Representations of the 'damaged' child: 'child saving' in a British children's charity ad campaign

Abstract

Drawing on a series of three advertising campaigns for a British children's charity, this paper discusses the representation of abused children as 'damaged' in some way. The pictures and text of the advertisements seek to elicit readers' concern for abused children by portraying them in a number of ways: as passive agents in their development; as signifiers of the dangers of the world and the (purported) safeness of the home. The portrayal of abused children in the advertisements serves to reinforce a perception of the vulnerability of all children and the need for adult supervision and 'care'. Whilst my intention is not to dismiss the seriousness of abuse or the work done by children's charities, I am concerned about the implications of these representations of childhood and 'damage'. I argue that the dominant representation of abused children drawn on in the advertising campaigns simplifies many of the complexities in the worlds and lives of children who have been abused.

Introduction

Abused or 'damaged' children stand as iconic referents to how childhood is, should be and has been destroyed. In this paper I scrutinise the basis on which we represent children who have been abused. My concern is that whilst it is important to portray the devastating effects of abuse and maltreatement, it is essential that we do so in ways that acknowledge and represent possibilities for resiliency and acknowledge children's agency and lived experiences.

It has been argued that journalists have 'child abuse fatigue' (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995) and thus reporting is usually focussed on the details of particular children and particular crimes. Reporting cases of child abuse within the British media has a history of covering high profile 'victims' such as Kimberley Carlisle (Jones, Pickett,

Oates and Barbor, 1987). In more recent years attention has been focussed on children such as Victoria Climbie (who represents an unusual instance in that she was a black African child) and most notably (in recent years) the abduction and murder of Sarah Payne in 2000 and Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman the following year. The children gain iconic status as exemplars of the tragic loss of childhood- both the actual loss of individual children and a symbolic fear for children generally.

In media reporting and more generally, childhood represents 'the object of all our collective good intentions' (Frost and Stein, 1989: 3). Childhood is seen as a state of becoming in which the task of childhood is to develop from a state of immaturity to the (adult) state of competence and knowing. Thus childhood is constructed as a time of immaturity and as a time of innocence. Media reporting of child abuse draws together dominant understandings of childhood and the notion of childhood innocence. Thus, the publicity surrounding child abuse (particularly child sexual abuse) serves to construct and reinforce our notions of 'normal' childhood as circumscribed by innocence, passivity and powerlessness (Kitzinger, 1990; Burman, 2003; O'Dell, 2003).

Commentators such as Rose (1990), Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) and Burman (2003) have argued that there is a mutual constitution of ('normal') childhood and 'lost' or damaged childhoods. 'Damaged' and stigmatised forms of childhood serve to denote the: '"right" kinds of childhood- innocent, playful, obedient, dependent, etc.' (Burman 2003: 35). Such ideas inform practice around children and their families (see Parton, Thorpe and Wattam, 1997).

Kitzinger argues that in attempting to maintain children as innocent they are disempowered. Kitzinger's concern is that by striving to preserve childhood 'innocence' children may not be able to develop skills necessary to protect themselves. In addition, the very notion of childhood innocence has an appeal to abusers for whom 'innocence' constitutes not just a sexual attraction but also a powerful way of preventing children from seeking help or being believed. Kitzinger (1990) argues powerfully that children who face sexual assaults are often not passive but actively resist the assault, often in ways not acknowledged by adults at the time or afterwards. Furthermore, the construction of childhood innocence stigimatises children who have lost their 'innocence' through sexual assault. Kitzinger (op cit) and Holland (1992) argue that portraying 'victims' in this way serves to construct the 'ideal victim' who is innocent, passive and powerless. The notion of an 'ideal victim' operates in media reporting and also in child protection practice. For example, Parton, Thorpe and Wattam (1997) discuss the notion of absent and present children in case protection files, they note that 'only certain children who "speak" in the files' (Parton, Thorpe and Wattam op cit: 98) and the concerns of others are rendered marginal or are subsumed within other agendas.

The taken for granted view of childhood is of a socially and biologically vulnerable state where childhood is pregiven and development occurs 'naturally' along particular (bio)logical stages (see Parton, Thorpe and Wattam, 1997; Burman, 1994; Levett, 2003). The problems with assuming a unitary trajectory of development and a focus on the (universal) child as an exemplar through which modern governmentality is exercised has been noted by critical commentators such as Rose (1990), and Burman (2003). Such commentators have sought to demonstrate the geo/temporal locatedness

of the child. However the notion of multiplicity of experience is much more tenuous in work around abused children. The pre-given universal stage based assumptions of development that dominate developmental science contribute to taken for granted ideas about the deterministic nature of the effects of abuse (O'Dell, 1998). Much psychological theory and research into child abuse draws upon a construction of abuse which explains present functioning in terms of past trauma (Reavey, 2003; O'Dell, 2003). The assumption of a deterministic trajectory of damage from childhood to adulthood is evident in comments made by Barnardo's Director of Marketing and Communications, Andrew Neb, 'Whenever you see a homeless person and sniff that it's all their own fault, it's worth remembering that *it was probably something in their childhood that pushed them into it*' (cited by Burman, 2003 discussing the first set of Barnardo's advertisements, italics added). A further example of the deterministic construction of abuse in which past trauma determines present state is evident in Finkelhor, Hotaling and Asdigian's work (1995) on non family attempted abductions. In the course of their research Finkelhor and Hotaling attempted to articulate the differences between families where there had been an attempted abduction and those where no such incident had taken place. It is significant that the researchers asked parents about their history of trauma and abduction in childhood. The assumption is that past trauma is of determining importance in present functioning for these parents and may in some way serve to explain the current situation within their family. However the study does not document pertinent aspects of the research such as the gender of the potential abductor; the absence of which represents, I would argue, a significant loss of valuable information about the incidents.

The notion that children need to be saved from harm and the concerns of the adult world is strongly embedded in (modern) Western ideology and practices. The implicit view, stemming (in part) from a Victorian view of children as a 'national resource' (Foley, 2001: 11), is that children are our future and need safeguarding and a such has a strong emotional pull (Burman, 1998; O'Dell, 2003). Thus, 'lost children', child saving and 'stolen childhood' are common imagery and icons in liberal western imagery. That *some* children are rendered visible by practices such as media reporting or social work concern has echoes in the historically earlier child protection practice of 'child saving'. Commentators such as Platt (1969); Gordon (1988); Holland (1992) and Burman (2003) have argued that 'child saving' focused on particular children who were seen to be in need of saving from their dangerous conditions in order to develop 'properly'. The children were thereby restored to what are deemed to be an 'appropriate' childhood. During the late Nineteenth Century in both the USA and the UK societies arose to 'rescue' children from poor and immigrant families (see Cahn, 2002). The assumption was that poor children were feral or beastly with 'vile parents' and thus needed saving to reform them and thus make better citizens in the future.

Whilst the focus of blame was firmly levelled at the poor and (recent) immigrant families, child saving also serves to blame mothers and to pathologise 'other' cultures. Burman argues that child saving implicitly endorses mother blaming where 'the interplay of gender between child and parent in child-saving discourse works to tie responsibility firmly to women' (Burman, 1998:222). Child saving reaffirms the notion of the bad mother but also in the case of girls feeds into a conflation of femininity and childhood, passivity and victimhood (Burman, 1998). It can also be

argued that child saving operates as a form of culture-blaming (Holland, 1992). Some children's lives are played out within a child saving framework in which their families are viewed, within wider discourses, as in some way problematic (Barn, 1989). In her book 'Shattered bonds: The color of child protection' Roberts (2001) argues that black children in the USA were more likely to be labelled as abused than their white counterparts even controlling for poverty, family structure, parental employment and location. Furthermore, Roberts (and others) argue that black children stay longer in foster care and receive poorer quality services. Similar arguments concerning the experiences of black children in the British care system have been noted by, for example, Barn (1989). The concern is that the child protection system dissolves black family systems. Similarly Atmore (2003) discusses the systematic and systemic removal of indigenous children (in Australia) from their families which was part of a government policy of assimilation. The assumption behind these policies was that white families represented a beneficial family environment, however, the action led to widespread abuse of the children in white families and white run institutions. The government in Australia is beginning to address these issues, however for a number of complex reasons abuse in many indigenous families (in Australia and elsewhere in the world) remains unaddressed (Atmore, 2003; Egger, 1997).

The analysis

The analysis offered in this paper is a thematic analysis of a series of publicly accessible advertisements that formed three distinct (but thematically linked) campaigns for the charity Barnardo's. The analysis focuses primarily on the written text but comments briefly on the visual imagery where relevant (see Flick, 2006; Reavey and Johnson, forthcoming).

Drawing on a feminist poststructural reading of the texts I discuss the representations of 'damaged' children and the ways in which the advertisements draw on the notion of an ideal childhood and the deterministic nature of development. The analysis examines the ways in which the advertisements encourage us to act upon the notions and sentiments exemplified in earlier child saving movements in our urge to protect children and save them from harm. Whilst I will discuss the concepts drawn upon by the Barnardo's advertising campaign, it was not my intention to deny that child abuse and maltreatment is a serious issue for many children. However, the images used by the advertising agency represent and reflect common images of childhood within British culture. The notion of 'lost childhoods' and the notion of saving children are powerfully embedded within everyday culture and within the more specific realm of child protection; as such the images and the ideas that they represent deserve critical scrutiny.

The advertisements

The advertisements were produced for Barnardo's in three phases. In the first set of adverts a situation of danger was depicted, such as a street with a car stopped to pick up a prostitute or an alley with signs of drug use. A child's image is overlaid on the site of danger so that it shows the child engaging in a dangerous (adult) activity. In the second set of advertisements an adult in danger or dead was depicted alongside text about the adult as a child. The final phase of the advertisment campaigns depicted a child whose image had been altered so that their face and hair looked very old. Thus in each of the series of advertisements the images and texts juxtapose adults with their child selves and fracture the developmental time line.

The adverts in the first phase of the campaign portrayed a child's image overlaid on the site of danger so that it shows the child engaging in a dangerous (adult) activity. The advertisements depicted a girl prostitute standing by a car; a baby with a syringe ready to inject an illegal drug and a dead boy lying next to a gun. The text for the adverts was as follows:

'Kim Vale age 24: Neglected as a child, it was always possible Kim would be an easy victim for pimps. With Barnardo's help, an unhappy childhood need not mean an empty future'

'John Donaldson age 23: Battered as a child it was always possible John would turn to drugs. With Barnardo's help child abuse need not lead to an empty future'

'Alex Upton age 29: Written off as a child, it was always possible Alex would turn to crime. With Barnardo's help an unhappy childhood need not lead to a wasted future'

Thus, the image of the child is juxtaposed against the backdrop of a dangerous activity/situation that the child will play out in their adult life- with disastrous consequences.

In the second set of adverts a similarly hazardous situation is depicted, however, in this instance the person portrayed is an adult. In one advertisement the adult is

depicted slumped in an armchair (presumably dead) and in a second depiction the adult is shown drowned in a canal. The text is as follows:

'Barry Stark. Died: Age 2 years

When Barry was repeatedly beaten from the age of two, a large part of him died. HIS hope and ability to love died. HIS future died. 38 years later, he put a shotgun in his mouth and died for real. WHAT a waste. AT Barnardo's we want to save children like Barry from a living death. WE combat the effects of domestic violence on children through counselling and help give them back their future and life. THIS takes time. THAT'S why Barnardo's works over the long term, helping over 50,000 children a year with nowhere else to turn. SOON you'll read a story, in this paper, about someone just like Barry. "HOW sad", you'll say. THERE are thousands of children like Barry and they don't want your sympathy.

THEY need your help MAKE a donation.'

Thus the image of the adult is juxtaposed against their abusive and damaging childhood histories. The line running through the text emphasises the notion that the history and future of the child/adult character has been erased by their abusive childhood, that their future/adult selves are a projection of their childhood trauma rather than a fully formed positive future.

The final set of adverts (to date) in Barnardo's campaign represent a slight departure from the first two. Here the child is again juxtaposed against a backdrop of an adult, hazardous context, however each depiction is portraying a child in a situation

designed to be read as a sexual situation (a girl sitting on the edge of a bed with the legs of an older man visible behind her; a girl sitting on a sofa with an older adult man stroking her hair from behind the sofa; a boy on the street with a male adult hand lifting his chin up; and a boy in a male toilet with an older adult man just visible in the front of the picture with his belt unbuckled). Unlike the first two sets of images there are no links made in the text between a previous or future life for the child/adult. However the child is depicted (through changing their hair and facial appearance) as old. Thus the image of the child is juxtaposed with the face of an ageing person. The text is shorter than the other campaigns and is the same for each advert:

'Abuse through prostitution STEALS CHILDREN'S LIVES help end

this obscenity'.

A textual reading of the advertisements

Present, past, future

The advertisements are visually and conceptually shocking. The power of the images arises from the shock in seeing children juxtaposed into adult activities and adult dangers. Thus we feel drawn to save the children from damage, and to save childhood from being a site of adult activities and hazards. The advertisements powerfully link together childhood and current (maladaptive) state in which adult pain or suffering is explained by past childhood trauma (Burman, 2003). The focus of the advertisements is on long term damage to the adult and in so doing makes visible, and gives priority to, adult states and issues. Thus we need to act to prevent:

'an unhappy childhood need not mean *an empty future'* (series 1)

The texts draw on taken for granted constructions of childhood and (by implication) adulthood. Children are seen to be vulnerable and powerless, their experiences are literally written for them. All of the children portrayed in the advertisements are seen as damaged by their experiences. In the third series of advertisements, the loss of childhood is symbolised as a literal ageing. The appearance of the children has been altered in the advertisement so that their faces look old and wrinkled. Damage is portrayed throughout the advertisements as a loss of childhood, literally a 'living death':

> 'Barry Stark. Died: Age 2 years
>
> ~~When Barry was repeatedly beaten from the age of two, a large part of~~
>
> ~~him died. HIS hope and ability to love died. HIS future died.~~ ' (series 2)

> 'Richard Fox. Died: Age 5 years.
>
> ~~AT the age of five, Richard's behaviour meant his teachers and parents~~
>
> ~~gave up on him and a large part of him died. HIS hope died, his self-~~
>
> ~~esteem died, his future died.~~ (series 2)

> 'Abuse through prostitution STEALS CHILDREN'S LIVES' (series 3)

'Damaged' children are positioned as innocent, vulnerable and in need of protection. The assumption is that children are innocent and passive agents in their lives. This is strongly represented in the Barnardo's adverts. Within the representations any (adult) responsibility for current state is rendered invisible by the straightforward juxtaposition of the adult and their past child self. The taken for granted assumption is that all children develop along the same (or similar) trajectory of damage. In the

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advertisements the prospects for abused children who do not receive help are very

bleak. The children are seen to develop (as in the instance of the character Richard

Fox) *without* hope, *without* positive self esteem and *without* a future. Any positive

aspects of their development, or indeed any mediating factors in their childhood

experiences are rendered invisible within the portrayal of 'victims'. Burman (2003)

argues that within these advertisements, and more generally, children are not seen to

be resilient. This raises key concerns for children who may not fit within the role of

passive, innocent victim (Burman, 2003; Kitzinger, 1988).

The notion of child saving is more evident in the call made by the charity for help. In

each of the three series of advertisements the reader is urged to take responsibility for

helping (saving) the child:

> ~~AT Barnardo's we want to save children like Barry from a living death.~~
>
> ~~WE combat the effects of domestic violence on children through~~
>
> ~~counselling and help give them back their future and life~~. (…) *THEY*
>
> *need your help* MAKE a donation.' (series 2, italics added)
>
> '*help* end this obscenity' (series 3, italics added)

Individualising abuse

The focus of the advertisements is almost exclusively upon the child. The

advertisements portray individual children with their own individual histories. Whilst

the focus is wholly understandable in the context of the work of the charity, however

on a broader reading, the representations draw upon the construction of abuse as a

problem of individuals, the focus upon 'victims' of abuse and trauma renders

invisible the abusers. There is little, if any, portrayal of the perpetrators of abuse or of

the child's family more generally. Whilst the advertisements echo current research that suggests that children may need adult, professional help to become happy, healthy adults, any actions required to help the abusers change their behaviours are either invisible and not addressed in the text.

Home/outside context

The taken for granted assumption in education campaigns aimed at children is that it is 'strangers' and the outside world that represents danger for children (for example, see Kitzinger, 1988; Gallagher, Bradford and Pease, 2002). A good example of this concern is the recent withdrawal of 'chat rooms' by some internet service providers in the UK because of worries about children's safety when talking to strangers via the internet. There have subsequently been a number of public education campaigns that caution parents to monitor children's internet communications to ensure that they are not being 'groomed' by potential adult abusers.

In recent media reporting of child abuse cases there has (arguably) been disproportionate focus on abuse outside the home and family with the majority of reports looking at 'stranger danger' (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995). Similarly, Levett (2003) notes that the most effective legal proceedings involving child abuse have been when the assault was perpetrated by a stranger. Whilst Levett is commenting upon the situation in South Africa, the situation is similar in the UK where criminal justice policy reflects the concerns about 'stranger danger', see Gallagher, Bradford and Pease, (2002). Feminist informed commentators such as Levett have argued that viewing abuse as a problem of strangers serves to obscure the 'links between male authority in the family and sexual abuse' (Levett, 2003: 58). In

addition to bolstering dominant ideologies of the family, the notion of stranger danger does not reflect the statistics, where, for example, Grubin (1999) cites 80-90% of reported sexual abuse cases are perpetrated by people known to the child. Similarly, Kidscape (1993, cited in Gallagher et al, 2002) cites figures for British children murdered between 1987- 1991 where 40 children were killed by strangers and 231 children were killed by people they knew.

In the first set of advertisements each child is seen in public spaces, on the streets, thereby conflating the outside world with hazard and danger to the child. This reinforces the assumption that children's place is in the home, children are safe at home and in danger in public spaces. In the last series of advertisements (where all the children are depicted as prostitutes) the girls are seen in a domestic setting (either in the lounge and in the bedroom) whereas the boys are outside the home (one boy is seen on the street and the other is in a public toilet). Thus the gendered nature of space is reified in the portrayal of child prostitutes with the allocation of domestic space to girls and boys depicted in public spaces. The feminisation of domestic space stands in contrast to the notion that the outside world is the site of danger and hazard for children.

Children's lives have been affected and regulated by the potential threat of child abuse and particularly the dangers posed outside the home. For example, contemporary British children are far more likely than previous generations to be accompanied by adults and often driven very short journeys to school (Joshi, MacLean and Carter, 1999; Smith, 2000; Robb, 2001). However, the home may be far from a safe place for children a significant proportion of all cases of child abuse

occur in the home (figures vary amongst researchers and amongst categories of abuse). Whilst the home may be unsafe for some children, it may also function as a refuge from prejudiced society outside the family (Atmore, 2003). Thus for some abused children there is a double bind around talking about abuse in the family, where talking runs the risk of further marginalising and possibly stigmatising their cultural group.

In conclusion

Whilst my intention is not to dismiss the important work done by children's charities such as Barnardo's I am concerned by the implications of such representations of childhood and abuse drawn upon in their campaign. The representations of childhood are singularised, children are viewed as passive agents in their lives and as adults determined and damaged by their childhood experiences. By viewing abuse in singularised ways we are denying children's lived experiences; we need to acknowledge that children live complicated lives and are actively involved in making sense of their lives and their development. The advertisements reinforce particular views of the abused child and thus send messages about how childhood *should* be. Representing abuse as always-ever permanently damaging does not recognise the ways in which children and adults *actively* survive abuse. Many adult survivors actively challenge the representation of the permanently damaged 'victim' of abuse (see O'Dell, 1998; 2003).

Commentators such as Parton, Thorpe and Wattam (1997) argue that our (adult) view of childhood is, as they term, 'adultcentric'; 'By this we refer to the way that interpretations of children's behaviour, their rights to a perspective or point of view

are achieved through the entitlement of adults to construct notions of 'child', 'childhood' and children themselves.' (Parton, Thorpe and Wattam, 1997: 96). Similarly, Burman points to the paradox that we are more concerned with the Barnardo's *reconstruction* of childhood trauma through adult figures than we are in real children's trauma. The children's voices and experiences are heard only through their conjunction with their adult selves. There is a need to recognise children's ideas about childhood and their lives (Foley, Roche and Tucker, 2001) and to strive towards ways of protecting children without denying them a sense of agency.

Children's charities are 'pushing against strong ideological factors' (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995) to get child abuse recognised and responded to. Barnardo's advertising campaign strategically draws on dominant notions of the child to elicit strong reactions. The campaigns are so powerful and work so well because they have drawn on our urges to keep children and childhood safe and to help 'save' the children/adults depicted. In essence we view the children in the advertisements as in need of saving; saving from a hazardous adult world to which they have no part to play. However, it is worth reminding ourselves that the Barnardo's campaign is aimed at the UK market. In the UK representations of child abuse within the media (when addressed) assume that such abuses are uncommon and an exception to the 'norm' for British children. However for children across the world (including some in the UK) abuse, prostitution and criminal activities represent the norm rather than a (pathological) exception:

'the fact is that children, real chronological children, not metaphorically fixed or developmentally arrested adults functioning *as* children, *are* in these states on streets the world over' (Burman, 2003: 46).

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