have implications for education policy, insofar as a key responsibility for education systems today is to safeguard children and promote their wellbeing. There are also implications for the provision of teaching and professional development for children's services workers (Stanley & Manthorpe 2004). Importantly too, beyond schools and

institutions, there are broader educative dimensions at play in relation to how such inquiries and discussions surrounding them serve a pedagogical function for the wider public. This was underscored in the Prime Minister's statement and it is evident in the extensive media coverage of the Royal Commission, captured by the oft-repeated phrase of 'learning lessons from the past', and in the practice of people telling their stories in the hope that these events will not happen again.

Inquiries into child abuse and neglect reflect increasing societal concerns with the vulnerability of children, an issue that has been brought to light, particularly since the 1960s, through a growing body of psychological research. There has been considerable critique of the deleterious effects of the rise of psychological discourses and a strong tradition of associated arguments about moral decline (for an overview, see Wright 2011b; see also Hookway 2013). Yet psychological research has powerfully underscored the devastating effects and the legacy for many people of ill-treatment in childhood. This provides further evidence of the limitations of the 'therapy culture' critique, at least in its dominant forms, and raises new questions about the complex effects of the spread of psychological knowledge and its relation to new forms of moral authority in the present. An important issue that has yet to be adequately addressed is the extent to which psychological literacy and new forms of openness and disclosure – particularly as embodied in official inquiries – reflect a democratizing current of late modernity, or whether this shrouds depoliticizing processes through therapeutic forms of catharsis, consolation and co-option. Comparative historical perspectives are crucial for gaining traction on these difficult questions and generating deeper understandings of inquiries, which are, as Gilligan (2002: 289) has noted, 'deeply ambiguous, both in their processes and their effects'.

Concluding comments

Contemporary openness about child abuse stands in stark contrast to the pre-1960s/1970s era when the maltreatment of children was not widely recognised, not publicly discussed and not on the political agenda. In light of its social importance, there is a strong warrant for historically informed sociological studies of child abuse and neglect (van Krieken 2010). This paper, and the broader project on which it draws, aims to contribute to an enlivening of sociological studies of this kind. In mapping the background to this research, I have sought to

illustrate the imbrication of changing ideas of childhood vulnerability and the effects of maltreatment with new norms of openness and disclosure in late modernity. With public inquiries providing the empirical focus of this coalescence, I have argued that inquiries offer a valuable lens through which to investigate this issue and the broader contours of social change.

Importantly, inquiries reflect what appear to be changing power relations, insofar as they expose wrongdoing, acknowledge the experiences of past victims and ostensibly hold the powerful to account. There are, however, many limitations to inquiries (Burgess 2009). The inquiry hearing room is not a court of law and the translation of ‘lessons learnt’ into social and behavioural change and institutional and legislative reform is complex and uneven. Nevertheless, inquiries have a range of important functions and their sociocultural functions should not be dismissed as ‘merely cultural’. The diminishment of the societal propensity turn a blind eye to sexual crimes against children, and indeed to childhood maltreatment more broadly, is both reflected in and has been buttressed by the rise of inquiries examining these matters.

Whatever the complexities, contestations, disappointments and failings of the Australian Royal Commission and other recent inquiries into the sexual exploitation of children, these inquiries reflect a profoundly important historical moment in which longstanding and powerful social and cultural taboos of speaking about child sexual abuse is being radically challenged. Comparative historical perspectives provide valuable insights into how it became possible for an inquiry like the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, to emerge at this time. Indeed historical perspectives are crucial for an analysis of inquiries, which are, by their very nature, Janus faced (Stanley & Manthorpe 2004), that is, they are both historically oriented and forward looking. As such, they throw into sharp relief the importance of temporality, illuminating key dimensions of the relationship between the past and the present, and in doing so, hold the promise of a better future.

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