

Using Foucault's notions of discourse to explore and research child sexuality

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Why?

- Practice as counsellor Child Youth & Family late 1990s
- Published practice articles
 - (2000). Problem wrestlers: Group therapy with pre-adolescent boys who act out sexually. *Social Work Now*, 17, 4-8.
 - (2003). Child sexual behaviour: A dilemma for social workers and caregivers. *Social Work Now*, 24, 17-24.
 - (2009). Play, prey or "sexploration"? Understanding and responding to sexual actions by children at primary school. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 3, 19-26.
 - (2010). Making molehills into mountains: Adult responses to child sexuality and behaviour. *Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice*, (1), 57-69.
 - (2011). Making sense of children's sexuality: Understanding sexual development and activity in education contexts. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 16(3), 69-79.
- Ongoing consultations with practitioners and agencies across Aotearoa

Foucault: Discourse

- Power/knowledge – power is productive, it is not a commodity
- Governmentality
 - Modes of objectification: Classification; dividing practices; subjectification (effects for individuals)
 - Totalising procedures: Biopower
- Normativity and normalisation
 - “The judges of normality are present everywhere” (1975/1977, p. 304)
- Biopower – effects for populations
- History of sexuality – 3 volumes (flesh/body; sexuality; sex)

Language and text: Derrida

- Deconstruction of the text (spoken, written) shows *how* meaning is achieved
- There is no fixed or universal meaning of the sign, it is fluid in each iteration
- “a margin of opacity” between sign and signifier

Performativity: Butler

Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted (Butler, 1997, p. 17)

Gender is performative insofar as it is the *effect* of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized *under constraint*. (Butler, 1997, p. 16)

Archaeology: History of ideas / thought

• **Sexuality**

- Cultural perspectives (WEIRD societies; O'Carroll, 2018)
- Sexological types (behavioural science)
- Instinct & Psychoanalytic drives (natural drives, phallogentrism)
- Commerce & Libidinal economies (prostitution, pornography)
- Feminist theories (desire, intimacy, power, political)
- Masculine constructions (satisfaction, patriarchal, pleasure)
- Sexuality as discourse: relations of power; gender; adult/child; heteronormativity; good healthy citizens

Archaeology: History of ideas / thought

• **Childhood**

- Kissing (health; hygiene; abusive)
- Masturbation (moral hygiene; mental health; knowledge)
- Sex talk (precocious; knowing; abuse/abusive)
- 1. Innocence (Christianity, Locke, Rousseau)
- 2. Risk protection (moral panics, threats to heteronormative family and to heterosexual gender binary)
- 3. Parental responsibility (surveillance, 'parent-training')
- 4. Education & other sources of sexual knowledge (who and how?)
- 5. Children's rights (sexual agency; Egan & Hawkes, 2009)

Methods

- Vignettes: 6 brief stories of child experiences
public urinating; kissing; mooning; masturbation; genital touching; sex talk
(2017). Using vignettes in interviews: Exploring discourses around child sexuality.
Sage Research Methods Case (pp. 1-18).

- Interviews (28 participants in total: 25 women, 3 men)
 - Individuals (17 participants: teachers (5); parents (6); therapists (6)*)
 - Groups (3 groups: teachers (4); parents (7); therapists (4)*)
- Discursive analysis of selected material from among the 20 transcripts

“a historical awareness for our present circumstance” (Foucault, 1982, p. 778)

What are the effects of power generated by what was said?

What are the links between these discourses, the effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested in them?

What knowledge (savoir) was formed as a result of this linkage?

The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world.

(Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 11)

Findings & analysis: Genealogy

to isolate “material verbal traces left by history” (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 133)

A “power/knowledge reading involves interpretations of interpretations, which are found in the significance of cultural practices” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 57).

The analysis of text is both limited and open (Derrida)

“reality, behaviour and subjectivity are always in texts” (Burman & Parker, 1993, p. 6)

Example: Relations of power - Sammie

- A parent, “a fulltime mum” of three children responds to vignette about two 8-year-old children kissing

They're children playing, experimenting. They must have seen that – whether it's in the home environment, their parents or siblings or whatever. They must have seen that, so they're mimicking what they're seeing.

What do you notice in this talk?

What is your understanding of ‘play’, experimenting, mimicking?

What questions might you have about possible meanings?

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What do you notice in this talk?

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What questions might you have about possible meanings?

I'm just thinking if they're eight, would they have those feelings?

[Pauses]... You know, if they like someone, then maybe that's a natural thing for them to want to kiss them.

I don't know [if] by eight it would be a sexual, sexual feelings.

I wouldn't have thought – I mean I don't know, I don't know if that would be considered to be sexual at eight.

From my experience, I wouldn't have thought it was.

If it was an older – you know, if they're the same age then yeah, but if it was older ones, then I would be worried. You know, one older.

What do you notice in this talk?

What is your understanding of ‘a natural thing’, ‘sexual feelings’?

What questions might you have about possible meanings?

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Oh, you know,

if [it] was senior students then

maybe ten, eight, nine – ten.

With an 8-year-old, then I'd be thinking, 'Hang on.'

What do you notice in this talk?

What is your understanding of 'senior students', 'ten, eight, nine – ten'?

What questions might you have about possible meanings?

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Analysing effects of power/knowledge

- What does this language do?
- What effects are there for a child?
- What are the effects for adults?
- What knowledge was formed as a result of linking discourses? *How* is meaning achieved?
- What is the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world?

Where to...

- What this research might offer:
- Counsellors in their conversations with parents about their children
- Teachers and schools in the relationships with families to support parents in their hope/intention/responsibility/right to (or possibly abdication of) educating children about sexuality
- Question? What might be useful in Initial Teacher Education?
- How might we find safe places for adults to have these discussions about childhood and sexuality? (apart from research or therapy?)