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Childhood in crisis? Tracing the contours of ‘crisis’ and its impact upon contemporary parenting practices

Mary Jane Kehily

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century media commentary and public discourses on childhood commonly invoke a notion of ‘crisis’. This paper poses the question, what is new about the current invocation of crisis and how does it manifest itself? Specifically, the paper explores the ways in which media texts, cultural commentary and policy documents/initiatives collectively produce a dominant discourse of childhood in crisis. I aim to trace the anatomy of this so-called ‘crisis’ in childhood, to examine how far it exists and what the main features of such a crisis may look like from different perspectives. In doing so I consider and comment upon the relationship between the past and the present and the ways in which a historical perspective can be instructive in understanding how concerns about childhood are conceptualised and given meaning. Based on an analysis of cultural texts that promote or collude in the normative idea of a crisis in childhood, the paper provides alternative ways of conceptualising prevailing ideas and assumptions of crisis and calamity. The paper draws upon a textual analysis of pregnancy magazines to examine the ways in which parents may be responding to the idea of a crisis in childhood and the impact this has on their parenting practices. Finally, the paper argues that contemporary meanings of childhood are shaped by the links between the past and present, to be found in residual notions of childhood in the popular imagination and contemporary accounts of risk and crisis. In the context of contemporary childrearing, cultural texts and residual meanings cohere to produce a reconfigured version of childhood that can be seen as a generative mixture of romantic, late modern and scientific identifications.

Keywords: childhood in crisis; media commentary; textual analysis; pregnancy magazines; parenting practices

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century media commentary and public discourses on childhood commonly invoke a notion of ‘crisis’. This paper poses the question, what is new about the current invocation of crisis and how does it manifest itself? Specifically, the paper explores the ways in which media texts, cultural commentary and policy documents/initiatives collectively produce a dominant discourse of childhood in crisis. I aim to trace the anatomy of this so-called ‘crisis’ in childhood, to examine how far it exists and what the main features of such a crisis may look like from different perspectives. In doing so I consider and comment upon the relationship between the past and the present and the ways in which a historical perspective can be instructive in understanding how concerns about childhood are conceptualised and given meaning. Based on an analysis of cultural texts that promote or collude in the normative idea of a crisis in childhood, the paper provides alternative ways of conceptualising prevailing ideas and assumptions of crisis and calamity. The paper draws upon a textual analysis of pregnancy magazines to examine the ways in which parents may be responding to the idea of a crisis in childhood and the impact this has on their parenting practices. Finally, the paper argues that contemporary meanings of childhood are shaped by the links between the past and present, to be found in residual notions of childhood in the popular imagination and contemporary accounts of risk and crisis. In the context of contemporary childrearing, cultural texts and residual meanings cohere to produce a reconfigured version of childhood that can be seen as a generative mixture of romantic, late modern and scientific identifications.

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century media commentary and public discourses on childhood commonly invoke a notion of ‘crisis’ (Furedi 2001; Palmer 2006; Hardyment 2007). Evidence that childhood is in crisis appears to be everywhere. The assumption that childhood is not what it used to be and that this, in itself, signals catastrophe appears to saturate our social worlds. In the popular imagination, nostalgia remains a familiar feature of the childhood landscape. Remembering childhood commonly calls to mind benignly romantic fantasies of play and adventure; the polite and deliciously well-ordered escapades of *The Famous Five* or a looser version of magical freedom that bespeaks how things ought to be. So what is new about the current invocation of crisis? In this paper I explore the ways in which media

texts, cultural commentary and policy documents/initiatives collectively produce a dominant discourse of childhood in crisis. I aim to trace the anatomy of this so-called 'crisis' in childhood, to examine how far it exists and what the main features of such a crisis may look like from different perspectives. In doing so I consider and comment upon the relationship between the past and the present and the ways in which a historical perspective can be instructive in understanding how versions of childhood are shaped and given meaning. Based on an analysis of cultural texts that promote or collude in the idea of a crisis in childhood, the paper provides alternative ways of conceptualising prevailing ideas and assumptions of childhood as a site of crisis and calamity. The paper draws upon a textual analysis of pregnancy magazines to examine the ways in which parents may be responding to the idea of a crisis in childhood and the impact this has on their parenting practices. Finally, the paper argues that contemporary meanings of childhood are shaped by the past and present, located in residual notions of childhood in the popular imagination and contemporary accounts of risk and crisis. Cultural texts and residual meanings cohere in contemporary times to produce a reconfigured version of childhood that can be seen as a generative mixture of romantic, late modern and scientific identifications.

The methodological approach adopted in the paper draws upon and takes inspiration from deconstructive modes of analysis to be found in sociological and cultural studies accounts of social processes. Taking a broadly post-structuralist approach to childhood as a social construction (James and Prout 1997; James et al. 1998; Jenks 1996) that is brought into being by the discourses that name and shape it, the paper places emphasis on understanding how the idea of a crisis in childhood is constituted and ascribed meaning within particular contexts. The argument presented in this paper is based upon textual analysis of a range of cultural texts: media reports, policy documents, popular commentaries on childhood and pregnancy magazines. Analysis of these cultural texts forms part of a larger ESRC funded research project investigating motherhood and social change, *The Making of Modern Motherhoods, memories, identities and practices* (MoMM)ⁱ. The study aims to contextualise motherhood and parenting practices within a process of historical and intergenerational change. This paper is based upon a selective reading of popular and commonly available newspapers, books, reports and magazines on childhood and parenting over a three year period from 2004 – 2007ⁱⁱ. For the purposes of analysis a

further selection of texts has been made, guided by the fullness of their commentary on childhood as a site of crisis. The texts discussed in this paper can be seen to represent the high water marks of media interest in 'childhood in crisis' over the research period based upon coverage and attention received at a national level. The paper is divided into five sections. The first two sections outline the ways in which the notion of crisis is invoked and how it can be understood historically while sections 3 and 4 offer ways of interpreting the 'crisis' through recourse to cultural studies and late modern perspectives. The final section turns to an analysis of pregnancy magazines to consider the ways in which contemporary discussions of childhood may have some implications for childrearing practice.

Contours of a 'crisis'

In Western contexts, focusing particularly on the UK, public discourses on childhood appear to be haunted by the spectre of darkness and danger. On 13 September 2006 a national newspaper in the UK, *The Daily Telegraph*, launched a campaign to halt the death of childhood. Warming up Postman's (1982) lament on the 'disappearance' of childhood 24 years earlier, 'Hold on to Childhood' was supported by 110 academics, writers and medical experts, collectively calling for a public examination of children's lives. Their much publicised letter in the *Telegraph* asserted that children have been 'tainted' by over exposure to electronic media, lack of space to play and an over-emphasis on academic testing in schools. A recent Unicef report (2007) on the well-being of children and young people in 21 industrialised countries ranked the UK at the bottom of the table in their assessment of child well-being and the US as second from bottom. The report focused on six areas: material well-being; health and safety; educational well-being; family and peer relationships; behaviours and risks; and young people's own perceptions of well-being. The report placed The Netherlands at the top of the table, followed by Sweden, Denmark and Finland. The report offers an economic account of the findings, powerfully suggesting that despite national wealth, children who grow up in poverty are more vulnerable and their experiences of childhood more difficult. Findings that lead the UK Children's Commissioner to comment, 'There is a crisis at the heart of our society' (cited in *The Guardian* 14.2.07).

The notion of childhood in crisis has been amplified by contemporary commentators. Sue Palmer's (2006) text, *Toxic Childhood: how the modern world is damaging our children and what we can do about it*, has received extensive media coverage in the UK, consolidating her status as an authoritative critic on all that is wrong with modern childhood, a position substantiated by her profile as an educator with a long career in primary education. Palmer suggests that technological change over the last 25 years has had a big impact on modern life. The side-effects of cultural change have produced a toxic cocktail that is damaging the social, emotional and cognitive development of children. Palmer asserts that consumerism constitutes a key ingredient of the cocktail. Children have come to associate happiness with the 'stuff' of consumer culture and the desirous nature of consumption patterns; wanting things, buying things, having things bought for you have acquired misplaced prominence in children's lives, distorting notions of what happiness really is and how it can be achieved. Other ingredients of the toxic cocktail include the denigration of play and places to play and the stress of exams and academic achievement. Modern childhood puts children under increased surveillance and excessive pressure, producing anxiety and contaminating children's experience of childhood. In a somewhat hackneyed metaphor drawn from the less than glamorous world of agricultural production, Palmer proposes that today's children are 'battery reared' rather than 'free range'.

Taking a different approach but anticipating many of Palmer's concerns, Frank Furedi (2001) locates the trouble spots of contemporary childhood within the family. Furedi asserts that parenting magazines and other media sources indicate that the family is in crisis. He suggests that the idea of the family in crisis has had a destabilising impact on parents, creating a loss of confidence in their abilities to parent and a pervasive sense of being under threat and out of control. Parenting in contemporary times, according to Furedi, is imbued with feelings of fear and paranoia. An obvious manifestation of paranoid parenting can be seen in parents' approach to child safety, a matter that has escalated from a concern to a national obsession. Furedi cites the example of a mother who drove behind the school coach to ensure that her son arrived safely at his destination. Parental fear for their children's safety may be out of proportion to the risks posed, however, it does not stop them playing an over-active role in all aspects of childrearing to the point where households appear to function as autonomous entities with little connection to neighbourhood or even the extended

family. Furedi's account of the changes in the way parents care for children can be explained by what he terms a 'breakdown in adult solidarity'. Adults no longer look out for each other or regard themselves as having a duty of care to *all* children. Rather, a distrust of adults in general has emerged in a climate where *all* adults, including parents, could be potential child abusers. Furedi suggests that the widespread distrust of adults is acknowledged and acted upon by children who may be keen to exploit adult insecurities in order to exercise power for their own ends. Furedi's views on the media and consumerism contrast with Palmer's in that he considers them as scapegoats for parents who feel powerless and, in their paranoid state, may be all too ready to castigate outside influences as a threat to their authority. Ultimately, Furedi concludes that childrearing practices are linked to and reflect the parenting style that is encouraged by the culture.

Concern over children and the protection of childhood has been a persistent refrain in recent government documents, legislative approaches and official reports. *Every Child Matters* (2004), the Government green paper prompted by the death of Victoria Climbié, opened up a dialogue aimed at improving services that focused on the needs of children, young people and families. At the heart of this initiative was the desire to promote 'joined up services' to prevent the abuse, neglect and premature death of children through ill-treatment. In consultation with children and young people, *Every Child Matters* summarised their needs as requiring help and support to: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; achieve economic well-being. These five aims formed the basis of the Children Act (2004), legislation focused upon developing more effective and accessible services for children and young people. A further outcome of the consultation process was the recognition that children need to be represented at a national level and their voices need to be heard. In March 2005 the Government appointed Professor Al Aynsley-Green as England's first Children's Commissioner. The Commissioner's main responsibility is to promote awareness of the views and interests of children. Children themselves indicated that they are concerned about bullying, personal safety and the pressure of educational work. The Commissioner has a brief to work independently of Government in ways that complement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A recent voice to join the chorus of childhood in crisis comes from The Children's Society, a UK based charity who recently published the findings of their *Good Childhood Inquiry* (2007), an independent survey commissioned to explore adult perspectives on children and childhood. The inquiry aimed to examine society's understanding of childhood for the twenty-first century in order to improve relationships with children. Key findings of the survey critically comment on the place of play and the role of consumption in children's lives. Despite the recognition that having friends and being able to spend time with them was regarded as central to a good childhood, 43% of 1,148 adults said that children should not be allowed out with friends until they were 14. Wanting children to have their freedom appears to be equally matched by the fear of letting them move freely outside the home without adult supervision. A pessimistic picture also emerges in relation to consumerism and material culture. Of the 1,255 people surveyed, nine out of ten felt that children are more materialistic now than in previous generations and that advertising at Christmas puts pressure on parents to spend more than they can afford. In a culture where the children's market is estimated to be worth £30bn a year, Chief Executive of The Children's Society, Bob Reitemeier called for adults to take stock, 'Unless we question our own behaviour we risk creating a generation who are left unfulfilled through chasing unattainable lifestyles' (BBC News 24, 2008). A majority of the sample also agreed that children's television and computer time should be restricted and that violent video games make children more violent. Other contributors to the childhood debate include the Primary Review's Community Soundings (2007), an independent inquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Summarising the findings of 87 regionally-based witness sessions, authors Alexander and Hargreaves note:

We were frequently told children are under intense and perhaps excessive pressure from the policy-driven demands of their schools and the commercially-driven values of wider society; that family life and community are breaking down; that there is a pervasive loss of respect and empathy both within and between generations; that life outside the school gate is increasingly insecure and dangerous; that the wider world is changing in ways which it is not easy to comprehend (2007:1).

Finally, in the litany of grievances that constitute a crisis, the latest 'trouble' with children is that they are too fat. Concerns over rising levels of childhood obesity has led the British Medical Association into a debate to determine whether overfeeding children should be regarded as parental neglect (<http://www.direct.gov.uk>). While

official and policy orientated sources present a more muted version of childhood than Palmer or Furedi, they nevertheless draw upon a compelling notion of childhood in crisis and children at risk.

Crisis in context

But is the crisis in childhood, as presented in so many contemporary accounts, real or is it more indicative of a media-fuelled panic about the state we're in? And if we assume some features of the crisis to present an accurate portrayal of children's lives does that necessarily signal the calamitous end of childhood and the despoilment of future generations? In order to look into the future it may be helpful to cast an eye back over the past. In response to contemporary articulations of crisis and anxiety, historian Hugh Cunningham suggests that these ideas are far from new. Rather, Cunningham (1995) argues that since 1500 patterns of change in the experience of childhood across Europe and north America have been similar and, furthermore, the antecedents of the present 'crisis' can be found in familiar echoes of the past, as expressed in the early twentieth century. Following Elias (1969) Cunningham notes that the civilising process creates greater distance between children and adults, with childhood being seen as a special state requiring special status. The defining spirit of the age at the beginning of the twentieth century held that the future would be determined by the way children were treated. Children were conceptualised as an asset of the state and childhood became a site for the intervention of the state. In order to reduce infant mortality, for example, mothers must be educated in matters of hygiene and duties of care. Maternal instinct was no longer enough. Children's health was a matter of public concern, monitored through weight, as it is now; the present preoccupation with overweight children has a parallel with past concerns about underweight children. Then as now, policies on children remain dependent upon medical and scientific knowledge – proof positive that the state knows best. As successive governments revised and refined their vision for childhood, increased state intervention inevitably entailed increased surveillance of families, particularly the children of the poor. Tensions between families and the state in all matters concerning the care and responsibility of children exist as recognisable fault lines in the present landscape. Cunningham suggests that the big changes to impact upon children's lives, compulsory schooling and a reduction in infant mortality were accompanied by a significant change in the way adults thought about children. The transition from

valuing children for economic reasons and their ability to contribute to the family income to valuing children for emotional reasons was 'probably the most important [change] to have occurred in the history of childhood' (1995:177). Investing in children emotionally can be regarded as the preeminent approach to twenty first century childhoods, assumed in a range of cultural texts and policy orientated approaches.

The fissure marking contemporary approaches to childhood begin to appear, according to Cunningham, in the second half of the twentieth century. Children's exposure to visual culture, commercialism and new technologies fragment the possibilities of preserving an idealised childhood in the Romantic sense. During this period children began to have enhanced rights, firstly to a childhood but subsequently as individuals, demanding to be treated more like adults with access to the privileges and pleasures of the adult world – though not the world of employment. Cunningham notes a significant shift in the balance of power within families, with childrearing becoming a matter of negotiation between parent and child, a process that is monitored by the state and other agencies. Cunningham concludes with the insightful comment that present tensions lie in the struggle between the idea of the child as a person with rights and the legacy of romanticism which asserts that the right of a child is to be a child. From this perspective the contemporary 'crisis' in childhood can be productively understood as the collision between competing and contradictory versions of childhood. The powerful pull of the romantic ideal and the pragmatism of contemporary childrearing practices appear to create an incongruous space, giving rise to a range of discordant voices and harbingers of doom.

Moral panic and the construction of crisis

The insights gleaned from historical approaches to childhood can be complemented by cultural studies perspectives, particularly studies concerned with examining the power of dominant constructions. Cultural studies analyses of the notion of 'crisis' have commonly cast the phenomena in terms of 'moral panic'. In this context exploring collective constructions and commonly held ideas can take on significance as a mode of analysis with considerable explanatory power. To give just two examples, firstly, Geoffrey Pearson's study *Hooligans* (1983). Pearson's study presents a carefully worked history of moral panics from the mid 1800s to the 1980s.

His argument based upon textual analysis of historical documents and contemporary representations suggests that every 20 years or so there is a moral panic about youth. Furthermore, each moral panic repeats the themes of the previous moral panic. Just when the panic is fading from popular memory it re-emerges in a newly configured form to be visited upon the next generation of young people. The second example is drawn from the work of Martin Barker. Barker (1989) develops a similar analysis in relation to young people and popular culture. Beginning with the *Penny Dreadful* comics of the 1950s, Barker looks at why these comics were considered to be bad for boys and how these arguments (usually concerned with exposure to violence) were mounted in the press, in politics and the law, among professionals, politicians and parents. Barker subsequently argues that these themes are repeated every time a new cultural form comes along. In recent times there has been a regular surge of panic focusing upon video nasties, teenage magazines and computer games in the late twentieth century to present worries about internet bullying/grooming and happy slapping in the digital age. Both Pearson and Barker comment upon collectively constructed and media generated moral panics that commonly rest upon fear of change and invocations of the past. Particularly, there is a concern with the power of dominant memories, how they are generated collectively and how they become imbued with ideological content. This approach highlights the ways in which moral panics may also be imaginative projections of one sort or another that articulate an anxiety about change and loss. Seen in these terms the idea of childhood in crisis can be understood as a moral panic that can be seen as a cyclical concern rather than a new phenomenon.

Late modernity, risk and the crisis of childhood

A further way of understanding the idea of childhood in crisis is through the lens of late modern social theory. Sociologists such as Beck, Giddens and Bauman suggest that late-modernity is marked by the emergence of a new relationship between the individual and the social. As the traditions of the industrial order diminish in significance, Giddens argues that self-identity becomes a reflexive project. The 'individualisation thesis' characterising late modernity places the onus upon individuals to take responsibility for producing and maintaining their own biography,

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, at some level or

another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour (Giddens, 1991:70).

Through the creation of a set of biographical narratives, individuals tell a story, to themselves and others, of who they are and who they want to be. For Giddens, the reflexive project of self is linked to the sphere of intimacy, 'Romantic love introduced the idea of narrative into an individual's life' (Giddens 1992). Moreover, intimacy has been transformed in late-modern times from a set of social obligations and regulations to a new form of democracy between couples. Giddens suggests that intimate relationships are increasingly based upon personal understandings between two people generated by a bond of trust and emotional communication rather than external norms and values. The changes in intimate relations identified as 'pure relationships' can be viewed as a new and highly personalized form of democracy based upon emotions.

Further commentary on the condition of late-modernity is provided by Bauman:

Everyone has to ask for himself the question 'who am I', 'how should I live', 'who do I want to become' – and at the end of the day, be prepared to accept responsibility for the answer. In this sense, freedom is for the modern individual the fate he cannot escape, except by retreating into a fantasy world or through mental disorders. Freedom is therefore a mixed blessing. One needs it to be oneself; yet being oneself solely on the strength of one's free choice means a life full of doubts and fears of error...Self construction of the self is, so to speak a necessity. Self confirmation of the self is an impossibility (Bauman, 1988:62).

Bauman's contribution to the individualization thesis appears pessimistic in its emphasis on the limitations and inherent uncertainties of individual freedom. The charge of pessimism is further fuelled by Bauman's analysis of consumerism as a form of control that seduces individuals with offers of a 'fantasy community' of freedom and security.

Beck (1992) occupies some of the terrain covered by Giddens in his concern to characterize the late-modern period and articulate the relationship between individuals and society in contexts that have been changed and reshaped by the processes of globalization and new technologies. Beck suggests that Western societies have been reshaped by a process of individualization marked by three distinctive features: dis-embedding; loss of traditional security; and re-embedding. Dis-embedding refers to the individual's break with traditional ties of family and locality, while loss of security points to a pervasive 'disenchantment', produced by the demise of traditional

values associated with the past. Re-embedding, by contrast, indicates the emergence of a new mood found in the creation of re-imagined forms of social commitment. For Beck, this is a paradox of the late-modern condition:

On the one hand, men and women are *released* from traditional forms and ascribed roles in a search for a 'life of their own'. On the other hand, in the prevailing diluted social relationships, people are *driven into* bonding in the search for happiness in a partnership. The need for a shared inner life, as expressed in the ideal of marriage and bonding is not a primeval need. It *grows* with the losses that individualization brings as the obverse of its opportunities (1992:105 emphasis as original).

It is possible to suggest that while the writings of Bauman, Beck and Giddens provide much food for thought, these theories of (post)modern subjects can appear theoretically abstract and cut-off from everyday lives in real contexts.

Extrapolating from late modern social theory, generatively points to the position of the child as changed and changing within new versions of family. The modern nuclear unit has largely superseded the extended families of previous generations and connections with extended family members may be physically distant as working patterns change and individuals exercise social mobility. While the nuclear family may still exist as the ideal version of familial relations in the West, late modern social theorists suggest that personal relationships are giving way to 'new practices of intimacy'. The move towards 'pure relationships' in which new generations relinquish established practices and develop individualized choice biographies based on their sole commitment to one another. 'Pure relationships', however, may not reflect the diversity of personal relationships and family forms and may not be fully accomplished. The break-up of the traditional family unit or rather its reconfiguration can be seen in an increase in single-headed households, same-sex couples, unmarried co-habiting parents and post-divorce couples who may each bring children into new relationships. The practice of in vitro-fertilization (IVF) by which infertile couples, single women, lesbian couples and mature women can have children is itself a reproductive technology that is extending the project of self, individualization and choice in late-modernity. Though commonly perceived as a threat to the family, it could be said that this new molecular structure is actually serving to rework what is meant and understood by the term 'family'. As the modern family is restructured in late-modernity, affective work relations and friendship circles can themselves emerge

as a new practice of intimacy that, if enduring, may act as a surrogate family as exemplified by the US comedy series *Friends*.

The emergent social practices of late modernity have many implications for children and childhood. As Jenks (1996) points out, concerns for childhood can be seen as a reflection of broader (adult) concerns for identity and security in changing times. Beck comments on the privileged status of the child in the context of individualisation and new practices of intimacy:

The child is the last remaining irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship. Parents come and go. The child stays. Everything that is not realisable in the relationship is directed towards the child (1992:18).

The idea of the child as a treasured emotional investment can be seen to suit the contingent nature of the 'pure relationship'. In this context the child becomes the emotional anchor for the couple, the thing that turns choice into permanency and commitment. Wyness (2000) notes that late modern conceptualisations of the child invoke a romantic and naive view of children that positions them as dependent upon and subordinate to adults. While late modern approaches to childhood conjure up the romantic ideal, children may also exist symbolically as an enhanced fantasy of late modern coupledness.

Parenting in late modernity

The legacy of the Romantic movement appears to haunt the late modern period, however, an analysis of pregnancy magazines suggest that it is combined with an approach to consumerism and science that gives child-parent relationships in late modernity a unique character. As a source of insight into contemporary parenting practices, pregnancy magazines represent childrearing as a generative combination of romanticism, consumerism and science. These practices can be understood as the 're-embedding' of a reconfigured version of childhood, styled to accommodate changing social relationships. As discussed above, children's relationship to consumption is broadly portrayed as bad news. Within policy-orientated and popular discourses children are tainted by consumer culture while parents are positioned as the victims of 'pester power' trying in vain to reign in their avaricious offspring. Pregnancy magazines indicate that the consumption practices of parents, however, also point to a desirous and enduring love affair with the fruits of material production. Within post industrial economies the logic of niche marketing suggests to companies that they

pursue an incessant search for ever more specialised and unusual products to appeal to a designated consumer cohort as a necessity for economic survival. The baby market aimed at pregnant women and new parents provides a rich source of opportunity for the creation and marketing of new products.

Hardyment (2007) notes the significant increase in the number of books and magazines on parenting since the 1980s, reflecting a burgeoning public awareness of childhood as a newsworthy subject never far from the public eye. In these publications the widely promoted idea that pregnancy is a special time to indulge and be pampered is supplemented by the romantic notion that children are a gift from God, to be showered with gifts from earth via doting parents, relatives and friends. Parenting magazines amply illustrate the increased commodification of pregnancy, birth and parenting as every aspect of the parental process has a range of products to assist it. The commodities available to parents have extended to areas previously untouched by the commercial sphere. The ante-natal scan for example, once limited to part of the medical assessment process in early pregnancy has become a commercial venture promoted by several companies as a pre-birth bonding experience for parents-to-be. Widely advertised in the classified ads pages of all the pregnancy magazines, a typical issue will include three to four advertisements from different companies offering 3D and 4D non-diagnostic ultrasound scanning at around £100 per session. The companies promotional material used in ads suggest that they are 'scanning to nurture', offering parents-to-be the opportunity to 'capture precious moments' when their baby's may be 'smiling, yawning, blinking, scratching their nose and sucking their fingers' in the womb. The largest company with branches throughout the UK is Babybond. Providing scans for different stages of pregnancy, Babybond claim to be the creators of the 4D scan 'bonding experience' for women in their 24-32 weeks of pregnancy. Babybond and other ultrasound scanning companies appear to blend romanticism with advanced new technology by suggesting that scans are provided for the purposes of 'bonding, reassurance and foetal wellbeing'

(<http://www.babybond.com>). Babybond products come as a complete package,

DVD in sleeve, 1 x A4 colour gloss 3D enlargement in photomount, 6 x A6 colour gloss 3D prints, CD-ROM in white, blue or pink Babybond bag, **to take home: £230** (<http://www.babybond.com>).

The Babybond experience suggests to new parents that parent-child bonding can be accelerated by pre-birth scanning procedures, giving parents security in insecure

times. The success of Babybond products indicates that the link between ‘science’ and ‘baby things’ exists as a commercial venture that is popular with parents and lucrative for companies, seductively providing parents with the promise of the best and latest scientific advances.

A further example of the blending between romanticism and science can be seen in advertisements and features on stem cell research. Though not as prominent or widely available as ultrasound scanning, stem cell retrieval at birth offers parents the hope of being the protectors and saviours of their children. Saving and storing your baby’s umbilical cord blood is promoted as a ‘natural life insurance’ against leukaemia and other related blood diseases. But more than this stem cell research promises to be a potential panacea for the treatment of many other diseases currently under investigation by leading scientists around the world. Investing in stem cells can be seen as a powerful act of faith, a belief in scientific progress combined with the parental desire to protect children from the foreseen and unforeseeable risks of life. Smart Cells International advertises in pregnancy magazines as the UK’s ‘leading provider of safe storage of umbilical cord stem cells’:

We’ve got you covered.

Thankfully, the odds of your baby being attacked by a life-threatening disease are small, however, the existing treatments and promising research associated with umbilical cord stem cells, offers families extra peace of mind... an extra layer of coverage so to speak (*Pregnancy*, September 2004)

Stem cell storage claims to give children a future while also underlining the idea that children *are the future*. A feature on the ‘stem cell debate’ in *Junior* magazine indicated that the total cost of retrieval and storage of new born stem cells is £1,250. One parent had the stem cell from her first child’s umbilical cord stored two years ago and is planning to do the same for her second child. She justified her decision as a form of insurance, acting on knowledge that positions herself and her partner as informed and responsible parents:

My husband and I felt that as we knew about it we couldn’t not do it. We just hope it will be a waste of money. The way we looked at it is that the cost is roughly the price of a holiday – I’d rather not go on holiday and be safe in the knowledge that I could be helping my children and possibly other members of the family in the future (*Junior*, February 2005).

The couple’s negative premise for stem cell retrieval, ‘we couldn’t not do it’, position them, at least on this matter, as the risk adverse subjects of ‘new times’. In keeping with Beck’s (1992) conceptualisation of late modernity as governed by greater levels

of risk, this couple style their identity as parents in relation to a broader culture of risk. In this example the consumption practices of parents can be seen as motivated by the care and protection of children, the avoidance of unnecessary risk and the prioritisation of family needs. It can also be seen as excessive and misplaced. Like buying your way to heaven in the medieval era and cryogenic freezing in the twentieth century, attempts to safeguard the individual in the future appears a worryingly inappropriate endeavour to secure that which can never be known. The need to spend valuable family resources in this way, however, needs to be understood. While it is difficult to offer a full interpretation of emergent parental practices in the here and now, it is possible that Babybond and stem cell retrieval constitute part of a reconfigured approach to childrearing, informed by modes of consumption and late modern risk-anxiety, in which the child appears as a late modern assemblage of romantic and scientific identifications.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the ways in which media commentary and public discourse on childhood commonly invoke a notion of 'crisis'. Media texts, cultural commentary and policy orientated accounts collectively point to a version of childhood in the popular imagination as despoiled and in crisis. A discussion of these texts outlines the contours of this crisis, examining its manifestations and boundaries. Texts from a range of different sources point to a crisis in childhood characterised by a decline in play, over-exposure to consumer culture, the stress of educational testing and a pervasively low sense of well-being. Ferudi (2001) and Palmer (2006) elaborate upon the themes inherent to childhood in crisis, locating their accounts, respectively, in 'the breakdown in adult solidarity' and the 'toxic cocktail' of cultural change that has had a detrimental impact upon children's lives. The paper suggests alternative ways of understanding the notion of childhood in crisis. Firstly, by placing contemporary accounts within a historical perspective and secondly, by considering cultural studies approaches to the idea of crisis in studies that explore the concept of 'moral panic'. The paper suggests a further way of understanding the idea of childhood in crisis through the lens of late modern social theory. Within this body of literature new practices of intimacy and the increase of risk and uncertainty in Western societies play a part in the restructuring of family relationships and childrearing practices. From this perspective it is possible to suggest that the crisis in childhood exists as a

reflection of adult anxiety and insecurity in ‘new times’. Late modern themes have implications for childhood most noticeable in the way the child is positioned as a treasured emotional investment providing security for couples in an insecure world. This conceptualisation of the child draws upon Romantic ideals of children as innocent and in need of protection. Emergent parent-child relationships gleaned from pregnancy magazines provide an insight into parenthood in late modernity. Consumer practices such as Babybond scanning and stem cell retrieval point to some of the ways in which new parents may be responding to the idea of crisis and risk. Illustrating some of the ways in which practices of consumption can be instrumentally deployed by parents to bond with and protect children, the paper concludes that these emergent practices may signal a reconfigured approach to childrearing in late modernity that blends Romantic ideals with technological advances.

Notes:

ⁱ Members of the research team: Rachel Thomson, Lucy Hadfield, Sue Sharpe. Award no: RES 148-25-0057

ⁱⁱ Pregnancy magazines: total 28 mags, 8 titles – Prima Baby and Pregnancy, Pregnancy, it’s the time of your life, Pregnancy and Birth, Junior Pregnancy and Baby, Mother and Baby, I’m Pregnant, Pregnancy, Baby and You, Practical Parenting

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