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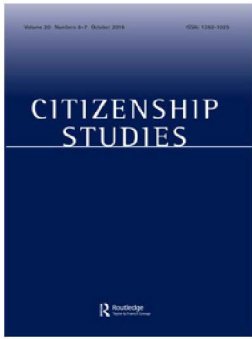


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Managing anxiety: neoliberal modes of citizen subjectivity, fantasy and child abuse in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

The neoliberal direction of social policy under New Zealand's fifth National government (2008–) is demonstrated in its 2012 *White Paper for Vulnerable Children*. This document advocates increased monitoring and policing of welfare populations and the downgrading of child protection policy to a technical administrative system for managing 'risky' families. The *White Paper's* release came soon after the coroner's report into the deaths of the 'Kahui twins', which were treated by the media as a shocking case of child abuse, and exemplified the media's use of a fantasy of a 'savage' Maori welfare underclass in reporting cases of child abuse. Drawing on Isin's analysis of 'governing through neurosis', this article explores how these media and policy discourses reinforce normative patterns of neoliberal citizen subjectivity by offering compelling pathways out of anxiety that re-route citizens' anxiety over child abuse in support of neoliberal modes of citizen subjectivity.

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Neoliberalism; subjectivity; citizenship; fantasy; child abuse; anxiety; moral panic

Introduction

By the mid-1990s, in New Zealand, the newly elected fourth National Government (1990–1999) began regulating to increase labour market flexibility and reduce social protection. Unlike the previous Labour Government, who attempted neoliberal economic restructuring as a means to a social democratic ends (Larner 1997), National spearheaded a moral front in economic and social neoliberalisation. A clear example of this was the Code of Social and Family Responsibility, a discussion document sent out to all New Zealand households in 1998. The Code initiated a moral debate about poor parenting and the permissiveness of New Zealand's welfare institutions. This debate was central to a political process of constructing a new citizenship regime based on the social antagonism between taxpayers and a non-taxpaying anti-community of welfare beneficiaries (Hackell 2013). This new citizenship regime underpins a further stage of welfare state neoliberalisation which 'reflects *both* the contradictions/limitations of earlier forms of neoliberalisation *and* the attainment of a more aggressive/proactive form of contemporary neoliberalisation' (Peck and Tickell 2002, 384).

New Zealand's current National Government (2008–) manages this 'critical conjuncture' (Peck and Tickell 2002) marked by the promise of competitiveness, social harmony and wealth on the one hand, and worsening social indicators on the other, by proactively

converting this tension into a social antagonism between taxpayers and welfare beneficiaries. Rather than view social problems as a reflection of the structural disadvantages that increasing numbers of New Zealanders experience as the result of neoliberalisation, taxpayer citizens are instead encouraged to view themselves as the long suffering victims of a socially irresponsible welfare underclass whose 'dependency' is the source of social problems and economic decline (Hackell 2013). New Zealand's neoliberalising Government articulates social problems in these terms because, firstly, it restricts feelings of social responsibility for the poor, casting them as the victims of their own poor judgement/immorality thereby legitimising social service disinvestment. And, secondly, it manages citizens' anxiety by promoting a neurotic investment in self-reliant prudentialism, and what Jenson calls austerity parenting. According to Jenson, a narrative of austerity coalesces more intensively and substantively around parenting than at any other site. In this discourse, bad parents are scapegoated and social ills such as 'poverty' are considered the result of moral failures of prudence and responsibility. Good parenting is offered as a solution to the social impact of welfare rollback and stagnant class mobility (Jenson 2013, 61). Self-reliant prudentialism and austerity parenting are emotionally appealing because they fuel neurotic feelings of righteous invulnerability. These modes of citizen subjectivity are linked to what Isin calls 'governing through neurosis' that offer ways of managing citizens' anxiety that embed welfare state neoliberalisation.

Processes of welfare state neoliberalisation converge across nation states towards the regulatory bias of the neoliberal project. However, nation states, each with their own unique path-dependent history, and ongoing 'war of position', respond contingently to neoliberal pressure generating 'divergence within convergence' (Neilson and Stubbs 2016). As each nation state blends neoliberal and non-neoliberal elements, a pattern is generated that critical geographers Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010) refer to as 'variegated neoliberalisation'.

This study focuses on New Zealand's specific neoliberalisation path. In particular, it shows how a neurotic 'fantasy'¹ of a 'savage' Maori welfare underclass was used to manage citizens' anxiety in ways that promote neoliberal citizen subjectivity. An example of this process is observed in media reports of the high profile child abuse deaths of the Kahui twins² and in the Government's *White Paper for Vulnerable Children 2012*. The fantasy of a 'savage' Maori welfare underclass is deployed as a governing strategy that 'transmits neurotic signs' (Isin 2004) through 'configurations of grievance and risk under neoliberalism' (Hier 2008, 175). In this fantasy, Maori parenting is portrayed as 'savage' which though in contrast with pre-colonial parenting practices (Taonui 2010) continues to demonstrate ongoing internal colonisation of indigenous Maori in New Zealand.³ Further, it manufactures 'moral panic' (Cohen 1980) that feeds citizens neuroses and offers a pathway out of anxiety that sublimates the universal need for social security into feelings of moral superiority and self-reliant invulnerability (Isin 2004; Layton 2010).

By strategically connecting its *new direction* in child protection policy with a mediated social construction of the Kahui case, the National Government constructed the deaths of the Kahui twins as a kind of national grievance where citizens were encouraged to identify with abused children, not in order to prevent child abuse, but rather to cultivate a recriminatory attitude towards welfare beneficiaries. By generating moral panic, media accounts of investigations into the Kahui case provided the Government with the perfect backstory for its new policy direction. The release of the *White Paper for Vulnerable Children, 2012*, timed to track alongside this high profile child abuse case, could be articulated with the

goal of bringing child abusers to account. The Government was able to appear to respond decisively to the child abuse case ‘that had traumatised New Zealanders’ (Binning and Masters 2006) while at the same time narrow the operational focus of child protection agencies away from recognition of the multiple and complex causes of child abuse towards a more singular focus on policing welfare populations.

This account is divided into the following sections. The first section is empirically based on an analysis of newspaper reports and opinion pieces which appeared in *Newstext Plus*, a database of New Zealand news media.⁴ The articles analysed represent a mediated social construction of the Kahui drama, a case that received unprecedented media attention in New Zealand, precipitated moral panic based on a perception of a crisis in child protection (Peters 2013) and had a disproportionate impact on the government’s *new direction* in child protection policy. It shows how New Zealand media constructed the deaths of the Kahui twins in accordance with a fantasy of a ‘savage’ Maori welfare underclass. The second section examines the government’s use of this media backstory to steer public alarm over child abuse away from a critical approach and towards a problem-solving approach focused on policing welfare beneficiaries outlined in the *White Paper for Vulnerable Children 2012*. Finally, the paper revisits how this neurotic fantasy rooted in the social antagonism between welfare beneficiaries and taxpayers manages citizens’ anxiety in order to reinforce neoliberal modes of citizen subjectivity.

‘Pro-active’ neoliberalisation: governing through neurosis

Isin (2004) argues that the neoliberal subject of the last three decades has been predicated upon and accompanied by a neurotic subject that has more recently come to the foreground as various governing strategies specifically operate to manage citizens’ fears and anxieties. He argues that this rise in significance of the neurotic subject signals a new form of politics. Isin’s general argument is explored specifically in this examination of the New Zealand Government’s strategy to further embed neoliberal citizen subjectivity by managing citizens’ anxiety over child abuse, which erupted into moral panic over the Kahui case. Their strategy promotes a punitive *new direction* in child protection policy and has reinforced modes of citizen subjectivity based in self-reliance, prudentialism and austerity parenting.

Both in substance and as a strategic political temporal interconnection, the media’s portrayal of the deaths of the Kahui twins and the National Government’s *new direction* in child protection policy can be viewed as a complementarity or ‘chain of signification’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) sutured by the fantasy of the ‘savage’ welfare underclass. This paper contends that this discursive formation operates to fend off critique and confirm the neoliberal project by reinforcing neoliberal modes of subjectivity.

The dilemma for political agents of the neoliberal project is how to convert anxiety caused by neoliberalisation of welfare into support for further welfare neoliberalisation. Social disinvestment, in particular, furthers insecurity and anxiety by detaching the state from the citizenry and transferring responsibility directly onto individuals and families (Layton 2010, 304). Neoliberal agents cannot therefore be focused on *removing* the neoliberal-driven structural determinants of citizens’ anxieties. Rather, the challenge is to deploy strategies that can *manage* citizens’ anxiety in ways that not only divert criticism away from, but also facilitate further development of, the neoliberal project. In this case, pathways out of anxiety are offered that promote perceptions and behaviour that calibrate with the goals of the neoliberalising state (Isin 2004).

Contemporary neoliberal governing strategies seek to calibrate citizens' perceptions and behaviours with a social disinvestment agenda by cultivating citizens' neurotic energies through fantasies. In particular, citizens' anxiety over child abuse deaths in New Zealand is ideologically managed, centrally but not exclusively, by deploying the logic of fantasy. Fantasies, following Daly, operate ideologically to affirm society as an objective order whose full realisation may be ultimately blocked by an 'other' (Daly 1999, 224). A relation of social antagonism enacts a fantasy in which ideal heroic citizens confront abject non-citizens or 'others'. In this neoliberal case, the 'other' is positioned as an external object of horror/fascination which blocks the achievement of a harmonious neoliberal social order (Daly 1999, 226). If not for the welfare underclass, which is cast as a folk devil in an emotionally confirming fantasy, we would be able to achieve the competitiveness, social harmony and wealth promised to heroic self-reliant citizens.

This neoliberal fantasy re-routes anxiety, caused by increasing insecurity and the loss of social support due to the neoliberal-led restructuring of the welfare state, into what Layton calls defensive neurotic fantasies of 'omnipotent self-sufficiency' (Layton 2010, 306). This neoliberal fantasy also mobilises anxiety specifically against the 'other'. That is, in defence of a social harmony that has been blocked by the welfare underclass, the neoliberal fantasy promotes retaliatory anger against this straw enemy. Individual members of the underclass are blamed personally for their welfare dependency and collectively for social instability and economic decline. In addition, neoliberal agents deploy this discourse to justify and garner support for policy directions that 'deal with' this enemy and thereby remove the impediment to the full flowering of the neoliberal social imaginary.

Although the Kahui case is one of a number of 'Maori child abuse' cases that have received media attention over the past 15 years or so, this case received particular public prominence largely because it was the focus of unprecedented media attention that generated, not a structural but, a moral perception of crisis in child protection policy. Garland points out that while such moral panics generate public alarm over deviance, other aspects of the social reaction are also important. 'The moral dimension of the social reaction particularly the introspective soul searching that accompanies these episodes' positions the deviance as symptomatic of wider moral issues (Garland 2008, 11). In this case, Mascyna King, mother of the Kahui twins, is cast as a folk devil and the portrayal of the deaths of her babies as symptomatic of the wider issue of the dangerousness and 'savagery' of a 'Maori welfare underclass'. This moral condemnation is at the same time, deployed in support of further re-regulation of parenting. Good parenting defined in contrast to the immoral, 'savage' welfare underclass is offered as the solution to the social impact of welfare retrenchment, inequality and poverty (Jenson 2013).

In the following case, moral panic over the deaths of the Kahui twins created a legitimising smokescreen for the government's refocusing of child protection services and rationalised the increased surveillance and policing of welfare recipients under the impetus of rescuing vulnerable children from dangerous adults. This approach effectively led the soul searching about the case away from any serious treatments of the social causes of and prevention of child abuse. Social anxiety, confusion and disgust were strategically re-routed towards the take up of modes of citizen subjectivity associated with a neurotic over investment in omnipotent self-reliance and austerity parenting. These modes of subjectification are established in opposition to an imagined 'savage' Maori welfare underclass and calibrate with the government's post-welfare agenda.

The Kahui case

On 18 June 2006, Chris and Cru Kahui, three-month-old twins, died from head injuries resulting from blunt force trauma. Police allegedly had difficulty investigating their deaths as the ‘tight 12’ – a dozen members of the three bedroom household where the babies lived, who according to media reports, all received welfare benefits – refused to talk to police. Media focus on the Kahui case and the ‘tight 12’ was described by politician, Tau Henare: ‘They were baying for the blood of the whole family. It’s like a lynch mob, really, the lynch mentality’ (Wishart 2006, 31). Frustration that the police were not in a position to charge anyone for four months inflamed public sentiment as the story of the ‘tight 12’ and their ‘wall of silence’ fuelled recriminatory anger. The Police Association subsequently sought a review of the right to silence, claiming the family members involved had closed ranks and refused to be interviewed (Police Association Says Right to Silence Hindered Police Investigation into Kahui Killings 2008). In fact, all members of the Kahui and King families gave full statements to the police (Wishart and King 2011, 273). After a four-month investigation, the father, Chris Kahui, was charged with causing their deaths. His defence was that the mother, Macsyna King, was responsible but she was never charged. He was acquitted in spectacular fashion in May 2008 with the jury deliberating for just 10 min. Public frustration and anger was further ignited by the failure of police prosecutors to secure a conviction.

The New Zealand Herald described the deaths of the Kahui twins as a ‘case which had traumatised New Zealand’ (Binning and Masters 2006). Ian Wishart in an article in *North and South* magazine entitled ‘The legacy of the Kahuis: Can Maoridom’s underclass be saved?’ explained the intensity of interest in this case in terms of ‘the straw that perhaps, has broken the camel’s back of tolerance in middle New Zealand’ (Wishart 2006, 31). The deaths of the Kahui twins created what was described by the then Minister of Child, Youth and Family Services, Ruth Dyson, as a ‘tipping point: a moment in time when the nation has been mobilised by disgust, and action is inevitable’ (Welham 2007, 14).

After the arrest of Chris Kahui, father of the twins, media reporting on the subsequent court case focused almost exclusively on the deficiencies of the individual parents, particularly the mother, rather than the impoverished environment in which the deaths occurred. The Kahui twins were born premature to parents who lacked employment, adequate income and housing. They had no vehicle and found transport to the hospital difficult to arrange. Because the twins were born by emergency caesarean, the parents were ill prepared and had to spend time arranging with Work and Income New Zealand to acquire essential equipment. They were also unaware of their entitlement to home help given their babies were premature and they already had a child under two at home (Wishart and King 2011, 107–109). Only one newspaper article of 94 collected for this study referred to the difficult circumstances that faced Macsyna King and Chris Kahui when they brought their babies home (Tapu 2012).

Instead, media offered an account of the twins’ deaths as the result of a particular set of unusual circumstances perpetrated by unusually ‘savage’ individuals. Reports focused on the details leading up to and following the ‘killings’⁵ and the character and personal histories of the parents rather than their circumstances. Media deployed a discursive frame that focused on deviance, seeking out criminal intentions and psychiatric motives for child ‘killings’. This mode of interpretation is problematic as parents rarely deliberately murder their children (Connelly and Doolan 2007, 28). However, the legal defence for Chris Kahui

argued that their mother, Macsyna King, had deliberately killed the twins and sought to frame their father. Immediately prior to the court case, Solicitor General David Collins QC expressed ‘grave concerns’ about the media prejudicing the case. Judge Roy Wade also expressed his concern that ‘untested and speculative material’ was being published and warned media to take care in their coverage of the case (“Media Warned Over ...” 2007). During the case, described in one report as having ‘enough outrage, scandal and smut to almost overwhelm the curiosities of the courtroom gawkers’ (Hume 2008, 13). Macsyna was depicted as a ‘career carer’ a member of South Auckland’s underclass described in one article as the ‘badlands’ (Wishart 2006, 28), who was wild and neglectful of her children. Media accounts of the court case included revelations of her smoking P procured from a massage parlour with Kahui’s transsexual brother, convictions for fraud and burglary and her connections with the Black power gang.⁶ Macsyna’s alleged promiscuity was also part of the defence’s case, including the allegations she had sexual relations with Kahui’s 14-year-old brother and that she was seen passionately kissing him outside a function following the twins’ funeral. Reports also focused on observations by hospital staff of her apparent indifference to the plight of her desperately ill babies, as well as her history of neglect and abandonment of her other children (Hume 2008).

Macsyna King was publically vilified in media accounts, described by a Sunday Star Times journalist as ‘one of the more poisonous figures to have come to public prominence in recent memory’ (Wall 2008). Some media maligned her as the ‘the wickedest woman in New Zealand’ (McLeod 2011, 15) describing her as ‘someone who responds to base impulses’ (Taylor 2008). Macsyna was depicted as callous, neglectful, selfish, domineering, sexually promiscuous and lacking remorse. As the case progressed, the media also focused on the extended family, headlines such as ‘Kahui cousin jailed for “dial a tinny” business’ (“Kahui Cousin Jailed ...” 2006) constructed a story of intergenerational welfare dependency, criminality, promiscuity and alcoholism (Gower 2008). Journalists, as well as Chris Kahui’s legal team, sought out relatives and ex-partners to speak out against Macsyna. These headlines and the stories that followed them constructed Macsyna and the welfare underclass from which she sprung as embodiments of a kind of ‘savageness’.

Kingfisher (1999) argues that indigenous populations, the poor and particularly solo mothers are often constituted as internal ‘savages’ linked to a complex web of others, including low-level criminals and drug users, and that these constructions serve to define the boundaries of ordered society.⁷ The construction in the media of Macsyna King as an internal ‘savage’ reinforced neoliberal modes of citizen identification in a number of ways. The focus on Macsyna’s ‘savage’ character, and lack of recognition of the cumulative danger of the poverty environment, reflects a subjective overinvestment in new (and impossible) standards of maternal propriety, that substantially expand the responsibilities of mothers in particular, and parents generally, for child outcomes. In this context, the citizen subject becomes enthralled by a fantasy of the self-sacrificing mother/parent and insensitive to the broader causal context of social realities that have given rise to deepening poverty, insecurity and related social harms. Neoliberal discourses encourage austerity parenting in which parents are encouraged to see themselves as responsible for prudently managing risk and enhancing their own children’s human resources in an increasingly risky and highly competitive environment (Jenson 2013). The normalisation of this parenting script needs an idea of abnormal parenting to bolster its purchase on the high moral ground. The construction of Macsyna as ‘savage’ reflects a social investment in an unobtainable idealised

mother image. When combined with the neoliberal discourse of austerity parenting, this image means that the social consequences of neoliberalisation for children such as neglect, abuse, youth suicide, obesity, illiteracy, declining educational achievement and addiction are interpreted as the failures of individual parents and, particularly, mothers. Only within the articulated discourses of masochistic motherhood and austerity parenting could Macsyna's demand for 'time out' (Evans 2012, 16) be constructed as pathological.

Social responsibility based on recognition of the broader social environment is sublimated and channelled into masochistic enjoyment of increased levels of self-sacrifice and self-reliance. Constructing Macsyna as an internal 'savage' offers a cycle of reprisal and retaliation as a way out of social responsibility and serves as an inducement to identify with austerity parenting because focusing our effort on anticipating and managing risks to our own children dampens anxiety and confounds our social responsibility to act on behalf of all children.

While neoliberalisation has promoted women's employment in the paid labour force, it has privatised the problems that naturally accompany this, problems that negatively impact on child welfare. Added to this is increased Maori male unemployment and a breadwinner masculinity discourse that frames childcare as emasculating. These circumstances very likely contributed to the outcome in this case. Chris Kahui's father, minutes before the fatal injuries were inflicted, directly fuelled his resentment at having been left on his own to care for the babies. April Saunders, a cousin who visited the home on the day the twins were fatally injured, stated that when William Kahui arrived, he spoke to his son about Macsyna King's absence from the house and 'kind of blew him up really to see why she's not there' (Evans 2012, 21). Only one of the media accounts mentioned this. This breadwinner masculinity discourse conflicts with a caring relation to children and is unjustly oppressive to both men and women. Dr Patrick Kelly, forensic paediatrician, also expressed the view that the father should not have been left alone to care for the babies, stating in the coroners court that:

Resentment, anger and frustration on the part of the father that, for the third time, he had been left by the twin's mother to cope on his own, together with a perceived inability to cope, are the kinds of emotion that may lead to momentary loss of control on the part of the caregiver who should not have been left in the position of sole caregiver of three infant children under the age of twelve months (Shane was aged eleven months). Macsyna King should not have left her partner to manage the three infants on his own without first ensuring that suitable assistance was at hand. (Evans 2012, 64)

Despite its woeful inadequacy, particularly given labour market conditions,⁸ the male breadwinner discourse continues to dominate our cultural milieu⁹ and was exploited by Chris Kahui's legal team, who presented the father as emasculated by an older and more powerful female, and a media which viciously blamed the mother despite all the evidence pointing to the father as having inflicted the fatal injuries.

Macsyna King's objections to the media's portrayal of her culminated in the publication of the book *Breaking Silence*, and her appearance on the prime time current affairs programme, Campbell Live on 25 July 2012. The interview coincided with the release of the coroner's report into child abuse deaths of her twin babies. In tears throughout the interview, Macsyna claimed she had not been able to properly mourn for her children because she had been subject to unrelenting attacks from the media and members of the public. During the interview, Campbell drew attention to the coroner's key findings that there is not 'a skerrick of evidence' that Ms King had a motive to kill her children or that she did so. 'Apart from

being completely without evidential support, the theory is implausible' (Evans 2012, 50). He also pointed to evidence given at the coroner's inquest by three medical professionals, who all claimed the twins were in good health and well cared for up until the last days of their lives when they were in the 'sole care and custody' of their father (Evans 2012, 51). Responses to Macsyna's appearance on the programme were swift and damning. In spite of the coroner's exoneration, the media refused to give up on the mother's culpability and a media backlash ensued, erupting into a storm of social media vilification in which she was cast as the 'embodiment of all that is wrong with our welfare indulgence' (Laws 2012). Although Macsyna King was a central figure in the story of the deaths of the Kahui twins, her attempt to speak publically about her experience was jarring because it interrupted a tightly woven mythology about the deaths of the Kahui twins that aligned with the government's rhetoric about welfare beneficiaries.

Macsyna King's speaking out in her defence, and the publication of Wishart and King's book, *Breaking Silence* were met with intense fury and a number of bookstores refused to stock it. Over 48,000 people joined a Facebook site dedicated to blocking the sale of the book (McLeod 2011). Following the television interview with John Campbell, a flourish of commentators expressed their outrage and condemnation of Macsyna. The following comment was made by talk back radio disc jockey, ex National MP, and Mayor of Wanganui, Michael Laws after the coroner's report had officially ruled Macsyna out as the person responsible for inflicting the fatal injuries:

selfish and self-absorbed, satiated only by substances ... You are exactly the kind of person who shouldn't be having kids because you can't really care. The nurturing gene is absent ... whether you were in that bedroom that night or not ... the truth is: if you had been a half way decent mum, the Kahui twins would be alive today. (Laws 2012)

Despite the coroner's report setting the record straight, demonstrating the degree to which the media had played fast and loose with the facts, the media continued to publish accounts of Macsyna as a 'career carer' who may not have killed the twins but was still ultimately responsible for their deaths (Woodham 2012).

Media and policy discourse relentlessly observes the ethnic asymmetry of child abuse, with Maori children being approximately twice as likely to be assessed as abused or neglected when compared with non-Maori children, as if these facts simply speak for themselves. Further, this asymmetry is exaggerated by the media's propensity to over-report cases of abuse of Maori children and under-report Pakeha child abuse deaths (Merchant 2010). There is also evidence of this same bias in the coding of hospitalisations (Kotch et al. 1993). In 2012 Maori Party co-leader, Tariana Turia expressed her distress at the constant dredging up of Maori fatal child abuse cases and asked that we allow these children to rest in peace: 'In continually feeding their names and experiences up for public consumption, as a society we continue to damage their memory' (Turia 2012).

By linking its *new direction* in child protection policy with mediatised social construction of 'Maori child abuse' the government was able to transform long-standing racism and resentment towards Maori into support for its neoliberal agenda. The following section shows how the release of the *White Paper for Vulnerable Children 2012* was timed to track alongside media reports of the Kahui case and other Maori child abuse cases. This strategic approach channelled citizens' desire for retaliation against the injury of child abuse, into support for a more authoritarian moral policing role for child protection policy.

The White Paper for Vulnerable Children, 2012

The *White Paper for Vulnerable Children 2012* explicitly outlined a ‘new direction’ in child protection services in response to ‘the killings of Chris and Cru Kahui’ (NZMSD 2012a, 4). With its focus on the assessment and management of ‘children at risk of significant harm’, the government’s *new direction* reset priorities in child protection services away from a social support-based approach to preventing child abuse and meeting the needs of poor children, towards protecting children from dangerous parents/adults.

According to the former Minister, ‘with the backing of the country and the will of this Government’, the *White Paper* sets out how to ‘fundamentally change what we do’ to protect vulnerable children who are at risk of maltreatment. A critical feature of this form of ‘consensus building’ is its strategic intent to divide good citizens from ‘savagely’ welfare beneficiaries. The former Minister for Social Development, Paula Bennett, stated at the outset:

Though I acknowledge the pressure that financial hardship puts on families, that is never an excuse to neglect, beat, or abuse children. Most people in such circumstances do not abuse their children, and I cannot tolerate it being used as a justification for those who do. (NZMSD 2012a, 2)

Her statement immediately triggers a representation of good citizens, who despite circumstances of financial hardship, do not abuse children, in contrast to the welfare underclass who use hardship as an excuse for ‘savagery’. The *White Paper* imposes ‘new parental expectations for all parents on a working-age benefit’ (NZMSD 2012b, 54), including requirements of accessing primary and preventative healthcare, quality early childhood education from three years of age and regular school attendance (NZMSD 2012b, 54). Here again, the good citizen is defined in terms of a set of norms and values of responsibility and care of children, in opposition to welfare beneficiaries who neglect their responsibilities to their children. The enforcement of these ‘new parental expectations’ also provides opportunities for increased surveillance of welfare beneficiaries, expanding the role of police, family doctors, hospital staff, teachers and early childcare providers as ‘first responders’ in identifying *at risk* children. Hyslop describes the *White Paper* as decentring social work in favour of ‘managerial prescriptions for narrowly conceived production efficiency and risk reduction’, and being primarily concerned with ‘widening the protective responsibilities of individuals, families, communities, business and frontline professionals across Health, Education, Welfare and other sectors of government’ (Hyslop 2013, 5, 6).

By covertly drawing connections with racist media accounts of high profile Maori child abuse deaths, the *White Paper* translates citizens’ racism and abhorrence for child abuse into support for *new direction* in child protection policy which amounts to a disinvestment in broad-based social work services for children and families, under the guise of ‘tough new measures in child protection’.

A landslide of official reports relentlessly re-establishes the fact that ‘Maori child abuse’ statistics are disproportionately higher than other ethnic groups. In 2009, the *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* published an article that specifically claimed that:

Maori, in particular those of sole Maori cultural identity, were at higher risk of exposure to physical punishment and inter-parental violence, and that the associations could not be fully explained by either socio-economic deprivation or exposure to family dysfunction in childhood. (Dannette, Ferguson, and Boden 2009, 154)

The government's child protection policy discourse promotes the view that child abuse is a Maori problem and refuses to acknowledge long-standing evidence-based research that conclusively links child abuse and neglect with social and economic deprivation (Pelton 1981; Berger and Waldfogel 2011).

The former Social Development Minister (2008–2014), Paula Bennett, emphasised inter-generational abuse and the over-representation of Maori in child abuse statistics but consistently refused to be drawn on the established link between child abuse and poverty, stating instead: 'Many children live in a different sort of poverty – poverty of affection, poverty of protection, poverty of expectation, poverty of educational stimulation, poverty of positive role models' (NZMSD 2012a, 26).

The government's obfuscation of the role of poverty in child abuse is part of its strategy to refocus social service agencies away from a social support-based approach to combating 'child abuse' towards a narrowed focus on policing welfare beneficiaries. In October 2014, the newly re-elected National Government was forced to admit to deliberately stalling the release of a report on child poverty until after the September 2014 election ("Government Secrecy Appals" 2014). The *White Paper* explicitly denies the contextual relevance of rapid socio-economic change to the issue of child abuse and claims instead that: 'There are children who despite the huge public investment in health, education and welfare, remain at the greatest risk' (NZMSD 2012a, 6).

Those who commit these heinous acts against their own children do so regardless of 'huge public investment' in supportive social structures. What other conclusion could we possibly reach than that they are, simply, savage. Taxpayers or 'everyday families' are emotionally vested in this neurotic fantasy because it dignifies them as responsible parents 'who put their children first, second and third in their order of priorities' (NZMSD 2012a, 5), in opposition to welfare beneficiaries who commit heinous crimes against helpless children.

Poverty is not merely associated with child abuse and neglect but is a direct causative factor in parents' abusive and negligent behaviour towards and the resultant harm to their children (Pelton 1981). Cross-national studies consistently reinforce the strong connection between child abuse, neglect and poverty (Jones and McCurdy 1992). Evidence suggests that countries with higher social spending have lower child homicide rates, with social security expenditures having the strongest effects on lowering child homicide rates. Furthermore, increased female labour force participation elevates infant and child homicide rates significantly more in countries with lower expenditures on social welfare programmes (Gartner 1991). Despite a large body of evidence pointing to a complex of factors and family stressors associated with the poverty environment, household and labour market shifts (Connelly and Doolan 2007, 28), the *White Paper* focuses instead on psychological aspects of parenting, such as 'parent-child attachment', 'positive parenting' and 'parent's knowledge about child development' (NZMSD 2012b, 24). Constructing the problem in terms of parenting places the blame on individual parents and implicates culturally based parenting practices. Elevating the role of parental psychology and culture obscures the role of social structural disadvantage and denies any sense of social responsibility that a nation with child abuse death statistics rated third highest of 27 rich nations might feel (UNICEF 2003).

It is worth noting the sudden explosion of policy discourse concerned with 'building resilience' (Kalil 2013) which needs to be understood within the context of a neoliberal post-welfare agenda. Rather than seek to reduce poverty, the government offers the social policy palliative of 'resilience' to help families to develop 'protective factors' that will support

families/whanau in their capacity to cope with adversity (NZMSD 2012b, 29). Policies that build resilience send the right signal to citizens encouraging them to invest in a neurotic fantasy of self-reliant invulnerability.

In August 2013, the government introduced further changes to child protection laws that included compulsory screening requirements for employees of government and state-funded agencies and the introduction of 'Child Harm Prevention Orders' to prevent people considered at risk of harming children from associating with children for up to 10 years even if they have not been convicted of a crime. Further, if a child has been removed by *Child Youth and Family* because of abuse or neglect, the onus will be on the parent to prove they can provide a safe home for any subsequent children they may have. The Family Court will be able to curtail the guardianship rights of parents whose children have been fostered. The former Minister of Social Development, Paula Bennett, described the changes as 'the biggest shake-up in child protection policy since the Child Youth and Family Act 1989' (Trevett 2013). This so-called shake-up of child protection law was announced on the same day as the sentencing of James Parker, a Northland school principal, who had been convicted of multiple counts of child sexual abuse of school children. It thus invited citizens to connect their desire for retaliation against a convicted paedophile with the government's 'shake-up' of child protection policy. While cooperation between media and political elites has long been a feature of democratic politics, the current government has raised the practice to a new level of sophistication, designed to manipulate the citizenry via the 'transmission of neurotic signs' (Isin 2004; Hager 2014).

The *White Paper's* heavy emphasis on identifying and punishing perpetrators invokes protective legal procedures, rather than the provision of welfare, and is therefore consistent with the pursuit of a neoliberal post-welfare state. Five of the seven stated aims of the government's action plan outlined in the *White Paper* pertain directly to policing and identifying abusers, including the integration of surveillance measures designed to identify vulnerable children and 'tough new measures to protect children from adult abusers' (NZMSD 2012a, 4).

The National Government's *new direction* expresses a new vocabulary of surveillance and investigation that displaces the previous 'social investment' approach initiated by the previous Labour Government which had interpreted and responded to child abuse within the context of family dysfunction exacerbated by rapid socioeconomic change. Furthermore, it undermines the goals of the 'social investment' agenda while still maintaining links with its moral resources. Devolution of service provision, a central plank of the previous Labour Government's social investment approach, provided space for Maori to pursue welfare provision on their own terms and produced successful Maori social development (Elizabeth and Larner 2009). The government's *new direction* in child protection instrumentalises the discourse of Maori self-determination while simultaneously fostering a narrative fidelity between its policy discourse and racist discourses of Maori 'savagery'. The government uses media accounts of 'Maori child abuse' to garner political support for its anti-welfare disinvestment strategy, while at the same time insulates itself from the charge of racism by appropriating the language of Maori self-determination. Thus, Maori discourses of 'cultural identity' and 'children as taonga' (NZMSD 2012a, 6) articulated in the *White Paper* are used to retain an association with the politics of Maori self-determination that is partial and selective lending social legitimacy to a neoliberal agenda that is profoundly anti-Maori.

Articulating Maori self-determination with the *new direction* outlined in the *White Paper* offers opportunities for Maori to advance short-term goals, but ultimately primes the citizenry for further state disinvestment in social services. The government's retreat from preventative, supportive social work in the context of sharp rises in Child, Youth and Family Services referrals has led to a rationalising programme epitomised by the risk predictor tool. The goal is to differentiate those 'at risk of significant harm' from the rest, so that scarce resources can be effectively targeted and parental rights and responsibilities can be emphasised and upheld. Ideas of partnership with Maori, NGOs and community groups, enforcement of parental responsibility and risk management, are in this way put to work as methods for controlling rather than meeting demand for child protection services (Parton, Thorpe, and Wattam 1997; Rogowski 2012). Bureaucratic systems such as the 'Vulnerable Kids Information System', outlined in the *White Paper*, reflect this narrowed operational focus on purchasing services to make the greatest difference and deliver value for money for taxpayers (NZMSD 2012a, 16). Designed to track multi-agency work with welfare families, the 'Vulnerable Kids Information System' deploys discourses and techniques of risk management to create new possibilities for preventative intervention into the private lives of beneficiaries through its embrace of risk-profiling. Its 'risk predictor tool' uses predictive risk modelling to generate a risk score for the probability of a maltreatment finding for the children of welfare beneficiaries. Using a range of factors whose connection with child abuse is abstract and statistical, such as age of mother and household composition, a combination of these factors, determined by an algorithm, results in the allocation of a service, or intervention. The team comprising mostly economists, who designed the tool, present it as a neutral science of social welfare that can be objectively applied to the complex morass of welfare beneficiaries. They argue that it 'enables scarce child protection and early intervention preventative resources to be strategically targeted' (Vaithianathan 2012, 6).

In sum, the *White Paper* was substantively and temporally articulated, with a media fuelled moral panic over 'Maori child abuse' and attendant fantasy of a 'savage' Maori welfare underclass. This fantasy compellingly re-routes public anxiety and policy critique over child abuse deaths into support for enforcing parental responsibilities and refocusing social work resources towards protecting children from dangerous welfare beneficiaries. This articulation builds on an established social antagonism between beneficiaries and taxpayers, and taps sedimented discourses such as long-standing racist attitudes towards Maori and a valuing of self-reliance over mutuality, both of which reflect New Zealand's colonial history. Sadly, this approach restricts the development of broader strategies of family support which provide a more effective lever of change for vulnerable children than criminalisation which progresses towards accountability rather than prevention. Broader strategies of family support are not only better able to protect poor children from abuse, they also substantively enhance the quality of their lives.

Concluding discussion

The National Government's reset of child protection policy to track alongside the media's treatment of 'Maori child abuse', and its focus on parental behaviour and risk management, cultivates a neurotic fantasy of the welfare 'savage' as socially destructive, violent and immoral that supports National's narrowing of social policy towards policing welfare populations. It also strategically positions the New Zealand Left as supporting more funds/rights for the benefit of a 'savage' welfare underclass.

The Left has been ineffective in combating this discourse because its arguments, based in recognition of the socially destructive effects of neoliberalisation, as Isin observes, have lost their rational subject (Isin 2004, 229). Research establishes that parents who abuse their children to the point of resulting in death suffer from common and prolonged social and familial stressors such as severe spousal discord, housing problems, financial difficulties, unemployment and youthful parenting. In a study of 18 OECD countries, the relative situation of the lowest income decile declined more in New Zealand during the 1980s and 1990s than in any other country (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1995, 15). But this rational view has less political traction because it is unable to offer a way out of anxiety.

Rather than signifying extreme social failure, child abuse deaths have been re-scripted as rationalising the need for more cuts in social services, more community surveillance and more social dis-investment. Or put another way, the neoliberal project has utilised its very failure to provide the opportunities for an adequate livelihood for a growing sector of society as a rationale for further neoliberalisation. The fantasy of a 'savage' Maori welfare underclass, animated by media stories of child abusing welfare beneficiaries and epitomised in the character assassination of Maccyna King, has played a key role in supporting National's policy direction. By demonstrating the 'savagery' of the welfare underclass, the government offered taxpayer citizens both a way to retaliate against the injury of child abuse deaths, and a pathway out of anxiety based in identification with self-reliance, prudentialism and austerity parenting.

Contemporary governing strategies in English-speaking countries address neurotic citizens, inviting them to identify social ills with the fantasy of the socially destructive, violent, immoral 'other'. In this New Zealand example, citizens are encouraged to invest in a neurotic superiority fantasy that focuses retaliatory impulses on the welfare underclass. This fantasy offers an emotionally comforting pathway out of anxiety and a unifying experience of citizenship identification based in a neurotic overinvestment in self-reliant prudentialism and austerity parenting. This process of scapegoating is mirrored elsewhere, for example the 'chav' stereotype of contemporary working class people in the UK (Tyler 2008) and the welfare queen in the US (Kohler-Hausmann 2007).

This unifying experience of neoliberal citizen identification also resonates with 'amoral familism' (Layton 2010; Rodger 2014). This concept refers to the process by which the individual family becomes the defensive source of resilience and responsibility while those outside the family are similarly viewed as self-responsible and having only themselves to blame for their failures. This competitive exclusive solidarity offers protection and social capital to 'insiders', while also fostering social antagonism and mistrust of 'outsiders' that can be linked with the hardening of attitudes towards the welfare underclass. Amoral familism allows citizens to disavow their social interdependency and complicity in the deaths of poor children. In addition, because the irresponsible behaviour of the underclass threatens social viability generally, the state is justified in taking a more controlling moral policing role.

Following Young (2003, May 5), this analysis supports a position of political responsibility towards children and particularly towards those who daily face systemic forms of disadvantage and deprivation. Our political responsibility towards the Kahui twins is not in finding what bad decisions were made, what particular crime was committed and by whom, but in a moral rejection of the systemic social structures that place children in dangerous poverty environments. The real horror of the Kahui case stems from our misplaced need to identify a particular person to stand in for the stereotype of an imagined 'savage' underclass,

to bear proven liability for their deaths as a kind of absolution for the rest of us. Following Spivak (1998), this paper has questioned the unquestioned muting of Macsyna King. If Macsyna King had been allowed to speak her experience may have been interpreted not as an exceptional case of savagery but rather as the predictable effect of neoliberal-driven poverty and exclusion.

Notes

1. According to Daly, ideology subsists on the fantasy of establishing society's consistency by generating straw enemies – fictional embodiments of the impossibility of social harmony – which if eliminated would enable the reconciliation of society (Daly 1999).
2. Chris and Cru Kahui, 3-month-old twins, died of traumatic head injuries on 18 June 2006. The parents were both accused of killing them. The father was eventually charged and acquitted. The case was the subject of unprecedented media attention.
3. The articulation between child abuse, welfare and indigenous people has variants in other countries with histories of internal colonisation such as Australia and Canada. See for example, (Proudfoot and Habibis 2015).
4. *Newstext Plus* indexes 22 daily newspapers including all the country's main daily papers as well as a weekly newspaper (*Sunday Star Times*), ensuring a national coverage of news sources. The study was able to examine the ways various societal actors responded to the case via the news media. After repetitions of the same article and letters to the editor were deleted, a total of 94 articles were critically analysed.
5. The deaths of the Kahui twins were frequently referred to as 'killings' in the media suggesting malicious intent on the part of the killer(s).
6. Black power is a prominent gang in New Zealand involved in drug manufacture and dealing. Its members are predominantly Maori and Pacific Islander.
7. While the media accounts did not specifically claim Macsyna was savage, a large majority of the media accounts depicted her in those terms. Exploring earlier phases of welfare reform within gendered discourses of poverty in the US and New Zealand, Kingfisher (1999, 4) shows how these discourses articulate with colonisation discourses in which the colonised other is constructed as savage, wild and ungovernable.
8. One study suggests that the correlation between shifts in employment levels and child abuse may reflect household role changes as women seek employment during economic downturns and unemployed men take on the care of children (Steinberg, Catalano, and Dooley 1981).
9. New forms of masculinity that reflect shifts in labour markets and women's changing social position are dependent on new ways of valuing caring and voluntary work outside of the labour market. Neoliberalisation of social policy reinforces rather than challenges traditional gender roles, particularly in poorer communities because it makes labour market participation the standard of social respectability for both men and women and privatises childcare. Child caring in the home is increasingly under-valued and socially disrespected particularly if you are a beneficiary.

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