

Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London*

Citation

Paechter, Carrie F.. 2017. Young children, gender and the heterosexual matrix. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 38(2), pp. 277-291. ISSN 0159-6306 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/16133/>

Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: gro@gold.ac.uk.

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: gro@gold.ac.uk

Young children, gender, and the heterosexual matrix

Carrie Paechter
Goldsmiths, University of London
New Cross
London SE14 6NW UK
c.paechter@gold.ac.uk

Young children, gender, and the heterosexual matrix

Abstract

In this paper I consider the adult focus of current mainstream gender theory. I relate this to how the concept of the heterosexual matrix originates in a social contract which excludes children from civil society. I argue that this exclusion is problematic both for theoretical reasons and from the perspective of children themselves. I start by discussing the nature of the heterosexual matrix and its foundations. I consider the implications for participation which arise from being named as a child, how that affects children's attempts to claim participation in civil society, and how this is related to children's naming of themselves as gendered. I then briefly consider the possibility that, because of their exclusion, children might also be considered to be exempt from the heterosexual matrix. However, I argue, there is considerable evidence that children are actively sexual beings who also work hard to claim inclusion in local practices of heterosexuality. I end by suggesting that there are three key reasons for this: that the discourses of normative sexuality provide children with a language to express sexual feelings; that self-insertion in the heterosexual matrix is a way for children to claim rights to participation; and that taking up heterosexual formations is a means whereby children can experience the power of naming themselves as part of the social world.

Keywords: gender; Butler; Wittig; social contract; heterosexual matrix; young children

Young children, gender, and the heterosexual matrix

Introduction

In this paper I examine the relationship between the social contract as historically understood in the philosophical writings of the global North, and Butler's (1990) conceptualisation of the heterosexual matrix, based as it is on Wittig's (1980/1992, 1989/1992) discussion of the social contract as inherently heterosexual. I then apply this to an examination of young children and their attempts to demonstrate and enact their right to participate in the social world. I am concerned with the relationship between the gendering of young children and their positioning in relation to civil society and the social contract; I examine the relationship between what it is to be named as a child (Bourdieu, 1991) and what it means to be named, and to name oneself, as having a gender, particularly through young children's constructions of self within the heterosexual matrix. It is well established that children in early years classrooms in particular are heavily invested in heterosexually-inflected gendered identities (Blaise, 2005; Browne, 2004; Davies, 1989, 2003; Francis, 1998; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992; Martin, 2011; Paechter, 2007; Skelton, 2001; Walkerdine & The Girls and Mathematics Unit, 1989). In this paper I explore how these operate in relation to a hegemonically heterosexual social contract, and clarify some of the relationships between young children, civil society, and their embracing of conventional heterosexual formations.

Specifically, I examine the relationship between children, dominant Western conceptions of civil society, and the heterosexual matrix. I argue that traditional Western conceptions of the social contract, as a compact between adults, are so bound up with the idea of the heterosexual matrix that it becomes problematic to apply the latter unquestioningly to children. However, gender researchers whose focus is young children, including myself, have found the heterosexual matrix to be a useful concept for analysing children's behaviour, and have generally ignored the inconsistencies implied by so doing. Furthermore, children themselves, especially those who, by virtue of their young age, find it hard to insert themselves legitimately into civil society, are active in taking up positions within the heterosexual matrix, and invoking its forms to enact scenarios and describe their activities.

In this paper I draw out and examine these hitherto unacknowledged contradictions. I start by discussing the nature of the heterosexual matrix and how it is founded on a particular conception of the social contract that has historically been dominant in the global North. From this I turn to the question of what it means to be named as a child, and how that affects children's attempts to claim participation in civil society. I then briefly consider the possibility that young children, because of their exclusion, might also be considered to be exempt from the constraints and requirements of the heterosexual matrix. This leads to a section in which I examine the evidence that young children are not only actively sexual beings, but also work hard to claim inclusion in local practices which exemplify their understandings of heterosexuality. This evidence brings us to the question of why children are so eager for this overt insertion. I suggest that there are three key elements underpinning this: that the heterosexual matrix, through the discourses of normative heterosexuality,

provides young children with a language with which to express sexual feelings; that self-insertion into the heterosexual matrix is a way for children to claim agency as active citizens; and that invoking the heterosexual matrix is a means whereby children are able to experience the power of naming themselves as part of the social world. I conclude with some brief reflections on how the ideas discussed in this paper can show us ways forward in feminist critiques of and struggles against the heterosexual matrix, through finding ways in which young children can be enabled to feel powerful through other means.

It is important to challenge the heterosexual matrix in this way, because it is initially presented (Butler, 1990), and subsequently treated, as a universal. It is, however, founded in taken-for-granted assumptions, both about adulthood and about the nature of society, which originate in what Connell(2011, 2014) refers to as ‘the metropole’. Indeed, Connell (2011: 288) suggests that

much of current sociological thought is based on a great fantasy –
that the world of the metropole is all there is, or all that matters, so
that theories developed from the social experience of the metropole
are all that sociology needs.

Furthermore, discussions within mainstream gender theory have ignored research, mainly conducted in the field of gender and education, that takes into account of children’s bodies and sexualities, and so have ignored some of the crucially important issues I raise here (R. W. Connell, 2010). While I share the view of other researchers that the heterosexual matrix is a useful analytical tool for understanding children’s identity constructions and behaviours, it is essential at the same time to be aware of the wider citizenship claims with which these are enmeshed. We also need to

understand that the Western status quo, in which children are largely ignored as participants in social life, is a product of a taken-for-granted affluence sufficient to exclude children from economic participation (Connolly, 2004; Prout, 2005).

Heterosexuality and the social contract

Butler (1990) argues that gender is constructed through a ‘heterosexual matrix’, in which gender and sexuality are inextricably linked. She defines her use of the term as being

to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I am drawing from Monique Wittig’s notion of the “heterosexual contract” and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” to characterise a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990: 151)

I have quoted Butler at length for two reasons. First, it is important to start with a clear definition of how the term ‘heterosexual matrix’ is being used here. Second, this extended quotation points clearly to Butler’s sources for this influential concept, and in particular to Wittig’s understanding of the social contract as inherently heterosexual. While much of my early discussion will refer more directly to Wittig than to Butler, my later exploration will principally focus on the latter, and on the

heterosexual matrix itself, due to the greater influence of her work on studies of gender and childhood. What may appear to be slippage in this respect is, however, deliberate, and, indeed, necessary, due to the way that Butler's work is undergirded by Wittig's understanding that heterosexuality is inherent in dominant Northern conceptions of civil society.

Wittig (1989/1992) sees the social contract, originating conceptually in the work of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, and understood as an unspoken agreement between individuals and the social order, as the underpinning structure of civil society. Rousseau, she argues, treats the social contract as 'the sum of fundamental conventions' (p. 38) which are implied by living in society. Central to Wittig's argument is that the social contract is heterosexual. She argues that the assumption of heterosexuality is so fundamental to society that the social contract is, in effect, a heterosexual contract:

Being tied together by a social link, we can consider that each and every one of us stands within the social contract – the social contract being then the fact of having come together, of being together, of living as social beings. This notion is relevant for the philosophical mind...through the established fact that we live, function, talk, work, marry together. Indeed, the conventions and the language show on a dotted line the bulk of the social contract – which consists in living in heterosexuality. For to live in society is to live in heterosexuality.

(Wittig, 1989/1992 p. 40)

This idea that to live in society entails living in heterosexuality develops an idea from an earlier essay in which Wittig argues that the discourses emanating from 'the

'straight mind' function to eliminate non-heterosexuals: 'you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be' (Wittig, 1980/1992: 28). This foreshadows even more closely Butler's (1990) conception of the hegemonic heterosexual matrix. To stand outside of heterosexuality, is, on such a formulation, to repudiate or exclude oneself from the social contract; equally, by stepping outside of the social contract one is at the same time enabled to remove oneself from the heterosexual matrix.

Both Wittig and Butler are interested in examining the heterosexual nature of the social contract in relation to the oppression of adult women (and, for Butler, people who are not normatively gendered) within a hegemonically heterosexual society (Butler, 1993, 2004). Their purpose is to work towards freeing individuals and groups from such formations, so that they are better able to have 'liveable lives', for which 'categories of recognition exist' (Butler, 2004: 8). Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix, and, by extension, Wittig's idea that the social contract is constructed as heterosexual, however, have also been used as tools for analysis of particular social situations and formations. Thus, within contemporary feminism, 'the heterosexual matrix' has become a taken-for-granted idea within which we can analyse the behaviour of individuals and groups, without, necessarily, making much headway in working for change. Atkinson and DePalma (2009: 18), indeed, argue that 'through naming and believing the heterosexual matrix and identifying evidence of its operation, we reify, reinforce and reinscribe it, even as we attempt to subvert, unsettle or deconstruct it'. With this in mind, my intention in this paper is to unpick the implications of using something formulated in terms of a social contract for analysing the behaviour and social relations of children, and to call into question the application

of such a concept to children without a full recognition of the implications of so doing.

Of course, the way in which Wittig writes about the social contract and the ways in which earlier Western philosophers do are not entirely the same. Wittig's predecessors in this work focus on the social contract as the underpinning of civil society, of the public world, and are concerned to establish ways in which such a public compact, and its result, the state in one form or another, relates to and bears down on individuals (Locke, 1690, 1952). This seems to lay the focus on the contract: a tacit acknowledgement, through taking part in public affairs, that one is bound by both its unwritten and written strictures. Wittig, on the other hand, by focusing on the way that language underpins the whole of the social, puts the emphasis on the communicative nature of social life. Wittig's conception of the social contract is, therefore, in some sense prior to those of the more politically-focused philosophers: their social contracts are unable to function at all without Wittig's. Consequently, although the conceptions are somewhat different, it is reasonable to assume that Wittig's assertion that the social contract is always heterosexual should also apply to the social contract as more conventionally understood, that which is involved in participation in civil society. This leads, however, to the questions: who exactly, is part of, and subject to, the social contract; and how is such participation, or exclusion, related to the heterosexual matrix? If civil society is founded on an assumption of heterosexuality, formed between people within the heterosexual matrix, what does that mean for those people whom we treat as not fully part of civil society?

Being named as a child

The social contract, however conceptualised in detail, has generally been understood as a compact between adults (Prout, 2005; Thomas, 2012), and, indeed, for the earlier philosophers, between adult males (Cohen, 2005). This reflects the formal exclusion of women from civil society in these periods, due to their perceived inability to transcend the body and participate in rationally-focused public life (Gatens, 1991; Hekman, 1990; Lister, 2007; Young, 1990). The philosophical, if not actual, subsumation of women and children in the civil participation of men, persisted until relatively recently. Rawls (1972), for example, who was concerned to establish how we might decide what would constitute a just approach to society, conceived of a thought experiment in which heads of households – a patriarchally charged formulation used as a defence against intergenerational rivalry – would decide, in a situation of ignorance about their own positioning, what would be the fairest way of doing things. More commonsense approaches to the question of who is a full participant in civil society also focus on adults (Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2007), or at least on those who are conceived as having an adult, or near-adult, understanding of the world.

Bourdieu (1991) argues that the social world involves a constant and repeated performance of categorisation, of naming. Such performative naming assigns individuals and groups to particular positions within society, and is consequently extremely powerful:

It is easy to understand why one of the elementary forms of political power should have consisted, in many archaic societies, in the almost

magical power of *naming* and bringing into existence by virtue of naming. (Bourdieu, 1991: 236)

Bourdieu is concerned with the ways in which such naming brings into existence, controls and subordinates particular social class groups. What I am interested in here, however, is what it means to be named as a child within civil society, and the relationship between one named as a child and the social contract.

One way to approach this is to look at where children stand in relation to the law. The law works in both directions here: it excludes those named as children from rights and privileges, as well as responsibilities, accorded to adults, while at the same time also providing protection for those considered to be vulnerable on the basis of their child status (Cohen, 2005). Laws are not entirely consistent, however. For example, English law considers children to be criminally responsible from the age of 10, though they are usually tried in child courts until they are 18. They are considered unable to give any form of consent to sex, even consensual sex with a child of the same age, before the age of 13, and those under 16 having sex with those older than that age are also regarded as being non-consenting. English law, therefore, like that of many states, names an individual as a child in some situations and not others, depending on age and, in some cases, on the child's perceived maturity. This latter criterion is particularly clear with regard to the question of 'Gillick competency', which relates specifically to the rights of girls under 16 to obtain contraceptive advice without parental knowledge or consent. A young woman is regarded as 'Gillick competent' if she is judged both to be able to understand the nature of the advice which is being given, and to have sufficient maturity to understand what is involved (NSPCC, 2015).

In such cases, naming a person as a child both protects them (from the full force of the law; from sexual exploitation) and restricts their rights to take part in certain activities, depending on age and perceived maturity. In both these respects, naming a person as a child takes them, partially at least, outside of the social contract, because they are considered to have neither the rights nor the responsibilities associated with full inclusion (Cohen, 2005). With regard to formal forms of child protection, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), all those under the age of 18 are named as children in this way, though the framing of their subordination in terms of ‘rights’ complicates and in some ways obscures the political implications of such positioning. Frijhoff (2012) argues that this keeps children confined in their childhood, while Gabriel (2014) suggests that children are constructed by adults as being of a different generation. Through this, adults ‘use their positions of power to define differences between adults and children’ (123).

The CRC also makes provision for the child’s voice to be heard in decisions that affect him or her. This simultaneously positions the child as a citizen who has a right to have and express opinions and have these taken seriously, and as someone who does not have full citizenship rights. For example, while the best interests of the child are considered to be the most important priority in decisions regarding children, it is not clear who are considered the most appropriate people to judge what these are (Rodham, 1973): for example, the CRC protects the rights of parents to share responsibility for bringing up a child and to guide and advise them. Children are also explicitly protected from work that is dangerous or which might harm their health or education, and (under the age of 15) from taking part as combatants in war. So while the CRC takes seriously the idea that children’s voices, opinions and wishes are

important, it also maintains the right for named and unnamed adults, including national governments, to override these. Furthermore, by providing for a child's education and personal development, the CRC treats children not as full citizens, but as citizens-in-formation (Buckley, 2014; Larkins, 2014), requiring that they be afforded the opportunities they need to develop into full citizens when they are older.

The extent to which children are regarded as full or almost-full members of the body politic, and therefore participants in the social contract, varies both with age and with competence. Stoeklin (2013) argues that, however children's rights are conceived, the child remains an actor with limited agency. He points out that in order for a child to be eligible for Article 12 of the CRC, under which children have the right to express their views and have them taken seriously, a child has to be seen as competent, but such competence is something that is socially defined and recognised. Being recognised as competent is something that happens in different ways in different situations (Frijhoff, 2012; Iverson, 2014; Wyness, 2012), but age remains a factor in such recognition. The younger the child is, the less likely he or she is to be treated, and thereby implicitly recognised, as a full citizen.

The implication of this partial citizenship is that children, particularly young children, are not generally considered to be participants in the social contract, as traditionally conceived. This leaves us with the question of how that affects their positioning with regard to the heterosexual matrix. In considering this question I am going to focus on very young children, in order to simplify the discussion. With older children and teenagers there is evidence of recognition of some citizenship rights, some of which (such as the notion of Gillick competence) are explicitly related to heterosexually-focused conceptions of what it means to be a full participant in civil

society, able to come to and enact one's own decisions. Generally, however, such notions of competence are not applied to children under six. The remainder of my paper, therefore, will focus on these very young children, and on their contradictory relationship both to the social contract, as adults-in-the-making, and to the heterosexual matrix.

Young children and the heterosexual matrix

I have established that the heterosexual matrix is implicated in wider conceptions of the social contract, and in the exclusion of young children from full participation in this. Such a position suggests that it might be possible for young children to stand outside of the heterosexual matrix, to be insulated from the level of involvement that is so hard for adults to escape. It could be that children's bodies, rather than having to be intelligible primarily as *gendered*, could instead gain their intelligibility from their status specifically as the bodies of *children*, with this happening prior to a sexualised conception of gender. The everyday social world has, at least since the nineteenth century (Prout, 2005) treated children in this way much of the time: they are seen as pre-sexual beings who need to be protected from sexualisation (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Epstein, 1999; King, 2009; Renold, 2006; Ryan, 2000). In the affluent North they are frequently the subject of moral panics in this respect (Robinson, 2008), while in less privileged parts of the world this can expose girls, in particular, to danger (Bhana, 2005).

Those carrying out research into gender, sexuality and childhood, however, have produced abundant evidence both that young children are anything but pre-sexual, and that they work hard to insert themselves into heterosexual discourses and

performances. This evidence suggests that it is unrealistic simply to position young children outside of the heterosexual matrix. Ryan (2000), for example, reviewing the literature up until 1988, reported retrospective survey data showing that adults remember sexual experiences with other children from age four, mainly in the context of fantasy play, such as ‘playing married’ or ‘playing doctor’. Such play frequently took place out of the sight and without the knowledge of adults, suggesting that studies relying on adult observation are likely to under-report such behaviour. Nevertheless, research carried out with adult carers has found that young children engage in a variety of sexual practices. Pre-school children have been observed in numerous studies to engage in masturbatory behaviour, including:

arousal patterns, orgasmic tension reduction, aspects of the child’s demeanour which suggested introspection (mental imagery) and behavioral patterns suggesting that children’s masturbatory activities were at times self soothing and tension reducing (while bored or stressed) and at other times stimulating and exciting (when bored or happy). (Ryan, 2000: 36)

Friedrich et al (1998), note that ‘day care providers reported that a majority of 4- to 6-year-olds interacted spontaneously, at least occasionally, in sexual ways’ (p. 2). Their own questionnaire study of female primary carers found that ‘2-year-old children are observed to be relatively sexual (compared with 10- to 12-year-olds) and children become increasingly sexual up to age 5’ (p. 5). Items with an affirmative response of over 20% for both boys and girls aged 2-5 years old include: stands too close; touches [mother’s or other women’s] breasts; touches sex parts at home; and tries to look at people when they are nude. They conclude that:

These items can be considered as developmentally-related sexual behaviors, meaning that they were observed in a significant percentage of children for that age and gender group. (Friedrich et al., 1998: 8)

It can thus be seen that even very young children, while not having the sexual focus or response of older children, adolescents or adults, do nevertheless have and express sexual feelings and engage in sexual play and exploration of one kind or another. It is worth noting that when such behaviour is observed to take place between children, it can be differently interpreted and regulated according to the gender of the children involved. For example, Woodward (2003), in an ethnographic study of a nursery class, noted that ‘amorous’ (p. 180) behaviour (kissing and/or cuddling) between girls, or between girl/boy pairs, was ignored, but visibly disapproved of when it took place between two boys.

Not only are young children sexual, evidence from a range of studies suggests that they are also heavily invested in the heterosexual matrix. Young children’s play reflects and reinforces heterosexual norms, and both boys and girls are active in inserting themselves into heterosexual social relations. This insertion takes place through the forms, foci and execution of play activities, and through the claiming and enactment of gendered power relations within early years settings. There is a myriad of research evidence about this; I will focus on a few examples.

Martin’s (2011) ethnographic study of an English nursery school shows numerous examples of children explicitly positioning themselves within heterosexual masculinities and femininities. Girls drew pictures of themselves in fashionable clothes, wearing makeup, including lipstick and exaggerated eyelashes, and with big hairdos. They portrayed themselves in princess costumes, party and wedding dresses,

and talked and monitored their clothing and appearance. Boys' self-portraits, similarly, inscribed them in stereotypically active masculinities, particularly through pictures of themselves playing football with their friends. Blaise (2005), studying five and six year olds, reports that girls 'pretended to be beautiful princesses attending extravagant parties and balls where they would meet and dance with a handsome prince' (p. 77). In some cases, boys were included in their play, as husbands or suitors who were taking them out, though the latter might, while superficially co-operating, simultaneously assert traditional masculinities through other play activities.

Girls' fascination with makeup and accessories is discussed by both Martin (2011) and Blaise (2005); in both cases children use makeup as a signifier of adulthood. In describing an incident where one girl brought makeup to school for show-and-tell, Blaise outlines how this led to an extensive discussion between the girls about how and when they used makeup at home. A boy attempting to be involved in this discussion was first ignored, then rebuffed, and finally ridiculed. Blaise notes that

this episode highlights how the discourse of makeup circulates in the classroom and how children use their knowledge of both the heterosexual matrix and makeup to maintain particular ways to be girls and boys. (p. 75)

This knowledge is both strongly gendered and openly associated with adulthood. Part of the girls' discussion concerns how much makeup (if any) they are allowed to use at home, and the difference between 'play' and 'real' makeup. Blaise comments that 'some of the politics the children are aware of include...the notion that it is not appropriate for young children to wear "real" makeup' (p. 75). By claiming to using

makeup whether or not their parents approve, these young girls demonstrate both their understanding that young children are ‘supposed’ to be positioned outside of the heterosexual mores of adult society, and their resistance to such positioning.

Several authors (Blaise, 2005; Browne, 2004; Davies, 1989; Marsh, 2000; Martin, 2011) have discussed the ways in which young boys are invested in superhero play, using it as a way of constructing heroic forms of masculinity in which weaker, mainly female, individuals, are rescued from dangerous situations. Marsh (2000) notes that the superhero discourse is mainly produced by men, for boys, and that this makes it harder for girls to become involved in these forms of play, though there are strategies that can be used to involve them. She suggests that superheroes appeal to young children partly in contrast to their relative powerlessness in daily life. Indeed, by playing a traditional superhero who saves the city, a child can imaginatively insert him or herself very firmly into the (imagined) body politic.

Cullen and Sandy (2009) argue that ‘children have strong, culturally embedded, discursively constructed notions of themselves as gendered and sexualised beings from an early age’. This is played out in a variety of ways, but most frequently including boyfriend/girlfriend identities and positioning, which again claims participation in the heterosexual matrix. Although studies of this more frequently focus on older, though still primary-age children (Epstein, 1999; Paechter & Clark, 2007, 2010; Renold, 2005), research on infant and nursery children has also revealed heterosexualised and (quasi)-romantic relationships and games between boys and girls. The games seem usually to involve variations on kiss-chase, in which one group (usually girls) chases an individual or individual from the other gender, kissing them once captured (Connolly, 1998; Martin, 2011; Scott, 2002). Martin notes that, while

boys seemed to be ambivalent towards these games, girls found them exciting. Bhana (2005) argues that this was also the case at the white middle-class South African primary school she studied, while noting also that for girls in township schools it is, by contrast, a form of sexual violence which they resist through other forms of sexualised play.

Martin and Connolly both comment on the importance, particularly for girls, of fantasy play involving heterosexual relationships, including mummies and daddies; doctors; mummies and babies (Connolly, 1998); and fairy tales in which princesses were captured and then rescued by princes (Martin, 2011). Despite their eagerness to act out these games and tell the researcher about them, the nursery children in Martin's study were keen to ensure she knew that they understood that they were 'too young' to take such relationships seriously. The American first-grade children studied by Scott (2002), however, were open in speaking about having boyfriends and girlfriends, both to the researcher and to each other, though these relationships were not always evident in playground play. For the British 5-6 year olds in Connolly's (1998) research, heterosexual orientation and relationships, as defined through boyfriends and girlfriends, were a significant focus of identity construction. For both boys and girls, having a boyfriend or girlfriend conferred significant cultural capital among the peer group, although there was an ethnic dimension to this, with African-Caribbean boys particularly prized and South Asian boys and girls particularly derided as romantic partners. The importance of sexual/romantic relationships as status markers in this setting, Connolly argues, had the effect of positioning girls as sexualised objects, treated as property in masculine struggles over territory. In this way, boys can be seen to be asserting and taking up heterosexual formations as part of

power plays which reflect the operation of the heterosexual matrix within wider society, and in particular a local context of violence in which even very young boys were expected to present themselves as streetwise.

Power, pleasure, citizenship and the heterosexual matrix

This leads us to the question: why is it so important for young children to insert themselves so forcefully into the heterosexual matrix? What is it that makes such a repressive formation so attractive to them? There are a number of possible answers to these questions.

The first may be that it is partly developmental. If pre-school children have sexual feelings, expressed through masturbation, curiosity about adults and exploration with each other, then the heterosexual matrix is the most easily available construct within which to understand these. Young children are surrounded by heterosexual relationships in their own (though not necessarily immediate) families, in the media, and in stories (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Davies, 1989). Children's fairytale fiction, in particular, offers images of romantic heterosexual love which, while unrealistic in multiple ways, form part of a wider imaginary to which many adults, of varied sexual orientations, subscribe. Indeed, it is not unusual for friendships between children of different genders to be described by adults in a joking manner as if they were romantic relationships, referring to 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends' (Woodward, 2003). It would not be surprising, therefore, if young children, experiencing sexual feelings about other children and attempting to make sense of them, would latch onto the heterosexual matrix as a discourse within which to locate and express their feelings: it is, after all, that which is most readily available.

The importance of self-inscription into the heterosexual matrix among young children seems, however, to require a stronger and more complex explanation than this. We need to be able to explain, for example, why teachers wanting to ‘queer’ early years classrooms have to work so hard in order to do so, and why alternative constructions of self, sexuality and the world are not easily taken up (Blaise, 2005; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Davies, 1989, 2003). It seems to me that a major factor here is precisely the close relationship between the heterosexual matrix and the social contract, and the importance for children of being part of the adult world.

Davies (2003) argues that, for children, the adult/child binary is of crucial significance, alongside male/female. They see adults, she argues, as having agency regarding both their own lives and those of children: they therefore struggle against adults’ positioning of them, which names them as children and so lacking competence (Gabriel, 2014). Children’s striving towards agency, Davies suggests, coexists and is bound up with this positioning. I would go further and argue that the contradictions experienced by young children lead them explicitly to assert their rights within society through self-inscription in the heterosexual matrix. They strive to become parties to the social contract by virtue of their desire to have more control over their lives. However, they are prevented from doing so partly because of the social convention that they are pre-sexual, which places them, as children, outside the heterosexual matrix. In this situation, positioning oneself within the heterosexual matrix is a way of claiming inclusion in the social contract. I also contend that this self-inscription is a powerful source of pleasure for young children, giving them a further motivation to bind themselves in this way.

There is considerable evidence that children desire to be part of civil society. Children of all ages have been found to lay importance on being kept informed regarding decisions about themselves (Mayall, 2007). When it comes to significant matters, such as domestic violence interventions (Iverson, 2014) and where and how a child will live after divorce (van Nijnatten & Jangen, 2011), children strive to make their voices heard, even in the face of opposition from adults in authority. Wyness (2012) points out that even for adults, the concept of an unmediated voice is problematic: giving weight to children's opinions has more to do with making sure that they have an input into important decisions than with affording them complete autonomy from adults (Thomas, 2012). He also notes that, in contrast to the dominant voice-based model of participation, one way in which children participate in civil society is through economic activity, which, while excluded from the CRC as part of an attempt to eliminate child labour, can involve adults and children working together for their common good. This is particularly salient in poorer regions where children's labour is essential to family finances. Ertl (2014) in a periodical article about Bolivia's child and adolescent trade unions, notes that, for these children and their families, their work is necessary for daily living. By having it recognised through state regulation and union membership, Bolivian children over 10 become entitled to the minimum wage and gain healthcare rights as workers, as well as protected time for homework; they value this recognition that they are economically active citizens. However, even in richer countries, children value participation in economic activity. Gasson et al (2014), studying New Zealand children working for pay, quote statistics suggest that 5% of New Zealand 9 year olds do paid work, rising to 76% by age 16. They point out that young people feel empowered by having an involvement in

decision making about their working lives, and value being able to work independently and contribute to the family.

It is clear, therefore, that even very young children feel that it is important to belong to civil society at some level. If participation in the social contract inherently involves, as Wittig (1989/1992) suggests, participation in dominant heterosexual forms, it is unsurprising that young children take up these forms as a way of demonstrating their rights and abilities to participate.

Beyond, this, however, it seems to me that a major factor in children's eagerness to take up and construct themselves within the heterosexual matrix is that it gives them pleasure; a pleasure that comes in part from the power associated with naming oneself not as a mere child, but as a member of the wider social world. Young children, positioned most of the time as lacking in social power, resist such positioning in many ways, including by acting out the roles of those whom they see as being powerful. Walkerdine et al (1989) point out that, even within a sexist society, women are relatively powerful in their roles as mothers. Girls engaging in fantasy scenarios in which they are mothers, taking control of their 'husbands' and 'babies' are claiming some of that power for themselves. Similarly, boys who take on masculine-labelled roles in play are both resisting the power of the (pretend) woman in the home and asserting their own symbolic positions within wider social life. As Blaise (2005), for example, analyses a game in which two boys 'take out' two girls in car which then gets involved in a shootout. She argues that both boys and girls claim power by positioning themselves as stereotypically gendered men or women, with the girls asserting authority inside and boys outside the home corner, and suggests that, in doing this,

All of the children are enjoying a chance to demonstrate their gender competence. They feel good while playing the heterosexual game. (p. 29)

We see this pleasure in taking on roles within the heterosexual matrix repeatedly in young children's play: in dressing up as princesses; in defeating baddies; in talking about makeup, clothes or football; in claiming romantic boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. This pleasure that children gain by inserting themselves into the heterosexual matrix should not be underestimated. It is the pleasure associated with feeling powerful by acting out powerful positions; it is the pleasure that comes from claiming and recognising one's future as full actors within a heterosexually-focused civil society; and it is the pleasure that arises from belonging, from inserting oneself into a heterosexually-constructed gender, shared with older children and with adults.

Some concluding remarks

If we understand the social contract in the way that Wittig does, as what we enter into as 'living as social beings' (Wittig, 1989/1992: 40), then children are indeed included, at least to the extent that they are considered fully social. The more focused understanding rooted in Western political philosophy, however, excludes very young children entirely as non-competent, and allows older children only the participation rights concomitant with adult perceptions of their ability to comprehend the import of decisions. This is not only the case in theory, but also becomes evident when we consider how adults, at least in more affluent areas of the globe, actually behave towards children, excluding them from economic and social participation. Children

themselves, however, are eager to participate in wider civil society, to understand what is going on in their lives, and to have their voices heard and their opinions taken into account. Faced with the experience of being named as children, and, as a result, excluded from the adult world, they have to find ways in which they can reinsert themselves into civil society and the social contract.

The heterosexual matrix is a key underpinning feature of adult society, and this is clear to children through their experiences of everyday family life, the media, and the stories they encounter both at home and at school. They can see that many adults gain both power and pleasure from their involvement in hegemonic sexual practices, and they want to have both of these for themselves. Indeed, one way in which they understand these heterosexual practices is as a marker of adulthood: they are not expected of, or even permitted to, those named as children. Children's self-inscription in the heterosexual matrix can therefore be read as a repeated act of resistance to the adult naming of children *as children*: it is a means whereby children make claims to adult rights and privileges by asserting that they are, essentially, the same as adults.

By taking part in heterosexualised fantasy play, children are able, if only fleetingly, to experience the pleasure of involvement in adult-signified power relations. This allows children to understand themselves as potentially, if not actually, powerful actors in the world, and, by so doing, to claim full membership of the social contract. These powerful claims reflect powerful desires. If we want to cut through children's investment in the heterosexual matrix, therefore, we may need to find ways to make it less powerful for them. How we do this is unclear, but it is at least possible that it may include changing the implications of being named as a child so that

children, particularly young children, can make claims to be full members of the body politic without the necessity to invoke the heterosexual matrix. This could include: finding ways to involve even very young children in decisions about things that matter to them; recognising and valuing their participation in economic activity; and, of course, resisting the heterosexual matrix itself so that it becomes less thoroughly implicated in the adult-focused society.

- Atkinson, E., & DePalma, R. (2009). Un-believing the matrix: queering consensual heteronormativity. *Gender and Education*, 21(1), 17-29.
- Bhana, D. (2005). "Show me the panties": girls play games in the school ground. In C. Mitchell & J. Reid-Walsh (Eds.), *Seven Going on Seventeen* (pp. 163-172). New York: Peter Lang.
- Blaise, M. (2005). *Playing it Straight: uncovering gender discourses in the early childhood classroom*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power* (G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Browne, N. (2004). *Gender Equity in the Early Years*. Maidenhead, Berks: Open University Press.
- Buckley, P. (2014). Subjects, citizens or civic learners? Judicial conceptions of childhood and the speech rights of American public school students. *Childhood*, 21(2), 226-241.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.

- Cohen, E. F. (2005). Neither seen nor heard: children's citizenship in contemporary democracies. *Citizenship Studies*, 9(2), 221-240.
- Connell, R. (2011). *Confronting Equality: gender, knowledge and global change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, R. (2014). The sociology of gender in Southern perspective. *Current Sociology Monograph*, 1-18.
- Connell, R. W. (2010). Kartini's children: on the need for thinking gender and education together on a world scale. *Gender and Education*, 22(6), 603-615.
- Connolly, P. (1998). *Racism, Gender Identities and Young Children*. London: Routledge.
- Connolly, P. (2004). *Boys and Schooling in the Early Years*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Cullen, F., & Sandy, L. (2009). Lesbian Cinderella and other stories: telling tales and researching sexualities equalities in primary school. *Sex Education*, 9(2), 141-154.
- Davies, B. (1989). *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: preschool children and gender*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Davies, B. (2003). *Shards of Glass* (Second ed.). Cresshill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Epstein, D. (1999). Sex play: romantic significations, sexism and silences in the schoolyard. In D. Epstein & J. T. Sears (Eds.), *A Dangerous Knowing: sexuality, pedagogy and popular culture* (pp. 25-42). London: Cassell.
- Ertl, M. (2014). Child labour in Bolivia: 'let us work'. *Contributoria*, (October 2014). <https://www.contributoria.com/issue/2014-10/53f5ca6a4250074f6100019e>
Retrieved from <https://www.contributoria.com/issue/2014-10/53f5ca6a4250074f6100019e>
- Francis, B. (1998). *Power Plays: primary school children's conception of gender, power and adult work*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Friedrich, W. N., Fisher, J., Broughton, D., Houston, M., & Shafran, C. R. (1998). Normative sexual behavior in children: a contemporary sample. *Pediatrics*, 101(4), e9. Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/101/4/e9.full.pdf+html>
- Frijhoff, W. (2012). Historian's discovery of childhood. *Paeagogica Historica: international journal of the history of education*, 48(1), 11-29.
- Gabriel, N. (2014). Growing up beside you: a relational sociology of early childhood. *History of the Human Sciences*, 27(3), 116-135.
- Gasson, N. R., Calder, J. E., Diorio, J. A., Smith, A. B., & Stigler, J. R. (2014). Young people's employment: protection or participation? *Childhood, online first publication*.
- Gatens, M. (1991). *Feminism and Philosophy: perspectives on difference and equality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hekman, S. J. (1990). *Gender and Knowledge: elements of a postmodern feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Iverson, C. (2014). Predetermined participation: social workers evaluating children's agency in domestic violence intervention. *Childhood*, 21(2), 274-289.

- King, J. R. (2009). Male teachers, young children, and teaching desire. In W. Martino, M. Kehler, & M. B. Weaver-Hightower (Eds.), *The Problem with Boys' Education: beyond the backlash*. London: Routledge.
- Larkins, C. (2014). Enacting children's citizenship: developing understandings of how children enact themselves as citizens. *Childhood*, 21(1), 7-21.
- Lister, R. (2007). Why citizenship: where, when and how children? *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, 8(2), 693-718.
- Lloyd, B., & Duveen, G. (1992). *Gender Identities and Education: the impact of starting school*. Hemel Hempstead, Herts: Harvester Press.
- Locke, J. (1690, 1952). *The Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.
- Marsh, J. (2000). 'But I want to fly too!': girls and superhero play in the infant classroom. *Gender and Education*, 12(2), 209-220.
- Martin, B. (2011). *Children at Play*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Mayall, B. (2007). *Children's lives outside school and their educational impact: Research Survey 8/1 Cambridge Primary Review*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.
- NSPCC. (2015). Gillick Competency and Fraser Guidelines. Retrieved from <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/legal-definition-child-rights-law/gillick-competency-fraser-guidelines/>
- Paechter, C. (2007). *Being Boys, Being Girls: learning masculinities and femininities*. Maidenhead, Berks: Open University Press.
- Paechter, C., & Clark, S. (2007). Learning gender in primary school playgrounds: findings from the Tomboy Identities study. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 15(3), 317-332.
- Paechter, C., & Clark, S. (2010). Schoolgirls and power/knowledge economies: using knowledge to mobilize social power. In C. Jackson, C. Paechter, & E. Renold (Eds.), *Girls and Education 3-16: continuing concerns, new agendas* (pp. 117-128). Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Prout, A. (2005). *The Future of Childhood: towards the interdisciplinary study of children*. London: Routledge.
- Rawls, J. (1972). *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Renold, E. (2005). *Girls, Boys and Junior Sexualities: exploring children's gender and sexual relations in the primary school*. London: Routledge.
- Renold, E. (2006). 'They won't let us play...unless you're going out with one of them': girls, boys and Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' in the primary years. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(4), 489-509.
- Robinson, K. H. (2008). In the name of 'childhood innocence': a discursive exploration of the moral panic associated with childhood sexuality. *Cultural Studies Review*, 14(2), 113-129.
- Rodham, H. (1973). Children under the law. *Harvard Educational Review*, 43(4), 487-514.
- Ryan, G. (2000). Childhood Sexuality: A decade of study. Part I - research and curriculum development. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24(1), 33-48.
- Scott, K. A. (2002). 'You want to be a girl and not my friend': African-American/Black girls' play activities. *Childhood*, 9(4), 397-414.

- Skelton, C. (2001). *Schooling the Boys: masculinities and primary education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Stoeklin, D. (2013). Theories of action in the field of child participation: in search of explicit frameworks. *Childhood*, 20(4), 443-457.
- Thomas, N. (2012). Love, rights and solidarity: studying children's participation using Honneth's theory of recognition. *Childhood*, 19(4), 453-466.
- van Nijnatten, C., & Jangen, E. (2011). Professional conversations with children in divorce-related child welfare. *Childhood*, 18(4), 540-555.
- Walkerdine, V., & The Girls and Mathematics Unit. (1989). *Counting Girls Out*. London: Virago.
- Wittig, M. (1980/1992). The straight mind. In M. Wittig (Ed.), *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (pp. 21-32). Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Wittig, M. (1989/1992). On the social contract. In M. Wittig (Ed.), *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (pp. 33-45). Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Woodward, D. (2003). *Nursery Class Children's Formation of Gender Perspectives*. (M.Phil), The Open University, Milton Keynes.
- Wyness, M. (2012). Children's participation and intergenerational dialogue: bringing adults back into the analysis. *Childhood*, 20(4), 429-442.
- Young, I. M. (1990). The ideal of community and the politics of difference. In L. J. Nicholson (Ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (pp. 300-323). London: Routledge.