

Children Protection, Politics and Procrastination: The Discourse of Deferral

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The Discourse of Child Protection and its ensuing political responses are discussed here following a 6 month analysis of media platforms in which child protection reforms were recommended following child abuse and neglect reports. The headlines, in social and other media were analysed to identify the significant aspects of reactions to horrifying tales, stories and reports of child deaths, injuries and other abuses. Clear evidence emerges of a disturbing discourse of deferral and political inaction that is only relieved when inquiries and Royal Commissions advocate strong and immediate changes. In addition, this study shows that *lacunae* (or what is missing in text or discourse) show that the voice of children is only heard after the event of horrific abuse and often relies on whistle-blowers or advocates. Despite the warnings and research of many distinguished child protection academics a cycle emerges which needs to reflect community desires to protect children via legislation and stronger regulations. Further, some inquiries have indicated stronger regulation and training of beleaguered child welfare staff.

■ **Keywords:** child protection, discourse, media analysis, politics

Honouring the Late Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO¹

In March 2016, the late Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO (personal communication, February 7, 2016) told me that she was doing “one last workshop” while we both enjoyed a much-needed break in Broome, WA. She insisted it was necessary despite a recent bout of illness. She was adamant that she needed to assist International Schools (in Indonesia) in recognising and dealing with child abuse and neglect in these schools, which often provide education and care for the children of diplomats and foreign expatriate communities. There had also been a recent matter before the courts in Indonesia, widely reported in local and international media (see Kelley 2016, p. 8), about child abuse within a school setting so she left in late March to conduct her work. She never made it home safely and suffered a stroke on the plane as it came in to land at Adelaide Airport. Prior to leaving, she sent me a strongly worded email in which she asked me to write another paper based on discourse analysis following the success of the previous paper on the *Discourse of Disbelief* (Schulz, 2013) published in this august journal. Professor Freda Briggs AO had seen the power of language and how it is manipulated by various groups in society and wanted me to promise to write an analysis of how it is reported and written about by the most important groups in our community – media (including social media) politicians

and professionals in the area of Child Protection. I am now keeping that promise. Vale Freda, Champion of Children everywhere.

Introduction

For years, and in previous centuries, governments, society and communities have been grappling with the notion that within them there are people who are mean, predatory, exploitative and cruel to children (Batty, 2005). David Batty has recorded in *The Guardian* a history that stems from 1889 through to the present day. It is a history replete with terms such as *mental cruelty*, *incest*, *children at risk* and of course the ubiquitous terms *abuse and neglect*. The *Children's Charter* outlined in this chronology showed that there would always be people who, like the late Freda Briggs AO, stand up and fight for change so that children could be safe from harm. But society has had to come to terms that there are those who do not stand up for children, who delay decision making and do not act to save children.

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Some of these people are parents and some are trusted care professionals, including social workers. From time to time parents have even murdered their own children, claiming that he/she had 'lost their tempers' and suggesting that he/she did so to 'stop the child from crying'. In several court cases cited in Briggs (2012, pp.18–19) these horrors are highlighted. In a well-known cyclical fashion documented by media in society and modern democracies there follows a litany of similar abuse and horrifying neglect of children at the hands of those people who are meant to love and protect them (Menezes, 2017).

The list of parents, teachers, social workers, police and the justice system who have failed children when he/she is most vulnerable is long. When these come to public attention via the discourse reported in the media, documentary, television or other means, the community clamours for change and demands that this 'never be allowed to happen again'. Cue political operative of government – either a Minister or senior bureaucrat or even an expert – to come forward and announce yet another inquiry to ensure change and challenge of the current system so that children can, at last, be safe.

How, in light of modern understanding of the plight of children who are vulnerable scared and needing to be rescued from a life of abuse and neglect, can this still be happening? Recent events recorded by media have shown that, despite several inquiries, Royal Commissions and reports, children continue to be left in the hands of those who would do them harm and no amount of public outcry appears to have stemmed the flow (Novak and Holderhead, 2016). There is the *tug of love* approach in media that provides ample opportunity to work within the typical media frames identified by media scholars and he/she are as follows: *Emotion, Sensation, Division, Conflict and Celebrity* (McCombs and Kiousis, 2004). Schulz (2012) found that media discourses and the politics of child protection often relate to the notion of time and only later discovered the problem of children being disbelieved.

The Media Frames as identified in the work of McCombs (2004) may be elaborated upon depending on the story, but these remain the tried and tested way to encourage, attract and recruit readers and viewers to media platforms, whether hard copy or social media blogs. Altheide (2003a, 2003b) has also added another dimension with his *discourse of fear* identified in legal and court matters. This work has also been replicated by Schulz (2010) in which politicians only appear to be engaged when fear within a community about personal community or family safety and security are highlighted on a constant basis. This occurred with stark reality in the matter of Shannon Mc Coole, an accredited childcare worker within the child protection system in South Australia, who at one time was considered to have 'leadership potential' according to former workmates. The stories abounded of how he managed to slip through the net and fool supervisors about the threat he posed to vulnerable children (Puddy & Booth, 2016).

Children are Not Safe: We are reminded via media and politics and the suggestions by academia and research appears to be ignored

The Language of Child Protection: Nomenclature revisited

Nothing prepared me for the foul undercurrent of society revealed in the evidence to the Inquiry; not my life in the community or my work in the law as a practitioner and a judge. I had no understanding of the widespread prevalence of the sexual abuse of children in South Australia and its frequent devastating and often lifelong consequences for many of them. Some witnesses previously had not been able to say what had happened to them. An elderly woman, who had been in State care as a child, said early in her evidence: "Who is ever there for frightened little girls in cupboards? Now you are there because you give me a voice and I wanted to say that (Mullighan, 2008, p. 7).

This was the statement made by the late Ted [Edward Picton] Mullighan QC, former Supreme Court Judge in SA, in his report to *the Children in State Care Royal Commission of Inquiry*.

A brief search via any of the modern internet search engines will show that when the term Child Protection is entered many of the sites that come on the computer screen mention terms such as *Abuse Neglect* and *Cruelty*. This point is valid as it leads into community fear and panic about what is unsafe or unpredictable in our communities. Beck (1987, 2005) has studied this phenomenon in relatively safe democracies in his seminal work *The Risk Society*, which indicates that when a community is actually very safe with low crime rates compared to other cities, he/she becomes beset with risk as an issue of concern. This is especially true with respect to children, their health and wellbeing. In addition, the personal safety of children is a major issue and is regularly featured in the news media both mainstream and social media platforms.

Even though it is widely acknowledged that *stranger danger* is relatively rare, paper headlines and TV news highlight child abductions with the result that parents become afraid to let their kids walk to school thereby setting other major risks to worry about, for instance child obesity or too much time spent on computer or social media. In order to ascertain the language swirling around the issue of Child Protection a set of media platforms was selected for this study as the major focus for attention using the terms *Child Protection, Child Protection Reports, Children and Protection*. These were used in search engines. In addition, a variety of search engines on the internet were used in order to ascertain that diverse points of view and stories would evolve from the searches.

The most obvious results showed that protection took second place once a report was downloaded and the terms reverted to a predictable class of linguistic agency concerns. According to Ranson (2016), who was citing Ybema et al. (2009, p. 302), in terms of the power of institutional au-

thority and its voice in raising and setting community and social policy and norms, the power of this language must be given due attention. Indeed, in citing Ybema in her thesis on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, the notion of its power and the language used in regular discourse become obvious:

Since such institutional structures constitute the medium for individual thought and action, they profoundly shape the individual's lifeworld when (s)he becomes a member of society (or an organization) and internalizes the outer world by learning the cultural knowledge and accepted behaviours of the community. The role of language is significant in this process for discursive construction operates at various junctures to facilitate socialization and enable institutional rules and routines to become part of the individuals' habitus (Ybema, 2009, p. 302 cited in Ranson, 2016).

According to Fairclough (2003), the representation of social actors involves a number of choices, including active/passive and inclusion/exclusion constructions, which are 'socially significant, for instance with respect to the representation of agency' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 155). The analysis of discourse elements surrounding the issues of child protection clearly shows children as being denied agency by virtue of others, such as lobby groups or politicians stepping in to claim legitimacy and control of what should be done to protect and care for children. Children are written and talked about, *reported to authorities as being in danger, vulnerable, neglected, suffering, in need of parental support, forgotten, abused and a community problem!*

In fact the notion of agency on behalf of the child is tenuous. As academics consider and research areas of child wellbeing and safety, the law reconsiders and reviews child protection matters, and lobbyists and community seek redress from the political legislature, it becomes clear that the language of deferment is central to talking about children and caring about them. In the long run the question to be asked is: has it changed anything? The most regular responses appeared in news stories featuring high profile politicians making strong statements about how *children were the future or investments for tomorrow*. The notion of agency is repetitive and consistent, and clearly sets out what the powers and authorities wish to see occur or set into motion. A selection of these from political commentaries, speeches and media statements is listed below.

- Child protection is a **community problem** ... the SA Government cannot guarantee all children's safety (Premier of South Australia, Jay Weatherill, June 2016)
- A 'fresh start for child protection' in South Australia (Minister Susan Close, SA Government website press release dated June 16th 2016)
- Ministers asks residential care centres to **lift their game**: included are concerns from Unions for the public service questioning the privatisation model of vulnerable

children in state care: **Union expressed concerns with privatised care model** A year ago, in August 2015, the Public Service Association wrote to Mr Hazzard with concerns that out-of-home care (OOHC) was being outsourced to the non-government sector. The union said the problems included '**increased incidents of abuse in care**' and '**failure to improve outcomes for children**'. New South Wales ABC report September 2016

- Child Protection Protocol Victorian Department of Education '**protecting the safety and wellbeing of all school children**' (State Government of Victoria, 2017)
- 'Protecting Victoria's **Vulnerable Children** Inquiry Launched' Archived Victorian Inquiry in Vulnerable Children Website launched 2011 (State Government of Victoria, 2011–2012)
- Hetty Johnston Attacks Family Court Judges, March 2017 '**calls for stricter guidelines to protect children**'

So powerful is this concept that repetitive anaphora (or retracing word links and concepts) becomes evident in the media analysis of word searches related to child protection.

The table below highlights key elements in lexis (word choices) had seen in Child Protection as reported in media platforms. In turn, it can thus be argued that a point of view becomes consistent as a way of thinking to form public opinion (Schulz, 2017 forthcoming).

Word Choice	Media Platform	Related Information
Sexual abuse (thousands of entries) Horror of abuse and neglect	News.com.au; abc.net.au;	Highlighting dangers and need for further studies and inquiries
Child Protection issues in media	UNICEF REPORT (UNICEF, 2011)	Power of media to highlight issues and to change community concerns
Children danger (1.5 million hits on Google alone)	News generally	Something must be done: Calls for judicial inquiry
Referral to authorities	Online Royal Commission websites	Facts relating to Child Abuse reports as at July 2017
Parents in fear (see especially online predators protection from)	Social media platforms	Twitter #childabuse is rife with several platforms calling for tougher penalties for abuse and ways to end violence against children (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2017)
Children in danger from society and internet chat rooms	Social media platforms	Predators on internet chat rooms advice to parents over 1500 websites give advice or apps to help track children's activity on internet sites
Predators stalk children	Online statistics by puresight.com	Fear discourse and statistics evident

Word Choice	Media Platform	Related Information
Parents to blame	Social media platforms suggest parental punishments (see for example the Chloe Valentine case in SA which sparked outrage and another inquiry)	Harsh judgmental calls for penalties and punishments for parents found guilty of abuse and neglect

Table of Lexis identified in media analysis searches

The foregoing findings, which are a sample selection of more than 120 searches on *Child Protection* and *Child Protection* matters and issues, show a clear indication of fear and concern on the part of the community. However, nowhere does it suggest that community and social mores have agency in changing the way children are to be protected. Instead there are calls for change, more training and more inquiries into how to solve the problem.

It is here that the *discourse of deferral* is becoming more evident. Consistently, the lexical choices are repetitive and highlight the fear that is becoming more evident in the community. These are known in discourse analysis as anaphora – a way of retracing the issues over and over again. Some highlights include: inquiry constant calls, scathing about authorities ignoring reports, danger, death, social worker failings, including the allowing or minimisation of harm by drug addled parents to keep child safe while intoxicated with drugs, and parents needing reassurance their child is safe in childcare arrangements.

In further studies the powerful element of collocation, or the company that words keep, is another central discourse element. This is a key to finding what is considered by many authorities on discourse as ‘author mindset’ (Fairclough, 2001). One clue lies in the strength of another element of discourse identified within this media platforms corpus: the use of co-location (*collocation*) of certain lexical items. Most obvious, but also most important, is the co-location of the words *child protection* with certain recurrent lexical choices at two or three words remove, either side of its appearance within the sentence structure.

According to Atkins (2002, p. 2), frequent recurrences of such selections can indicate a socially constructed point of view: one powerful enough to pull forward lexical (word choices) and items subconsciously as a speaker or writer composes, operating as a semi-automatic or pre-formed, ‘cued’ selection. Atkins suggests that language conditions people’s attitudes and expectations. Those who habitually use and re-use certain preferred words and phrases betray ‘a settled way of thinking’ – and also the expectation that this will be shared by listeners. To some extent, however, this also applies to those who are the subjects of this language: those spoken of, who are objectified in the terms used, and who may well take up the positions implied. In other words, how language settles around an issue within a given community, controls community perspectives, and so behaviours. This view is also echoed by the works of Wodak and Meyer (2001) who consider this a major focus in understanding what is really being said or discussed by the protagonists.

Below are listed some key collocations identified juxtaposed with the terms *child[ren] protection* (included the terms *child abuse* in some cases) in my research of media platforms between 2016 and 2017.

Child Protection/Abuse: Collocated Terms

Child protection was *missing* in a *Government sponsored* care facility!, *horrific*, *long standing*, *over many years*, *missed* by the Department officers, *distressing*, *led to suicide*, *mental illness*, ‘*fell through the net*’, *needs closer examination*, *was hidden for years*, *priests failed in duty of care*, *crisis engulfs* [name of church of organisation]. Others include *Home truths*, *long standing*, *horrors of children in care*, *trafficked for sex*, *girls married at 10!* *Unspeakable crimes against* [children], *offender walks free* after abusing children, children *abused at Government facilities* meant to care for them. The above list of collocations shows clearly that reporters have a mind set to use fear discourse as a way of attracting and recruiting viewers or readers. This view is echoed in the content analysis performed by Altheide (2003a) in which he outlined strong links to fearful and horrific discourse elements in stories related to criminal behaviours.

The selected group of collocations with the terms *child/children* when first compiled became a harrowing introduction to the notion in media that there is an attraction of repulsion (see for example Gross & Aday, 2003; Schulz, 2017 forthcoming). In fact, Gross and Aday made suggestions in their study that people are drawn inexorably to crime stories or those that horrify and stun the viewers or communication platform users. He/she referred to the *scary information* in people’s houses and living rooms. Studies around the world highlight the attraction of repulsion and the lure of being horrified while still being safe and secure at home (Cohen, 2002). For example Schulz found in 2010, as well as in a more recent study in 2017, that more than 200 hours of free to air TV is dedicated to crime, courts dramas, forensic dramas, terrorism, or murder mysteries and often he/she includes the horrors of child murders. Murder mysteries are a constant fascination and nothing is more horrifying than a missing child or children (Leaver, 2017). For example, whenever a child is missing in Australia the 1966 murders and missing Beaumont children are raised in what media terms the ‘tombstone paragraph’. Countless books and programmes on various media have aired in the hope of finding out what happened to ‘Australia’s Most Famous Unsolved Mystery’ (Rule, 2006). Such constant reminders of children as victims clearly define that it is our society that forgets to take care of children. In recent years there have been many others, but the little blonde toddler Madeleine McCann (Akerman, 2017), the daughter of two English doctors on holiday at Praia De Luz in Portugal, has taken centre stage as we prepare each year to be *horrified* and *obsessed with finding the truth of what happened*.

These terms are most often collocated as a reminder by the authors to be aware and to be very afraid. Altheide (2003a) suggests the discourse of fear is a major attractant

to media and this is evident in discourses and the collocated lexical items surrounding children in *danger or peril*.

Agency

Ranson (2016) has clearly identified that within news analysis discourse there is a strong correlation between agency and the ability to make choices and decisions about one's life. For children this is clearly absent. Ranson has suggested that in most instances agency appears to have two sides for consideration; those who have it and those who do not (Ranson, 2016, p. 42). In the case of children reported widely over multiple media platforms, that agency is confined to other authorities reporting on the situation or deciding whether something should be implemented in order to change the circumstances of the victims of child abuse, neglect and other harm. Some examples of this discourse are also discussed by various researchers, such as Fairclough (2003, p. 155 cited in Ranson, 2016) who indicates representation of social actors involves a number of choices, including active/passive and inclusion/exclusion constructions, which are 'socially significant, for instance with respect to the representation of agency'. Through the analysis of lexical patterns, it is observed that childhood victims are constructed as having agency in some instances and lacking agency in others. Within the extracts, the actors are presented as either an agent, or a subject, of their of their victim status. Consider some of these commentaries found online with stories related to child abuse and neglect. Some [most] children lack agency when he/she is victim of: tug of love or a war within a custody dispute (see also Schulz, 2012 on contested media spaces and courts), abused for years at school, disbelieved by the authorities for years, suffered at the hands of those entrusted to care (see for example McFarlane, 2016). In this harrowing story on the ABC's *Four Corners* programme, children described bullying, harassment and sexual abuse inflicted by other children who share their homes. Children also described adult men preying on and sexually exploiting girls in 'resi' or residential, care.

The agency is clearly with others as to how children are portrayed and treated within this situation of abuse and neglect. He/she are reported widely in myriad media platforms; used for sexual gratification, becoming obese, spending too much time in front of screens, and being oversexualised (see for example Ey, 2016) which clearly identified the issues of concern that very young children were subjected to early sexualisation via media and other social media platforms. 'This raises questions about the extent to which children are introduced to adult sexuality from a very young age' (Ey, 2016, p. 8) Clearly the agency to change things, despite many years of research suggesting that this is a danger for them, authorities have not acted to regulate and or dictate content on early childhood TV or other media.

In addition, other research indicates that children need more input and education on safety and wellbeing to *protect themselves* from harm or abuse. This implies that children have agency to do so when in actual fact this ability is often

taken from them by neglectful parenting, poor self-esteem, cultural norms or other factors.

For example, the training programmes to develop child protection and children's learning to keep themselves safe use the premise that there is agency within children to keep safe when parents are constantly fearful that this is unlikely, and in neglectful families this is left unattended until social workers and Departments of Community Welfare and Wellbeing are notified (see for example the programmes initiated by the Daniel Morecombe Foundation, 2017 in Qld)². Unless these curricula work, the agency is shifted to *Authorities* who are tasked with keeping children safe from harm. However in some scenarios or worse still, police intervention may bring children into the justice system where it has been reported children are often facing more harm and abuse or in danger of their wellbeing (see for example the South Australian Police Website which gives information on keeping children safe).

Authority

The readers, viewers and users of media platforms, as well as the field of child protection, education and academia, is constantly filled with the 'white noise' of what Gitlin (2001) calls *supersaturation*. On any given day the average person living in a modern democracy will be subjected to more than 4,000 pieces of information via news, radio, pod casts, media platforms, personal messaging and various other means of communication. In fact, there are also large amounts of advertising which are viewed in daily commutes to work for the employed members of society via bus shelters, sides of trams and buses and leaflets. Gitlin claims that we are overwhelmed in our daily lives by the torrent of media and information, and this affects the public responses and reaction. As a result of this, there is conjecture that in order to attract and recruit a person to a point of view, opinion or story that certain media techniques are employed. A major focus on fear appears to work in this regard.

Child abuse and neglect stories fulfil this role in strong measure and the authorities are always invited to comment and participate whenever these appear. Indeed viewers of the Australian Nine network in recent times were treated to two stories in quick succession in which the fear discourse was strongly used. In the first story the murder in November of 1984 in which the headlines 'A mother's pain' and her relentless quest to find the murderer of her beloved little girl (described as the day Melbourne *lost its innocence*) was aired when 33 years later the killer was brought to justice in September 2017. In a strongly worded story the viewers were reminded that the murderer was living in the same suburb or *virtually next door*. The other story on the same channel related to a reporter (Ben McCormack from Channel Nine Australia) who misused child images on a computer and pleaded guilty to the charge of mistreatment of children via a media carriage such as the internet. In both of these stories fear was the main protagonist for the protection of children.

In other situations there are constant reminders from authorities such as police and child psychologists of the

dangers lurking outside the safe cocoons of our homes. In addition, academic authorities who have researched the issues facing the education and wellbeing of children are often asked for their opinions via media, but he/she is used solely for the safe and sure ways in which to attract viewer's emotion, sensation, division, conflict and celebrity. Significantly, Ey and Cupit (2011) have warned the community of educators and child protection interventionists that there are dangers in young children's usage of the internet (Internet Safety 101, 2006–2017). Yet we are bombarded with pictures often used by schools to promote their curriculums of young children poring over an internet iPad or tablet! The message appears to be, as Gitlin (2001) suggests, overlooked because it is just too hard and too difficult to deal with it all. Additionally, we have significant input via social and other media platforms that children who watch music videos are also subjected to dangers of early sexualisation. Ey and McInnes (2015, p. 63) have clearly demonstrated in their study that children who watch music videos during child friendly viewing times will be given strong messages about what it means to be sexy or what type and style of behaviour to emulate. In fact he/she states:

[C]onfirmed that music media accessible to children on weekend morning television is highly sexualised. It also established that music media references are signifiers of pornography. Given that these music videos allegedly meet the classification criteria of PG/G-rated television, there are questions about whether these music programs are conforming to the Australian Commercial Television Industry.

Such a strong warning might result in legal changes, but it will take strong lobbying from parents groups and various child protection advocates. It will be shown in the final discourse analysis of my study of political discussions on the matters related to child protection that few people are listening and do so only under extreme pressure or when a major tragedy occurs. Authorities in charge of the care and wellbeing of children in various senior roles are active and researching constantly to enhance the lives, wellbeing and development of children and it seems tragic that few politicians and their staff are willing to put children in the *paramount* frame.

Topoi and Combined Approaches to the Political Discourses of Deferral

Topoi in discourse appear strongly to connote a commonly held view or belief in a point of view. *Topoi* are defined as commonly held views or discourses that are likely to be found within certain groups usually within professions, political fields or community and ethnic groups. These commonly held views begin to shape their thinking and definitions of how social mores or behaviours, or general opinion should be considered. Discourse analysts call this the *topoi* or *collective common discourse* within a group and often it is accompanied by their own lexical choices or preferred common language approaches. According to Jäger (in Wodak &

Meyer, 2004, p. 35) the notion of *topoi* constitutes a store of 'collective symbolism or a picture of societal reality and or the political landscape'. In this he strongly suggests that the political contexts of these realities are disseminated via their interpretive political views, and create catchphrases or link utterances and generate what appears to be plausible. Thus this is then reinforcing the power of such discourses. He further suggests that these discourses have power and contribute the powerful structures within our society in which politicians can exercise their version of events and points of view. In collating these catchphrases of *topoi* and commonly held views it surprising to see that the commonality of experience is evident on all sides of the divide. The list below is taken from more than 100 media platforms and gives a clear picture of deferral and commonality of expressions:

- Premier calls for inquiry (Richardson, 2016)
- As a father and leader of the state I'm horrified, I'm sickened
- Demands increase for child protection changes
- Royal Commission is needed demands opposition
- We must do better
- We have failed but we will change things
- Horrified beyond belief
- Shamed
- Disturbed
- Legislation to be introduced
- Accepting the recommendations from the judicial inquiry into child abuse responses
- appalling revelations
- Rotherham UK abuse revelations and neglect cases [never acted upon for fear of cultural backlash]
- Need to change laws relating to child protection
- Child Abuse scandal biggest in UK must never happen again
- We must ensure we protect our children better
- Councillors criticized for inaction on child abuse
- Priestly abuses covered up for decades criticized by both sides of the house
- Scandal rocks Tyneside
- Scandal horrifies Boston
- Scandal horrifies Adelaide
- Scandal horrified the UK (Perraudin, 2017)
- Debate called on horrors of child abuse
- We need to tackle this
- Challenge of our times

The selection of typical headlines and statements made by various authoritative political and other operatives on various media platforms is typical. All spokespeople for child protection departments of child welfare, education

or other organisations all seek to be *horrified* and jump to the media to explain that it must *never happen again*. This time things will get better say most of the political operatives and their executive directors. But the Rotherham South Yorkshire experience (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotherham_child_sexual_exploitation_scandal and <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/rotherham>) and the *Boston Globe* revelations and other exposés clearly indicate that the protection of children has a long way to go. The collective *topoi* shows clear evidence that while he/she (political operatives or their spokespersons) recognises the need to change things, it is most often yet another inquiry or Royal Commission that is called, the report is written and then the political masters suggest which areas or recommendations will be adopted.

LACUNAE (What is missing in discourse but becomes evident over time)

On channel seven in Adelaide, South Australia, on 18th September 2017, a story was presented called ‘Justice for Evie’ on the current affairs programme *Today Tonight*. The context of the programme was based on the issue of a child who had been savagely beaten by her mother who was convicted of the crime. Headlines on the website of Channel 7 highlighted the ‘case that shocked the world’. However, the mother ‘walked free’ with a suspended sentence and a fine according to the story. The father of the child (now in a new relationship and custodian of the child) said that he ‘will fight for justice for Evie as she has *no voice*’ (Picone, 2017).

In discourse analysis the topic of Lacunae is of great interest as it highlights the text that is missing . . . or perhaps the voices of those who cannot speak or write. In earlier studies by Schulz and Cannon (2011) lacunae, or missing textual elements, were identified in sentencing remarks where the term *punishment or penalty* were absent. Schultz and Cannon showed in their study that this often resulted in outraged communities who expected to hear and see this element of punishment in judicial sentencing remarks. In the media story outlined on *Today Tonight*, the lacunae appeared evident in the community and other outrage at the ‘leniency’ of the sentencing of the offending parent. The husband in this story used his own outrage to call for a tougher penalty to ensure that, in his opinion, justice had been served. In echoing this call, local political shadow Minister for Child Protection also called for the Attorney General to appeal the sentence. On the penultimate date for lodging an appeal against the sentence the Attorney General declined to appeal.

Lacunae are a powerful issue in discourse as outlined in the works of Schulz and Cannon (2011), Southerton (2003) and Dellinger (1995). Lacuna theory holds that what is missing can be significant, and it was noted by Dellinger “as a specific property of the text as a means of communication in both form and content” (1995, p. 10) and may be intentional or unintentional. This sweep of stories show the media do not regard the result as amounting to a sufficient (or any) penalty or punishment in terms of their discourse of time as

the measure of balance of the punishment to the harm to the victim. Other headlines include *abusive priests escape punishment* (Robertson, 2010) *Abusive parent walks free without time in prison* and *parents call for stiffer and stronger penalties for child sexual abusers*. Many current affairs programmes in Australia and worldwide have highlighted the problems of cover up and secrecy related to the child abuse victims of priests and significant organisations; and that it was apparent that many escaped punishments or penalties of any kind. The lacunae of punishment heralds outrage and is only acted upon when the media does not allow political operatives any other outlet but to respond. The Boston Child Abuse scandal which hid abusive priests only came to light due to the dogged and determined investigative journalist who would not be silenced.

This scandal was the focus of a film about the issues faced by the journalist and the determined efforts of the Boston Archdiocese in the USA to keep the abusive priests out of the limelight and hidden away or relocating them to other towns and cities. The story by the *Boston Globe* by Crimaldi (2017) suggests that victim/survivors are still coming forward years after the event. Such is the power of appropriate discourse that it can move people to come forward and tell their stories in the hope that it does not occur again.

Another example is the story from ABC Radio PM (2017) which focusses on the call by ‘Child Sexual Abuse Survivors [call] for tougher cover up penalties’ in the wake of the many Royal Commissions of Inquiry and Judicial Inquiries which appeared to give voice to those who have suffered in silence and a lacunae of disbelief and denial. That issue of disbelief according to Briggs (2016) means that children, in particular, need to tell 12 people before he/she is finally believed and acted upon.

This question of disbelief parallels the notion of lacunae or what is missing in text and is echoed by the work of Schulz (2014) in which the research showed bias in reports based on children and their disclosures of abuse to parents and other authorities. In these situations there is clear evidence that authorities have failed to act – *failed to believe the child or children* or their advocates—as it sounded too incredulous. But when he/she, as victims of abuse, finally get a chance to be heard via mothers, teachers, relatives or carers the unconscious bias of investigating officers becomes a major hurdle sometimes too great to overcome. Such is the cycle of abuse that it is almost too difficult to solve. Or is it?

The Cycle Continues and is Still Making News and Horrifying Communities

The cycle that is evident in modern democracies is fraught with a variety of issues. The fact is that children do not have a vote and their voices are silent (lacunae in discourse). It is only when he/she mature and realise what has happened to them that he/she begins to agitate for changes. In addition, those who have long advocated for children to be placed at the paramount place in child protection laws fear that this

has not happened strongly or widely enough. Further, the push for tougher sentences or for a review of Family Law and its responses to children at risk is also placed as a difficult challenge and is often placed at the bottom of a long list of actions needed to save and protect children.

The case of Chloe Valentine in South Australia provides clear and current exemplar of the cycle and time line that appears repetitive.

Child Tragedy, Child Death, Horrified Community Responses, Inquest reveals more horror and neglect, workers explain how child fell through the net, Organisations deny their wrongdoing or their neglect of the child or family, Inquiry or Royal Commission Called, Pledges by Political parties of all persuasions to change the law or regulations, yet another child is hurt and the cycle begins again.

1. Chloe Valentine is killed after her neglectful parents force her to ride a motorised scooter in the backyard whilst he/she filmed her many attempts (ABC News 2016). He/she failed to seek medical attention until it is too late after she has had multiple falls from the scooter.
2. It is reported that her parents had drug addiction problems and were given permission to retain custody of the child despite their drug-taking
3. The welfare social worker had a parenting plan that allowed for safe taking of drugs for the parent [s] while Chloe was supposedly cared for
4. It is revealed at an inquest that the welfare and social worker had limited knowledge of child protection and how to implement safe practices for intervention
5. The coroner of South Australia, Mark Johns, makes a series of recommendations
6. Premier Jay Weatherill calls for an inquiry into Departmental training and recruitment of social workers of the SA Dept. of Families and Communities/ Families SA (this also followed the revelations of child abuse by a Departmental Care worker, Shannon Mc Coole, who had abused babies and children while in a childcare facility run by the Department Families SA)
7. The Inquiry hands down a long list of recommendations
8. The Department has a new name – the Department of Child Protection
9. Child Protection commissioner advocated
10. Laws reforming background screening of workers for Families SA

The cycle listed above is a select example, but is an exemplar of how this continuing concern for the welfare of children is such a vexed issue. Political discourses continue to allay fears by siding with the *topoi of horror* and *pledging to change* the circumstances so *it cannot happen again*. However, in the case of the UK mass sex grooming scandals this included cultural issues that prevented full police intervention of the Asian Community involved until a whistle blower

within that same community gave voice to the problem. The *Discourse of Deferral* continues and it is hoped this study will help to identify and change the direction so that the voices of children will be heard earlier, be believed sooner and that he/she will, in turn, be safer.

Endnotes

- 1 The Late Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, Champion of Children and their protection, passed away on 6th April 2016. In 2000, Prof Briggs was named Senior Australian of the Year for her work in Child Protection and was honoured by a State Memorial headed by Premier of South Australia, the Hon Jay Weatherill MP, and the Governor of SA. She was a mentor to this author over more than 30 years.
- 2 It should be noted that the late Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs instituted the first course of curriculum dedicated to keeping children safe and helping them to identify ways of knowing if they would come to harm or be at risk of abuse. This programme, first introduced into New Zealand, was called “*Keeping Ourselves Safe*” and was part of the NZ Police Department project to prevent child abuse from occurring. In the early 1980s, Prof Briggs brought this programme to South Australia and started the first ever University curriculum for professionals in child protection identification and intervention and who were considered world leaders at that time.

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