<u>"No One Wants to be That Mother":</u>

<u>An Ethnography of Difference and Emotion in Sydney</u>

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Abstract

This research explores Australian middle-class ideals of the "good child" as the source of parental emotional fulfilment and identity. Here, moral constructs of what a child should be and do, are indexed to parental values and definitions of what constitutes the good life. In an intensive and competitive parenting culture, where children's achievements and good behaviour bring social capital to their parents, how do parents of "difficult" children negotiate the disappointments, shame and often marginalisation that come with being the parent of a difficult child?

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Sydney, Australia, this thesis examines the role of children in the construction of the good life. Placed at the intersection of the anthropology of parenting and psychological anthropology, my work explores the overlap of intensive parenting and the pathologization of childhood, and seeks to understand how the parental ethnotheories of middle-class Sydneysiders, produce a particular socio-moral model of the good child. Through an engagement with the lived experience of parents of difficult children and by attending to parental discourses and the emotions, I shed light on parental experiences of marginalisation. In so doing, I map a path from the macro structures of neoliberalism to the micro structures of everyday experience.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_Emma Balkin_____   Date: _7/2/2019_____

Emma Jelstrup Balkin

Human Research Ethics Approval Number

Ethical and scientific approval has been granted for this project to be conducted by Ms. Emma Balkin under the supervision of Dr. Aaron Denham by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee.

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And to Gabriel, Lucia and Alma, this is for you. To begin, begin. xx Mor.

Prologue - Holding up the Umbrella

On a cold winter's morning I meet Laura in her office in inner Sydney. We have never met before, but she has offered to share her story with me. In fact, she seems relieved that someone is taking an interest. "It's really tough… and no one really understands what I'm going through". Laura is a single mother of three children, and her six-year-old daughter Marnie has become increasingly aggressive and difficult to manage. "She is extremely emotional, she just flies off the handle, sometimes for no reason. She cries, screams, kicks and hits, anything to command attention." The situation has been going on for many months and is putting considerable strain on family life. "We don't go out anymore, I just can't take her anywhere, it's too embarrassing. People stare, and shake their heads, and you know they're judging you. Last time we went out, she pulled her pants down in the middle of the restaurant…".

Laura worries her other two children are missing out on activities and outings other "normal" families do, because they can't go anywhere with Marnie. "Do you have any support?" I asked.

"Well, not really. Everyone has their own life. And anyone that spends any length of time with Marnie will come and say to me 'you need to take her to see someone. There's something wrong with her'" she says and looks away.

Laura has sought help from her GP, a psychologist and a speech therapist. Yet she feels ambivalent about the outcome. "The psychologist recommended we set up a firm routine for her, with strict consequences as soon as she mucks up. That works some of the time, but it's hard because it all comes down to me to enforce it. And you know – I don't always *know* what to do!" Laura comes across as an extremely capable woman, who juggles two professions – a job that is highly unpredictable and demands calm, cool-headed think-on-the-spot abilities, as

well as an academic career. Yet she is stumped by a six-year-old. "It just feels like there's that massive disconnect as far as the support goes. There's very little. You have to seek it out yourself and set it up yourself, there's not that umbrella you get if you go into specific areas with a diagnosis – I'm the one who's holding up the umbrella. And then that has affected my mental health. I ended up with a really bad bout of anxiety, and I never had anxiety before this."

Laura mentioned medical diagnoses a few times. I ask her whether she thinks a diagnosis would help Marnie. "I don't know. I feel like there'd be more support. There'd be more resources. There'd be more people you could go to for assistance. There's financial support, all that sort of thing. My best friend in Perth, her son has Asperger's, she gets financial support, specialised paediatrician, support in the classroom, whereas you know with me, the only thing is that her behavioural issues have pulled her down into the bottom of the class, so she gets assistance as far as learning goes. But you know…? As far as the behavioural stuff goes… Nothing… And the worst thing out of all of this is she *knows* how to behave. She knows. I can see it in her eyes, she knows what she's doing. But how do you deal with that? What do you say? Who do you go to? Where's the support for something like that? There's no one. There's nothing. As far as this niche – non-specific behavioural stuff - she doesn't fit into any specific category... There's no box for Marnie." Laura's distress is palpable. Her daughter's behaviour is a burden on the whole family and Laura is becoming desperate for answers. I ask her what she hopes for and she tells me: "I wish she would just be good".

Introduction

Laura is not the first person to express this idea of a "good child", in fact it is common in everyday, taken-for-granted discourse in Australia. But as a native Dane, it puzzles me. It does not make sense to talk of a "good child" in Danish, where you might call a child a "clever girl", "kind boy" or "sensible girl". But it is unthinkable to put together the words "good" and "child", because – I venture – Danes do not discursively construct the child in terms of a good/bad dichotomy. What does it mean to say that a child is good? While I understand it as a pedagogical tool to elicit desired behaviours, I was curious about what cultural model of the child these words index[1]. Do we mean that the child is obedient? Amenable? Easy to parent? What kind of children merit this label? And what of those who don't? Exploring how these ideas relate to the construction of what Australian parents see as the "good life" are at the core of this thesis.

Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik posit that the universal function of the family is to raise "good children" (2007). In this sense we can take good to mean well-adjusted to the local norms and expectations (Holmes 1998). Notions of goodness are malleable. How do different cultures construct it? And how might political-economic contexts shape it? Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis explores what it means to raise a good child in contemporary, middle-class Sydney[2]. Because good is not defined only by what it is, but also in contrast to what it is

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[1] This is not to suggest that Danes do not have moral models for childhood, simply that they do not speak of "good children", which hints at a different ontological understanding. A comparative study is beyond the scope of this thesis, I mention it only by way of disclosing the initial spark of interest for this project.

[2] Defining the middle-class is no easy task, and beyond the scope of this thesis. For an anthropological perspective on the class concept I refer to Heiman et al (2012), who theorize class as a sociocultural phenomenon that grows out of material conditions and relations of production, shaping group habitus and status, all the while (re)producing particular subjectivities and practices. While this is not specifically a study of class, I refer to the "Sydney middle-class" in recognition of not only the socio-economic conditions under which they live, but more pertinently the kinds of moral projects that are undertaken by the middle-classes. Child-centred, intensive parenting is specifically a middle-class project – the working class and the poor do not have the resources or the propensity to invest in concerted cultivation in the same way (Lareau 2011).

not, the meanings are particularly visible at the boundaries of good/bad, normal/abnormal, in-group/out-group. Within anthropology it has been argued that such apparent dichotomies are not natural categories, but social constructs. Ruth Benedict highlighted the cultural relativity of the abnormal early on, arguing that norms of acceptable behaviour are not absolute, but culturally constructed as variants of what is considered good (1934).

In a time where many children are diagnosed with mental and behavioural disorders (Lawrence et al 2015), I wanted to examine the 'grey zones', where boundaries are drawn between normal/disordered. These disorders are often talked about as natural "kinds" (Hacking 1999) and have come to influence how we see ourselves and each other (Brinkmann 2017). While I do not intend to critique the validity of psychiatric disorders, my critical perspective demonstrates how at the edges of such diagnostic categories the naturalness starts to fray. In these lived margins, parents straddle the gap between expectations and reality. Probing these in-between spaces reveals much about the cultural system in which our lives are made and unfold.

This study centres on the mothers of children with maladaptive behaviours, children not often labelled as good. I examine how society understands and explains the problem, particularly the influence of "psy" (psychological/psychiatric) language, and the emotional and identity struggles this entails for parents. In Australia, well-behaved children are often described as a "credit to their parents". If that's the case, are difficult children somehow a *deficit* to their parents? Throughout the thesis, I use the term "difficult children". In everyday discourse, they are usually referred to as "naughty" or "brats". These pejorative terms do not allow the child to be seen as a whole person, situated in a particular time and place. I use the term *difficult* to signify that their behaviours are at once challenging for the adults in their lives to understand, manage and explain to others, but also to indicate that the child is having difficulty in their experience of being in the world.

"Intensive parenting" is a labour and resource-intensive childrearing paradigm that frames children as priceless and innocent. It is a well-documented social and historically specific phenomenon (Hays 1996, Furedi 2002, Faircloth et al 2013, Hoffman 2013, Lareau 2011). Examples also point to how it relates to children with diagnoses (Malacrida 2001, Blum 2007, Lilley 2013). However, when it comes to the parents of difficult children who do not readily fit into any available diagnostic category there is a gap in the literature. These children are neither considered "normal" nor (officially) "disordered", but intensive parenting ideals still apply and often pose a great challenge for these parents.

Harkness and Super (2006) identify a literature gap on the ethnographic study of parenting in Western cultures. Often lumped into the same category due to their similarities, the differences between these cultures are assumed to be negligible. While the differences may not be overly apparent, the variations are rich and surprising, and reveal themselves only over time. In my early years in Australia, I saw little difference between the Danish and Australian parenting cultures. It was only after my long-term engagement (10+ years) with the institutions and broader parenting communities that the differences stood out. The "good kid" statements started to sound less like a pedagogical strategy and more like an implicit moral judgement. I began to question whether there was a fundamentally different view of what a child is and should be? Surface similarities can blind us to these differences because, in many ways, everyday life looks very similar – there are nuclear families and birthday parties, schools and soccer games, prams and toys and family outings. But peeking through the cracks in the surface reveals divergent assumptions.

In examining the parental ethnotheories (Gaskins 2008, Harkness & Super 2006) of middle-class Sydney, and the implicit assumptions about the nature of the child, I attend to discourse as a form of social action, central to the production of the social world (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). As a moral project, the good child feeds into a broader aspiration to the good

life. Taking an interpretive approach, I will explore how these ideas are shaped by neoliberalism and the influence of the psy-disciplines (what Vorhölter calls the "psy-dispositif", forthcoming), and how parents of difficult children navigate a sometimes hostile sociomoral environment in creating a good life for themselves.

Methodology

I conducted six months of fieldwork in 2018, during which I immersed myself in the social practice of parenting in Sydney. This was easy to do as I am a mother of three, and throughout my daily life I come into contact with many other parents and children. I read widely – anything that was published in newspapers and local magazines about parenting and children, I scoured the official government website on parenting (www.raisingchildren.net.au). I listened and watched carefully, wherever I went, attending to how people talk to, and about, children and parenting. I followed discussions on online parenting and mothers' groups. I participated in eight parenting classes, I interviewed 12 mothers and had dozens of informal conversations with other parents and professionals (teachers, psychologists, doctors and a psychiatrist). Most people with children were interested in my research and keen to contribute their opinion. This broad access helped me to gain insights into how "outsiders" – parents of "normal" children, teachers, health professionals – think about *those* mothers and *those* children.

Observing organised activities and workshops was more complicated. Organisers fretted about privacy, indicative of the existence of taboos around the difficult aspects of parenting. They also wanted to focus on the "positive programs" they run for families, and the "positive outcomes" they achieve, reflecting a wider cultural desire to focus on the "positive". The negative aspects are best hidden behind closed doors it seems.

Parenting classes

Across Sydney, many parenting classes are offered every week by a variety of government agencies, community organisations, and private operators. Most of the organizations follow a few branded programs, such as Triple P (Positive Parenting Program), Tuning into Kids, 1-2-3 Magic or Bringing Up Great Kids. They operate on the premise of "evidence based" parenting methods, typically focusing on how the child's brain works, what sort of behaviours to expect at each stage of development, and where in the brain these behaviours originate.These classes seek to overturn common assumptions that tantrums or other "misbehaviours" result from wilful defiance, suggesting they are instead the result of neurological architecture and the child's inability to understand their own emotions.

I participated in eight parenting classes during my fieldwork. My intention was to attend many more, but I was denied access to more than 20 due to the "sensitive nature of the topic". When I did attend classes, parents were desperate to tell their stories, to be heard, to be recognised. So much of their burden is hidden under the carefully maintained façade of their daily lives that they were longing for release, and were happy to share the details of their despair.

Interlocutors

I interviewed 12 mothers, ranging in age from their late 20s to late 40s, all living in Sydney. Their ethnic backgrounds were diverse (Lebanese-Australian, Croatian-Australian, English-Australian, American, Canadian and "white Australian," meaning multigeneration Australian of European descent). Three were single mothers, one was in a same-sex marriage, the rest were married or in de-facto partnerships. Two mothers had only one child, one had five children, most had 2 or 3. Nearly all were middle-class, well educated, and resourceful both financially and socially. Two mothers, one a blue-collar single mother and the other a stay-at-

home mother of five, were "aspiring to the middle-class". That is, living in a lower-socioeconomic area and of immigrant background, but being clearly competent, well-informed women espousing middle class Australian values.

I selected the interviewees based on their self-identification as having a difficult child. These children ranged in age from two to 10 years old. The ages of the children were less important, since my goal was not to compare behaviours to developmental expectations, but to understand how the challenging behaviours were perceived by, and impacted on, the mothers. There were some variations in the challenging behaviours the children were exhibiting, but they all broadly included tantrums, aggression, obstinance, defiance, lack of cooperation and sometimes inattention. Only one child already had a behavioural disorder diagnosis (ADHD), but most other mothers were searching for, or considering seeking, a diagnosis for their child.

The interviews took place in local cafes or the women's homes or offices between April and August 2018. I followed a semi-structured approach, and interfered as little as possible. Occasionally I would probe, but I wanted to let these women tell their stories freely and bring forward what they considered most important. Most women were very open, but a couple were guarded and required a more structured approach. Being a mother helped the interview process in terms of relating on the level of shared experiences and developing rapport. I initially expected to use a snowball sampling method to find participants. This, however, was challenging due to the sensitive nature of subject matter. It became clear that the kinds of behavioural problems these families were experiencing were taboo.

Participants often became emotional. The women shared their stories, sorrows and despairs. This was positive. Sandwiched between the expectations of producing good children, and the moral implications of failing to do so, these mothers manage their affect by hiding and attempting to maintain a "normal" façade. Opening up and speaking freely without judgement

about taboo topics was cathartic. A few mothers thanked me at the end of our interviews for taking a genuine interest, and for conducting this research, saying they often feel their plight is overlooked.

While gender was not an explicit focus of this study, it remains important to note how women still carry the bulk of the day to day responsibility for childrearing, and are also judged more harshly on their abilities to parent. However, throughout the thesis I often use the term "parent" (both as a noun and a verb) to indicate how these dynamics are starting to shift as fathers become more involved and to recognize the dominant discourse which tends to refer to "parenting" rather than "mothering". For these reasons, and acknowledging the limited scope of this thesis, I refrain from contextualising my observations in the gender studies literature.

Autoethnography

I have relied on autoethnographic elements to provide depth to my research, in the sense that as an immigrant living in Sydney for 13 years, this field site for me is at once both home and 'other'. My interest in this field of research springboards off my experiences as a mother, raising children in Sydney, and often being puzzled by how children are seen, imagined and treated here. Hastrup argues that "puzzlement is the hallmark of the anthropologist", as we try to make sense of how others live and make meaning (1995). Over the years I have been mulling over these questions, as I have been repeatedly confronted with ways of doing and knowing that were different to my own. As parental ethnotheories can be very difficult to access directly (Harkness and Super 2006) my long-term immersion in Australian culture has been an advantage.

Through this project I have put real ethnographic data to these musings, to provide an account of life that is not merely an exercise in navel-gazing reflexivity, but one which I believe

is enriched by having lived through many similar experiences as my interlocutors, on the premise that self-observation is vital, when the objective is to achieve analytical depth, rather than representative breadth (Brinkmann 2012:74, Wacquant 2011). Throughout the project, I have been careful to maintain an "awareness of my awareness" (Denham 2014: 389), using my puzzlement and emic/etic status as a tool to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of others, and how these can point at, and tell a story about, a broader cultural system; while simultaneously recognising my own positionality. The result, I hope, is a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) that may help uncover some of the everyday assumptions about children, parents, difference and emotion we often take for granted.

Chapter Overview

In their interpretivist approach, Corsaro and Miller note that children are inextricably linked with their social and cultural contexts — "it is not possible to extract a separate model of the child from the world or culture in which he or she is situated" (1992: 9). I share this view, and work from the assumption that the model of the good child/bad child - whether seen as a dichotomy or a continuum - is a social construct, taking its meaning from and giving meaning to the "local socio-moral ecology" in which parenting takes place (Hoffman 2013). Chapter one considers the socio-moral ecology of middle-class Sydney and the child-centred approach to parenting.

Chapter two considers the social dimensions of parental emotions. Beyond how parents feel about their children's deviant behaviours, how are these emotions socially constituted, and how do emotive discourses inform and constitute reality? Leaning on the anthropology of emotions, I argue that parental emotions should be understood as the products of cultural and discursive practices (Abu-Lughod & Lutz 1990, White 2007, Harré 1986). Through everyday

participation in social worlds, we are encultured with particular models of understanding, and we come to embody certain patterns of emotion and reaction — learning how emotions correspond to circumstances. Our emotions cannot exist without social context, and "we reify and abstract from that concreteness at our peril" (Harré 1986: 4). With this in mind, in chapter two I will consider how parental subjectivity and affect is constituted through social engagement in dominant parental discourses – at once produced by and reproductive of a particular cultural reality or "intentional world" (Schweder 1990).

Taking the stance that language has constitutive power, I am interested in the meanings created in these discursive spaces around what a child is or should be. In Schweder's words "nothing real just 'is', realities are the product of the way things get represented, embedded, implemented and reacted to in various taxonomic and/or narrative contexts" (1990: 3), i.e. these children are not abnormal as a fact of nature, but rather as a product of our collective production of meaning and social order. McDermott and Varenne take the view that culture is not so much about sharing, but rather "hammering each other into shape with the well-structured tools already available… a disability may be a better display board for the weaknesses of a cultural system than it is an account of real persons" (1995: 326). My intention is not to argue that behavioural disorders are purely fictitious categories, instead I align myself with Hacking's theory that a social constructivist perspective need also be mindful of biology – how people are, is largely a product of biology, but what we make of that is largely cultural (Hacking 1999) – and that the 'real' and the 'constructed' interact and together create ever-evolving categories (1990). These categories hold the power they do, not as natural phenomena, but because of our interactions with them.

With this in mind, in chapter three I look at two distinct explanatory models for deviant behaviour – the common sense and the medical models, and attempt to understand how people come to inhabit, and make sense of, social categories they had previously thought foreign to

them. As Alice tells me "no one wants to be *that* mother"; in two words — "*that* mother" — an entire prototype of negligent, deficient, incapable and amoral parenting is conjured. This is a category to which many of my interlocutors feel they have been — or are at risk of being - relegated.

Chapter four considers the impact of the psy-dispositif and evidence-based-parenting as a trope for meaning-making. While I always intended to study the impact of psy-language, what surprised me was how a neoliberal language was being applied to parenting expectations and everyday practices. Adults would talk about parenting as "an investment" with references to input-output rationality, suggesting that children are expected to offer a "Return on Investment", not monetarily, but rather in bringing emotional fulfilment to their parents. Initially, I was blind to this rationalisation of what I had otherwise always considered a "natural" parent-child bond. But the more I attended to this, the more I saw patterns of neoliberal values represented in the most intimate sphere of our lives — the family home, a realm typically reserved for matters of another nature - personal relationships, caregiving, affect. The trope of the "natural" mother-child bond still dominates, but is being reshaped in the image of neoliberalism. In the words of Brown "neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized" (2015: 10).

Applying the neoliberal language to this sphere was not a deliberate, or even conscious, choice by these parents, and herein lies its hegemonic force — our psyches are not removed from the political and economic realities in which everyday life unfolds, rather we are "embedded, embodied and embrained" in this social world; our economy becomes our psychology (Tweedy 2017: xxvii). Not confined to economic policy, neoliberal ideology seeks

to redefine how to be in the world, by "extending the economic grid to social phenomena" (Foucault quoted in McGuigan 2014: 229). It spills over into the private sphere, reshaping how relationships are spoken about and perceived. As McGuigan notes "neoliberalism is implicated in an ideological battle for hearts and minds over everything, most insidiously by influencing the very language that is used mundanely" (2014: 225). Throughout the thesis I will highlight how this neoliberal grid is imposing on the parental ethnotheories of middle-class Sydney, and becoming substantially engrained in a range of cultural and moral models.

Theoretical Underpinnings

To examine the moral models, I draw mainly on Foucauldian ideas around technologies of self, biopolitics and regimes of truth (2003). But I also acknowledge Mattingly's ideas around everyday morality as something that sits somewhere between personal agency and structurally imposed models (2014); and an interactionist approach that holds that difference is situationally produced (Goffman 1963). Mattingly refers to the everyday practice of morality as "projects of self-cultivation" (2014: 42). Childrearing plays an interesting role in these projects, as parenting is simultaneously a form of self-invention (Furedi 2002). Hunt argues these projects should be thought of as "ethical self-governance" as they are undertaken in response to existential questions around "what to do? How to act? Who to be?" (Hunt 2003: 172). However, Hunt also illustrates how these projects spring out of broader discourses on risk and meaning, and the "responsibilization" of the individual. Such discourses cannot be separated from larger political projects, or from the social context in which they take place. Therefore the "ethical project" of self-cultivation is undertaken in dialectical relation to sociomoral conventions around what it means to be a good person/good parent/good child. Foucault's

"Technologies of self" provides an apt model for understanding how socio-moral structures are adopted and implemented by the individual in everyday life (Foucault 2003 [1982]).

This thesis would not be complete without at least a nod to Zygmunt Bauman. While its scope is too limited to explore his theories in depth, I have to emphasize that Bauman's idea of "liquid modernity" has influenced my understanding of the social world and its current ontological challenges. Bauman defines late modernity as a "liquid modernity", in which life is characterized by uncertainty, and an obsession for constant, unstoppable change — "change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty" (2000: viii). To Bauman modernity is synonymous with liquefaction, the melting down of old structures in pursuit of perfection. Initially this period of change was to be transitory, eventually leading to a new (solid) stability and tranquillity. This did not eventuate, and we are now suspended in this state of constant flux, where we are simultaneously rudderless and aimless. In liquid modernity it is not enough to simply *be*, life is a process of constant *becoming*, with no fixed endpoint. Keohane et al (2016) echo Gramsci in saying "the old is dying but the new cannot yet be born", arguing we are stuck in a "permanent liminality" where meaning and connection is replaced by consumption and sensation (2016: 128). When I listen to parents speak, I get a distinct, almost visceral, sense of this liquidity. "Floundering" (meaning: "to struggle or stagger clumsily in mud or water") springs to mind as an apt metaphor for parenting in this time and place.

Giddens poses that the absence of meaning results from the disembedding of social institutions from local contexts, various forms of expertise are seen to have universal validity and local forms of meaning become void. When individuals cannot rely on their "natural attitude" — taken-for-granted assumptions about everyday practices — it causes an "ontological insecurity" (Giddens 1991: 37). This holds true for Sydney's middle-class parents, where questions about how to be and what to do occur on an almost daily basis, and against the constant pressure of an uncertain future.

The transfer of cultural capital in this context has many obstacles (Blum 2007). We can no longer rely on the values, practices and routines passed down through generations, because the ways of our parents are no longer suitable, useful or even desirable (Bauman 2000). The rearing of children has in this sense become unmoored, as we constantly seek novelty and simultaneously try to navigate the unpredictable future. Keohane et al describe this as "individual and collective amnesia/aphasia" of the past and a "despair/hopelessness corresponding with loss of futurity" (2016: 128). Ontological insecurity can have the effect of an increased focus on domesticity and the near environment, those things that are more immediately controllable (Katz 2008). The elevation of the child to the status of the very meaning of life then has not arisen out of nowhere, it is emplotted within a broader social and political trajectory.

Along with the uncertainty comes a heightened sense of risk. Lupton (2013) details how our concept of risk has transformed with modernity, where having a feeling of control over one's life has become increasingly important. Risks — no longer associated with the powers of nature or the will of the gods — are now the responsibility of individuals, they are to be predicted and managed. In a liquid society where everything is uncertain, risk is perceived to be omnipresent, and the individual is to take charge of their own wellbeing; "effective" risk management then becomes not only a prerequisite for survival, but a matter of status too. Those who manage their risks well are seen as successful, those who do not are irresponsible and neglectful (Hoffman 2009). Lee argues that risk is a "stand-in for a crisis of meaning and morality" (2014: p14).

In practical terms, this means that middle-class parents are highly attuned to potential risks in their child's life – in the child's body, psyche and behaviour. Being a parent in liquid modernity is – in the language of neoliberalism – akin to being a risk manager. What is

emerging is a leitmotif of Sydney middle-class family life, where the parent is a risk manager and the child is the meaning of life. The following chapters will explore this reshaping of the parent-child relationship.

CHAPTER 1: The Anthropology of Parenting

The anthropology of parenting is an emerging field (Faircloth et al 2013). Not because the study of kinship and childrearing is anything new of course — it has a long tradition within the discipline. It is emerging as a particular field because the concept of *parenting* is relatively recent. Until a few decades ago *parent* was a noun that described the relationship between a mother or father and their offspring. It is now a verb describing a set of social roles and obligations that are to be performed to measurable degrees of success (Edward and Gillies 2013, Furedi 2002, Hoffman 2013). Good parenting is both quantified as the possession of a particular set of skills to be practiced upon one's children (Hoffman 2009, Smith 2010), and measured by the amount of time, effort and money parents put into doing things for and with their children. As such "parenting" is a socially and historically situated form of childrearing (Lee 2014, Smyth 2014, Timimi 2010).

Childhood on the surface appears to be a most natural phenomenon—a period of human maturation from infancy to adulthood. However, it is also a social institution, imbued with moral ideals and political agendas - childhood as we know it is a relatively new concept (Hendrick 2015). For much of history childhood was not a sentimental phase "demarcated by its own clothes, toys, games, literature or education" (Faircloth 2014) — people had *more* children and paid them *less* attention. Children were born to be productive, contributing members of their families. They were not seen as "valuable, lovable, innocent but intelligent individuals, to be cherished, protected, defended and developed" (Levine and White 1991: 22). These dramatic changes to the concept of childhood were generated by the social and political changes of the industrialisation and the philosophical ideas of Enlightenment (Levine and White 1991, Lancy 2015, Faircloth 2014, Rose 1989, Timimi 2010). As production moved outside the home, children went from being an economic asset to an economic liability, their value shifting instead into more affective territory (Katz 2008).

Over the course of the 19th and 20th century this construction of childhood was influenced by developmental psychology, which became increasingly interested in childhood as a phase in which the foundations of personhood were laid (Woodhead et al 1991, Rose 1999). In the 1950s and 1960s attachment theory, in which a prolonged period of bonding between mother and infant is understood to be crucial to the child's cognitive and emotional development, saw increasing demands placed on the mother, and continued to gain influence in coming decades (Smyth 2014). These social, political and economic shifts brought increased social isolation of the mother, forcing her to rely more on expert guidance, than direct familial advice to care for her children; transferring the ownership of the knowledge basis of childhood from parents and grandparents onto experts (Timimi 2010, Furedi 2002). Since the middle of the 20th century the imperative for parents to develop their children's cognitive abilities has continued to grow, as has the responsibility to keep one's child safe, through near-constant surveillance.

Today we place enormous sentimental value on children, both extending and sanctifying the period of childhood (Lancy 2015). No longer needed for their physical labour, "children are increasingly valued for their contribution to parents' emotional wellbeing" (Lancy 2015: 71), or what Rose calls the "emotional economy of the family" (1999). What then, are the ontological and moral implications, when a child "fails to deliver" on their promise?

"I just want them to have the best": everyday competitive parenting in Sydney

The practice of childrearing cannot exist in a vacuum, it is produced by, and reproductive of, larger cultural and social structures. Parental ethnotheories are cultural understandings about the nature of life and the nature of children, which influence how parents raise their children, and how children come to experience the world (Gaskins 2008, Harkness &

Super 2006). Parental ethnotheories as a field of enquiry can be accessed through the study of the social and physical environment, as well as the culturally regulated childcare customs (Harkness & Super 2006).

To introduce the context, let me paint a brief picture of the "socio-moral ecology" of middle-class Sydney family life (Hoffmann 2013). It is a social milieu characterised by pressure – to perform, achieve, consume and compete. In addition to managing demanding careers, big mortgage, long commutes and other stresses of urban living, the parenting culture is intense and, more often than not, marked by a competitiveness in the guise of "the child's best interests" – a value-laden moral codex, in which parents peg themselves, and each other, in a hierarchy of parental virtue. Parents are expected to put considerable effort into all aspects of their child's upbringing – from dietary nourishment to extracurricular enrichment; constant supervision is considered both responsible and necessary.

Schooling for middle class Sydneysiders is a moral battleground. While public schools are accessible to all children, relatively well-funded and largely free, there is a pervasive notion that public schools do not offer "enough" opportunities, that by attending a public school children will be "missing out". Sydney is home to an extensive range of private schools, most charging upwards of $20,000 per annum. These schools offer parents prestige, and a chance to climb the social ladder. Implicit in the decision to send a child to a private school is an assumption that the parents are giving their child "the best", often described as giving the child an *advantage*. An advantage over whom, and to what end exactly, is never spoken explicitly, but the discourse hints at an imagined future of competitive employability, and its entailed (consumer) freedoms. Even parents who could never actually afford it, still waitlist their children for exclusive private schools, and exalt their merits in conversation. Education in Sydney is a mark of parental aspiration — a distinctly neoliberal aspiration, where schooling is

conceived of not as an education of future citizens, but as an investment in Human Capital (Brown 2015, McGuigan 2014).

Sydney's private schools are essentially brands of "educational excellence" that parents buy into – politically billed as the freedom of choice — to situate themselves as a particular *kind* of parent – exemplified by the school stickers parents adhere to their cars to announce to the world their membership of an exclusive community, and thus their worth as a parent. In this part of the world, parenting is not merely childrearing, it is a form of identity work. No conversation with a Sydney parent is ever far removed from the ubiquitous question of "so where are you sending them to high school?" – often when the child in question is still an infant. These conversations allow parents to place not only themselves, but also each, other into categories of particular kinds of parents, in the process creating subtly bounded in-groups and out-groups (Barth 1969).

This thesis is not about schooling choices, but the vignette provides an important illustrative example of Sydney's middle class parenting culture and its pressures, norms and expectations – in particular the competitive aspect. This competitiveness extends beyond schooling, into sporting and extracurricular activities in which middle-class children participate in abundance. Parents dedicate their free time to driving kids across town to various forms of "enriching" experiences – sports, music lessons, dance, art classes, speech and drama, most of which culminate in competitions - their sporting prowess a particular source of pride for many parents, who are often heavily involved with the child's chosen activities. It is common for families to barely see each other on a Saturday as parents take their children in opposite directions for their various commitments. It is also common for parents to boast about their child's achievements on social media. This is all part of what Lareau calls "concerted cultivation": the deliberate parental orchestration of children's lives to elicit or cultivate

particular skills and talents (Lareau 2011). These activities are often strategically chosen to increase the child's human capital as a way of building future advantage.

With competitive-advantage ideology penetrating all domains of childhood, one might be tempted to ask whether children are still allowed to do anything simply for the pure pleasure of it? Even when a parent proclaims how much their child loves a particular activity, it is usually followed up with a description of how skilled and accomplished they are at it. It seems adeptness is a prerequisite for enjoyment. There is both a utilitarianism and a vicariousness with which these decisions "in the child's best interests" are made. In Sydney, children's achievements bring social capital to their parents. I want to clarify that individual parents usually make these decisions with the best of intentions at heart. But they do so in an attempt to navigate their family through a cultural and socio-political system in which these practices are structured into the fabric of everyday life. The concept of 'children's needs' has become "doxa" (Bourdieu 1977) — they are usually taken for granted as indisputable facts of nature. But Woodhead shows us they are instead culturally contextual – they only make sense in the specific environment into which children are being socialised and enculturated (Woodhead 1991). In neoliberal societies then, to altogether reject this concerted cultivation would be tantamount to neglect.

Intensive Parenting: The Culture of the Maxi-Mum

An advertisement at a shopping centre in Sydney

This kind of childrearing –in which the parent invests huge amounts of time, energy and resources in their children - has been dubbed *intensive parenting* by Hays (1996). It is a way of bringing up children that is "science based and expert-led", in a paradoxical double-bind where parents are at once "God-like" in their status as makers of their child's destiny, yet they are simultaneously inept and in need of expert guidance to undertake their parental responsibilities, because risks are everywhere and cannot be negotiated without expert guidance. Furedi has called this *paranoid parenting* (Furedi 2002). It is anchored in the paradigm of "infant determinism" — which holds that all future outcomes for the child are determined by "the early years" (a common trope for child development) - and "parent causality" - in which the parents hold the sole responsibility for these outcomes (Lee 2013).

A family life with the child at the front and centre, is what Lancy calls "the neontocracy" (Lancy 2015). Drawing on a history of kinship studies, Lancy posits the neontocracy model as an invention of modernity. It is an inversion of "the gerontocracy", a

family model which places children on the lowest rank of the family hierarchy. Lancy argues these two markedly different family styles shape family life in vastly different ways. In a neontocracy the status of the child is elevated already from birth, they are given "almost inexhaustible social capital without having to work for it" (2015: 406). Children are conceived of as precious, innocent, fragile and incompetent. Implicit in the ideologies of the neontocracy is the notion that a child's natural state is one of happiness and much of family life revolves around fostering and maintaining this happiness, almost at any cost (2015: 410). For Sydney's middle class parents this would be a familiar characterisation. I have lost count of the times parents have told me their social lives are ruled by their children's agendas (endorsed and encouraged by the parents though they may be). As one father told me "you just do what you have to do to keep them happy". In this way, parenting intertwines with happiness discourses, which construct happiness as synonymous with all that is good - its pursuit the very meaning of life (Cabanas 2016). Parents give happiness to their children, and expect it to be reciprocated. The promised result of all this intensive parenting work is a "good child" - one who is happy and well-adjusted, and a relatively smooth family life. Children's contribution in a neontocracy is measured not by the work they do, but by how much happiness they bring. If children bring happiness - vicariously - to their parents by *being* happy, what happens when children are seemingly deeply unhappy? Or when they obstruct the attainment of happiness with their difficult behaviours?

Furedi argues the value parents place on their children is directly linked to a "hollowing out" of adult identity. He says that today children have been transformed into a "formidable instrument for the validation of the adult self" (2002: 120). Parenting, according to Lancy, has become the ultimate hobby – children are now "the essential components of 'the good life'" (2015: 73) – a chance for parents to shape and mould a new subjectivity, and in turn bask in the glory of their children's achievements. This is the standard in middle-class Sydney. But how

does this play out when the child fails to achieve such heights? When there is no glory in which to bask? With such high stakes, how does a child's social maladjustment shape their parents' very sense of self?

This kind of parent-child relationship indicates a blurring of the boundaries between parent and child, self and other. It is a particular intersubjectivity, with such deep bonds of empathy that the parent (and probably mothers especially) come to see themselves through the prism of this relationship. Miller's observations are acute, when he describes "how infants grow mothers in North London" – through the birthing of a child, the woman is herself (re)born as a mother, and through the raising of the child, and the many decisions that entails, the mother constructs a new self in the image of "the good mother" (Miller 1997). Parenting then, is a moral project of self-cultivation (Mattingly 2014). While Miller pays particular attention to this project as it relates to consumption, parenting as a moral project extends also to many other domains – schooling, activities, manners, behaviour, the right friends and interests - the work of raising a child then is inextricable from the work of constructing the self.

The product of intensive parenting (and a contributing factor to it) is a particular image of the child not so much as a subject in their own right, but rather as an emblem of values and admirable attributes. This results in a "prototype" of the good child, i.e. an imagined child that embodies all of those values and virtues associated with the category - or the one that is "the most child" (Anderson 2004, Hastrup 1995). This "prototype" child is seemingly attainable to anyone so long as the right ingredients are added, at the right time. The child as category is in this sense a repository for the adult imaginary – at once a symbol of innocence and a promising future. As a result, all real children are measured against this prototype at the pinnacle, and evaluated on a variable scale as to what degree they inhabit the category. It is in relation to this prototype that variations and deficiencies in childhood are constructed.

Just as there is a prototype good child, the category of 'parent' also has a prototype. Those parents who have accumulated more parenting skills (Hoffman 2010), who have invested the most time and effort into parenting, and who have the ability to display these skills – are the ones who typify the category; they are "more parent" than those who have less of this social and cultural capital. As such there is a performative element to good parenting; one must publicly demonstrate the possession of these abilities. However, to align most closely to the prototype, it is essential to also be seen as having good kids. A mother can invest *all* of her resources into parenting, but if she has not succeeded in turning out a good child, she may still only occupy the periphery of the parent category. In this way "parent" is not just what you are in relation to your child, it also an asymmetrical social category.

In some ways, the neontocracy may seem to be a progressive development, granting children more agency, more recognition as subjects, more say in the everyday life of the family than they ever did before. But what is important to note is that the inversion of the gerontocracy does not automatically convert into a democratic, egalitarian family model. In the neontocracy children have status, but they don't necessarily have agency. Their status is couched in child as "accumulation strategy" or child as "ornament" (Katz 2008). The child as accumulation strategy refers to the competitively cultivated children of intensive parenting, as a way of securing optimal (economic) future outcomes. Child as ornament refers to the fetishization of the child as a commodity, and of childhood as a time of innocence and freedom – paradoxically the very antithesis of the reality of the child as accumulation strategy. Both of these practices are problematic for parents of "difficult" children, who are neither attractive ornaments nor are they thought to be likely future assets.

CHAPTER TWO: On Parental Emotions

"The main field of morality, the part of ourselves which is most relevant for morality, is our

feelings" (Foucault 1994:111 (1983))

On a rainy afternoon in mid-May I attend a Mother's Day afternoon tea at my daughter's preschool. Vanessa and her son Lucas are there too, and I am aware of how tense she feels. Shadowing Lucas everywhere to ensure he does not cause any problems, she is unable to enjoy the occasion as it was intended. Other mothers spend time with their children and chat easily with each other. There are children painting their mothers' nails, others sit amiably, making cards together. Lucas is wandering around a little aimlessly. Four different children confidently march up to Vanessa to let her know that Lucas is very naughty. She smiles at them politely, unsure of how to respond. Later she tells me "I worry that everyone goes home and talks badly about him. Sometimes I think that no one likes him. Sometimes I don't even like him. I do love him, but he's just gotten more and more challenging. I feel judged, and I feel defeated. And then I just explode. I don't know why, I'm just not calm anymore... This is not how it was supposed to be."

Parenting involves a panoply of complex and often intense emotions. For parents of difficult children, it is often even more so. Love is typically front and centre of this emotional spectrum. Within Australian culture parents expect – and are expected - to love their children, and they usually do. But they do not always like them, and the presence of love does not obliterate the experience of intensely negative or confusing emotions. But such negative emotions are typically taboo, so much so that parents can find it difficult to even accept their existence. This chapter considers the social dimensions of parental emotions, as not only a product of emotive discourse - "what individuals *can* think and feel is overwhelmingly a

product of socially organised modes of action and of talk" (Abu-Lughod 1990:27) - but also as a vehicle for reproduction of the socio-moral order. Foucault's argument that in Western cultures feelings are the "main field of morality" is poignant, especially as overt morality has largely disappeared from public discourse and now functions inconspicuously by proxies – mainly those of risk and harm (Hunt 2003). Feelings then become a moral compass. Abu-Lughod and Lutz suggest that the link between affect and morality exists because feelings are constituted as "the core of the self, the seat of our individuality" (1990:6). How then, do we come to feel the way we do? And what can our emotions tell us about morality and social practice? It is in the arena of the emotions that the ideal of the good life is given shape and gravity, and it is here that the aspirations to the good life are challenged by the reality of life with a difficult child.

"Pushing my buttons": Emotion Talk and Neoliberal Morality

"I try to label Louis' emotions for him, because he is only five and doesn't yet understand what he's feeling. So, I might say "yeah, you're feeling really frustrated now, huh?" says Theresa whose son is prone to meltdowns. Other mothers have also mentioned "labelling emotions" to me. It is also known as "emotion coaching".

Emotion talk has gained traction in mainstream parental discourse in recent years and is now commonplace in Australian parental pedagogy, which typically proffers that emotions are key to understanding children's (mis)behaviours, and that today's generation of parents didn't grow up with this kind of emotional pedagogy. Parenting educators describe how an emotional re-education is necessary for parents to avoid the "mistakes" of previous generations. Parents are encouraged to see children's behaviours as emblematic of their inner emotional lives, rather than "naughtiness"[3]. The idea is that once parents understand the correlation between emotions [3] Though it is worth noting that I continue to hear the word "naughty" applied to children on an almost daily basis. The good/naughty dichotomy is clearly still an ingrained ontological perception of the nature of the child.

and behaviour they can, according to one class I attended "parent more *effectively*". Note the use of neoliberal terminology – effective parenting suggests specific end objectives, or "behaviour targets".

In examining the "emotion vocabulary" (Harré 1986) of Sydney parents, "anger" - or its more socially acceptable cousin "frustration" – came up frequently in interviews and discussions. Many of my interlocutors, who would normally describe themselves as calm or level-headed, would confess to regular bouts of anger at their child's transgressions, usually followed by intense feelings of guilt and shame at having "been so horrible to a small child that afterwards you just want to kill yourself," as one father describes it. Public displays of anger towards children are frowned upon, and are discussed fervently on online mothers' forums, where condemnation is often swift and unswerving. For example, in one forum, when a mother anonymously confessed to feeling angry with her toddler, answers such as "please see a psychologist immediately" and "I've never felt anger like that at my child, please seek help" were commonplace.

Despite this discourse, parental anger is a common occurrence. A recent study suggests that two thirds of parents shout or yell at their children when they misbehave (Rhodes 2018). There is a vexed relationship between reality and the imagined ideal. Anger is also the main "problematic emotion" that comes up in parenting classes and literature, where it is represented as a natural, though undesirable, reaction to children's misbehaviours. The anthropological literature on emotions demonstrates that a "natural" emotion is a matter of conjecture. While emotions have biological aspects, there are also layers of cultural meaning (Warner 1986, Heelas 2007, White 2007). "Children push our buttons," said many of my interlocutors when describing their children's challenging behaviours, suggesting that children deliberately elicit parental anger. But to say that anger is a *natural* part of parenting suggests there is something inherent to the parent-child relationship that causes parental anger. However, this is a matter of

circumstance and interpretation, what Schweder would call an "intentional thing" – it is causally active, but only by virtue of our mental representation of it (1990).

By contrast, Briggs writes that among Qipisa Inuits, anger towards children is inappropriate. Momentary mild annoyance may occur, but actual anger towards a child is both rare and frowned upon, as it is thought to demean the adult, demonstrating their own childishness (Briggs 1992 [1989]). Interestingly this echoes what an experienced Sydney parent educator told me - that parents are "emotionally immature" and cannot manage their own emotions. Yet parents are expected to teach children how to recognise, understand and manage their emotions (Furedi 2004).

Cultures vary greatly in their expectations of children. In Australia it is taken for granted that children ought to obey adults (particularly parents, grandparents and teachers). Benedict calls this the dominance-submission dichotomy. This dichotomy is not universally present – many native American tribes for instance, reject the idea (Benedict 2008 [1938]). Expectations of child submissiveness are commonplace in middle-class Sydney; when children are not submissive to adult authority, it is a transgression to be disciplined. Often it is also interpreted as a failure of parenting.

White's (2007) idea of emotive institutions offers an interpretive lens. Emotive institutions "constitute points of articulation between embodied feeling, cultural models of emotion, and socially organised activities where emotions and emotion talk do specific kinds of pragmatic work" (White 2007: 248). Hence, we could relocate the source of the anger from the individual situation – for example: a child's repeated noncompliance with their parent's request – to the emotive discourses that inform the parental response to that situation. When the child is "pushing buttons" then, the parent's angry reaction is not exclusively in response to this behaviour, but is shaped by a cultural schema, informing their "feelings about their feelings"

(Frijda & Mesquita 1994). This "internal representation of social norms and rules" (Averill 1986: 100) dictates how the situation, and the relationship, is supposed to take shape. If parents are conditioned to believe that children should obey their parents, then the anger may be a response to the failure of having an obedient child, rather than the child's actual actions.

With a difficult child these reactions can be frequent, and start to form a regular emotional pattern for the parent. Even in the private situation of the home, a child not living up to the norms for the good child, may cause the parent to feel angry and disappointed that they can't be the good parent and that all of this does not add up to the ideal of the good life. The difficult child becomes a hindrance to their parents' moral aspirations. In these situations, "emotional and social meaning make up each other" (White 2007: 248).

Fear and the Imagined Future

Another central emotion is fear. Parents fear not bringing up a good person. Because the child is seen as being in a permanent state of becoming (Prout & James 2015, Katz 2008), events in the present take on a utilitarian quality – everything is building towards an imagined future. The child's misbehaviour in the present enacts the parent's moral imagination, where such behaviour results in a path toward future delinquency. "Sometimes I think, what if he's a bad egg," said Alice. Parental discourses heighten this reaction and reinforce parents' sense of determinism. For instance, Mary said, "I worry about the future. What happens if I don't get this [parenting] right? It's all on me."

These emotions are not direct products of the child's misbehaviour, but rather of the complex web of meanings we produce and reproduce in everyday life. White (2007), leaning on Williams, proposes "structures of feeling" to understand how on the one hand, feelings are embedded in structures of ideology and politics, and on the other that to understand the meanings of these feelings, we need to see them in the context in which they are expressed and represented. The child as an imagined future adult is situated within a particular ideological

interpretation of the good person. In the present neoliberal structure of feeling that may include being independent, entrepreneurial, flexible, resilient, able and willing to undergo constant self-improvement. A child who resists these demands in the present may be imagined to be on the wrong path.

The social reproduction of children is inseparable from the reproduction of economic and political systems – therefore children who resist attempts to be moulded and controlled are seen as risks. I am not suggesting that children and young people do not sometimes engage in self-destructive behaviours or that they should simply be left alone to fend for themselves. However, neoliberal societies are so highly attuned to risks, and individually "responsibilised" (Hunt 2003) that hypervigilance in parenting is now synonymous with good parenting, with children subject to constant risk assessments. This risk avoidance discourse often draws on tales of caution that link future adverse outcomes to childhood factors. Mary, for example, told me of her friend's brother who leads a marginalised existence. Single and unemployed, his mother should have done more to prevent this outcome, she reasons, as he was always a little odd. Children who fall outside narrow margins of normality have the potential to induce moral panics.

Neoliberalism produces an orientation towards the possibilities of the future and we are obligated to make the most of those possibilities. In liquid modernity "I can" becomes "I must" (Bauman 2000). This discourse of self-realisation and aspiration is so dominant that attempts at resistance are pathologized (Brinkman 2016, Brinkmann 2013, Keohane and Petersen 2013). When children seemingly refuse to engage in their education, or otherwise conform to the norm of the good child, it is not only obstinate and difficult behaviour in the present, it is also seen as a rejection of what a neoliberal middle-class society values: aspiration, self-realisation and drive. Referring back to Katz's idea of the child as accumulation strategy (2008), if the difficult child cannot be transformed into a self-regulated, flexible and self-motivated Self in the present,

their future human capital is unimaginable. The emotional experiences of parents are thus more than a one-directional, psycho-biological reaction to a specific, bounded event (White 2007). They are complex, contextual, vehicles of meaning with a certain moral force.

"Those Mothers": Feeling Rules, Expectations and Parenting Scripts

Hochschild theorises that emotions are governed by "feeling rules" (1979). Rarely spoken explicitly, feeling rules are embedded in our habitus, informing how we *should* feel in a given situation. We bridge the gap between how we *should* feel and how we *do* feel by doing "emotion work", i.e. active attempts at changing our emotions.

Parents know that they shouldn't feel angry. The dominant discourse on parenting tells us that parenting is a joyful experience. That children can be hard work, but they are worth it because they make you happy. That parenting is rewarding; if you are a good parent and put in enough effort, you will be rewarded with good children. Lisa tells me about her expectations of "quality time" with her strong-willed, challenging 3-year-old son Jacob:

"I wish I wasn't so cranky. I don't want to be. I really just want to enjoy him. For example, I'll decide that we're going to do some baking together. Because, that's a nice thing to do, right? But very quickly I become frustrated and annoyed because he's making a mess and it doesn't turn out at all as I thought it would. But I know I should be more patient."

In this ideology anger is a polluting emotion (Douglas 1966). It destroys the purity of the naturally harmonious bond parents expect to have with their child and it hinders or destroys the mutual joy that is "supposed to" emanate from the relationship. Laura tells me she feels resentful towards her daughter, whose difficult behaviours stop them from enjoying the "normal mother-daughter things, like going for manicures, and other girly things". The emotion work required by the parent of a difficult child is particularly demanding, because the distance

between how one is supposed to feel and the reality of how one does feel can seem unbridgeable.

All my interlocutors had an idea about the kind of parent they wanted to be before having children. But that imagined future self is often impossible to enact in everyday life with a behaviourally challenging child. Says Sandra, half-jokingly: "No one tells you it's going to be like this. This was not in the brochure!" Similarly, Vanessa, whose 3-year-old son often will not cooperate and has had difficulties with fitting in socially at day-care, also describes her disappointment:

> I thought raising a child would be more enjoyable. That once that child finally arrived, I would just be this natural mother. I don't regret having my son, I love him, but I do feel really let down. I wanted to be a mother for as long as I can remember, and had always expected motherhood to be really fulfilling, that it would just feel right, like a higher sense of purpose. It hasn't turned out like that for me. I've struggled ever since I had a child to understand the purpose. I thought the child would be the purpose, and now I've started seeing it more like a cyclical thing – you have the biological urge to have a child, you have them and sort of bring them up, and then they leave and you die. What's the purpose of it all? So, no, it's not fulfilling at all. But there's still a lot to do, I still want to raise a good person.

Vanessa struggles every day to reconcile her actual emotions with the feeling rules of middle-class Sydney society. To say that her feelings are simple psychobiological reactions would be incomplete. They spring from a cultural narrative that idealises motherhood as the ultimate female achievement. Admitting to being disappointed with the reality of motherhood is largely taboo. While it is ok to admit frustration with certain aspects of parenting – such as the lack of sleep, to admit a fundamental disappointment with the role of mother transgresses the cultural notion that mothers are *lucky* to have been bestowed with the honour of motherhood and defies the positivity/happiness trend. Vanessa continues: "I could never say to my mothers'

group[4] that I'm fundamentally disgruntled with motherhood. That just wouldn't go down well. Nobody will admit to feeling like a failure."

Hochschild argues that we often idealise how we *expect* to feel (1979). Alice and I are sitting in her office one day, chatting about her son Freddy. Initially she's upbeat, and radiating competence, but the more we talk, the more she lets her guard down. She tells me:

> I'm finding that I'm a different mother to what I thought I'd be. I never expected it to be so wholly absorbing and challenging… I think it has a lot to do with romanticised images of celebrities. And I didn't know anyone, who really struggled with motherhood. I remember being in my twenties, and seeing *those mothers* flap around the supermarket and thinking to myself, 'well, *I'll* never be like that!' But now I am that! And more! I thought I'd be super breezy. I thought I'd enjoy it more, but it's just hard. I don't know how to cope with Freddy… Before I had him, I was a very even person. Now I just lose the plot and yell all the time.

Vanessa has a similar experience:

> I was SO convinced about becoming a mother, that I was then so shocked at the actual experience of it. I don't regret becoming a mother, but I do regret that my expectations were so off kilter. I knew how mundane parenting could be from watching my sister do it, but I didn't understand how I could feel like such a failure at it.

The expectations are drawn from a cultural narrative that idealises parenting – the begetting of a child - as the ultimate in existential fulfillment, the missing piece in the puzzle of life. But, this narrative neglects to consider children as subjects in their own right; children as status symbols are not thinking, feeling, acting beings. They are more like ornaments, a blank slate upon which parents write a narrative which complements their own, or as Lancy says "new subjectivities to mould" (2015:73). As I will discuss further in chapter four this idealised view derives partly from an "evidence-based parenting" logic that says you can control the "outcome" – how the child "turns out" – by putting in the right parenting techniques. Many of

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[4] In Sydney, at the birth of a woman's first child, the mother will be assigned to a "mothers' group", initially run by a midwife, but intended to be continued throughout the early months/years as a support function for mothers with children of similar ages.

my interlocutors' frustrations hinge on their having expected to be *in control*, and instead feeling *out of control.* This dissonance may be a more likely source of parental anger and disappointment than the child itself.

"You can't say 'my child hurts me'": Scripted Narratives

Structures of feeling, and feeling rules, are reproduced in everyday life through scripted narratives. Many conversations between mothers follow standard scripts: social conventions that dictate how one comports oneself and what sort of things can be spoken (White 2007, Fairclough 2001). Certain themes recur constantly – sleep, exhaustion, schooling, extra-curriculars, nutrition, screen-time – and are often discussed with standard phrases and expressions. But there are other topics that are largely off-limits in social conversations. These taboos arise out of fear of being judged or deemed incapable/negligent, shame at not managing the "task", and loneliness – feeling that there is no support or understanding. Laura does not discuss it with her friends, saying "What's the point? They don't understand, their kids are much easier to manage."

Many women will have a select few family members, or close friends, whom they feel they can be honest with. Outside of those intimate bonds, interactions between middle class mothers in Sydney are governed by scripts. Mothers should maintain a certain façade, while also appearing "authentic" (Cabanas 2016). Women with difficult children walk a fine line when attempting to balance authenticity, with fitting in as a "normal mum". Many do this "successfully", keeping hidden the real problems, while only alluding to the "acceptable problems": a set of common parenting complaints that fit into the parenting script. For example, lack of sleep: "oh my gosh, I need coffee – Willow was up every hour last night" – this follows an often-repeated script, the purpose of which is to elicit sympathy from other mothers. Another one is: "I just don't get anything done when Xavier is at home". Running off these scripts

usually results in a chorus of recognition and encouragement. As the kids grow the scripted

problems change – the homework burden is too big, or the laundry is never ending. These

frustrations are not make-believe, but they are so scripted that most of us rattle them off without

too much thought, as a way of making conversation – and connection – with other mothers.

These are the common and socially acceptable challenges of motherhood through which we

bond.

But at the margins there are challenges that have no script, that cannot be spoken for

fear of lack of understanding, stigma, exclusion. As Alice tells me "you can't say 'my child

hurts me' – that's not an acceptable thing to talk about". It is unacceptable because the subtext

is that good children do not hurt their parents, and that good parents can control and manage

such situations. The shame Alice feels is obvious, the tears roll down her cheeks as she tells me

this. She is at a loss, not only for what to do, but for how to cope with her feelings; both

towards her child – you are not supposed to dislike your own child – and her disappointment at

the reality of parenting: "no one tells you it will be like this, no one."

Occasionally a mother will transgress the boundary of the script and venture into taboo

subjects, but often the conversation quickly stops. Laura tells me: "There's not much point in

trying to talk to people about it. They don't know what to say and so I just don't burden them

with that." When she has occasionally broken the taboo, people have invariably told her that

she needs to take her daughter "to see someone", meaning a psychiatrist or paediatrician - "no

one actually offers anything helpful". And so, Laura, who is a confident and smart woman,

retreats and shoulders her burden alone. "I only really talk to my psychologist – she has to listen

because I'm paying her to." Laura says with a wry laugh.

These scripts form part of a socio-moral practice, a way in which we produce and

reproduce moral standards and norms for what constitutes a good parent and a good child.

Mothers have to partake in this discourse to convey they are good parents. They have to be

careful, how much they reveal of their children's challenges, lest he/she be labelled problematic, potentially pushing them to the periphery of the good kid category. Sandra feels this pressure: "We love him as he is, I just wish others could focus more on his strengths and positive attributes". She knows he has been labelled "naughty" by other parents, and so she tries fervently to promote a more positive image of her son. To do so, she has to keep her negative, confused emotions to herself. She confides only in a couple of other women, whom she knows has similar experiences.

These scripted narratives function not only to police what can be talked about, but to implicitly seed the concept of what a good person is and does in middle-class Sydney. Middle-class parents tie their identity so strongly to their role as parents, and to the relationship with their child(ren), that there is often more to lose than gain by being honest. As one mother tells me: "There is a lot of aspiration among the parents in this area – what it is they are aspiring to exactly I don't know" – indicating the kind of social climbing middle-class Sydney parents engage in, even if they are already well up the ladder, there is always room to acquire a little more status – if not professionally or financially, then in other arenas such as parenting. Sandra observes that parents in her community engage in "competitive parenting", where there is always a bit of one-upmanship in the form of strictness, parenting style and skill-sets, and of course in children's achievements. Before her children started school, she rarely doubted herself as a parent. Now, she feels she has to prove herself constantly.

In a culture where much of life, parenting included, is presented in glamourous, positive and carefree snapshots on social media, there has been a push-back against this glossing over of the negatives and a call for more honest, authentic representations. However, this honesty is often still presented in a very redacted and polished form, as if to say "oh yes, the negatives exist, but look we can still make it look good - yes, my kid just smeared their organic quinoa porridge all over the vintage, designer dining table – no matter." Or: "sure my kid just threw a

tantrum, so I let her watch Peppa Pig on my phone. #badmom". I am paraphrasing, but this is the gist of much social media parenting talk. It presents parenting problems as minor kinks in an otherwise smooth and happy life, giving the impression that there are quick fixes to life's problems, allowing you to quickly move on with your positive, joyous, meaningful life. This is not the reality with a difficult child. The problems are multiple, often presenting themselves in quick succession with no easy fixes or glamourous backdrops. These mothers are left with the distinct impression that if you cannot package your child's problems appealingly, or with at least some potential solutions on the horizon, it is better to not speak up at all.

Risk, Happiness and the Quantified Self

During fieldwork I noticed a propensity to assess things – events, behaviours, emotions, moods - by a binary measure of good/bad. Watching families share a relaxing moment at the park for example – the child goes down the slide "good sliding!". The child runs a few meters "good running!" Each little thing the child does is subject to an on-the-spot assessment – "good job!" is doled out cheerfully and with applause, whenever the child gets something right. When the parent disapproves, it is also made explicit in words, for example: "it's not nice to call your sister names". The reprimand may also reference how the parent *feels* about the behaviour, thereby indexing the behaviour to the parent's emotions, for example: "I don't like it when you shout" or "it makes me angry when you don't listen". This may seem like stating the obvious, but other cultures may deal with misbehaviours more subtly. Japanese parents, for example, often redirect their children in an indirect manner (Clancy 2008 [1986]). When parents link their reprimands to their own feelings, they are sending the child a clear message that the behaviour is unacceptable because of its emotional impact on others. This is a clear shift away from a disciplining that marks a behaviour as unacceptable because it is (morally) *wrong*. In this way children learn to orient themselves morally in the world by their emotions.

The running commentary of moral judgements is also evident at school. Schools hand out certificates, points and treats every time a child does something mildly positive (my own daughter recently brought home a "golden ticket" for holding the door open for her teacher). They also keep score of the negatives. Points can be won and points can be lost, like a bank account for behaviour, down to the minutest of details. Says Sandra: "I'm just tired of the teacher ringing me with a list of "bad" things – many of them minor! - that Jack has done. Can't she just deal with it at school? And don't get me started on the points! The points are meant to motivate him, but he loses more than he gains!"

Jack's behavioural deficits are in this way made even more explicit. This binary appraisal process means that things can rarely just *be*. As a pedagogical tool, it relies on direct rational reasoning with the child, and an expectation of rational compliance. By making expectations explicit, parents seek to include the children in their own moral projects. Vanessa tells me she and her husband deliberately model the behaviours they want Lucas to exhibit, such as kindness and good manners. They also explain to him, repeatedly and in detail what they would like him to do and why, but to no avail. This particular cultural logic is not working for them, causing increasing frustration.

In a move away from punitive discipline methods, many parents attempt the "catch them being good" adage (also promoted in parenting classes), where the parent verbalises good as well as bad behaviours, on the premise that children love – and need – praise. Through this moralising pedagogy children are being weighed and measured throughout the day, their every action subject to external judgement. Children are rarely just left *be.* Moreover, the good boy/girl rhetoric indicates that behaviour is a bounded event, inextricably tied to the person *doing* the behaviour. It is not seen as something that is co-created, arising situationally and externally to the individual.

These evaluation processes are reminiscent of neoliberal corporate culture, where everything can be measured and progress carefully monitored - the KPI's of good parenting do not include unruly behaviours. The result is a "quantified self", in which the measurable aspects of a person come to take priority over the "qualitative aspects of human self-identity" (Brinkmann 2016: 75). This is "the age of the calculable person, the person whose individuality is no longer ineffable, unique, and beyond knowledge, but can be known, mapped, calibrated, evaluated, quantified, predicted and managed." (Rose 1998: 88). It may also be symptomatic of the parental paranoia of getting it wrong – not parenting optimally, or of missing something – for example a "key indicator" that their child is unhappy, abnormal or disordered. Hunt argues that in late modernity where overt morality discourse has all but disappeared, risk and harm have become proxies for morality (2003). Parents, being the sole responsible for their children, are constantly engaged in processes of risk assessment and risk management, this is a moral obligation of our times.

Those who manage their risks well are seen as successful, those who do not are irresponsible and neglectful (Hoffman 2009). "You get out what you put in" one woman told me dismissively referring to a misbehaving child. Parental discourses of risk therefore play not only on anxieties around the safety and wellbeing of one's child, but also on the fear of not being seen as a good parent. It is difficult then for parents to opt out of the intensive parenting culture, even if they wanted to, and it is even harder for parents of difficult children who, even though they are in many ways excluded from the dominant parenting narrative, are expected to parent even more intensively in order to rectify, or atone for, their children's deficits (Blum 2007).

Parental aspirations to the good life encompass a complex constellation of imagined future ideals – turning out a good person – and the more immediate rewards of joy and happiness that are supposed to emanate from the parenting experience. But while difficult

children may bring joy and happiness, they also bring many difficult experiences – doubt, shame, disappointment, fear, and anger for example, all of which may lead the mother to a sense of defeat. Being seen as a parenting failure has profound emotional impacts, sapping the parent-child relationship of its positive affective qualities.

The risk and happiness discourses run parallel and combine to make powerful "technologies of the self", where the actions of parents are governed less by official institutions and more by the internal desires – and anxieties – instilled by these discourses, to create the good life (Foucault 2003 [1982]). Not only an emblem of high status, good parenting is increasingly imagined, expressed and feted as the road to the good – happy - life. Writes Rose: "The modern self is impelled to make life meaningful through the search for happiness and self-realization in his or her individual biography: the ethics of subjectivity are inextricably locked into the procedures of power" (1998: 79). As such it becomes very difficult to untangle the moral projects of family life from the neoliberal regime of truth.

A common proverb goes: "you are only ever as happy as your unhappiest child". Happiness is a moral imperative, it is the precept of the good life, the very definition of all that is good, and an unhappy child means that something has failed. In the parenting classes I attended the instructors would routinely start out by asking parents to reflect on what they would like for their children. The answer was ubiquitously "I just want them to be happy". The "just" is telling, it implies that really it is a simple desire, that happiness should be easily attained, that it is not much to ask for. As one mother told me: "All children deserve to be happy." We have elevated happiness and its pursuit to both a right and an obligation, its attainment both an individual responsibility and a sign of personal success (Cabanas 2016). A state of perpetual positive affect – rather than momentary experiences of joy and contentment, neoliberal happiness is reified – a 'thing' we can hold on to and show off, at once a shield against all evil and an emblem of good life choices.

Children hold a special place in this ideology: as a symbol of pure happiness. We expect happiness to be their natural state. In a neontocracy, family life revolves around maintaining this happiness at any cost (Lancy 2015). The parent-child relationship has an element of a contractual arrangement – the parent gives, endlessly, selflessly, and the child reciprocates by being happy. Parents of difficult children feel this obligation acutely. They are in a double bind as they exhaust themselves trying to make their children happier. Sometimes their difficult child is an obstacle to their own happiness. Says Laura:

> If Marnie would just do the right thing, if she would just be good, it would make my life so much easier! I started drinking every night to cope with it all. That obviously wasn't working and it's not what I want my children to see either. But it is just so exhausting. The psychologist told me that first of all I need to sort myself out because she is feeding off my emotional behaviours. She told me "you need to deal with that because she needs to have a stabilizing influence, you know, you need to look after yourself". But it's easier said than done. I'm trying, but it's all so consuming.

Not only is Laura responsible for making her daughter "happier" (presumably if she were happier, she would behave better), but she is also responsible for making herself happier in the midst of all her other obligations. At the same time, there is disappointment that despite all she does for her daughter, she does not reciprocate with happiness.

Paradoxically, it appears that children can also have too much happiness. Often their unsavoury behaviours are simply the expression of untameable exuberance. Adults become irate when childish giddiness leaks into the adult world, and hinders adult agendas. Too much childlike joy, it seems, can also be bad for adults' happiness. But this also hints at a particular definition of happiness that is not so much about the in-the-moment-joy that tends to be a child's definition of happiness, but rather it is about becoming, achieving and self-realising – in other words an ever-evolving process of aspiration and transformation. Standing still, no matter how joyfully, is a liability - "the happy self is always incomplete by definition" (Cabanas 2016: 475). Perhaps then the expansion of disorder – or unhappiness - is more about the shrinking of

the child's domain, a new constraint on their experience of, and engagement with, their world? Difficult children are thought to be at risk of never *becoming* happy. Therefore, the morally just parent must seek solutions.

CHAPTER THREE: Childhood Deviance and Explanatory Models

"It is now harder than ever to be a 'normal' child or parent" (Timimi 2010:693).

Scholars describe a narrowing in childhood behavioural norms (Timimi 2008, Timimi 2010, Diller 2006). The behaviours my interlocutors are struggling with, largely occupy a grey zone, where they are neither considered normal by the general community, nor do they fit the diagnostic criteria for behavioural disorders. These behaviours include distractedness, disorganisation, disobedience, disruptiveness, tantrums, and physical aggression. Sometimes they are more of an inwardly directed nature: a withdrawal from the world and a refusal to engage. The behaviours are difficult to manage and sometimes difficult to make sense of. When parents review their own childhoods and compare, they often make the following observations: 1) that their parents enforced discipline more strictly, and 2) that children had more freedom and got up to more mischief. On the surface these statements seem contradictory, but I believe they are two sides of the same coin. It signals an ambivalence towards today's childrearing norms, where children are subject to near constant surveillance. When today's parents were children in the 1970s and 1980s certain rules were strictly enforced, but outside of those boundaries there was leeway and large swathes of time and space, where children were unpoliced (Edwards and Gillies 2013).

Because childhood – both real and imagined – has changed so dramatically in recent decades, looking to the parenting practises of the past rarely feels like an option. This is a hallmark of liquid modernity: the ways of our elders are no longer deemed suitable, useful or even desirable (2000). This intergenerational tension is also a "distinct feature of the neoliberal imaginary" (Mcguigan 2014: 234). While individual parents may look to their own parents for advice or reassurance, on a wider scale dominant parental discourses seek to distance

themselves from earlier generations, often explicitly. The parenting classes I attended were usually premised on the idea that even though the previous generation meant well, they did not really understand the intricacies of the child's neurobiology or the complexity of their emotional needs and development. As one instructor said "we have come a long way since then (1970s/1980s)." Unable to make sense of parenting by looking to the past, parents seek other models for understanding.

Broadly speaking, middle-class parents understand difficult behaviours by looking to one of two explanatory models (Weiss 1997, Kleinman 1988). I call these the common sense model and the medical model. The former explains deviant and challenging behaviours as a function of deficient parenting. It is anchored in the paradigm of "parental determinism", which holds that parents are ultimately responsible for all childhood outcomes (Lee et al 2014). This means that any hint of abnormality triggers a scrutiny of parental behaviours and attitudes. I refer to it as "common sense" because it reflects a shared pattern of thinking that invokes common conclusions (Duffield 2007). At once reflecting our subjective truths, while simultaneously appearing to us as external and solid reality, common sense is a powerful cultural construct (Crehan 2011). To grasp the social potency of this model, it is important to understand how it is implicated in a politicization of the family, in which childhood is imagined as the source of, and solution for, all social problems (Macvarish 2014, Edwards and Gillies 2013, Hoffman 2010, Rose 1999). Parental determinism as a causal model sits well within a neoliberal divestment of social responsibility.

This model is the first step in the hierarchy of resort. Once it has been exhausted and the parenting skills of the mother/father have undergone improvement (by reading parenting literature, attending parenting classes, adjusting their techniques and implementing various

behavioural "incentive schemes"[5]) without delivering sufficient results, parents look to the medical model. Once a child's behaviours can no longer be attributed to bad parenting alone, the explanation becomes one of pathology. While somewhat hierarchical, these models also overlap and intersect, and the language of the medical model is seeping into the common sense model, hence the two models exist on a continuum rather than as completely separate entities. This chapter considers these explanatory models, their moral implications and the stigma they each carry.

The Common Sense Model

The troubling behaviours my interlocutors experienced did not manifest overnight, they revealed themselves over time. "Is this normal? All children have tantrums, right? I didn't really know what to expect" says one mother, whose child's emotional meltdowns have proven excessive to the norm. Parents question where these behaviours are coming from, initially comparing their children to others around them. As the challenges grow, parents wonder "why me? Why our family? What have *I* done to cause this?" These questions are soon followed by "what is the outlook? And how can we change the situation?" The common sense model is already at work. Faced with challenging behaviours – like Laura's six-year-old daughter Marnie, who screams, punches and refuses to comply – parents are already finding their own skills lacking, and may start to sense the judgement of outsiders too. Consider Mona's comment: "I don't often take them out anymore. It's just too embarrassing how they carry on, and strangers staring at us, like 'what are you going to do about this' you know?"

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[5] This is a common parental pedagogical tool. Children "earn" points, stickers, stars etc each time they exhibit "good" behaviours. Once they reach X amount there will often be a reward of some sort. It operates on the premise that children need/want to be incentivised for having socially appropriate behaviour.

Public embarrassment is a common theme amongst my interlocutors, many of whom have stopped going out to the usual places families go — the park, the supermarket, the café — unless expressly necessary. This is the foremost place, where the common sense model makes itself felt in these families' lives. The public space is an arena for displays, practices and enforcement of morality. Here children demonstrate to the world whether or not they have competent parents, as their behaviours reflect directly on their parent's skills. The parents of children who misbehave in public are scrutinised, their discipline of the misbehaving child closely monitored by strangers, who act as arbiters of moral standards. These situations function as an opportunity for the parent to present themselves as a good parent by ensuring that the child is either publicly disciplined, or by explaining their behaviour to those present, often accompanied by an apology (Ryan 2010).

For mothers of difficult children these scenarios are frequent and emotionally taxing. Having to constantly perform the role of "good parent" to a surveillant public is exhausting, and reinforces the mother's sense of inadequacy. Sally's two-year-old son Evan is boisterous: "Strangers have come up to me and told me that I need to control him. So, I normally follow him around everywhere to make sure he's not annoying anyone. I'm just tired of always saying sorry. So now we just spend our afternoons in the apartment. It's easier. But we do get lonely too". Sally has had a challenging time since Evan was born and has suffered from depression. The social isolation is likely to add to her burden.

Avoiding public scrutiny is common, though Theresa has a somewhat different experience. Her five-year-old son is "super emotional" and will often have meltdowns in public. "He'll just cry and cling to my legs and refuse to move. And there's nothing I can do except wait for it to pass," she said.

"How does that make you feel when you are out in public?" I asked.

"Well, it doesn't bother me too much. I find that I get a lot of kind looks and sympathetic nods". Theresa's experience suggests that there are nuances to what the public will tolerate and deem normal. Where that line is drawn is hard to pin down, however it may concern the age and size of the child, and the particular behaviour. Crying is likely more tolerable (and deserving of sympathy) than a display of anger and aggression. Theresa is also among the most confident of the mothers I meet, suggesting that the parenting Self one presents in these situations matters as well.

Whether looks are approving or disapproving the public space is an important stage for the (re)production of morality. Here, personal parenting values and ideas are put in relief against those of the wider community. Small gestures can have a big emotional impact (Goffman 1959). These public interactions are mechanisms for maintaining the order of what childhood "should" look like, and a chance for the parent to build (or lose) social capital. Csordas argues that anthropologists undertaking studies of morality must consider 'evil', without which morality would be moot (Csordas 2013). In this case evil can be "understood as imperfection/impurity/defilement or as ambivalent/uncontrollable power… or as part of the personality/character of a person" (Csordas 2013: 527). Our experiences of ontological insecurity incite a desire to control. With childhood as a site for moral production, the child's behaviour and modes of being become something to manage. Those who are uncontrollable pose a threat to the moral project.

While it is unlikely that anyone in Sydney's middle-class would refer to a difficult child as 'evil', certain uncontrollable children are grouped into an 'undesirable' category for their lack of willingness (or ability) to partake in this project. Their behaviours make them unpredictable and difficult to be around. They are pollutants to the imaginary good – the high-achieving, but innocent; joyful, but obedient prototype child. They are thought to be if not evil in the present, at potential risk of becoming so in the future. These children are to be either

remediated, or contained so that their bad behaviours do not pollute the public space, or indeed the minds of other children. As McDermott and Varenne note "a disability may be a better display board for the weaknesses of a cultural system than it is an account of real persons" (1995: 327). Therefore, we must consider whether there is really something "wrong" with these children, or whether their wrongness is more accurately a product of our social order or an ignited fear within the observer. How we organise social life is also a way of organising our thoughts and values (Douglas 2013[1995]). Children who fall outside the norm of the controllable and incentivisable pose a threat to the way we imagine the good life – especially one conceived within neoliberal ideals of order, efficiency and predictability. .

I ask Alice how she felt about difficult children – before she had one of her own: "Growing up, there were some naughty kids in our group of friends and I associated that with being a boy and having lazy parents. And I thought 'I'm not going to be a lazy parent', but now I realise you have no control over tantrums. That never occurred to me. I just thought 'slack parents'. You just think that if you do things right the kids will be ok."

This idea of "doing it right" is the backbone of the common sense model. There is an implicit assumption that if you parent right you can immunise your family against problematic behaviours. Those with well-behaved children often take it as proof of their good parenting abilities. All of my interlocutors are resourceful, well-informed and well-intentioned women, who subscribed wholesale to this idea, some of them even having had a good first child. It never occurred to them that they would end up with a difficult child. This is where the common sense model reveals its limitations to these mothers, but only after imposing considerable anguish. Vanessa confesses: "I just keep thinking that there's a secret out there somewhere that I haven't been let in on. How come other people's children are able to sit and do the right thing and mine isn't?"

Strangers observing her difficult, fussy child will never see the amount of care, love and effort she has *invested*. She tells me that she feels judged, by other parents and by the day-care teachers: "Whenever we arrive at day-care, I just feel like they look at me with these pleading eyes like 'oh no, here's Lucas. Please tells us what to do with him, we don't know what to do'. But is he really the only kid that's like this?".

Vanessa's feelings are not a figment of her imagination. Katherine, a primary school teacher, tells me: "So many kids just aren't disciplined at home. The parents are lazy, can't be bothered doing it properly, and the kids are just brats. As a teacher, you just know which kids aren't parented properly. You see their behaviour and the things they say, and you just think well, that's gotta come from somewhere!" Katherine reaches for an easily accessible common-sense discourse to explain the challenging behaviours she experiences in the classroom. She does not articulate the social dynamics of the classroom or her own relationship to these children.

One mother told me of her daughter's parent-teacher interview, where the teacher heaped praise on the young girl, "she is an absolute credit to you" he said "you can be very proud". This praise felt jarring as she knew her son would never be described as a "credit" to her. He would probably be considered a product of deficient parenting. But how could that be when she was the mother of them both?

Mothers are all too aware of the teacher's gaze. Two women I encounter sporadically throughout my fieldwork – both mothers of difficult boys - tell me, separately, that once their sons' challenges took hold, they began avoiding the school playground. They would drop their children off at the gate, and if they had to attend school, they would keep their heads down, avoiding social interaction with teachers and other parents. In some places this might seem inconsequential. Not so in this part of Sydney, where school is not only a site for the education

of children, it also functions as an important social hub for parents. Parents – mothers especially – gain social capital by being involved in school life – from helping out in the classroom and organising school social events, to simply being *seen* around the school grounds. Here, social bonds are formed and parents often discuss who is a good kid and who is a troublemaker. Both of these mothers – smart, kind women – were initially involved in the school community, but became gradually marginalised through the perception of their children as naughty – because implied, and sometimes overtly stated, is the notion that they have failed as mothers to turn out well-behaved, likeable children. The marginalisation is subtle. No one has shunned them overtly, it happens through an emotive discourse, a common-sense narrative that labels these kids as bad, naughty, undisciplined, under-parented.

These mothers suffer from "courtesy stigma" – the particular kind of stigma that comes from being closely associated with a stigmatised person (Goffman 1963). Stigma spreads in waves around the stigmatised person, so that people close to them are tainted by association. As such the categorising of a difficult child carries implications for the whole family. Goffman talks about the "moral career of the stigmatised individual" which relates to how the person experiences the stigma dependent upon at what stage in their life they first realised they were stigmatised. For the child him/herself this is likely to happen while they are still constituting their sense of self. As such it may leave a lasting impression.

For the parents of maladjusted children this realisation would probably come around early to middle childhood. A parent gazing at their baby, would not likely imagine them as a future problem child. Miller shows how middle-class parents imbue their babies' personas with all that is benign and pure (1997). The realisation that one's child is different, marked, takes a heavy emotional toll, as the parent suddenly has to renegotiate not only who their child is in the world, but also who they are as a parent in the world – they have to "radically reorganise their view of the past" (Goffman 1963: 34). Where did I go wrong? Was I too strict, too lenient, too

distracted, too involved? These are the questions my interlocutors ask themselves on repeat. This reorganisation of the past, and the profoundly existential questions it entails, forces a wedge between the otherwise fused identities of mother and child – as mothers project their own ideals and values onto their children, but what is mirrored back at them is something unexpected. This can create an ambivalence towards the child and a destabilising of the mother's own sense of self.

In her work on autism, Lilley nuances the idea of courtesy stigma, introducing "attachment stigma" to reflect how much this stigma is shaped by the particularities of mother-child intersubjectivity (Lilley 2013). A mother does not *choose* to associate with her child – they are not two distinct subjects, rather they are mutually constitutive. Because of their attachment the mother experiences the world through her child, their hardships are hers. Her stigma then is twofold – she feels their stigma acutely, and at the same time she bears the blame for that stigma and is responsible for their behaviours. Attachment stigma then may be a more useful term to think with in this case than courtesy stigma.

My interlocutors often allude to behavioural challenges being "something that happens to other people", they never dreamed it would happen to them. Alice describes her nephew's behavioural challenges and says "I don't want Freddy to turn out like him, I don't want that for him…" She looks out the window, rubs her temples and fidgets with her scarf. "I'm also really surprised, I just didn't expect this for Freddy". This kind of thinking is likely nothing new. But combined with neoliberal ideology, which holds that success (achievement, happiness, status) is a direct outcome of individual effort, responsibility and effective risk management, it means that when this does happen to you, you have no one to blame but yourself.

The Medical Model

The second explanatory model, the medical model, removes from parents - at least theoretically - the burden of responsibility by shifting causality from bad parenting to pathology. Medicalisation is the process through which increasing swathes of everyday life come to be understood through the lens of pathology (Brinkmann 2010, Brinkmann 2013, Diller 2006, Conrad 1992, Lock 2001). Where medicalisation was previously thought to be one-directional; driven from within the biomedical field and its expanding jurisdiction over everyday life, medicalisation has now become multi-directional, meaning that people seek out medical diagnoses and solutions as an act of agency (Ballard 2005). A psychiatrist tells me that parents often come to her desperate to receive diagnoses she cannot give. They hope the medical gaze will make the problem *real.* Parents seek confirmation that they are not imagining the severity of the problem. If a medical professional *sees* them, recognises them, it validates their struggle. Once the problem can be named, possible treatments can be discussed and (positive) outcomes imagined. Finding the common-sense model lacking and sometimes uncompassionate, these parents see diagnoses as offering both explanations and solutions, and a certain degree of absolution – "brain blame" means that it was not bad parenting after all (Blum 2007). A diagnosis can offer relief and hope for the future.

It is not only parents who see the medical model as the solution, often others will encourage it too. Lucas's day-care centre called Vanessa and Peter in for a meeting. The teachers[6] were concerned with his behaviour – he cannot stay focused and will not join the group. He finds it difficult to get along with the other children. The staff suggested that Vanessa and Peter consult a paediatrician to assess whether there was a developmental issue, saying they would want to "catch it early" if there was. "Part of me worries that they don't enjoy having

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[6] "Teacher" is the term used to describe day-care staff members. However, they do not usually have formal teaching qualifications.

him there. I go home at night feeling like nobody likes my child. It's devastating… So, we did take him to see a paediatrician and he told us it's all normal, nothing to worry about at this stage, though it might take a few years to improve."

There is a gap between social expectations and developmental paediatric knowledge, reversing the direction of medicalisation "upwards". Diagnosis-seeking has become a dominant "idiom of distress": an attempt to express, and draw attention to, one's suffering in a way that is culturally meaningful (Nichter 2010). In a time and place where effective risk management is essential to being a good person (Lupton 2013), seeking medical solutions is considered a form of risk mitigation. If a parent fails to act on "symptoms" it is seen as negligence (Diller 2006).

Many parents place great trust in the medical system. My interlocutors who were at the earlier stages of behavioural challenges evidenced this faith in particular. Theresa, whose five-year-old son Louis experiences extreme emotional meltdowns, told me that while she is currently managing by being patient, she already has a strategy in place for future management:

"When it gets to a point where I feel I can no longer manage his meltdowns I will be proactive and consult a psychologist, so that we can get on top of it before it becomes a big problem."

The idea that behavioural problems can be "fixed" through medical intervention is a commonly held belief. It possibly reflects the neoliberal notion that problems have technical solutions (McGuigan 2014). "You should take her/him to see someone about that" is a commonly uttered phrase, urging the mothers to seek medical or psychological assistance. Any problem can be solved simply by consulting the right expert. The mothers I interviewed all indicated that they either had, are or would seek medical advice to assist in managing their children's behaviour.

Jessica's eight-year-old son Felix has always been very emotional. Lately she has noticed that he struggles to stay on task, and his teachers are concerned that he is not applying

himself at school. Jessica, a single mother, is seeking medical advice, expecting an ADHD diagnosis. "I think a diagnosis would help me understand him better. If he has ADHD, then I know he's not doing it on purpose. We are overdue for some help. I'm just so worried about him constantly. I just want him to be the best he can be."

There are several elements to this statement. Firstly, as Brinkmann writes, in Western societies we have become "diagnostic cultures" in which we make sense of ourselves and each other through diagnostic language (Brinkmann 2017). For Jessica a diagnostic label would remove her worries (at least initially). It would mean readjusting her expectations of her son; to her mind he is either choosing rationally to behave in unacceptable ways, in which case he needs to improve — or he is impeded by a cognitive disorder, in which case he deserves sympathy. In this bifurcated optic there is little ground for ideas around personality, temperament, immaturity, or even meaningful agency. I have known Jessica for some time and do not mean to suggest that she is uncaring or unnuanced, quite the opposite. She is simply relying on the cultural models available to her, and reaching for the discourses at hand.

Secondly, Jessica is feeling overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for her difficult son. She says explicitly she needs help. But in Sydney, without a diagnostic label there is very little help available to parents, especially single mothers on tight budgets. When we conceive of the problem as an individual medical issue, potential solutions are also conceived of in this medical space. Due to the taboos discussed previously, Jessica cannot even rely on emotional support from those around her, and she feels that a diagnosis would relieve some of that stigma. If you can tell people he has a diagnosis then they will better understand, she reasons. By turning their suffering into a medical fact, Jessica expects to transform her experience of it.

Finally, her comment about wanting Felix to be "the best he can be" piques my interest. It suggests that his distractedness and propensity to emotional reactions are somehow not a real part of him. Instead they are obstacles that can be removed to clear a path for the emergence of "real Felix", as though his *real* self consisted solely of positive traits. In this model medicine becomes a vehicle for self-development and self-realization – a cornerstone of neoliberalism. Jessica tells me of the various extracurricular experiences she tries to provide for Felix, and worries that as a single mother she cannot offer him "enough opportunities". Felix is loved, nurtured and well-catered to. He has a safe home, a loving mother, a nutritious diet. He goes to school every day, has friends and a variety of after-school activities. To any outsider Felix is a privileged child. But his mother is steeped in the competitive culture of the middle-class where these things are not enough. "If only I could afford to send him to a private school" Jessica sighs, "the opportunities he would have there. I just think I'm not giving him enough". It leaves me to wonder by what metric is your best self measured?

Vorhölter describes happiness as a fundamental marker of a normal and healthy self – the absence of happiness then results in medical and psychological interventions (Vorhölter forthcoming). Because of the porous emotional boundary between mother and child there may be a circular process at play in which the child's behaviours makes the mother unhappy, causing her to seek medical intervention for the child in a bid to regain happiness for herself.

While the promise of a diagnosis offers hope to some, the mothers who were further into the medical model were more disillusioned than hopeful. Since starting school, Sandra's son Jack, a boisterous, bright and strong-willed boy, had become difficult to manage, distracted and disruptive. At age 7 Sandra took him to a paediatrician hoping for solutions. The paediatrician sent her home with a set of questionnaires to complete. When she returned the forms the doctor promptly diagnosed ADHD. Sandra was shocked and saddened and felt that not only did the diagnosis not properly represent her child, whom the doctor had barely even

spoken to, but that it also came without any real solutions. "The only thing the doctor offered us was a script for Ritalin. But I can't just jump straight into medicating my son. There must be other options". Sandra left the clinic more confused than she had arrived. But being a resourceful, educated woman she took it upon herself to manage his newly identified condition, seeking out advice and solutions from various sources – psychologists, nutritionists, occupational therapists and neurofeedback clinics and while she found some of this useful, mostly she just felt frustrated at the lack of unified advice:

"You only get bits here and there and you have to piece it all together yourself. And then it is often contradictory so then you have to work out what's real and what isn't. We traipse around town, pulling him from pillar to post and now he's starting to feel like there's something wrong with him. I wish we had never gotten the diagnosis. But he's stuck with it now, you can't take it back."

What had initially been a faith that the medical system could help solve Jack's problems, has instead become another source of stress and frustration. It seems there is an inbuilt ambivalence in the medical model, many parents are vexed about the implications of a diagnosis. Blum writes about the burden shouldered by parents of children with "invisible disabilities": while brain blame relieves initial parental culpability, parents instead become responsible for seeking out treatments and solutions to ameliorate their child's conditions and are placed into a role as spokespeople for not only their children, but all people with this condition (Blum 2007). There is also the possibility of a shift in culpability – while the disorder may be associated with neurochemistry, there may be suggestions that this was caused by something the mother did when she was pregnant, or the result of the way she nurtured the baby in infancy. If the mother wants to regain some of her parenting capital, she must assume the role of warning others of risky behaviours she engaged in to trigger the disorder. Then she may be, at least partially, absolved of her culpability. Denham suggests the idea of "trajectories of

blame" to understand the processual nature of blame, and how it changes over time and circumstance (Denham 2012). In reality a diagnosis does not remove stigma, it merely shifts it from the "*that* (bad) mother" category to the "advocate mother" category.

Courtesy stigma may lead to "post-stigma acquaintances" placing the parent into a new group of people with whom they previously didn't believe to have anything in common, while distancing them from those people whom they previously saw as peers (Goffman 1963). This kind of stigma can displace mothers from the in-group to which they previously belonged, to the out-group of "*those* mothers". These are not official membership groups from which mothers can be formally expelled. The exclusion is indirect, and comes in the form of an averted eye in the playground, a decline in phone calls or a cessation of invitations to social events. It is subtle, but the impact can be profound. Both Sandra and her son Jack have been on the receiving end of these marginalising tactics and it hurts. For Sandra, the social dismissal of her cherished and longed-for child strikes deep in the heart.

Though Sandra has spent the last year studying up on ADHD and believes that society could do much more to accommodate children like Jack, she does not want to take on the advocate role. Not wanting the world to see her family through the ADHD lens, she just wants to be a "normal mum". She wants to claw her way back into the in-group of mothers to where she rightly belongs for all of the care and effort she puts into raising her children. So, she keeps the diagnosis a secret and works as hard as she can to maintain the sense of normality.

The system is built around medical diagnoses. Without one it is difficult to access support mechanisms. Lucas's teachers were hinting to Vanessa and Peter that there may be some extra funding available to help them manage him, were he to receive a diagnosis. Though Vanessa was reluctant to seek a diagnosis, she also reasoned that it could be beneficial to them. Another mother told me that her son's school suggested they have his diagnosis changed from

ADHD to autism to warrant more funding. Recall Laura whose story I told in the prologue, and her desperation to fit her daughter Marnie "into a box" to allow them to access some help. But Sandra's experience shows this linear progression from problem to solution is largely an illusion. The reality is messier, and now Sandra worries how Jack's diagnosis will shadow his future education and employment opportunities, as she has been told – ADHD is not something you can outgrow.

CHAPTER FOUR: "He is a bit ADHD": Suffering and the Psy-Dispositif

In many western countries the number of children with diagnosed behavioural disorders has risen sharply in recent decades (Timimi 2005). Childhood behavioural disorders are "characterised by an intensity of externalising problems" (Sanders & Kirby 2014: 14), signifying that we see the source of the problem as *internal* and that the behaviour as its *external* expression. These disorders can be prevented or ameliorated with the "right" style of parenting (Sanders & Kirby 2014). Whether the rise in diagnoses indicates a real increase in the incidence of mental disorders; a better ability to diagnose; or a shift in mindset, where increasingly "problems in living" (Szasz 1961) are interpreted through psychiatric models; is a matter of contention (Brinkmann 2006, Timimi 2010, Diller 2006). Timimi suggests it is due to a complex interplay between a real increase in distress due to the way neoliberal policies shape our living conditions and an increased tendency to view distress through the psychiatric lens – what Brinkmann calls "diagnostic cultures" (2016).

In Australia the incidence rates have remained steady over the 20 years that mental health has been measured in children, with around 14% of 4-17-year-olds experiencing a mental illness (Lawrence et al 2015). However, this is not reflected in the popular discourse, where there is much alarm about the rise in mental illness. This may indicate a discursive shift, suggesting that we think, talk and feel differently about the difficulties in everyday life. Brinkmann argues that the dominance of psy-language is reshaping our experience of suffering (2014).

The vocabulary of psychiatry and psychology (hereon in called "psy language") has become increasingly commonplace in everyday discourse. Most middle-class parents are au fait with diagnostic terms such as ADHD, ASD, OCD, anxiety, depression, even ODD (Oppositional Defiance Disorder). Unprompted by me, all of my interviews – and countless

other conversations – referenced these concepts. Such broad cultural adoption, of previously specialist terms signals the emergence of a "psy-dispositif", a term Vorhölter uses to describe the "forms of knowledge and institutions that embody and represent psychological expertise" (Vorhölter forthcoming). Recalling Abu-Lughod's point about socially organised modes of action and talk determining what can be thought and felt (1990:27), the influence of psy language then has potentially deep implications for the construction of both selfhood, the parent-child relationship and the ontological status of the child.

The psy-dispositif makes new forms of knowledge available to parents. Its language gives shape to the parent's feelings of distress and inadequacy, its apparatus provides a causal explanation for frustrating behaviours, and perhaps most pertinently it combines with risk discourses, and parental expectations of control, to decrease societal tolerance for childlike behaviours. As Diller argues, the norms for the "normal child" have narrowed significantly (2006), and vast numbers of children may be swept into diagnostic categories, where they do not really belong. These are not official diagnoses, but rather the effects of parents, and institutions such as schools, applying psy knowledge to difficult children. While these children are not officially diagnosed, and may not even be aware of the labels applied to them, they can still create "looping kinds" (Hacking 1990) through the differentiation in treatment they now receive. Bundgaard shows convincingly, how a child's status as "problematic" can be situationally produced through the actions and attitudes of teachers towards the child (Bundgaard 2004). She argues that as a category, the "problematic child" is continuously activated through the social and discursive practices towards the categorised child. This happens despite the generally good intentions of the adults interacting with the child. As such, the deployment of psy terminology in relation to children in everyday life may, rather than provide an allowance for the child, instead hold the child captive in an adverse social category.

Sandra comments "I know he can be annoying, but so can other kids. Why does *he* get singled out so much?"

Diagnoses have also become "semiotic mediators" for distress: symbols that carry cultural weight (Brinkmann 2014). In the online mothers' forums I followed, threads would often come up where a mother would (usually anonymously) share her concerns about her child's behaviour. Whilst some mothers would reply "it's normal, don't worry", many others would immediately bandy about psy-language, suggesting potential diagnoses: "it sounds like he may have ADHD" or "these are common traits of ODD". In middle-class Sydney using psy terminology is an important signifier of distress. To say that a child is struggling socially at school because they are a little immature does not carry the same weight as saying they are "a bit ADHD" or "on the spectrum" (referring to Autism Spectrum Disorder), regardless of whether this child has been officially diagnosed. As a moral device, this language draws a line between "right" and "wrong" kinds of children, policing the prototypical (good) child by making clear that *that* kind of child must be disordered, and therefore does not belong in this category.

Using psy-language conveys the perceived severity of the problem, but it is also a symbol of knowledge. Psychology carries a great deal of cachet in neoliberal societies. In the middle-class there is social capital in accumulating and displaying knowledge of psychological explanations. All of my interlocutors avidly demonstrate this angle when describing their problems. Alice, for instance, tells me about the methods she employs to mitigate ODD behaviours, though at age two her son is not even eligible for such a severe diagnosis. Jessica believes her son has ADHD and longs for an official confirmation of her lay-diagnosis. Sandra tells me that after her experience with her son Jack she can tell whether other children have ADHD. This echoes Malacrida's observation that mothers seek to position themselves as both

knowledgeable and worthy, as a way of distancing themselves from the bad mother category (2001).

The medical explanatory model springs out of expert medical knowledge, but takes on a life of its own as a "folk model", where laypeople redeploy its knowledge system into everyday practices of lay-diagnosis as a means for making sense out of suffering and distress. This could be viewed as empowering: having knowledge and taking charge of one's situation as an exercise of agency. However, the dominance of this model also marginalises other models for understanding, thus excluding a variety of perspectives and solutions. For example, when I was a child in Denmark in the 1980's and 1990's, difficult children were helped through occupational therapy and pedagogical means. There is a risk of a "psy hegemony" over childhood problems, with the potential to radically reshape the ontological status of the child.

"Studies show…": On Evidence-Based Parenting

During fieldwork, I noticed a recurring linking of parenting with science, in both the media and everyday discourse. Most of the parenting programs I attended also claimed to be "evidence based". Parenting norms and practices were being justified with "studies have proven X". Rarely were these referring to a specific study, and rarely would people enquire as to the source of such studies. There seemed to be a tacit acceptance that middle-class parents seek, acknowledge and implement scientific evidence in their childrearing practices – at least discursively.

"Science-led, evidence-based parenting" (hereon in EBP) is a somewhat spurious concept; it means different things to different people. Officially, an EBP program offers behaviour-modifying strategies, its efficacy supported by empirical research (California Clearing House 2019), though there is no consensus in the literature as to what qualifies as

evidence-based (NSW Department of Community Services 2009). However, when EBP is invoked in general parenting discourse it is generally to validate claims about effective parenting by linking it to (neuro)science. It is not my intention to critique or question the efficacy of EBP programs, or the accuracy of neuroscientific research about children and parenting. My interest is more phenomenological, how is this kind of knowledge inserted into everyday life and appropriated by parents?

Parents of difficult children often describe their lives as a "daily battle", and rarely find parenting rewarding, though they know it is "supposed" to be. Hence, they can feel like they are doing it wrong. When I ask mothers, where they seek advice, their answers almost invariably include EBP, though there is often a tension between an ideal that holds parenting as a natural, intuitive undertaking, and a confusing, challenging reality that dethrones notions of intuition and necessitates expert guidance through a discourse of EBP. These are smart, educated women who are used to putting their faith in positivistic science. With a myriad of "expert" opinions and solutions proffered at every turn, choosing those that are already proven by science should save time and effort. The basic tenets of EBP are that effective parenting should:

- Increase parental warmth and responsive behaviour

- Increase discipline consistency

- Increase levels of monitoring and supervision

- Decrease harsh, coercive parenting (NSW Department of Community Services 2009)

But these are subjective values, with no explicit base level — increase and decrease from where exactly? My interlocutors have all been warm, caring parents, who are conscious about limit-setting and shun punitive discipline. Yet their children's behaviours are still challenging. EBP offers a sense of optimism: so long as you follow the right recipe and add the right ingredients, you can approximate the prototype child. The logic then follows that if that person

doesn't turn out as expected there must be something wrong with *them,* and — in the age of neurocentrism (Singh 2013, Rose 2003) — most likely with their brain. There is an implicit understanding that undesirable traits can, and should, be eradicated as early as possible, so the child can be "their best self". It is noteworthy that in an age where the individual is feted and revered, we are simultaneously in the process of eradicating real individual difference. As one mother tells me of her 9-year-old son: "on the one hand his school is all about inclusivity and promoting individuality, but on the other it's like they're saying to him – 'you must squeeze into this tiny little box. Be *this* way.' I can't make sense of it". This is the paradox of neoliberal individuality. It is a surface individualism, centred on consumption. Underneath there is an expectation to conform to the ideals of productivity and effectivity.

EBP are not just a set of proven behaviour strategies, neutral of culture, though their grounding in science tends to make us think that they are. EBP cannot be untangled from cultural and political structures. It exists within a neoliberal regime of truth (Foucault 2003 [1977]) in which the paradigm of infant determinism and parent causality is the primary explanatory model for childhood outcomes. In line with neoliberalism's divestment from social responsibility, the promotion of this paradigm locates the responsibility for social reproduction within the individual family. If a child is not coping or conforming, it is due to individual or family dysfunction[9]. In this regime little consideration is given to social, political and economic factors, because the means of (re)production are tied to an individualised, neoliberal power apparatus, where people think of themselves as human capital – flexible, resilient and competitive individuals with growth mindsets. Illouz details how interwoven emotions and capitalism have become. The commodification of emotions plays a central role in the reproduction of neoliberal social structures – by turning emotions into a "thing" to be managed

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[9] This Victorian government website lists the risk factors for behavioural disorders. They are all either individual or familial: https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/behavioural-disorders-in-children

(Illouz 2018). Rather than examining the flaws of the system, we encourage each difficult child to master their emotions through projects of self-improvement, in order to become more resilient to the demands and challenges of the system, so that they can go forth and reproduce it.

The EBP strategies are also reproductive of neoliberal culture – they are designed to foster self-management, autonomy, resilience and, perhaps as bi-products, competitiveness and reward-seeking. There is an inbuilt utilitarianism in the advice of science-based parenting – recently a study was widely publicised, suggesting that parents should hug their children more because it makes them smarter! Rather than being spontaneous expressions of love, hugs are now to be strategically implemented in order to develop the child's future human capital. Even love is being instrumentalised, as Rose notes: "Love was no longer merely a moral duty or a romantic ideal, it was the element in which were produced normal and abnormal children" (Rose 1999: 160). Thus, while this parenting ideology may seem culture-free because it is science-based, it is nonetheless reproducing a particular way of being a person and a particular way of being in the world. In theory parents could reject this ideology, but when it is embraced by the government as the solution to the "public health challenge" that is problem parenting (Sanders & Kirby 2012), it becomes a hegemonic force that can be hard to resist or even to identify as problematic.

Therefore, while EBP may be able to offer some useful strategies to parents, as a regime of truth, it cannot be separated from the systems of power that sustain and produce it. It is important to recognise that as historically and culturally situated technologies, scientific and clinical practices do not "simply "discover", but have important ontological effects in and of themselves" (Behague and Lezé 2015: 251). Where neoliberalism and the psy-dispositif overlap, new technologies of self (Foucault 2003[1982]) are emerging. Where the psy language provides a discourse to verbalise and conceptualise problems in living, EBP provides a solution that is both prophylactic and remediative. There is an assumption that rational beings will rely

on the rational evidence of science. To not do so, would somehow be an intellectual, as well as moral, failure. In this way dominant discourses manufacture consent, while dissenting discourses, ideas and practices are marginalised. But "complete rationalisation denies a space of freedom for the conduct of one's life" (Rose 1999:259).

The EBP discourse is a form of risk discourse, its implicit message is one of caution – if parents do not follow its principles, they run the risk of turning out a deviant or maladjusted child. As such it is very compelling, with its evidence and statistical truths lending it an air of immutability. But can a statistical truth be an existential truth? Does a discourse of risk and responsibility provide sufficient raw material to make meaning out of life's deeply confronting and perplexing challenges?

For new parents EBP may provide a sense of security, that one can safeguard against difficult behaviour by parenting "correctly" from the outset. But for parents of difficult children the logic wears thin. Many mothers I spoke with had tried EBP strategies, only to get frustrated when their child wouldn't react as predicted. These parents still have to make a life for themselves and their children, even when the scientific evidence says they've done it wrong and are on a bleak trajectory. Moreover, EBP can further decrease a parent's confidence, as they lose the ability to react to the child in front of them as a human, not a strategic risk manager racking their brain for the right way to handle this situation so as to achieve the right result later on. As parents try to turn out flexible, resilient, self-managing neoliberal children, do they risk losing sight of the actual *person* before them?

Suffering and Agency: Children as Meaning-Makers

If we take seriously the "emergent paradigm of childhood sociology" (Prout and James 2015) and accept children as active agents in their own lives, then we must also take care to not

reify their behaviours to a spectrum ranging from the "cute" on the benign end, over the mildly-annoying-but-developmentally-necessary, to the deviant and disordered on the other extreme; but rather see their behaviours as human, dynamic and meaningful. To reduce children's problematic behaviours to nothing more than symptoms of psychiatric disorder or neurological dysfunction is to nullify their agency. This discourse runs the risk of reducing children to "medico-scientific things" (Biehl and Locke 2010). I am not suggesting that children cannot or do not suffer psychiatric disorders, or that such diagnoses are never appropriate, but when a large proportion of the child population is suffering supposed mental disorders, it is imperative that we re-examine our foregone conclusions. When parents seek medical diagnoses as a solution to a challenging home life, and the child does not actually satisfy the diagnostic criteria, it is time to ask questions about our expectations of children, and perhaps of parents too. When adults lay-diagnose as disordered, children they do not even know, what does that suggest of children's ontological status in society?

Could we potentially see children's difficult behaviours as meaningful acts of agency, a form of resistance to their conditions of living, brought on by ontological insecurity, liquid modernity and neoliberalism's fragmenting force? In a time and place, where the big risks "out there" (Hunt 2003) are beaming into family homes around the clock, bringing stories of political turmoil and imminent climate disaster, stories in which the future is constantly spoken of in bleak and uncertain terms, is it really any wonder that children should feel despair for the world they are living in, and a "dread" (Kierkegaard 1995 [1844]) for how to be in this world?

Jackson posits that "though individuals speak, act and work toward belonging to a world of others, they simultaneously strive to experience themselves as world makers" (1998: 8). Children usually do engage in, and submit to, the process of becoming a social being. But in a culture that is increasingly narrowing children's domain, could we potentially see their

challenging behaviours not as mere disobedience, but as attempts at world-making in their own right?

Conclusion

Through this thesis I have drawn attention to the ways in which neoliberalism and the psy-dispositif intersect to create new subjectivities. Through discursive construction and new technologies of self, the ontological status of the child is shifting. In middle-class Sydney children play a central role in the construction of a good life. Difficult children pose an obstacle to this moral project of self-making. By engaging with the lived experiences of the parents of difficult children I have shown how they walk a balance between conforming to the norm through medicalising the difficulties, and stubbornly loving their children as they are. In a liquid culture where meaning is to be individually pursued, I have problematised the idea of parenting science as "neutral" and questioned the ever-narrowing norms by which children are quantified and in turn objectified.

The blurring of the boundary between parent and child means that transgressions are taken more personally. Parenting is not only childrearing but also identity work, through which parents gain social capital. Parents use their children as emblems of their own moral virtue, and parents of difficult children lose social capital by their failure to produce a good child. The child as ornament and accumulation strategy is inherently paradoxical; to be cute and reified on one hand, while being competitive and aspirational on the other is a tall order to place on a young soul. But then children are not really thought of as souls in neoliberal liquid culture. They are brains and human potential to be shaped in the image of productivity and consumption, their daily lives instrumentalised to maximise their future competitiveness.

Neoliberalism and liquid modernity provide a volatile, shaky and uneven scaffold for the rearing of children, its hegemonic influence reaching down into the very core of how we

constitute our sense of self, restructuring our relationships through powerful emotive discourses and in the process causing us great emotional distress. Many of my interlocutors referenced the cliché "it takes a village to raise a child", signifying their sense of loneliness in the task of childrearing. Perhaps, we need to reconsider whether it is really the children that need fixing?

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13 March 2018

Dear Dr Denham

Reference No: 5201701094

Title: *Childhood at the Margins, an Ethnographic Exploration of Difference and Emotions in Middle Class Australia*

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical and scientific review. Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Human Sciences & Humanities) considered your application.

I am pleased to advise that <u>ethical and scientific approval</u> has been granted for this project to be conducted by Ms Emma Balkin under the supervision of Dr Aaron Denham.

Approval Date: 13 March 2018

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007 – Updated May 2015) (the *National Statement*).

Standard Conditions of Approval:

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement,* which is available at the following website:

http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol.

3. All adverse events, including events which might affect the continued ethical and scientific acceptability of the project, must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.

4. Proposed changes to the protocol and associated documents must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on 9850 4194 or by email ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures are available from the Research Office website at:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Karolyn White
Director, Research Ethics & Integrity,
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and the *CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice.*