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Opinion Piece

Children as Commodities: Conflicting Discourses of Protection and Abuse of Children

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In modern society children are valued and nurtured, and it is often stated in media discourses across a variety of platforms and via the press and elsewhere, particularly by politicians, that "Children are our future". Thus, they deserve the best education and a safe and secure environment in order to thrive and become a part of society. To this end, this study looks at how the media and its language construct children as a commodity in the economy who are used by media as a barometer for society and its commitment to decency and community. However, on closer inspection, a disturbing discourse of division emerges showing the community is split on how best to care and protect our children so that they may partake of that future. Children are used to promote viewpoints (or even ideologies) by celebrities who use their children as exemplars of their parenting style. In addition, children are used by media as a measure of whether a modern democracy is fair or decent in its application of law. From issues related to the pester power through which marketers use children to sell products to the lure of the internet, children are used to make money or seek access to it. Most modern legal frameworks actively support the maintenance of children within culture and kinship groups, yet thousands of children each year are deliberately separated from their parents who are encouraged by marketing ploys to send their children to other parts of the world for education or to seek a migration outcome. This study suggests that modern democratic societies are not consistent in their discourses which, on the one hand, seek to promote active support for the care and wellbeing of children and, on the other, continue a divisive discourse about appropriate responses. In this analysis and commentary, italics are used to give emphasis to keywords and phrases.

■ **Keywords:** Commodification of children, children as measures, vulnerability, child parent separation, child protection, migration

Children are the most vulnerable members of human society, captive and dependant on their adult carers who have complete power over them. This very vulnerability puts them at a high risk of abuse and exploitation. Power-seeking adults look for weaknesses in children and abuse them in many ways: economically, emotionally and sexually. The first responsibility to protect children against abuse lies with their family, primarily with their parents in the Anglo-American culture of the nuclear family. This caring relationship is sometimes broken by social disruption and war, and sometimes by the members of the family abusing the power they hold over the children. In such cases, the State has a responsibility to intervene to protect and care for these children.

History teaches us that too often the State has managed this responsibility to vulnerable children so badly that they have been placed with abusers who maintain the guise of carers. Victorian England permitted the use of child labour until the late 18th century when the laws against child chimney sweeps were passed in 1788.

Later, the Factory Act, which was passed in 1833, prevented children from working in dangerous and unsanitary factories (Griffin 2014). Children were sent from England to escape war only to be mistreated and sexually abused in orphanages in Australia. In a Senate report for the Australian Parliament, Siewert (2009) related the abuse and trauma of some children:

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> '. . . they were brutalised. Some believed their parents were dead. Some found out later that they were not and very few got back to England in time to be able to be reunited. But the answer to your question is, yes, we did get a lot of that evidence'.

Aboriginal children were taken from their families under the guise of protection, but often for the real aim of destroying their culture. The State often placed children in the care of church organisations that used their cloak of spiritual authority to hide sexual abuse, gratifying the lust of priests instead of providing care, as documented in the various reports that have found their way into the public domain[1]. For example, reflecting on the inquiry he had led, the late Hon. Edward Mullighan QC (2008, p. v) said himself that:

> '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'.

Many of these reports highlight decades of abuse and neglect in state and church care, and the lack of state government responses to such abuses. Much of this has now been documented by special commissions and discussed in the media, sometimes with sanctimonious horror. So, it is timely to see if our society has responded to these lessons of history so that children are now given the protection that their vulnerable position deserves. It is worth noting that media discourses continue to provide similar tales and suggestions of how children are vulnerable and at risk.

Children as Measures of Society and Discourses of Concern for Children

Children are often used as a measure of how society treats its most vulnerable citizens. In recent years, the outcry from parents, communities, cultures, academics and politicians have resounded with the demands that our children be kept safe and secure. In recent works (for instance, Ey & McInnes, 2015; Schulz, 2018), significant concerns have been outlined which have found their way into media and elsewhere. Laws in modern democracies often state categorically that children should be protected from harm, kept safe and maintained within their culture and kinship groups. This was highlighted in the *Little Children are Sacred* report, which was authored by Patricia Anderson and Rex Wild QC (2007) and released by the Northern Territory Government on August 8th, 2007. The report was significant in highlighting severe cases of sexual and child abuse, severe neglect and alcohol problems in aboriginal communities. It also suggested that a majority of children from these communities were not attending school or receiving basic health care. Its findings were so damning that the media ran with significant headlines suggesting that yet another *'Stolen Generation'* of Indigenous children had been identified. The report resounded strongly in the media and resulted in what has been termed the Howard Government Response in which elements of the military (nursing and medical staff) were sent to intervene and save children at risk in remote and tribal communities. Within weeks, military vehicles replete with nursing and medical staff appeared at community facilities to examine and treat children.

John Howard, the then Prime Minister of Australia, was seen to be moved by the findings of the report, which identified severe failings on the part of communities, families and government in protecting children from diseases (some of which were venereal diseases in primary school aged children) and child abuse and neglect. The summary of their reports online indicated that:

> 'It is impossible to set communities on the path to recovery from the sexual abuse of children without dealing with the basic services and social ills. It is our hope that no Aboriginal child born from this year on will ever suffer sexual abuse' (Rex Wild QC and Patricia Anderson, Inquiry Co-Chairs *Little Children are Sacred* p 3 of summary report 2007).

Another heart-rending report written by the Australian Human Rights Commission in the *Bringing Them Home Report* identified a stolen generation of Indigenous children separated from their parents between 1910 and 1970 under government authority. During these decades children, seen as 'at risk' by the then Aboriginal Protection Authorities in Australia, were perceived to benefit from being taken from their parents and communities and raised in orphanages and homes run for this purpose by well-meaning people with often deluded notions of 19th-century hygiene and education, who believed that, through separation, these children would become civilised. Such was the outcry from Aboriginal activists that eventually the Government of Australia apologised to the nation in the in the Federal Parliament. This apology was delivered by the then Prime Minister Mr Kevin Rudd on February 13th, 2008. In this speech, which brought Aboriginal leaders present in the Great Hall of the Parliament to tears, he apologised for forced adoptions and a litany of failings on behalf of the people of Australia. Thus, a barometer of our concern for children as a modern caring nation was delivered to the community via TV, radio and online. In this speech, the PM emphasised the following:

> 'We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country' (PM Kevin Rudd Feb 13th, 2008 reported in *The Australian).*

These tragic events still haunt the communities concerned and are often referred to whenever there is an issue that is associated with abuse or neglect within an Indigenous family or community.

A country is often judged by how it treats its children and their families, with a measure of decency being assessed through the lens of how children are being used as a commodity. For example, the media were actively reporting on the issues of children being separated from parents, who were 'illegal immigrants', at the border of Mexico and the USA. Under US law, children must not be kept in detention while awaiting their asylum claims. However, children were photographed in wire netting cages and *screaming* for their parents (see, for example, the online stories reported by *The Guardian* relating to this). This was clearly identified as a problem created by the new anti-immigration policies of the Trump administration and the media actively condemned the USA as an unfeeling and uncaring society. The discourses abound with lexical issues related to *screaming, anguish, heartless authorities and distress.*

Children as Vulnerable Without Parents, a Discourse of Division?

For many years, researchers have been concerned about the separation of children and parents, and, to that end, most policy frameworks designed for the protection of children seek to keep families together. See, for example, the work of Fisher, Frazer, and Murray (1986), who defined the problems of homesickness as a form of risk to development in children at boarding schools. Their early research showed a high incidence of homesickness and ailments reported in their first year of boarding.

Other research concludes that boarding school, in some instances, can influence children of a different culture to that in which the school is based and cause traumas. For example, Manson, Beals, Dick, and Duclos (1989) did early research on native American Indian students at boarding schools and concluded that a significant percentage were at risk of suicide due to the lack of familiar and family supports. Other research also supports the notion that children do better if they are kept within the family unit. Schaverien (2011) argued that sending very young children to boarding schools away from early kinship groups mars their development of attachments and ongoing relationships later in life. She named this problem 'Boarding School Syndrome'. Most government agencies working with children from difficult and challenging environments work very hard at maintaining family kinships despite having to remove children to safety and into temporary or other boarding arrangements, such as foster care. This is borne out by the policy papers released by the Australian Government, which specifies a strong preference for children, where possible, to be kept within their cultural frameworks and family kinship groups. However, when child abuse reports are made, and maltreatment or neglect ensue, there appears to be no national plan or policy to allow a child to be easily removed to a place of safety, and there have been examples in which abuse has been reported but a lack of action has resulted in the death of children. See, for example, the issues raised by the Australian Institute of Family Studies report, which suggested as early as 2005 that:

> 'The variability in the grounds for intervention, what is substantiated and the response to families that do not meet the threshold for statutory child protection intervention means that children in different parts of Australia may be subject to similar adverse circumstances but experience a different response dependent upon where they live' (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005, p. 23).

The above report highlighted that often children were kept within family groups as a policy default position – a situation which may need reviewing. There have been examples reported in the press of children left in abusive situations often because of a lack of staff or resources to handle the problems. In South Australia, for example, the matters arising from the "House of Horrors" (2011) and Chloe Valentine (2012) cases deeply affected the community's disdain for leaving children in what are seen to be dysfunctional and dangerous situations. These cases led to the Nyland Royal Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Systems (2016), which identified a lack of clarity of policy. This inquiry, in turn, led to the update of legislation pertaining to how social workers should intervene in such matters while investigating claims of abuse and neglect.

Many children spend a great deal of time away from their parents in the formative years and it often coincides with either parental disadvantage or extreme wealth. For example, throughout the democratic world and elsewhere, children are sent to boarding schools or are boarding in home stays at a local level in order to benefit their education and create opportunities to move away from a disadvantaged or socio-economically difficult environment.

Consider the case of girls' and boys' boarding schools in Nigeria where children are sent for a chance at education. Most of these schools are run as boarding colleges which specify strict rules and attendance, and are based on disciplined studies and a Western education. This is said by pundits to assist those young people who wish to have a better future. However, the Islamic groups headed by Boko Haram (which literally means banning education) have been quoted as deliberately targeting these schools and capturing or kidnapping the children to prevent further education. According to one report in the African news (Agence France-Presse (AFP), 2018), these schools are particularly at risk due to their focus on a secular education. This has led to several schools being closed down in recent months and years. The AFP quoted a UN report, stating that: 'According to the UN children's agency UNICEF, more than 2,296 teachers have been killed and some 1,400 schools destroyed in the wider northeast region' and a separate text box highlighted the fact that this determination to educate children had resulted in 20,000 deaths.

In South Africa, Oprah Winfrey, the African American celebrity, has started a significant Academy for Girls (who board and receive a strong Western-influenced education).

In fact, some parents complained about the amount of time they were allowed to visit their children and how often they were allowed to use their cell phones on weekends. Criticism online echoed these views and comments about nutrition and other matters were actively made. An executive of the school responded to the complaints by appealing to security and school spirit (Felix, 2007) and other reports related to the Oprah Winfrey Academy for Girls also suggested that issues of concern had been raised about policy and practices of how the girls were treated by the school.

This school has received praise from the late Nelson Mandela and also from former President of the USA Bill Clinton. This Girls Leadership Academy deliberately takes girls from very disadvantaged backgrounds and especially from parents who are affected by HIV AIDS – a significant problem to this day in South Africa. Prestigious schools in other countries also market their specific ability to help children learn other languages or to develop to their full potential. Websites in Canada and Switzerland highlight this. For example, the My Premium Europe website offers the top 19 Schools, many of which have up to 47 different nationalities like the Schaffhausen School.

Children and the Risk Society

Ulrich Beck (2008) has written extensively on the phenomenon of the risk society, which sees modern democratic nations, which are experiencing safer and safer societies despite the fear discourses used by media, put an increasingly stronger emphasis on safety.

Since the early 1980s, it is rare to see younger or primary school children walking to school with free-range parenting frowned upon via media reports (see, for example, the Letters to the Editor in the *New York Times* in 2015). People are consumed by fear according to Altheide (2003a, 2003b), who suggested that the fear discourse is the currency of modern media reporting. Thus, rare, but reported, child abductions immediately suffocate the ability of parents to allow children to have the freedom to roam a neighbourhood or park because the world has 'changed' and is dangerous to children. Constant references to what parents must fear both globally and locally, or via health reports, are in the media and on social media platforms. The obesity crisis, learning difficulties, missing out and inactivity, and brain abuse via screen times are just some examples of these fears. The fear discourse of 'unsupervised children are in danger' has grown the *family taxi* of mums and other relatives picking up children from school in the ubiquitous SUV (as this provides safe travel). In turn, a new fear arises about obesity and the lack of exercise in children affecting their health.

The Legal Response in Australia

Most laws in Australia emphasise that the best place for the wellbeing of a child is within a family. Indeed, this is echoed by the Department of Family and Community Services in NSW which suggests that a child should:

> '. . . stay home whenever possible . . . . Most families can get help to cope with difficulties while the children remain at home. Sometimes children spend time away as part of a plan to help them and their family. They can go home when the family issues are addressed' (Department of Family and Community Services Website).

In South Australia, the Children's Protection Act 1993 (SA) empowered the Minister to intervene and take care of a child who was 'at risk'.[2] Included in the definition of at risk was a significant risk of physical, psychological or emotional harm or abuse (including sexual abuse) and the inability to 'exercise adequate supervision and control over the child', as well as failure to ensure attendance at school. Drug addiction was also identified. If a child's physical or psychological development is in jeopardy that was also defined as risk.

As a result of the Nyland inquiry of 2016, this legislation was replaced by the Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017. This portentously stated in Section 7 that the 'paramount consideration in the administration, operation and enforcement of this Act must always be to ensure that children and young people are protected from harm'. In Section 8 of the Act, it recognises that children's lack of voice is a significant aspect of vulnerability and that the following needs of children must be considered:

- the need to be heard and have their views considered;
- the need for love and attachment;
- the need for self-esteem; and
- the need to achieve their full potential.

In Section 18, the concept of risk is expanded to include removal by the State for underage marriage or genital mutilation, while in Section 10, the Act requires early intervention. Again, the principles of intervention include taking into account the views of the child and also her or his 'culture, disability, language and religion' and 'if relevant those in whose care children or young people are placed'. These latter points are reinforced in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who should retain a connection with their family and culture according to Section 12. So, it can be seen that the State is responding to the previous failures to intervene when families were not caring for their children and, at the same time, not separating Aboriginal children from their family, and respecting a child's religion and culture as well as preventing abuses of genital mutilation and forced child marriage. How instances of those policies being in conflict will be resolved remains to be seen. However, despite the identification of previous failures and responses to them, mainstream culture continues to accept the abuse of children as accessories to celebrity, exploiting them for economic advantage, for farming of organs, using them for migration outcomes and, even though it is

illegal, exploiting them for the sexual pleasure of adults which remains rife on the internet.

Children as Accessories in Popular Culture

Children, Emotion, Celebrity and Concerns

A brief internet search using the term *children of celebrities* returns a startling number of results – up to 17 million on some search engines. The current fashion to see and hear more about celebrities and their children has magazines devoted to the cult of celebrity, while Google search results return headings like '15 children who look like their celebrity parents'. There are also significant numbers of articles in online and mainstream media platforms that focus on problems, clothing and 'what we can learn from celebrity *kids in trouble*'. Discussion also ensues on vegetarian, paleo and vegan diets for children and the debate on *free range parenting*.

Following this pattern, a quick glance at the traditional selection of women's magazines available in Australia shows clearly that celebrity culture is focussed on having children – announcing pregnancies often with clear photos of the mother and baby in utero being lovingly patted by an older future sibling. Television programmes also focus strongly on the cult of celebrity and this has become almost daily news fare. Recent studies have shown that the media clearly emphasises stories with the following qualities: *emotion, sensation, division, conflict and celebrity* (see, for example, the work of Schulz, 2018; Schulz & Cannon, 2018). It appears, however, that celebrity is the main news peg from which a lot of stories are hung and from these other newsworthy matters are raised. An example of this has been the attention paid to high profile stars such as Madonna with her brood of adopted and biological children who was interviewed by the *Today* programme and reported on *People* magazine online in which she highlights her *emotional journey* to adopt from African Malawi (Vivinetto, 2017). Angelina Jolie and her adoptive and natural born children also stir strong story lines as they hit news and story headlines focussing on their charity approaches from Asia to Africa. They are often discussed in terms of what they wear, how much they look like their parent or how they emulate their desires to 'make a difference' and join with their parent in charity work.

Celebrities are also seen celebrities are also seen as direction setters for how to give birth to children (via the latest, safe and serene manner), raise a family, dress them and make them *useful members of society*. The social and mainstream media are brimming with a plethora of stories within this genre such as People TV (2018) showing Pink as the glamour star and her tips on raising strong healthy children based on her own experiences of a tough childhood. Other preferences for raising a family include celebrities rearing non-gender stereotyped children – see, for example, Parents (2018a) – and *paleo kids* concerning a very controversial and strict diet based on caveman experiences such as hunting, foraging and gathering of foods. The ongoing celebrity culture is also fuelling a level of anxiety in new parents who do not have access to support or significant resources when raising children in less than ideal circumstances. One family that receives an inordinate amount of scrutiny, of course, is the Royal Family and, in particular, their latest additions: Prince George, Princess Charlotte and Prince Louis. Photos and articles abound on what they are wearing, what nursery schools they attend and what well-behaved children they are and how they are a *credit to their parents* with photos taken by their proud mother.

In contrast, a Smith Family Report (2016, p.11) suggests that in the early years, some children are missing key areas of development: 'One in three (32.6 percent) children from Australia's most disadvantaged communities does not meet one or more key developmental milestones in their first year of school. This compares to 15.5 percent of children from the most advantaged communities'. Examples abound of children in trouble (disadvantaged, failing milestones and living in poverty), yet the media and women's TV, in particular, and magazines, in general, are still replete with stories of the celebrities described in discourse as living in *baby bliss,* and announcing pregnancies via Twitter feeds (Parent, 2018b). This media platform offers parents at least '55 ways in which celebrities have announced their much-awaited pregnancies'. Then of course, after the babies are born, there is a constant stream of discourse which describes in minute detail the progress of their lives.

Media consumers, in general, are fed regular versions of this via television and mainstream paper-based magazine products which then, in turn, feed the online platforms. Children in this context are described, analysed and often compared with their famous parents as having their looks, charm or being groomed to take over when the time is right! This, of course, is unrealistic and does not allow or consider that the average parent consuming this information may be affected by this unreality. For example, the work of Chess and Maddox (2018, p.201, citing Duffy & Hund, 2015) echoes this view in their study of celebrity video gaming and popular culture. '[T]hat "the last decade has witnessed a proliferation of socially mediated cultures of creative production located in the traditionally feminine domains of fashion, beauty, parenting, and craft".' In turn, they argue strongly that there becomes a proliferation of ideas to copy, and anxieties to follow which do nothing for the future protection and wellbeing of children. They also suggest that within this cult of celebrity is a push to form female viewers and users of this form of media into self-appointed, aspirational celebrities, though they often fail in their attempts to become the perfect copy of Kim Kardashian or Angelina Jolie. Indeed, the plethora of what I suggest are parenting *princesses* who use their celebrity to this end and want to be seen as special and receive a large

amount of support and attention (see also Hall & Holmes, 2008).

Children as Entertainment

The early years of the 20th century gave rise to the idea of the child star. Shirley Temple [later Black] became a favourite with film goers who were facing difficulties and challenges during the lean years of the Great Depression. Because social media was not invented then only the positive side of this little girl's behaviour and family life was ever reported (Zeitchik & Kaufman, 2014). It is very different today when reports of the lives of Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber and others have often resounded with tales of their law breaking or behaviour which has resulted in tragedy. Earlier still is the tragic tale of barn stormers or aerialists who used children to entertain and show their mettle or talent. There is no shortage of modern children, often younger than 10 years of age, who are actively encouraged by parents to be displayed and used for entertainment. Some recent examples have included the Channel 7 Network programme *Little Big Shots.* This one-hour show has been replete with jugglers, bubble artists, martial art black belt champions, entrepreneurs, and opera divas, who are often joined on stage with youthful language interpreters as many of the children come from international countries and are flown along with proud parents to Australia to perform. However, there is hardly ever a discussion or reaction to how these children at such young ages came to be at the skill levels expected of adults.

Many researchers have examined the situation of young children who are in the entertainment world and some of the studies indicate that issues of concern are widespread. For example, Suhay (2014) in the *Christian Science Monitor* waxed positively over the life of the late Shirley Temple Black a well-known child star of the 1930s and the Great Depression, but others fear that children in the entertainment industry are at risk or have suffered exploitation. However, Dalton (2011) described the life of children who were film stars as controlled and exploited, and reported that at times they were sexualised and maltreated. Other researchers and reports suggest that children are often maltreated and abused in entertainment-based work. Reporter Mark Guarino in the *Christian Science Monitor* (2010, p.1) has indicated that children become 'tickets to fame' and as a consequence this provides evidence for concern. He states that: 'In this scenario, people will increasingly use their children in bizarre, shameless, and sometimes unethical ways specifically to gain notoriety and then will take one step further to brand themselves as the official representative of that notoriety, which means a steady income and a guaranteed spot on the cluttered but competitive media landscape'.

This clearly indicates that the plethora of parents using social media to make their children famous via entertainment do not always have altruistic motives and are aided and abetted by modern media approaches to entertainment.

Some examples of this have been given intense scrutiny by media, but the Child Protection protocols are unlikely to remove such entertaining and talented children from so-called well-meaning parents (Merry, 2018). According to Merry, the problem today stems from the impact of the internet and its ability to invade and provoke intense interest to the detriment of famous children. She cited earlier examples of the late child star and later singing sensation Judy Garland having to weather the groping of older men on set, and Danny Bonaduce (*The Partridge Family*) who suffered extremes of mental ill health during his life as a result of his child stardom.

Children Used for Economic Purposes

Children as Economic Accessories to Modern Lives

During the 21st century, many Western advanced democracies called on their populations to grow by increasing the birth rate per woman.

An example of this was when Peter Costello, treasurer in the Howard Government Administration of 1993–2007, suggested that Australian women of child-bearing years should have one baby for each member of a married couple and 'one for the country'. In an ABC radio report from June 27th, 2007, Ashley Hall announced: 'And Mr Costello is keen to take credit for the boost in baby bumps, pointing out the Government's been urging families to have babies by offering them a baby bonus and increasing family payments'. The resulting baby boom was consistently purported as good for the country and assisting with the growth of the economy.

In addition, Japan which has a low birth rate, also attempted a number of options to try to get women to have more babies. For example, Semuels (2017) in *The Atlantic* referred to the mystery of why so few babies were being born in Japan and various issues have been raised to describe the phenomena which is affecting the Japanese economy and other social issues. Part of the reason has been the advent of women into the work force and their concomitant forging of careers, and the lack of males being able to secure permanent jobs to secure family finances. High-level cabinet meetings generated by the PM Shinzo Abe are still seeking solutions to the problem. Even Singapore and parts of Asia are noting the lack of children being born to families. This has been widely reported and consistently relates to the importance of birth rates to the economy of a country that is experiencing an aging society. Vivienne Khoo has identified and written about these issues extensively since 2016 as the resistance to having families intensifies the debate in East Asia, in particular, where the economy is dependent on babies as a vital link to future prosperity. In her article, Khoo (2016, n.p.) stated that 'According to the World Bank East Asia and the Pacific areas are ageing the fastest and China and Japan have the greatest demographic stress levels'. A recent United Nations report, meanwhile, says that both countries will see their 'dependency ratios' rise, meaning that there will be more dependents and fewer workers in those countries by 2050.

The discourse relating to children as appendages to the world economy and the recalcitrant modern families failing to have more children is again dominating the world stage. Levinson, as early as 2000, was suggesting that children are now agents in their own economic endeavours and can no longer be considered as other within the family domain and constricted by them. In fact, she claims: '. . . they are distinguished by a focus on children as units of observation and by a willingness to recognize children as actors in their own rights, constrained by societies' constructions of appropriate spaces and activities for childhood but mediating the impacts of social boundaries by their choices and behaviour' (Levinson, 2000, p. 126). While this view point has merit, there are disturbing signs that children are used by families for economic gain but that children are denied agency in this decision-making approach.

Children as Money Makers

In keeping with the political element, recent times have seen extraordinary media coverage of the relationship between the former Deputy Prime Minister Mr Barnaby Joyce and his paramour (now partner) Vikki Campion, whose baby Sebastian was born in April 2018 while Mr Joyce was serving as a senator in the Australian Parliament. A follow-up interview about the affair with Campion, conducted by Channel 7, resulted in a payment of $150,000 to the couple's baby to be 'placed in trust for his future'. Online platforms abound with images of them and their baby. Here is another example of babies being 'worth something' despite the trauma and trouble they may bring to the parents. Other examples are often exploited by media as they strive to fill an ever-expanding media cycle.

ABC Australia (2018) recently featured a young entrepreneurial eco sensitive child who had started her own business and was saving towards her future home and aspirations for her education. Children as worth is becoming big business as advertising works harder at getting parents to respond to their darling children's *pester power*. In addition, the risk society is promoting the buying of brands to protect, educate and secure children's safety via such items as the ubiquitous Sport/Suburban Utility Vehicle (SUV) motor cars outside schools at drop off times, the plethora of children's educative toys and child tracking devices. This style of helicopter parenting is carefully and consistently brought up as a 'hot topic' on women's TV programmes or in women's magazines, reminding them of their responsibility for raising the perfect child.

In recent times, in Australia, some programmes have been promoting the ability of children to make money by being 'little entrepreneurs'. One such programme featured a little boy aged about 11 called Max Cosgrove who raises chickens and sells them online to various people (Black, 2018; Pidgeon, 2017). He featured on a programme called *Little Big Shots* on the Channel 7 network in Australia and along with him were very young, talented children who entertained and enthralled. This young lad is reported to be making large amounts of money and setting himself up for a future as a chicken farmer. Another child collects containers for recycling across an area that lacks a collection point and subsequently collects money for them under the container deposit scheme and is saving for a house (King, 2018). While the aim of the show is to entertain, the compere is always keen to ask the children about their future and various answers have been forthcoming, such as concert pianist, aerialist for *Cirque du Soleil*, chicken farmer, dancer and movie star.

Children as a Marketing Ploy

Pester power is well documented and commented upon in such a way that even academics are calling for certain marketing and advertising bans to protect children's health, well-being and even sexual development (Ey & Mc Innes, 2015). Recently, this was evident during a parental fracas over a miniature grocery shopping items promotion by Coles supermarkets in Australia. Stories were rife of frantic parents attempting to buy and swap at Coles supermarkets around Australia to ensure that their child received what they wanted – a complete set of mini groceries. It was claimed in the media that this was a marketing and advertising ploy used by Coles to divert attention away from the negative responses to the removal of free plastic shopping bags in order to reduce plastic waste. The availability of the free mini grocery items with each $30 purchase soon overtook the media reportage. See, for example, the stories from News.com.au which outline the chaos at shopping centres. Indeed, even visiting pop star celebrity Katy Perry was reported to ask for a complete mini grocery set (Carlson, 2018).

Children Exploited for Other Purposes

Children Conceived Especially and Used as Donors for Sick Siblings

In countries where medicine has surged ahead and can save lives, bone marrow and organ donors have been welcomed in the fight to save lives. In some countries, the availability and the matching of donors takes an inordinate amount of time and, despite calls for more donors, many families wait in vain for their loved one to be able to receive donor organs or grafts. Such is the problem that, in some cases, parents have decided to conceive a child to act as a live donor for their sick one. Gina Kolata, as early as 1991, wrote in the *New York Times* about children being conceived as lifesavers. In her story, a photo of a new baby is displayed and the parents, during the interview, discuss her life saving ability (Kolata, 1991). An example of using a sibling as a potential lifesaver donor appeared on TV screens in Australia only recently (Sunday 12th August 2018, *Sixty Minutes* current affairs programme). This also occurs in Asia where sons are highly prized, and daughters are viewed as a potential commodity. In a story from *The Straits Times* (Lee, 2018), community

outrage over a couple's decision to give away a daughter in order to save their son from leukaemia is recounted.

A lead story in the Daily Mail UK also addressed the children as donors issue, referring to the Densley family whose children had been born with a fatal auto immune condition, and a son of 4 years who was saved by a fourth child who was genetically engineered to be a match for donation of bone (Stevens, 2018). Several examples have been identified on media platforms and the children are often referred to as brave, *fighting for their lives,* and *being saved* by their little brother or sister. Parents are often referred to in media discourse as *desperate* and *devoted* to saving their children. The story by Kylie Stevens highlighted that the Densley parents had made a *controversial decision* and that they *hit back at criticism* of using their new baby, Lilijana, for the purpose of donation. There are several stories available online, but the discourse remains the same: the donor children are *heroes or lifesavers* and the parents of the sick child are *desperate* and *determined.* Yet, despite criticism, their new child conceived for the purpose of donation – without consent of that child – is seen as a *brave* decision. The question remains, is the child written about here a commodity?

Children as Anchors for Families Wishing to Migrate to Another Culture or Country

In many countries, including developing countries, separating parents and their children is quite commonplace and is prevalent among some wealthy families who take the opportunity to educate their children in Western languages and culture through boarding schools. One obvious example is Eton Boys College in the UK, which was founded in the 15th century, and is considered one of the most prestigious boys' schools in the world. It is not uncommon for the children of foreign royalty, aristocracy or corporate barons to send their sons there for not just the education, but the future networks and connections to be had there. In recent times, the Princes of the Royal of House of Windsor – Princes William, heir to the British throne, and Prince Harry – have both attended this school. It is known that former boys include at least two Presidents from the Middle East and a king. It has 19 alumni who became Prime Ministers of the UK and boasts several well-known Nobel Prize winners, novelists and celebrities. Even as far away as China, the *Hong Kong Tatler* (2018) provides information to parents to prepare to send their children to the UK for education:

> 'Thinking of sending your kids to the UK for a British education? Unlike in America, Britain calls their private schools "public", whereas non-fee-paying institutions are referred to as "state schools" or "comprehensives". . . . . we've shortlisted some of the best British public schools with incredible educational standards and high-class facilities for you to consider' (*Hong Kong Tatler*, 2018, n.p.).

This paragraph is then followed by a photo of Eton and various well-known boarding colleges outlining their credentials and fees, which can run to more than AUD$100,000 per year per child. Australia is not that different and markets itself as a significant education destination with another prize attached at tertiary level – permanent residency. For example, some online platforms extol the virtues of coming to Australia at a young age to learn English without a distinct Asian accent. In fact, the number of primary school children coming to study in Australia is growing, along with their parents who seek to invest in Australia. Since 2016, when Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull announced a new visa class which allows children to study at primary level and later apply for permanent residency, the numbers of enquiries have increased – according to Juwai.com, a specialist real estate portal which was reported by the multicultural news service of SBS News in Australia (Acharya, 2016, n.p.). They reported 'an increasing number of Chinese families seeking to live and migrate to Australia'. Dave Platter, from the leading Chinese international-property portal Juwai.com, said 'there has been a nearly 20 per cent jump in inquiries for properties in Australia since Mr Turnbull's announcement' (Acharya, 2016, n.p.). Another news report on Juwai.com suggests going to New Zealand 'before the door closes'.

In Australia, a child is sometimes sent on ahead of other family members to live in rented accommodation with a nanny hired by the family. In many instances, the nanny can have up to four or five children in the household, which is near the school. The child (or children) attends a local state school and, occasionally, other children board along with the same nanny or child carer who acts as the parent (in loco parentis), taking the child/ren to school each day. Larger numbers are now attending state-run primary schools in what Juwai.com calls 'good areas', usually in the wealthier suburbs where the parenting, child wellbeing and education appear to be of a higher standard. These children are charged full fees, but this is often less than prestigious private schools in Australia. There is a plethora of websites which advocate study in Australia for young children, as well as senior high school children. These include the Study Adelaide and My Australian Dream websites which give a very comprehensive overview of how to approach the decision and what benefits there are. One website advocates the outcome of a visa as a road to permanent residency quite clearly.

Nevertheless, some private schools are much in demand, such as The King's School in Sydney, which boasts an international and inclusive curriculum and welcomes boys from around the world. Their website states that:

> 'The School's advanced boarding facilities and international reputation for academic excellence and leadership, result in strong interest from international students who make up almost 15% (around 50+ students) of the boarding population at any time' (The Kings School, 2017).

It would appear that being separated from your children if you are wealthy parents is *de rigeur* and considered as a benevolent thing to do for setting your child up for success

and a brilliant future. The School also provides agents overseas to assist and facilitate enrolments and student visas.

In Australia, Noel Pearson, an Indigenous academic and adviser to governments, is a strong advocate of education as a way out of disadvantage for Indigenous students and he promotes boarding schools for gifted and enthusiastic students. Pearson (2018) suggested recently that he could see sending children to boarding school as a way out of passive welfare. However, Fogarty and Guenther (2018), in their Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) blog, questioned his assumptions. They suggested that the successes of education via boarding schools for Indigenous children are often based on incorrect results and suppositions, proposing that location, culture and identity play a part in child wellbeing. They argued that sometimes these students' choices are limited because going home is problematic due to welfare issues and opting for a chance at a better life via a good educational beginning may not work out. While the issues surrounding boarding schools are often discussed and researched, one has to wonder if parents worldwide are oblivious to the possible negative outcomes for their child and can only visualise glorious open spaces, English classes and a potential future life in another country, often spearheaded by their children.

Children as the Barometer of Concern Identified Within Laws Pertaining to the Care and Welfare of Children

Within the immigration debates that have been foregoing in this article, there are also concerns that some countries are not humane in their approaches to the care and welfare of children, especially those who receive children unaccompanied by their parents as well as those who arrive with their parents.

A case in point is the global discourse of disapproval (Schulz, 2010) in which the USA was openly criticised for the treatment of children by separating them from their parents who appeared at the border between Mexico and the USA seeking asylum. The laws made to prevent children from going into detention had the effect of raising the ire of activists, who made a lot of noise about children being kept in cages while awaiting allocated accommodation (Hains, 2018). These discourses abounded in which lexical choices (i.e. descriptions and words used) focussed on the *inhumane practices* and children *screaming in cages.*

Children are often used as a yardstick for deciding if a society is decent or not, and whether it cares about the children who live within its communities. For example, the debates about child care and its affordability often play out in the media using claims such as child development being delayed due to the lack of care available to working mothers or fathers. In Australia, such a scenario was evident when, during budget debates on child care rebates and on the changes that were then implemented in 2017, some parents who were interviewed for an online story who did not pass an eligibility test based on income suggested to ABC reporter Julie Doyle that: 'It's vital for sociability for the kids and the things that they learn at day care they just don't learn at home'.

'The government has got this all wrong' (Doyle, 2018, n.p.). Most parents were unprepared for the means testing for claiming child care rebates, which for some meant an increased cost for child care. This has resulted in ongoing debate about whether the Australian government cares enough about children to provide child care and development services for early childhood. Some leading child care firms were encouraging parents to volunteer up to several hours a week to pass the eligibility tests and thus be able to claim from the government purse.

Discourses of Divided Opinions

In order to determine how the media reports on matters such as children being separated from families, it is significant to recall that children, for the most part, do not have agency in decisions that shape their lives. Such reporting should be dealt with by professional researchers who consider these issues on a regular basis. However, there appears to be a strong disconnection between government policies related to children who live here in various situations and with families and cultural groups, and the active recruitment of children to come and live and study in Australia. The following table gives examples taken from more than 50 media and website platforms and identifies and summarises briefly the main lexis used. In addition, collocations – words juxtaposed either side of the main theme of children and often referred to as 'the company words keep' – are identified, which are recognised by De Beaugrande (1998, p.41) and used extensively as a method of analysis in discourse.

Various researchers indicate that collocations often point to author or public mindsets. For example, the works of Manning and Schutze (1999), Fairclough (2003), and Schulz (2010; 2014; 2018) clearly identify the power of discourse analyses that show strong contextual, co-located word choices which have the effect of describing and informing the thought process used in discourse research. Manning and Schutze (1999, p. 141) argue that:

> 'There is, however, a tradition in British linguistics, associated with the names of Firth, Halliday, and Sinclair, which pays close attention to phenomena like collocations. Structural linguistics concentrates on general abstractions about the properties of phrases and sentences. In contrast, Firth's Contextual Theory of Meaning emphasizes the importance of context: the context of the social setting (as opposed to the idealized speaker), the context of spoken and textual discourse (as opposed to the isolated sentence), and, important for collocations, the context of surrounding words (hence Firth's famous dictum that a word is characterized by the company it keeps)'.

This form of analysis clearly identifies what the author's mindset might be when consistently suggesting themes. In

the recent USA Presidential elections of November 2016, thousands of collocations were identified with the term Hillary [Clinton]. The one most often identified was *crooked* Hillary, showing a clear focus of attention to the theme of Ms Clinton (Schulz, 2017). It is argued that this contributed to her defeat, in that regular reporting of Ms Clinton described her as *crooked* or that she should be *locked up*.

In trying to identify what is said or considered about children, a table of collocations has been comprehensively classified and can be seen below. Children, in turn, are often described in collocations as *vulnerable, precious and valued* and, thus, in need of attention and care.

MAJOR COLLOCATIONS CLASSIFIED IN MEDIA REPORTS

FOCUS/THEME/ TOPIC	COLLOCATIONS	INDICATION
Unaccompanied children	Migrants – safety – fearful - screaming – frightened	Host country or destination appears as cruel and inhumane in treatment of children CNN News Kopan (2018)
Donor children	Brave – hero – saviour	Children are special
Education	Western – studies – beneficial – migration – visa	Moving to Western nations guarantees a better outcome for children who study in English speaking or Western nations (Australian Dream Solutions Website, King's School website)
Marketing to children as a focus	*Pester power* – sugar products – obesity – screen time – laziness – social media	Children push to get what they want. Children become obsessed by what they see on TV or their social media
Economic agents for families	Clever – entrepreneurs – feeding the family – extra cash – smart – role models	Special children – smart children
Children as heroes	Fund raising – setting examples – working in third world countries	Celebrity culture shows direct help and aid as part of childhood
Stolen children	Children fearful – away from culture or kinship	Children should be kept with parents
Children in detention	Refusing – depressed – self-harming – withdrawn – contagious spread – loss of hope (Doherty 2018)	Used by advocacy groups to gauge the care and attention of host migration destinations
Children as future	Investment in nation – precious – and world leading education	Notion of children in discourse as foundation of future
Children in need of protection	Legal care and protection – state duty of care	Children are not in charge of their destiny and need special protection from harm

DESCRIPTORS USED IN MEDIA IDENTIFY CHILDREN AS AT RISK FROM A VARIETY OF ISSUES

Focus	Lexis/descriptors	Issues raised	Media or platform
Children at risk of abuse and neglect	Deprived, abused and left to their own devices	Home alone children	Mainstream news and TV (Barnardo website, Aust. Institute of Family Studies etc.)
Children separated from parents-stolen	Stolen from the kinship or culture Indigenous children suffered as result inhumane practices	Children not allowed to grow and thrive in own culture groups Children forced away from parents and family	Government reports and other inquiries online and via media reports of USA immigration practices online CNN news reports
Children as lifesaving commodity in family (donors of organs or tissue)	Hero, brave and life saver Saving the family Desperate parents	Last chance for the child Is it ethical? Criticism backlash from community	Online and mainstream TV Modern technology
Unaccom-panied children	Unaccompanied minors Migrant children without parents Anchor children	At risk of trafficking At risk of being abused during journeys UNHCR focus of attention	News platforms and online magazines (CNN news, Hains (2018)
Education abroad	Safe secure learning environment	Networking for children, languages,	Swiss boarding school websites Australian school websites Education abroad websites
Migration as outcome	Opportunities for migration to Australia, New Zealand and the USA or other European Countries	Sending child abroad to broaden opportunity to stay in country of choice. Learn another culture and language	Sacrifice for parents pays off to access fresh starts for family via their child or together later (see Juwai.com website and Bagshaw, 2018)
Risk of suicide	Boarding Schools as option for native American children at risk	Removing children from cultural spaces or family develops mental ill health	National Health website, America Manson et al. (1989) and Schaverien (2011) Asthana in *The Guardian* (2008)

CONTINUED

Focus	Lexis/descriptors	Issues raised	Media or platform
Leadership opportunities for girls	Sending children to boarding schools seen as a positive direction for disadvantaged children	Helps girls to achieve dreams of escape from poverty and chance at career	Oprah Winfrey leadership academy websites; Warren Pearson indigenous leader suggests benefits while others do not agree (Rogers, 2017 on *The Conversation website*.)
Child care	Too expensive Government and issues related to support for parents in higher income levels	Children at risk of non-socialisation	Online and parent support sites (Bulman, 2016)

Descriptors and collocations are supported by the *Topoi of Children* as needing support, but the activities of parents and celebrities as described in this general survey clearly show that when necessary children can be used to entertain, earn money, respect, and act as a barometer of community concerns within a nation. *Topoi* are defined as commonly held views or discourses that are likely to be found within certain groups, usually within professions or community and ethnic groups and they are often expressed in a common language or linguistic profile. These commonly held views begin to shape thinking and definitions of how social mores or behaviours, or general opinion, should be considered. These descriptions identified from media platforms clearly indicate concerns of children at risk or potential abuse within certain environments. They have been identified above as potential for causing problems.

Discourse analysts call this the *topoi* or collective common discourse within a group, and they are often accompanied with their own lexical choices or preferred common language approaches (Fairclough 2001; Schulz & Cannon, 2018; Van Der Valk, 2003; van Dijk, 1998). Certain *topoi* are very evident in discourses that suggest that the public hold the same or similar views within a community. These *topoi* show in media and other platforms that children should be identified as: *needing protection, to be kept with families, should not be separated from kinship and family groups, and that they are precious and part of the future, your child is your future, your children deserve the best in education, health, clothing and environments.*

But along with this set of *topoi* as identified within this media and discourse analysis are a set of *divisive discourses.* These include that: *sending your children away is an investment in your future as potential immigrants, education as an investment to secure your old age and that in some cases they can secure the health of your other child(ren) by becoming a tissue donor, or even as a fund raiser.*

The survey of discourse analysis conducted for this overview highlights some potentially troubling issues with respect to how best to discuss and consider such issues of concern. For this discourse analysis and research to be contextualised, it should turn its attention to questions such as: Are our children in danger from being used and abused as a commodity without us being aware enough to spot the issues as they arise? Divisions of opinion on what is best for children often appear to take second place to the hype that accompanies using a child to promote oneself, to better one's environment, or to save a life of another child. Should children be asked their opinion on what they want or need? Or is it that parents are always right in their decisions?

Endnotes

1 See, for example, the *Bringing Them Home* report (1997), The *Little Children are Sacred* Report (Wilde and Anderson 2007), The Mullighan Inquiry: Commission of Inquiry into Children in State Care and Children on APY Lands (2008) and the Nyland Royal Commission (2016) The Life They Deserve as examples of this genre of reporting of which there are several in Australia over the last 20 years or so.

2 Division 2 and Section 6 of Children's Protection Act 1993 (SA)

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