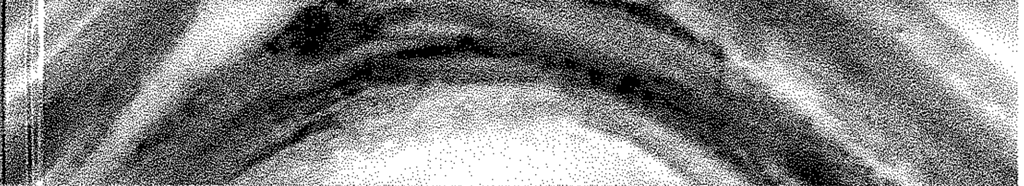
ROUTLEDGE

Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood

The contradictory nature of sexuality and censorship in children's contemporary lives



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Childhood innocence, moral panic and censorship

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Introduction

The hegemonic discourse of childhood is intimately linked with the concept of innocence, which is equated with purity, naivety, selflessness, irrationality, and a state of unknowingness, or of being less worldly – all of which characterize the child as vulnerable. The discourse of childhood innocence plays a critical social function in defining and regulating differences between the adult and the child, of which sexual innocence is central. This chapter examines the connection between childhood innocence and children's sexual subjectivities, providing a brief historical overview of the development of this relationship. Sexuality has come to signify danger in the lives of children through discourses of innocence and protection, which have largely dismissed children's sexual subjectivities (Bhana 2008; Davies and Robinson 2010; Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2009, 2010; Renold 2005; Robinson 2008, 2012a). Childhood as emotional capital is infused with sentimentality, romanticism and nostalgia, largely built on this idea of innocence, which is forever lost to adults. The social insistence on maintaining, protecting and prolonging childhood innocence – especially children's sexual innocence – in Western societies has been supported by broad socio-cultural, legal and political practices. This insistence has also been reinforced by discourses of developmentalism, in which understandings of children's physical, emotional and cognitive capabilities are influenced by social values and perceptions of childhood and innocence. The *innocent child* (imbued with race, class and gender) has become a figurehead for the ideals of Western civilization – almost becoming 'a substitute for religion', according to Hugh Cunningham (1991: 152).

It is within this context that transgressions from the cultural norms associated with childhood – particularly those practices contravening childhood innocence – foster broad public and private anxieties in society. Such anxieties often manifest into moral panic as a result of media frenzies that perpetuate community stereotypes, myths and misconceptions about children's vulnerabilities, so increasing community fears. Social conservatives have mobilized the discourse of childhood innocence as a powerful

political tool to instil moral panic for political gain. This chapter investigates this moral panic, which has primarily focused on children's relationships with sexuality, and the current international debates on the sexualization of childhood, which have resulted in government and community calls for greater censorship, increased surveillance and regulation of both children's and adult's lives. It is ironic that the increasing regulation and censorship of childhood, in the name of protection, has rendered the child *more* vulnerable.

The origins and transformations of childhood innocence and childhood sexuality: a brief historical overview

The sacred and innocent child in the seventeenth century

The historical representations of children's sexuality can be seen to parallel the changing discourses of childhood and of childhood innocence. However, it is important to note that historical records relating to child sexuality overwhelmingly represent adult and official institutional perspectives, rather than children's accounts of their own experiences. Although the concept of childhood innocence can be traced back to Greek ideas on human perfection, Christian narratives and representations of the sacred child – as epitomized by the baby Jesus – have significantly influenced the discursive constitution of childhood innocence. Within Christian religious discourse, the child is constituted in opposition to the adult, who is positioned as the bearer of original sin in the biblical book of *Genesis*. This narrative of Adam and Eve's fall from grace as a result of giving into temptation and eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge in the Garden of Eden constructs the binary of the exalted and fallen, which is paralleled by the binary of the fallen and knowing adult and the innocent unknowing child. In this religious narrative, the child is viewed as representative of the purity, goodness and innocence that existed prior to the fall of Adam and Eve – a potentially redeemable space made possible through the inherent virtues of the innocent child and the repenting adult (Faulkner 2011).

Childhood innocence has historically been central to Western Christian religious discourse, especially through its significance in Renaissance art during the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, and in the Romantic literature of the eighteenth century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1992 [1762]), an essay on education and on *man*, praised the *natural* innocence and goodness of the child – lost through the process of becoming adult. The linkage of innocence with whiteness has also prevailed, as reflected in *L'Innocence*, a painting by the nineteenth-century French artist, William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905). The painting features a child – Jesus – who is generally represented as white, angelic and protected from potential evil or harm. In Bouguereau's painting, the Virgin Mary, dressed in a white

robe, stands holding a white 'spotless' lamb and the white Christ Child in her arms. The image of the Christ Child with the lamb (the sacrificial lamb – also a religious symbol of innocence) links childhood innocence also with the natural and the nonhuman. In the poem, 'The Little Black Boy' in Romantic poet William Blake's *The Songs of Innocence* (1789), innocence is also linked to colour. Blake locates childhood innocence in the *weakness of whiteness*, which is a central signifier of innocence, as well as privilege and childhood (Bond Stockton 2009: 31). The little black boy narrating the poem remarks:

> My Mother bore me in the southern wild,
> And I am black but O! my soul is white;
> White as an angel is the English child:
> But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

The little black boy is a representation of strength and experience, in which he loses any links to innocence. Kathryn Bond Stockton maintains that in the late twentieth century, 'Experience is still hard to square with innocence, making depictions of streetwise children, who are often neither white nor middle-class, hard to square with "children"'(2009: 33). Children who are perceived as disorderly, disobedient, chaotic and uncontrollable not only lose their status as innocents, but their identity as children, is also questioned. The virtuous and innocent child, tempted by *evil*, has further to fall and is harshly judged. This point also echoes the loss of innocence perceived to be associated with the *knowing child* – the child who has the language to speak about sexuality, considered inappropriate for its age.

Prior to and in the seventeenth century, according to Sterling Fishman (1982), child sexuality seems to have been given little attention, even by religious moralists. However, the need to protect childhood innocence as a reflection of divine purity generally prevailed amongst religious conservatives. The overcrowding of living spaces, especially amongst poorer families, resulted in adults and children sleeping in close proximity in the same rooms. Privacy in relation to sexual activities would have been difficult and it was most likely that children would have viewed adults' sexual behaviours and/or were sexually abused by adults, and/or were engaged in and experimenting with their own sexual activities either alone or with other children (Fishman 1982). It seems that one of the most notable sexual references associated with children during this period was found in the early seventeenth-century diaries of the physician to the young Louis XIII, who showed his genitals at the French Court and invited members to touch his penis (Jackson 2006; Cunningham 1995). Phillipe Aries (1962) argued that adults' enjoyment and encouragement of children's displays of sexuality disappeared in the seventeenth century

as the discourse of childhood innocence gained prominence, and religious moral entrepreneurs of the time began to argue for increased modesty and greater surveillance and control of children's behaviour.

Salvaging the child in the eighteenth century

With the changing social, political and economic landscapes arising from the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – especially the rise of capitalism and of middle class ideologies – the nature and role of the family in Western societies began to change to meet the social and economic needs of the time. Along with changes in the family, understandings of childhood also began to transform to meet the requirements of these broad socio-cultural shifts. The discourse of childhood innocence took on additional meanings, and became imbued with the middle class morals, values and privileges of the time. The modern nuclear family emerged, as large extended working class families fragmented into more mobile units consisting of immediate family members, who could be relocated easily to smaller homes in industrial cities in the search for work. Whilst there was increasing poverty amongst the working classes, the middle classes prospered, moving into new suburbs, establishing larger and more comfortable homes, and experiencing more leisure time. With this prosperity, children from middle-class families became more protected as their roles became increasingly differentiated from those of the adult. They became increasingly relegated to the privacy of the home, under the expected care, surveillance and protection of parents and other family members. Patricia Holland (2006: 8) comments, '"Childhood" was part of a more comfortable lifestyle based on an ideal of domesticity and privacy'.

The introduction of compulsory public education provided a means to fulfil industrial capitalism's demand for a more literate population, but it was also a means to control and regulate working-class children – who were perceived as unruly – and to school them in Christian moral and middle-class values. With the creation of age-segregated schools came an intensification of the separation between children and adults, and an increased focus on protecting children. It was during this time that certain knowledge, such as sexuality, became designated as for adults only. Upper-class girls, schooled in Christian moral values so as to become genteel society women, were expected to represent female innocence and virtue. Upper-class boys, on the other hand, according to Stevi Jackson, were chosen for preferential treatment: they were trained as 'the first specialized entrepreneurs in a society more and more centred on trade and manufacture' (Jackson 1982: 39). Such practices strengthened gender differences and reinscribed male privilege and power, especially within public spaces.

During the Victorian era in the USA, the United Kingdom and Europe, ruling-class gentlemen, empowered through wealth and privilege, frequently

exploited working-class girls for their sexual satisfaction – a practice which was viewed as a class right (Wood 2005). Childhood innocence, equated with compliance and virginity in pre-pubescent girls, was highly sought-after – there was also less chance of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and of girls falling pregnant (Wood 2005). Sharon Wood, a US historian, claims it was considered that 'girls who played in the streets and alleys or were not shocked by sexual overtures made themselves fair game' (2005: 136). This comment highlights how girls were often blamed for their sexual exploitation, and were seen as failing to adequately protect themselves by *appropriate* responses or by staying indoors. Although innocence was generally considered an innate trait in children – especially amongst conservative religious communities – some refused to acknowledge it as universal among children, based on the perceived natural immorality of working girls. Woods points out that 'Even some Evangelicals rejected the idea of innate childhood innocence, assuming little girls could be depraved and degraded by nature' (2005: 136). These traditional gender and class-based assumed rights to exploit children's sexuality gradually began to clash with a growing move to protect children from mistreatment of all kinds.

The exploitation of children from poor families or institutionalized backgrounds in the workforce – where they were often subjected to physical abuse and long working hours in unhealthy and dangerous conditions – was central to the establishment of child protection laws in the mid-nineteenth century in the USA, the UK and Europe. In the USA, severe abuse suffered by the young Mary Ellen Connolly in New York in 1874 at the hands of her foster parents resulted in media outcry and public outrage (Shelman and Lazoritz 2005). Mary's abuse came to the attention of a Methodist missionary who tried to have the child taken from the foster parents. It was only when Henry Bergh, the founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA, founded 1866), and Elbridge Gerry, the ASPCA's legal counsel (who were also leading the campaign against cruelty to children more generally), became major advocates for Mary Ellen's case that the child was successfully removed from her foster parents (Beatty and Grant 2010). The case resulted in social policy reforms associated with child protection and the formation of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC). Prior to this case, cruelty to animals had attracted greater public concern and legal policy recognition than the cruelty experienced by children, demonstrating the increasing influence of social reformers focusing on the plight of children at this point in time. Modern child protection legislation is considered to have originated from laws instigated by the NYSPCC, which significantly shaped the regulation of child labour, censorship around children's access to drugs, alcohol, weapons and what was perceived as obscene material, and regulating what were considered inappropriate leisure and living spaces for children (e.g. children were prevented from living in houses of

prostitution). This legislation not only constituted children as requiring special state intervention in order to protect them from cruelty, but it equally considered that children (especially working-class children) required special attention and protection for the sake of their moral development, a perspective influenced by Christian and conservative values. The construction of children as different from adults was strengthened, and the boundaries between what it meant to be an adult and a child were legally reinforced. Innocence was articulated as the distinguishing characteristic on which to ideologically build and maintain the differences between adults and children.

Childhood innocence and the regulation of children's sexuality in the nineteenth century

The introduction of age-of-consent laws in the USA and UK in the latter years of the nineteenth century aimed to not only protect young children's innocence through intervening in their sexual exploitation, but also to curb the perceived immorality associated with sexual relations between adults and children across all social classes. Censorship of sexuality more generally was both a public and private affair in the Victorian era. Foucault (1978) in the *History of Sexuality* argues that children became critical in the repression and regulation of sexuality in constructions of and the policing of sexual deviancy, and in morality more generally during this time – a role that is still attached to the child today. The history of sexuality in Western society since the seventeenth century, according to Foucault, has been a process of turning sex into discourse – a process of power in which sexuality in Victorian Puritanism became regulated and repressed, whilst simultaneously taking on an element of titillation and eroticism. During the eighteenth century, theological and medical moralists viewed child sexuality – epitomized largely through masturbation – as sinful, physically injurious and as a pathological problem (Fishman 1982). This belief intensified during the Victorian era; it was considered a social evil impacting not just on the individual but also on the wellbeing of society more generally, necessitating strict measures to eradicate the behaviour.

In secondary schooling during this period, the regulation of sexuality amongst young people was a constant preoccupation of authorities who were on perpetual alert. As Foucault pointed out:

> [T]he space for classes, the shape of the tables, the planning of the recreation lessons, the distribution of the dormitories (with or without partitions, with or without curtains), the rules for monitoring bedtime and sleep periods – all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to sexuality of children.
>
> (Foucault 1978: 28)

The sexuality of the schoolboy became a public problem and was subjected to major surveillance and institutional intervention. Prolonged masturbation in childhood was believed by some medical professionals to lead to a weakening of the intellect of the individual over time, and to effeminacy and degeneracy in their offspring (Kociumbas 1997). Madness and suicide were also risks of spermatorrhoea, which is the involuntary discharge of semen without orgasm. Although there was a focus on boys' masturbation, girls were also warned not to engage in this risky behaviour, as it was believed to have critical medical consequences for them also, including nervous and uterine diseases, menstruation problems, sterility, headaches, flatulence and colic (Kociumbas 1997). Intervening in masturbation, particularly that of males, was central to medical campaigns, and restraining devices and surgical interventions were developed and utilized to curb this behaviour (Wolfenstein 1998). The medical theory of depleted nervous energy which emerged during the nineteenth century resulted in semen being considered a vital fluid of the nervous system, and many new physical and mental health conditions in males began to be attributed to self-abuse through the practice of masturbation (Kociumbas 1997). The perceived precocious interest in sexuality of some children was linked to mothers introducing learning through reading too early in childhood. Such solitary and sedentary behaviours were believed to prematurely excite the brain, leading to physical feebleness, stupidity, spinal damage and even death. Circumcision was advised if the child failed to stop its masturbatory habits, as it was perceived to inhibit excitability (Kociumbas 1997).

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, new specialized knowledge of childhood, framed within scientific discourses such as paediatrics and developmental psychology, constituted childhood as a particular state of being separate from adulthood. A range of new organizations and institutions were set up with children's welfare as the primary business, aligning with the discourse of ideal domesticity propagated through the middle classes (Zelizer 1985; Hendrick 1990; Thorne 2009). The medicalization of childhood resulted in the invention of many new childhood diseases, including premature sexuality (Kociumbas 1997). Defining and regulating what constituted normative sexuality in children and diverting non-normative forms became the focus of intervention. The construction of heterosexual monogamy sanctified through marriage became the norm through which all other sexualities were scrutinized and considered peripheral and perverse, including children's sexuality. Medico-sexual regimes defined and regulated normal sexuality. Foucault's (1978) history of this period highlights how the surveillance of children's masturbation led to its conceptualization and enforcement as a cultural taboo that required constant surveillance and policing by those in authority. The child's wellbeing was linked to the health of the nation and the construction of the good normative citizen-subject. Uncontrolled child sexuality was not

only considered a threat to childhood and childhood innocence, but also to the social fabric of nineteenth-century middle-class society, constituted around family relationships and middle-class Christian morality.

During this time, childhood innocence became even more strongly equated with a denial of children's sexuality, with the good/bad child constituted in one's adherence to or rejection of Victorian Christian morality – those who did or did not engage in impure sexual thoughts or actions. The romantic image of childhood was reinforced to encompass white, Christian middle-class ideals, with children of the poor constructed as corrupted savages and heathens who were constituted as a threat to the welfare of the nation and as the imagined sexualized Other (Cunningham 1991; Jackson 2006). According to Foucault, the pedagogization of children's sexuality, in which children's sexual potential – considered precious and natural on the one hand, and contrary to nature, perilous and dangerous on the other – was viewed as requiring constant intervention from parents, families, educators, doctors and psychologists, in order to prevent the threat it was perceived to pose to the physical and moral development of the individual, as well as the 'collective dangers' it posed to society (Foucault 1978: 104). Continuing well into the twenty-first century, this pedagogization of children's sexuality has also involved the regulation and policing of children's access to knowledge of sex and sexuality.

Barrie Thorne (2009) argues that institutionally, childhood is formulated at the intersections of states, markets and family, and that throughout Western countries during this time these realms were being dramatically reconfigured. Viviana Zelizer (1985) has described this transformation as a movement from 'the economically useful child', who contributed to family labour and wages, to the 'economically useless, but emotionally priceless child', who has been made sacrosanct and removed from paid labour into the more protected worlds of families and schools. Harry Hendrick (1990) describes this process as children being removed from 'socially significant activity'. The process of consolidating and maintaining the differentiation between adults and children has continued at the forefront of public and private policy and practices to current times. The constitution of childhood innocence as the defining discourse of this differentiation has also prevailed and intensified. Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist during the 1930s in the USA, observed the extremities to which societies went to emphasize the differences between the child and the adult, noting that the child was to 'be protected from the ugly facts of life', including sexuality (Benedict 1938: 162).

The sexual/asexual child and discourses of protection in the twentieth and twenty-first century

During the twentieth century, the repression and denial of children's sexuality has continued alongside a new discourse of children's sexuality introduced primarily through the works of Sigmund Freud, particularly his *Three Essays*

on the Theory of Sexuality (1976 [1905]). Sigmund Freud challenged the comfortable ideas of childhood innocence, arguing that sexuality was not absent or dormant in childhood, but rather that children had an active sexuality that needed to be expressed. Freud claimed that children's initial feelings that connected them to the world (especially to the mother) were sexual in nature. For Freud, childhood was centrally constructed around a flexible sexuality, a polymorphous perversity (Freud 1976 [1905]). That is, before understanding social norms, children find erotic pleasure and sexual gratification in any part of the body – behaviours which are considered perverse in adults. Once children learn social norms, they suppress these behaviours, which then become repressed (Freud 1976 [1905]). Freud argued that the suppression of childhood sexuality was the *cause* of adult neurosis, including sexual deviancy. A healthy mature heterosexual adult, according to Freud, experienced a ***normal*** – that is, unsuppressed – psycho-sexual development in infancy.

In the post-Freudian period of the 1970s and 1980s, in Western countries such as Australia, the Unuited Kingdom, Canada and the USA, there has been a re-evaluation of children's sexuality. This has largely resulted in the erasure of children's sexual subjectivities and sexual agency, and the constitution of sexuality as a danger to children (Angelides 2004; Robinson 2005a). Steven Angelides (2004) maintains that this re-evaluation was largely a result of the recognition of child sexual abuse as a widespread social phenomenon, and its reconceptualization from a practice in which the victims were often blamed for the behaviour, to a practice that is now largely viewed as an abuse of powerless children by powerful male adults or youth. In this context, children's vulnerability is linked to their lack of knowledge of sexual behaviours and to their limited access to power. All children's sexual encounters, even those with other children, have consequently been largely constituted as non-consensual. Angelides argues:

> [A]lthough reinterpreting the issue of power and its relationship to knowledge was a critical way for feminists to challenge our society's tendency to blame the child victim, the question and the discourse of child sexuality were unfortunate casualties of this process.
>
> (Angelides 2004: 153)

The discourse of childhood innocence regulates children's sexuality through its desexualization of the child subject, and the discourse of protection has largely supported this process (Angelides 2004; Renold 2005; Robinson 2005a; Egan and Hawkes 2009).

The discourse of protection has become increasingly powerful since the mid-nineteenth century (Egan and Hawkes 2009). Today, the discourses of childhood innocence and protection play a mutually reinforcing role in constituting and regulating political and legal policies, adult/child relationships,

parenting practices, broader socio-cultural practices, censorship and children's access to knowledge in Western countries – and all of this under the perception of this being in the best interests of the child. It is critical that there are broad social and community policies and practices which operate to protect children from harm and vulnerability – particularly abuse, neglect and exploitation. How a society achieves this without disempowering children or negating their agency and sexual subjectivity, or using children to demonize and regulate others, must be the central aim of protective policies and practices (Egan and Hawkes 2009). The very methods often used in the name of protection contribute to children's despair, lack of competency and, ultimately, to their increased vulnerability (Corteen and Scraton 1997; Kitzinger 1990; Plummer 1990). The critical irony for children is that 'To be agents in one's own life one must cast off innocence' (Faulkner 2011: 8).

Stranger danger and moral panic

The relationship between childhood and sexuality has become increasingly constructed as one inherently fraught with danger. Since the 1960s in Western countries, based on an increasing awareness of the prevalence of child sexual abuse, public and private anxieties have intensified into moral panic about 'stranger danger' and children's public safety from the paedophile (Riggs 2011). Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton point out that moral panics act on behalf of the dominant social order, arguing:

> They are a means of orchestrating consent by actively intervening in the space of public opinion and social consciousness through the use of highly emotive and rhetorical language which has the effect of requiring that 'something be done about it'.
>
> (McRobbie and Thornton 1995: 562)

Public and private anxieties and moral panic around stranger danger have been fuelled by highly emotive and rhetorical language, primarily through mythical representations of the paedophile as an ever-present threat to children's safety and by political rhetoric that calls for parents to be ever-vigilant in watching and protecting their children, especially in public spaces (Levine 2002). The emotional capital invested in the child provides fertile ground in which to manifest social anxiety and moral panic (Irvine 2006).

These fears and anxieties often result in calls for greater regulation and surveillance, not just of children but also of parents. An Australian Research Council for Educational Research study conducted with 500 parents in the southern-eastern state of Victoria found that only 40 per cent of city parents thought it safe for their primary-school-aged children to go to school alone, with stranger danger and road safety cited as the main deterrents for the remainder (Arlington and Stevenson 2012). Despite parents' mixed opinions

on this issue, those who do not adhere to dominant socially-sanctioned parenting conventions can find themselves targets of official surveillance. In Australia, for example, there have been incidents where parents have been cautioned by police, have had police reports filed against their names, and have been threatened to be reported to the Department of Community Services for allowing their school-aged children to walk to the local shops (exemplified by the case of a seven-year-old Sydney boy walking on a familiar route to the shops, which were 400 metres from his home) or to take public transport to music lessons alone (in this case, a 10-year-old girl) (Arlington and Stevenson 2012). The parents in these incidents believed that their children were mature enough to have this independence, but were also concerned about being labelled *irresponsible* parents (Arlington and Stevenson 2012) not just by authorities, but also by other parents.

Judith Levine points out that cases of molestation, abduction and murder of children by strangers are rare and are not increasing (Levine 2002: 24). The Australian Institute of Family Studies' Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault conducted a study in 2002–3 with 6,677 women aged 18–69 years (Fergus and Keel 2005). The study found that 18 per cent had experienced sexual violence before the age of 16. Of these women, 2 per cent had experienced abuse by a parent (most frequently by the father) and 16 per cent by someone other than a parent. Of the abuse experienced by those other than a parent: 20 per cent was by a friend or friend of the family; 17 per cent by acquaintances or neighbours; 13 per cent was by someone else known; uncles, brothers, grandfathers, cousins, other relatives and other children/students comprised the greatest percentage at 37 per cent (with less than 10 per cent for each); and 13 per cent were strangers (Mouzos and Makkai 2004, cited in Fergus and Keel 2005). In this research, just under 80 per cent of the children who were abused knew the perpetrator. This reflects the findings of earlier studies, which state that relatives were the abusers in almost half of the child sexual abuse cases examined (Fleming 1997). The National Children's Home (1992, cited in Masson 1995) has estimated between one-quarter and one-third of child sexual abuse cases in the UK are perpetrated by a child or young person (Vizard *et al.* 1995). These figures reinforce and support Levine's (2002) findings that the stark reality is that paedophile strangers are not the main threat to children's wellbeing and safety. Seen in this light, the motivations behind the vigour with which the discourse of stranger danger has been taken up need to be publicly scrutinized. Ironically, stranger danger is a more comfortable discourse for many adults than acknowledging that children are more frequently abused by someone they know and trust, such as a parent or other close relative, neighbour, teacher or family friend. The stranger/paedophile (as constituted through the media) becomes the political scapegoat for all child sexual abuse, taking the focus off the abuse perpetrated by the average person (including the parent) in the family home or local neighbourhood. The family is critical to the foundation of social organization and of children's socialization – the paedophile stranger becomes a useful political tool to shift public sentiment away from scrutinizing the family unit and society more generally.

In recent years, anxieties have extended into fears associated with children's perceived vulnerabilities to strangers in the *safety* of the family home, who target children through chat rooms and social networking sites. Also, children's access to knowledge through television, the Internet, and other mobile communication technologies has resulted in an increased state of anxiety about the type of information that children are now privy to through these means. Parents fear children accessing pornography or other information about sexuality which has been deemed age-inappropriate. This anxiety is also related to the lack of control felt by many parents, as part of a generation who seem to be being left behind in terms of the technological advancements and new media that are so much part of the everyday lives of their children. Children's access to new media technologies has also raised additional anxieties about children's increased vulnerabilities to harassment and about their welfare more generally, in the face of an increasing use of popular social networking sites and mobile phones by children and youth as a means to sexually harass peers and others.

Official and unofficial regulation of the Internet, exemplified by the introduction of commercial Internet filters such as *Net Nanny*, aim to control children's time on the Internet, to limit their access to age-inappropriate knowledge (e.g. blocking pornography, *profane* words and information associated with hate speech and other particular words, such as 'adult', 'alcohol', 'tobacco', 'gambling', 'sex', 'sexuality' and many more) and to reveal children's online activities by alerting parents, providing them with reports on children's instant messaging and chat room activities, and allowing them easy access to their children's networking activities on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and Bebo. Similar Internet filters have been placed on computers in schools to control and limit children's access to certain knowledge in those contexts. This is often much to the frustration of many children and young people, who perceive that their education and research is generally curbed by extreme interpretations of inappropriate knowledge by school authorities, whom they consider overly cautious and untrusting of students (Robinson and Davies 2008b). This censorship and regulation, perceived by parents and authorities as critical to children's and young people's safety, often leads to conflicts between parents and children, and school authorities and students. Children and young people often seek information on the Internet that they cannot get from other sources, including from talking with their parents. Sexuality education is a good example of this, especially with regards to sexual orientation. Many young people who are dealing with uncertainties about their sexual orientation often only have the Internet for support. There are some parents

who feel uncomfortable at *prying* into their children's personal communications (often done without their child's consent or awareness) but feel that they have no choice – these actions often cause further rifts between the parent and the child or young person.

Childhood innocence and moral panic as political strategy

In Western countries, moral panic is used as a political strategy by conservative governments and social moralists for maintaining the hegemony of the values and practices of dominant groups in society. Sean Hier's (2003) work on moral panic provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon as a political strategy of social ordering in societies that are being challenged and changed through processes of globalization, and through increasing awareness and articulation of identity politics. In his discussion of the heightened sense of moral panic in a risk-conscious society – commonly associated with the uncertainties of late modernity – Hier points out that there has been a 'process of convergence, whereby discourses of risk have conjoined with discourses containing a strong moral dimension' (2003: 4). 'Throughout modernity', he argues, 'the quest to establish a sense of existential security – such as community – has come at the expense of the de-legitimation of the Other: the criminalized, gendered or stigmatized' (2003: 15). Innocence and childhood innocence have been utilized in conjunction with protectionist racist discourses, as well as sexist, classist and homophobic discourses, to define and regulate Others – for example, women, Aboriginal peoples, refugees and queer subjects (Kincaid 1992; Faulkner 2011). An example of public and private anxieties manifesting in moral panic can be seen in reactions to the increasing number of refugees arriving by boat to Australia. Racist sentiment has underpinned the representation of refugees, who are perceived as 'selfish' and 'immoral' parents who risk the lives of 'innocent' and 'helpless' children for their own benefit. Tapping into this emotional capital has never been more effective than when it was used in the 'children overboard' *Tampa* affair by the conservative Howard government prior to the 2001 Australian federal election, in order to win a third term in office. Racist rhetoric was captured in altered images that depicted asylum seekers supposedly throwing their children overboard from their decrepit and leaking boat into the sea. Despite the fact that the public became aware that the images had been altered by some unknown entity to give a distorted view of the facts, media and political spin-doctoring had already constituted the refugees as immoral, inhumane 'queue jumpers' – a discourse of asylum seekers that has remained solid for more than a decade, as a result of continued moral panic fed by the media and current government policy and rhetoric.

Non-heternormative or queer subjects also fit into the context of the stigmatized Other in Hier's framework, through their mythical constitution as a

threat to security and the community – especially to the child. These 'enemy stereotypes' or 'folk devils' (Cohen 1972) originate from 'everyday cultural stereotypes of the stranger' (Hier 2003: 17). The queer subject is readily couched in stereotypical understandings of the stranger, often historically centralized in public and private anxieties associated with *stranger danger*, as pointed out earlier. Myths serve to distance the queer subject from normative life narratives, instilling fears of their aims to undermine the *natural* moral and social order inherent in heterosexual relationships. With regards to the heightened sense of risk-consciousness, insecurity and moral judgment aligned with the process of othering the stranger, Hier concludes that 'as anxieties endemic to the risk society converge with anxieties contained at the level of community, we should expect a proliferation of moral panics as *an ordering practice in late modernity*' (2003: 19).

A proliferation of social anxiety and moral panic has historically been associated with children and sexuality, which has carried through to contemporary times (Egan and Hawkes 2008; Evans 1993). Janice Irvine (2006: 82), viewing moral panic as 'recursive conflicts over sexual issues', highlights the importance of emotions associated with panics. Irvine argues that it is critical to understand how moral entrepreneurs utilize panic to strategically manipulate community emotions in order to 'erode sexual rights' (2006: 86). The homosexual or queer subject has traditionally been at the centre of moral panic in relation to children through the mythical constitution of these subjects as either the paedophile, or recruiters of young children into a perceived lifestyle of hyper-sexuality, sexual abnormality and depravity. This social anxiety has impacted early childhood education in particular, with widespread suspicion of male workers as potential peadophiles, regardless of their sexual orientation. Very few men consider training or employment as early childhood teachers due to these myths, and those already employed in the field often encounter the suspicion of parents and other colleagues (Silin 1997; King 1997).

In 2007, moral panic arose in Poland in association with the BBC children's television program *Teletubbies*, sparked by comments made by Ewa Sowinska, the conservative Polish government-appointed children's rights watchdog (Robinson 2008). Sowinska, after viewing the program, remarked: 'I noticed that [Tinky Winky] has a lady's purse, but he's a boy ... At first I thought the purse would be a burden for this Teletubby ... Later I learned that this may have a homosexual undertone' (Reuters and Jensen 2007). Sowinska's reaction to the 'burden' of carrying a handbag soon escalated into homophobic fear when Tinky Winky was perceived to be a boy carrying a red handbag. National concern erupted in Poland in line with the perception that the program promoted the homosexual lifestyle to children. In this incident, the government instigated moral panic, primarily to try and gain widespread acceptance for the government's political agenda of sexual cleansing through a series of initiatives aimed at outlawing the promotion of homosexuality

amongst Polish children and the dismissal of gays' and lesbians' civil liberties. The Polish Education Minister at the time, Roman Giertych, proposed legislation enabling the sacking of teachers who promoted the homosexual lifestyle in schools. This was not the first time that the Teletubby Tinky Winky had become the target of conservative, right-wing political and religious attacks. In the USA, the late Reverend Jerry Falwell also attacked the Teletubby character. Tinky Winky has been accused of being a gay icon, represented by his purple colour, and the fact that he carries a red purse and has a triangle shaped antenna, which are all viewed as codes for signifying gay pride or gay subjectivity. Public outcry associated with children's television characters is not new. Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street*, and their famous late-1940s predecessors, *Noddy and Big Ears*, were also denounced as being gay and viewed as potentially influencing young children's future sexualities (Evans 1993). Nachman Ben-Yahuda (2009) states that 'moral panics are about struggles for moral hegemony over interpretation of the legitimacy (or not) of prevailing social arrangements and material interests. And, as well as being local, today they may also be cross-national or even global' (2009: 3).

Similar moral panics erupted in Australia during the period 2004–6 in relation to children's television and early education (Taylor 2007; Robinson 2008). The first incident was the airing of an episode of *Play School*, a long-time popular Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) children's television program, which momentarily (approximately 30 seconds) featured two mothers taking their child and her friend to an amusement park. This was in fact the second time that this particular episode went to air; the first airing received minimal public comment. The momentary segment, known as 'Through the window', consisted of the dialogue: 'I'm Brenna. That's me in the blue. My mums are taking me and my friend Merryn to an amusement park'. This statement, said by the young girl, was played over images of her two mums smiling and waving. This segment of the show usually explores families from different ethnic, social and religious backgrounds. The Australian Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, criticized the ABC for 'running an agenda in a children's program'. The second and third incidents were associated with conservative politicians and the media questioning the use of certain educational resources that were being used with young children in local-government-funded early childhood centres, and in some cases, the use of taxpayers' money to fund the development of the resources. The resources in question included *Learn to Include* (Harding 2006) and *We're Here: A Resource For Child Care Workers* (The Lesbian Parents' Play Group 2001), which incorporated representations of same-sex families developed to increase young children's awareness of family diversity and to counteract the homophobia and heteronormativity that begins early in children's lives (see Chapter 5). These particular moral panics were politically instigated, not just to reassert the

hegemony of childhood innocence, but to also reaffirm the social order and conservative heteronormative morals and values as the foundations for citizenship and marriage, at a time when they were perceived to be under threat. In this and the other examples discussed above, discourses of childhood innocence and the homosexual as 'folk devil' were mobilized by conservative, right-wing politicians and moral entrepreneurs to strategically activate a moral panic to counteract the growing support in and outside the queer community for legislative reforms and equal citizenship rights, especially in relation to legal recognition of same-sex marriage (Irvine 2006; Robinson, 2008; Taylor 2007).

In 2012, the Malaysian Home Ministry banned the selling of the classic sex education book, *Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle, first published in 1973 (Chong 2012). This heteronormative book teaches children about love, relationships, sex and pregnancy. The ban came in response to a public outcry by conservatives about the book's graphic description of sex, the pictures of nude male and female bodies, and the use of proper names for anatomical parts. Malaysian officials expressed concerns that the book could harm the morals of the community, ultimately agreeing with the complaints that the 'degree of obscenity inside the book was too much' (cited in Chong 2012). They also stated that the book may be considered suitable for children in Mayle's homeland, but it was not suitable in Malaysia. The book was considered to be in violation of Malaysian penal codes dealing with the distribution and sales of pornographic materials (Chong 2012). In this case, the book depicts only the very basic mechanics of heterosexual intercourse and reproduction, ostensibly posing far less threat to established social orders than representations of queer relationships. Nonetheless, the fact that even this bare minimum of information has so recently been deemed subversive and developmentally inappropriate for children provides a clear example of the increasing regulation surrounding children's sexuality education, not just in the West but globally.

Children are used as the prime instigators and beneficiaries of the social, political and economic policies and reforms that politicians and conservatives espouse. Henry Giroux (2000: 41) points out that 'Lacking opportunities to vote, mobilize, or register their opinions, young children become an easy target and referent in discussions of moral uplift and social legitimation. They also become pawns and victims'. Strategically, politicians and moral entrepreneurs position themselves as protectors of childhood innocence through the rhetoric of a disappearing childhood to ignite moral panic. Innocence erases the complexities of childhood as well as the differences that children experience in childhood, but also 'offers an excuse for adults to evade responsibility for how children are firmly connected to and shaped by the social and cultural institutions run largely by adults' (Giroux 2000: 40). Giroux makes the point that welfare reforms and policies in the USA have impacted severely on poor families and their children. This has included cuts

to support for unemployment and children with disabilities, harsh compliance measures, low wages and inadequate child care. Giroux argues:

> The language of innocence suggests a concern for all children but often ignores or disparages the conditions under which many of them are forced to live, especially those who are generally excluded because of race or class for the privileging and protective invocation of innocence.
> (Giroux 2000: 41)

This is a point reiterated in Deevia Bhana's (2008, 2009) research into HIV and AIDS education in South Africa. This research focuses on how discourses of childhood innocence impact on HIV and AIDS education in primary schools, highlighting the political nature of this type of education in South Africa. Bhana argues that childhood innocence is constituted as white and middle-class through teacher attitudes and pedagogical practices. As HIV and AIDS is most prevalent amongst black communities in South Africa (as a result of structural and material inequalities stemming from years of colonialist rule and apartheid), HIV and AIDS takes on a racialized and class-based dimension, and is perceived by the dominant class as the disease of the Other. This perception has influenced the pedagogical practices of some teachers in South Africa, who perceive HIV and AIDS education to be more appropriate for black children. Bhana (2008) argues that this discourse of HIV and AIDS legitimizes the lack of education about sexuality and HIV and AIDS with white children, and reinforces the constitution of childhood innocence as white and middle-class.

The sexualization of childhood: the disappearance of childhood?

Public and private anxieties about children in Western countries such as the USA, the UK and Australia in recent years have increasingly focused on concerns around the 'disappearance of childhood' (Postman 1982). These anxieties are reflected in current international debates about the sexualization of children through different mediums such as advertising and television (e.g. music video programmes), and children's unregulated and accidental access to knowledge considered age-inappropriate on the Internet (Rush and La Nauze 2006; Bailey 2011; Papadopoulous 2011). As argued by Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes (2008: 293), such debates are not new, but are reflective of the anxieties and panic of earlier social movements associated with 'potentially corrupting forces' in the lives and sexuality of children. They provide the examples of urbanization, immorality, immigration and fiction (e.g. comic books) to illustrate their point. The 'epistemological assumptions guiding the debate on sexualization in Australia', they argue, 'parallels the alarm that spurred the social purity movement at the turn of the century in

the Anglophone west' (Egan and Hawkes 2008: 293). Fears, particularly in these contemporary debates, have been generally equated with what is perceived by some as an erosion of the socio-cultural *differences* between adults and children (Rush and La Nauze 2006). Childhood innocence, especially children's sexual innocence, is the central socio-culturally-constituted difference between adults and children, and it is fears of childhood sexuality and the loss of innocence that are paramount in these anxieties (Egan and Hawkes 2008; Lumby and Albury 2010; Taylor 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2011). Central to many of these narratives is a dismissal of children's sexual subjectivities, desires and agency, and a reiteration of gendered discourses that echo patriarchal and moralistic values, and double standards associated with young girls' sexualities in particular (Egan and Hawkes 2008; Tolman 2002; Hartley and Lumby 2003; Lumby and Albury 2008; Albury and Lumby 2010). As pointed out by Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose, much that is written about these issues that

> draw attention to the problematic corporate practices that sexualize girlhood, [and] do so in ways that enable commentators to draw moral boundaries around (hetero)normative and age-appropriate notions of girlhood sexuality, isolating and regulating what is acceptable and unacceptable desire and practice.
> (Renold and Ringrose 2011: 390)

This point is reiterated by Catharine Lumby and Kath Albury (2008) who argue that these debates on the sexualization of children in the media tend to see the impacts on children – girls in particular – in a monolithic manner, dismissing the pleasures they 'take from media which are consciously irreverent and subversive of adult ideas of what they should be doing and thinking' (2008: 82).

Childhood innocence is used to foster social anxieties and moral panic, which in turn are aimed at reinstating a particular discourse of childhood, of the girl child, and of adult/child relationships which are being challenged by socio-cultural changes in post-feminist and neo-liberalist societies (Currie *et al.* 2009; Jackson and Westrupp 2010; Ringrose 2011). This international moral panic perpetuates the fears that young girls' sexual subjectivities are fixed in one of either two binary categories – the knowing-hypersexual-inappropriate child and the innocent-asexual-developmentally-appropriate child (Renold and Ringrose 2011). The moral panic is intensified when three, four and five-year-olds are viewed to be also playing out the knowing-hypersexual-inappropriate child of this culturally constructed binary, through their interaction with and consumption of popular culture and media. Adult-centric (and often moralistic and classist) readings and dismissal of children and young people's pleasure and desire, based on hegemonic discourses of

childhood, undermine the complexities of childhood, especially children's gendered and sexual subjectivities, cultures and agency.

Numerous official reports and other literature on the sexualization of childhood (Rush and La Nauze 2006; Levin and Kilbourne 2008; Olfman 2009; American Psychological Association 2010; Bailey 2011; Papadopoulous 2011) predominantly conceptualize the sexualization of children in the media, advertising and popular culture as an abuse of children, a source of children's premature sexualization, and a contravention of public norms and morality. Much of this literature (e.g. Rush and La Nauze 2006; Papadopoulous 2011) makes direct cause-and-effect links between the sexualization of children and phenomena such as: children's engagement in violence; eating disorders arising from unrealistic body images deemed as sexy; engagement in unethical sexual behaviours (e.g. boys' engagement in sexual harassment); potential psychological disorders in children (though a recognition of the lack of research in this latter area is acknowledged in some cases); sexual behaviour at an earlier age; and the 'grooming' of children by paedophiles. These claims are problematic as they are based on limited research, make broad generalizations about all children, and do not include an analysis of the positive and pleasurable relationship that children have with popular culture and media. Children's views and voices are rarely included, if at all, in these current debates, despite being their central focus of concern. This omission perpetuates the misconception that children do not have something to offer, that they are unable to provide insights into their experiences and how they feel – especially about sexuality – and that children are passive victims, duped by media, advertising and popular culture. Research conducted by David Buckingham and Sarah Bragg (2004) in the UK, which focused on the impact of viewing sexual imagery in the media on young people (9–17 years old), whether intentional or not, found that this experience was not perceived by children or young people as encouraging them to have sex prematurely. Young people also indicated that the media was an important alternative source of information about sexuality, often considered more useful than other sources in their lives, such as schooling, or even parents.

The majority of the literature examining the sexualization of children does not offer an analysis of the complexities that exist in relation to children's peer groups, cultures, or in terms of children's sexual and gendered subjectivities (Lumby 1998; Taylor 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2011). As Buckingham and Bragg's (2004) research suggests, what children view as sexualizing images, how they read them, and the impact of these images may be very different from how adults' perceive children experience these images. I have conducted research with young children in which popular cultural images have been used to initiate discussions about relationships and love. Although the images often depict children engaging in adult-like practices, such as kissing and children dressed in wedding outfits as bride and groom (see Chapter 5) children clearly understand these images are

portraying adult behaviours, and make distinctions between children's fantasy and play, and real life practices that they view as differentiating children from adults. Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze raise concerns about the way that children's 'slowly developing sexuality' is 'moulded' into stereotypical forms of adult sexuality (Rush and La Nauze 2006: 1). They argue that the problem with the sexualization of children is 'that the precocious and unhealthy leaps towards the end of this development process are encouraged by advertising and marketing' (2006: 3). There is no discussion by Rush and La Nauze (2006) of how heteronormativity and the heterosexualization of children's gendered and sexual subjectivities (in or out of advertising and marketing contexts) – or even of class, ethnicity or race – impact on children's location in discourses that propagate 'stereotypical forms of adult sexuality'. Research with young children, including the research on which much of this book is based, clearly demonstrates that children have desires, actively engage in constructing their sexual subjectivities (as well as regulating the sexual and gendered subjectivities of their peers and of adults) at early ages, and find pleasure in the process (Thorne 1993; Renold 2005; Blaise 2010; also see Chapter 5). Sexuality is generally constituted in children's lives through adult (hetero)normative narratives that have sources well beyond marketing and advertising.

The fetishization of childhood innocence

Writing about childhood, the sociologist Zach Meyers (2007: 58) states: 'why sexuality is perceived to be inherently harmful is difficult to identify'. Or is it? As previously discussed, sexuality has become increasingly perceived as dangerous to children, primarily through discourses of stranger danger, child sexual abuse and child protection. It has also been constituted as dangerous because it serves a larger political agenda – one that is about the state of the future, according to Lee Edelman. Edelman (2004) argues that politics is practiced in the name and sake of 'our children's future': no child, no future (Bond Stockton 2009). Edelman points out that 'the cult of the child ... permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for contemporary culture at large ... is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end' (Edelman 2004: 19). The repression of children's sexuality and the significance placed on childhood innocence has resulted in their fetishization and eroticism (Kincaid 1998; Bruhm and Hurley 2004; Walkerdine 1997, 2001). James Kincaid (1992: 4), taking up a Foucauldian position, argues that by 'insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism'. This has resulted in *the child* being constituted as a regulatory measure for normative sexual practices more generally (Kincaid 1998; Berlant 2004; Edelman 2004). Through the inscription of innocence on children's bodies, childhood and children have become increasingly

fetishized (Bruhm and Hurley 2004; Faulkner 2010, 2011; Kincaid 1998, 2004; Walkerdine 1997, 1999), as epitomized by Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955), a narrative about a middle-aged man's obsession with a teenage girl, and Stanley Kubrick's 1962 screen adaptation with the same name. The fetishization of innocence is also exemplified through the practice of children's beauty pageants and through Western consumer marketing and advertising campaigns in which childhood innocence is exploited (Robinson and Davies 2008b). However, the fetishization of innocence has not solely been related to childhood: it has also been associated with innocence or child-like characteristics in women, as illustrated by the Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe. Part of the public representation of Monroe was a child-like innocence and vulnerability that was sexualized through her female body.

Affrica Taylor, utilizing Judith Butler's concept of performativity, argues that the sexualization of children in the media functions as performative adult projections, stating that

> the risky unintended consequences of repeatedly referring to more and more images of children as pornographic, of continually interpreting them in 'the eyes of the paedophile' and of speaking about them as a-priori sexual images, we can see that the performative effects of all these repetitive speech acts is to actively produce, enact and embody a sexualized way of looking at children.
>
> (Taylor 2010: 51)

Such a process was played out in Australia in 2008 in relation to photographs of young nude children, aged 12–13 years old, which were being exhibited by the Australian photographer Bill Henson. This resulted in moral panic, bringing to the fore heated and highly emotional debates about the line between pornography and art. The Henson photographs had previously been shown publicly in Australia without any controversy, but on this occasion it was the nude photograph of a young girl used for the invitation to the private opening of Henson's exhibition that sparked a national controversy, initiated by the media, which quickly turned into a 'tabloid frenzy' (Marr 2008). The controversy sparked violent public reactions, which led to the closure of the exhibition out of fear that the photographs would be vandalized and out of fear for the safety of the gallery's personnel, who had received numerous threatening emails and telephone calls about the pictures, some of which were on the gallery's website. The gallery was eventually raided, the photographs were confiscated, and Henson was threatened with possible charges related to child pornography. The controversy fed into more general social anxieties about the sexualization of children in the media, childhood innocence, paedophiles, the Internet, decency and censorship. However, any potential legal action against Henson was dropped when the Australian Classification Board

found that the photographs were fit for 'G' classification – that is, fit to be viewed by all ages (Marr 2008: 117). The photographs were considered by authorities to be in a different league to images considered to be child pornography. As with any artwork, the photographs will continue to provoke many differing personal opinions, and the line between art and pornography will continue to be hotly debated (Bray 2009). For instance, Abigail Bray (2009: 174) puts forward the view that 'in the debates over Henson's photographs, narratives about *private* harm to children were put in competition with narratives about *public* harm to future of Australian Democracy'. It is extremely important to be vigilant in society around child abuse and children's sexual exploitation, but how this is done in some cases may need to be reconsidered in terms of how it impacts upon children and the potential perpetuation of abuse. In many respects, the incident can be seen as having perpetuated the fetishization of childhood and childhood innocence. The manner in which media censored the photographs of the children which were used in the reporting of the case – by placing black bars across the children's bodies to hide body parts – in fact made the images more confronting, and seemingly sullied or dirty (Marr 2008). Foucault (1978) argues in his repressive hypothesis that censorship intensifies the fetishization of the forbidden object, increasing the curiosity, the gaze, and the desire for that which is censored. As Taylor reminds us, censorship reinforces the power of the performative effects of speech acts: repeated public debates 'prolong and proliferate the reiteration of the unspeakable' (Taylor 2010: 51).

Key points in this chapter

This chapter has outlined the centrality of the discourse of childhood innocence in the regulation of both children's sexual subjectivities and those of adults, as well as its use as an effective regulator of broader norms associated with childhood and socio-cultural practices. Around the world, discourses of childhood and childhood innocence have been successfully employed to foster moral panic for political gains by social and moral conservatives. Moral panic operates to maintain the social order in societies and, in the context of childhood, it has especially been mobilized to perpetuate the hegemony of heternormative narratives. Instigated through media and political discourses, moral panic focused on stranger danger reinforces myths and stereotypes about children's public vulnerabilities, often eclipsing children's private vulnerabilities in the privileged white middle-class nuclear family. Discourses of childhood innocence and protection, which have largely rendered children's sexual subjectivities invisible, have often been the rationale for denying children access to relevant and important knowledge about sexuality and relationships.