

“DEFECTIVE CHILDHOODS”: TELEVISION NEWS
AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF THE ‘CHILD IN NEED’

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ABSTRACT

The modern media, particularly television news, produces and airs news reports and special programs presenting social justice and human rights stories. Some of these news reports feature children with identified emotional, financial, or other needs. Due to television news’ pervasiveness and influence in American society, the media entities which create the news have significant power to shape Americans’ understandings and beliefs on children’s lives, rights, and needs. In this thesis, I ask: how does the media, through television news programs, maintain a specific discursive construction of ‘children in need.’ I have conducted a qualitative content analysis based on transcripts from the national television programs NBC Dateline, ABC Nightline, ABC 20/20, and CBS 60 Minutes between 2007 and 2012, looking at episodes featuring groups of children in some identified need. I examine the ways in which these television programs present certain childhoods as problematic. My findings indicate that the news’ collective construction of ‘children in need’ portrays them as hidden from the rest of America, as courageous dreamers, and as living abnormal lives. Furthermore, I compare and contrast the news programs’ representation to the Progressive era child-saving movement, revealing that the modern media’s broadcasts on ‘children in need’ disfavor lower class populations. Ultimately, I argue that the news media serves the function of

deeming certain childhoods as less than ideal, or 'defective,' which therefore marks them as deviant from what is considered a universal proper childhood.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Defective Childhoods: Television News and the Social Construction of the ‘Child in Need’,” presented by Sarah M. Gonzales, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A preview of the January 26th, 2007 episode of the news program 20/20 opened with this phrase: “Childhood as you’ve never seen it before. . .a must-see hour for anyone who cares about America’s children.” The childhood it refers to is that of children in Camden, New Jersey, an urban city with very high violence and poverty. This special episode takes viewers “on an extraordinary journey” . . .into “a life few of us ever experience” (20/20, 2007). Its subject is the children in this city – who they are, what their lives are like, and how to help them.

Children are a subject of great concern in modern American society. Debates and discussion over how they should be treated, what is best for them, and their role in social life take place in a variety of settings and institutions. A phrase has developed in recent years to describe a child assumed to be missing something(s) considered important and necessary: a ‘child in need’. This phrase is used in a variety of locales and to describe children in a diverse range of circumstances. Since childhood is a social construction based on cultural values and historic specificity (James & Prout, 1990), a phrase such as this is made meaningful and applied based on current cultural conceptualizations of children and childhood. I want to break apart the concept of the ‘child in need’ and demonstrate that it is a complex categorization based on specific cultural and political interests. Since the mass media is a significant contributor to discourse on children, I have chosen to evaluate national television news to do so. In this paper, I ask: how does the media, through television news programs, maintain a specific discursive construction of the concept of ‘children in need’? In

order to answer this question, I have conducted a qualitative content analysis of national television news broadcasts.

Children are a prolific topic in television news, and the range of coverage is seemingly unlimited. Children do not appear just in nightly television news, but also in national news programs such as Dateline and 60 Minutes. When children are discussed on such programs, the shows tend to frame their coverage from a perspective of concern; in essence, the programs mark certain realities as social problems. Yet selecting issues to be covered and how to present them to audiences is not self-evident; when the news programs feature an issue of concern regarding children, for instance, they make statements based on particular ways of thinking about children and their conditions. The mass media is in the business of producing representations; as they choose what to broadcast and use language and images to discuss some reality, the final product is a representation of that reality. Therefore, when television news discusses children, it creates a representation of children and their lives. Since representations are not mirror images of the reality they represent, how do the news programs frame children and their needs, circumstances, and significance? Which children do they choose to feature and how do they frame their discussion of them? By analyzing the media's representation of the 'child in need,' I will explore how such framing works in mediating popular understandings of children growing up in what are deemed to be anomalous lives.

Theoretical Foundation

This project takes a social constructionist approach, operating on the premise that people develop meaningful understandings about things through interaction with others, especially through language (Berger & Luckmann, 1996; Goffman, 1959). This theoretical

perspective is particularly useful to this research project because I am studying how the media makes particular children's realities meaningful through the way they discuss them.

In Loseke and Best's (2003) reader *Social Problems: Constructionist Readings*, the authors lay a theoretical foundation for the study of social problems that is useful to my research problem. The social constructionist approach studies the way that people think subjectively about objective realities. The meaning-making process in which we categorize, name, and place values on events and occurrences is crucially important in how we react to those realities. The media, particularly the news media, has become an important mechanism through which this categorizing and naming takes place. As they speak of the realities they are broadcasting, they produce knowledge about them. The language the media uses to discuss phenomena manufactures a discourse that contributes to the social construction of those realities. I use the term discourse in a Foucauldian sense: the discourse produced by the media about a particular subject constitutes a source of knowledge about it based on the language used to construct it (Foucault, 1975).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) theorize on the way that people collectively construct reality through processes of actions and interactions. They believe that people react to objective realities by making them subjectively meaningful. This perspective helps us understand how the media serves as a tool in the social construction of reality – in the case of this research project, the reality of the 'child in need.' The news entities use objective realities, such as the fact that a certain demographic of children has a higher poverty rate than the rest of the country, or that young migrant children work the blueberry fields in Michigan, and create a broadcast by applying subjective meaning to those realities. The way the news media frames the social realities and how people interpret them are based on subjective ways

of rendering the objective realities meaningful. As Robert Beauregard (2003) puts it, “the discourse is not merely an objective reporting of an incontestable reality but a collection of contentious interpretations. The ‘real world’ provides material for discourse, but these understandings are then mediated socially through language” (p. 21).

Television news programs are significant social actors in the social construction of reality for a multitude of reasons. Because the majority of Americans today have access to television broadcasting, one program or news report has the potential to reach millions of viewers across class, race, and age divisions. Todd Gitlin (1980) has argued that media frames help organize the world for viewers who rely on journalists to provide them with news (as cited in Gamson. et al., 1992). Accordingly, we could say that the media powers which produce these programs not only introduce social issues concerning children but also provide conceptual roadmaps that guide viewers in thinking about them. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) argues that the words and images used on television make things seem real and provide a way to understand events and issues. Journalists have the power to impose their viewpoints of social issues on society based on how they frame the news. Viewers of the news programs rely, consciously or not, on the way the media frames the children’s lives and needs to form their own understandings. Referring to television news coverage, media and critical discourse analysis scholar Norman Fairclough (1995) maintains that the media has “the power to influence knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations, social identities,” a function which comes from its “power to represent things in particular ways” (p. 2). Based on these theoretical perspectives, news programs can have significant effects in shaping the way individual viewers and society as a group understand children and their needs. It is important to study how the media represents them because it has far-reaching influence and

the power to manufacture a discourse which has significant repercussions on the way that children are viewed, conceptualized, and treated.

The Study

This study examines how national television news portrays children and their circumstances, particularly those framed as concerning. I have selected the news programs Dateline, Nightline, 20/20, and 60 Minutes to analyze, looking at episodes from 2007 through 2012. My analysis is based on transcripts of selected episodes of these programs. I have conducted a qualitative content analysis of the transcripts in order to perform a discourse analysis. My analysis is based heavily on the representation produced by the media, emphasizing their language, examples, and categories. Yet I attempt also to place this representation in historical context and evaluate its significance in larger social interactions.

When the media makes children a topic of their discussion, they are contributing to national discourse on children and childhoods. Discourse analyses are important because it is through discourse that people collectively construct their understandings and representations of the world around them. Discourse filtered through the mass media has a high potential of influencing how social issues are understood and interpreted by a large amount of people. I suggest that this study will contribute to the literature on modern conceptualizations of childhood and speak to the legacies of the past child-saving efforts on current conceptualizations and actions towards children today.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A dominant social scientific view on childhood is that it is an invention of the last several centuries. The belief that children are inherently different from adults, that they deserve separate treatment from them, and hold a specific status in society, marked the invention of childhood. While there is some contradictory evidence that ‘children’ in this sense existed much earlier in history, childhood is a social construction based on fluctuating cultural norms (James & Prout, 1990). Beliefs on what should characterize childhood and children’s needs and abilities vary immensely. Of course, this is true from culture to culture worldwide, but even within the United States. Studies like those by Annette Lareau (2011) demonstrate that beliefs on how children develop and parents’ proper roles vary according to cultural norms of social class. Even the definition of a child is contested. Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, defines a child as any person under the age of 18, the United States has not ratified it (Majka and Majka, 2005) and we see the definition contested in places such as the juvenile court system and the debate about trying children as adults.

Empirical studies demonstrate the social construction of childhood. For instance, Moss, Dillon, and Statham (2000) have written on the contrasting dominant discourses about childhood in two locales: In British social work policy, childhood is constructed with the ‘natural’ place for children being in the home, cared for almost exclusively by their mothers; in contrast, in Reggio Emilia, Italy, it is considered natural and beneficial for children to attend day care and form diverse relationships with many others. Furthermore, in Costa Rica shifting economic and political changes around 1980 corresponded with a public shift in

seeing street children as dangerous and deviant, rather than previously as normal and unproblematic (Aldebott-Green, 2011). Finally, Annette Lareau's (2011) work on class differences in child rearing in the United States has revealed that poor and working class families tend to adopt a view of child development as "the accomplishment of natural growth" and value unstructured play time while middle class families tend to utilize the view of "concerted cultivation" and actively schedule activities. These case studies demonstrate that childhood's social meaning varies across time and space, that "it always relates to particular cultural histories and geographies" (Aitken, 2001, p. 120).

Historical Overview

The mid to late eighteenth century brought a significant change in Western views of and interests in childhood (Cunningham, 2005; Mintz, 2010). Whereas previously children tended to be seen as morally corrupt and in need of reform, now they were generally thought of as morally pure, innocent, and requiring protection from corruption of the adult world. Christianity and its views of children as inherently sinful lost some of its influence on the mass population (Cunningham, 2005). Childhood became a period to be extended, not shortened. The nineteenth century showed a significant change from the colonial period. As part of this shift, childhood became more and more demarcated from adulthood, and it was seen to be a particularly special time of life that required special treatment. This is evidenced in new products such as colorful furniture designed just for kids, and institutional changes such as an expanding school system and child labor laws (Mintz 2010, 2004). Psychological and educational literature created standards for an age-graded educational system that emphasized children's limitations and goals at specific ages. Signs of early intellectual, social, or sexual maturity were cause for alarm, as they indicated a shortened childhood. The

view prevailed that “childhood was not only a separate stage in life, but the best of those stages” (Cunningham, 2005, p. 58).

These changes in beliefs about children were correlated with changes in industrialization and economic structure in the nineteenth century. Factory work often sent the family away from home and split apart. Many families had to send their children to the factories just to provide basic subsistence. At the same time, a more distinct middle class was developing – a class which gained more financial capital and did not need its children to work in order to provide a daily living. Cunningham (2005) notes that as the upper and middle classes were able to establish more privacy and comfort through larger houses designed more privately, the individuality of children became the focus of family life. Parental relationships with children were highly regarded and each child seen as unique, yet this was contradicted because expanding advice literature provided general, universal principles for child-rearing. A decent childhood came to be viewed as essential for a productive and healthy adulthood. The romantic notion of children as innocent and pure permeated into belief systems, even if not in actual practice.

The nineteenth century marks the historical moment, as Mintz (2004) argues, of the invention of modern childhood. This new modern childhood meant that children, by definition those age birth to around thirteen (adolescence as a unique stage had not been popularized yet), were supposed to be dedicated to education and not required or allowed to labor. This new ideal blossomed out of the urban middle class but eventually spread to other subgroups of society and into national policies and practices. This emerging and idealized romanticization of childhood emphasized “children as symbols of purity, spontaneity, and emotional expressiveness” (Mintz, 2004, p. 76). Importance was placed on extending

childhood by delaying children's participation in adult behaviors. The ideal childhood which emerged was one where children remained innocent and carefree, able to play without working or stressing. The previous considerations for children's souls and children's importance in the needs of the state were joined by "a concern to save children for the enjoyment of childhood" (Cunningham, 2005, p.137). Children were considered 'blank slates' easily influenced by good or bad (Mintz, 2004), and the belief that a childhood carefully protected within a stable family structure was a prerequisite for a decent adulthood became popular during this time period (Cunningham, 2005). Childrearing practices employed tenderness and patience in teaching children self-control (Mintz, 2004). Also, new advances in medical care drastically reduced the infant mortality rate, while urbanization and industrialization caused the birth rate to decrease significantly. These changes allowed parents to attach themselves emotionally to each child more so than in the past, and society's sentimentality towards children as a whole grew (Zelizer, 1985).

As the idealized childhood emerged as one of carefreeness and protectedness, it became (and still is) difficult to match this ideal with the realities of many children. For example, the Civil War brought children into harsh realities, starkly at odds with such an ideal, such as child soldiers and many children orphaned by the war (Mintz, 2004). Mintz argues that this strengthened the commitment to a protected and prolonged childhood. Similarly, factory work for children was difficult, dangerous, and laborious. Cunningham (2005) argues that this reinforced spreading social constructions of childhood being viewed as a period for education rather than for preparation for the workforce. Although middle class children were generally able to fulfill the ideal of childhood by abandoning work at home for education at school, poor children had to take work in factories just so their

families could survive. It was in part this disparity between the ideal and reality that sparked philanthropic efforts to “save the child.”

Industrialization of America’s cities corresponded with a growing concern over children’s welfare in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Mintz, 2004). Social scientists have provided an account of the period broadly between the middle of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in which reformers in Western societies sought to radically change policies on children and the realities of children’s lives, known as the ‘child-saving movement.’ The reformers were philanthropists who responded to street children, juvenile delinquency, child labor, and child abuse. Urban centers were the primary site of the philanthropic efforts, where rapid industrialization brought an increase in the prevalence and visibility of these social problems (Mintz, 2004).

Poverty and its effects such as hunger and child labor were the most direct target of reform by the child-savers, but the movement’s domain covered a variety of issues and spheres, legal, personal, and educational. The legal system served the role of passing regulation limiting children’s work and requiring school attendance. Schools became a site not just for academic education but also for nutrition, hygiene, and medical standards to be spread and monitored (Fass, 2011). Child rearing literature drawing on psychological discourse became popular, mostly in the middle class, but was also distributed to lower class mothers.

Children of poor, working class, and immigrant families were the movement’s primary targets, given that poverty and child labor were the movement’s main concerns and children of these groups were most likely to have to labor and suffer poverty’s effects. However, less conspicuous motivations also drove child-savers to target these groups. Many

of the child-savers considered the social ways of these groups appalling and morally corrupt, some describing them with words such as “savages” and “the dangerous classes” (Cunningham, 2005, p. 138). Such groups’ children were targeted not only because of their perceived innocence and neediness, but also because they were believed to be “unformed enough to be salvable” and could be taught to conform readily to the more ‘decent’ ways of the more affluent classes. Philanthropic efforts served the function of surveying working class children and creating room for public intervention in their lives. For example, the first kindergartens were established by wealthy women to target poor children and teach their mothers how to raise their kids with proper morality and hygiene (Mintz, 2004). Furthermore, the child-savers “often confused delinquency and neglect with the realities of life under poverty” (Mintz, 2004, p. 155).

Although the ‘discovery’ of child poverty and its related issues drove the child-saving movement to a large degree, its goals were broader than simply rescuing children from physical dangers such as hunger or long hours at the factory. There was also a moral, sentimental purpose. Reformers wanted to give children the relatively new ideal childhood – one characterized by play, carefreeness, and innocence. Activities such as harsh factory work stole these ideals from child laborers. Abuse and work were seen as threats to children’s status as “icons of innocence” (Mintz, 2004, p. 154). The child-saving efforts were inspired “ultimately . . . by the Romantic ideal of a sheltered childhood” (Mintz, 2004, p. 93).

As the child-savers sought to reduce poverty and its symptoms for children during this time period, discourse on the rights and needs of children became applied to children universally, at least at a national level (Fass, 2011). These efforts reflected a genuine

concern for children's welfare, while also providing for the needs of the state (Cunningham, 2005; Fass, 2011). Reformers, and increasingly more sections of society, believed that things such as education, proper nutrition, and innocence should not be privileges for some children but rights for all (Fass, 2011). Those who were mindful of the nation's progress believed that it was necessary for all children to have a basic level of care and opportunity (ibid). Child savers wanted to provide underserved populations of children with the new social benefits that middle class children already had. These benefits, such as education, medical care, and good nutrition, became seen as rights for all children. The purposes behind the child-saving efforts were ambiguous – wrought with both hope and fear, to protect children from society and society from children (Mintz, 2004). While many reformers believed that poor children had rights to what other children had and cared about their well-being, many believed that poor children were hazardous to society and had broader social interests in mind (Fass, 2011).

Modern Day

Dominant American views on childhood today remain similar to the cultural construction that emerged in this earlier time period. Childhood today is strictly demarcated from adulthood, with children seen as the most innocent and precious group of people. The ideal is the notion of a protected childhood, where children can engage in the behaviors and characteristics thought to be pure and natural to all children and can remain free from adult life, danger, and stress. However, it must be noted that while this cultural value towards childhood dominates American society, views on children and childhood, like other cultural objects, vary across class and cultural groups within the United States. Furthermore, American views towards childhood can be regarded as deeply ambivalent (Mintz, 2004).

This is seen in contradictions such as viewing childhood as a time for carefree play and learning while simultaneously pushing for increasingly tough education standards, or the trope of “kids killing kids,” in which children are both the ultimate innocent victims and the violent perpetrators.

The emphasis on children’s individuality and individual rights has been heavy in the last few decades (Aitken, 2001, citing Frones, 1994). This emphasis on individuality can be seen in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989. The Convention lists rights advocated by the UN to be extended to all children across the globe. Individuality appears in rights such as the right of the child to have freedom of expression, the right to privacy, the right to develop one’s potential, and the statement that “the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society” (UN Convention, p. 335).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is part of a trend over the last few decades of an international awareness of childhood. The concept of “the world’s children” has appeared in international discourse, and beliefs in universal childlike qualities and ideal childhoods have been extended to encompass children worldwide (Stephens, 1995). Research suggests that the modern American ideal of childhood, developed during the Industrial Revolution and spread during the child-saving movement, is shared largely among Western societies but is being forged in some non-Western countries such as in China, where parents and schools are debating a balance between work and free play for children and a carefree childhood has become associated with positive mental health (see Naftali, 2010). This example demonstrates how globalization is altering the domain of childhood internationally. The CRC was drafted in order to lay a foundation for providing children globally rights it identified as ideally universal. These rights are many and diverse, but

reminiscent of dominant Western view on childhood. For instance, the document states that “childhood is entitled to special care and assistance” and that “the child. . .should grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding,” and proclaims each child’s right to free primary education, rest and leisure, and an identity. Anthropologists have criticized the CRC for imposing a Western-based bias on childhood and ignoring cultural specificities (Fass, 2011; Stephens, 1995).

Stephens (1997) chronicles how particular notions of children and childhood were utilized in practices of nuclear testing and popular culture during Cold War America. She argues that children of ‘deviant’ populations (i.e. Native American, Mormon, and institutionalized children) were legitimated as acceptable recipients of the risks of nuclear testing (cancer, in particular), while ‘normal’ children (i.e. white middle-class children in proper gender roles) were symbols of all that was right and good in American life. Ironically, images of children at risk of harm from foreign nuclear attack featured these ‘normal’ children, yet the government’s policies and practices made the ‘deviant’ children actually most at risk of harm by using them as test subjects. This historical example demonstrates how children can be used as symbols in the interests of specific groups and how children who fit the cultural normative image are treated differently than those who do not.

The Media’s Role

The media has had significant effects on the way children and childhoods are ‘known.’ The surge in media coverage of children worldwide in the last two to three decades has publicized dire conditions of children, while doing so against a backdrop of representations of ideal childhoods. Alongside media representations of ideal childhoods

appear media coverage of deviant childhoods. Marking some childhoods as deviant from the ideal sets them up for legitimated corrective action. Additionally, discourse regarding “the world’s children” has brought together notions of the universality of childhood while the media has broadcasted an array of childhoods which oppose the Western ideal of a protected childhood (Stephens, 1995). For instance, Fass (2011) writes about both how in the last three decades the “shrinking of the globe” and journalist and photographers’ work have “made the world’s children familiar to observers everywhere” (27), and how Western newspapers use images of disabled or disfigured children from around the world as “objects of pity and even objects of sensational exploitation” (25).

Other studies have documented the way that children are represented in the media. For example, an analysis of news accounts of childhood cancer (Dixon-Woods, Seale, Young, Findlay & Heney, 2003) has indicated that sick children are represented as brave and cheerful more than in pain, and cancer is identified as a threat to ‘the entitlements of childhood,’ with these including the right to love, protection, innocence, and education. The media generally portrays childhood illnesses by highlighting stories of children overcoming them stoically. David Altheide (2002) argues that children are powerful symbols, evoking a strong discourse of fear in the news media as media networks seek to provide information and entertain. There have been several studies on the media’s involvement in creating moral panics about issues regarding children (ibid), but little research has been done on the way specific groups of children themselves are portrayed by the mass media.

Other research has looked at the media’s role in producing a collective awareness and compassion regarding human suffering. Researchers such as Hoijer (2004) have documented how the media has played a fundamental role in fostering “global compassion” – a

heightened awareness of human suffering around the world and an increased political and humanitarian commitment. As the media documents far away wars and disasters, it emphasizes the suffering of those who are considered innocent victims, mostly ordinary civilians. Through this their suffering makes up a significant part of Western people's perceptions and understandings of international circumstances, and humanitarian aid organizations have gained more support. Hoijer maintains that the media, particularly television accounts, are the primary mechanism through which ordinary citizens and politicians experience global suffering and become challenged to include strangers in their "moral conscience." Although my data feature only national accounts of suffering broadcast to a national audience, television's role in broadcasting the lives of the children on the shows in my data can be thought about with this same framework. This is because such broadcasts also portray human suffering, many feature groups of children part of a specific demographic deemed as 'far away' to most viewers, and children constitute the people most epitomized as innocent. Similarly, television words and images play crucial roles in fostering "mediated intimacy," in which the audience can feel connected to people they 'meet' on the television screen (Orgad, 2012).

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

My data was obtained using the Lexis Nexis database through the University of Missouri – Kansas City’s library subscription. This database has a news and radio collection which provides full transcripts of news episodes from national networks. It is a comprehensive collection beginning in 1980 and updated daily. I selected the news programs NBC Dateline, ABC 20/20, ABC Nightline, and CBS 60 Minutes because they reach a national audience, have significant viewership, and regularly feature children as story subjects. I filtered my search by program name, date of 2007 through 2012, and the search terms ‘child OR children OR kids at least 5 times.’ This was to gather a comprehensive list of broadcasts which featured children in some way as a primary subject. This time period was chosen so that enough data that could be analyzed would be generated, and to reflect a time period considered current.

Because I am looking at the notion of the ‘child in need,’ I focus on episodes which feature some kind of problematic perspective regarding a group of children. My initial selection criteria in choosing episodes which relate to my research problem was simply that they featured American children as a primary topic and featured some sort of problematic perspective, in which some level of concern was expressed, and the concern was applied to more than just a couple particular children. This led to a large and quite diverse group of episodes. This group of episodes can be divided into two rough categories. The first category includes episodes which feature an issue of concern to no specific group of children, other than perhaps American children in general. Two prominent examples are episodes that discuss childhood obesity and bullying. The second category is made up of episodes that

feature a concern targeting a specific population of children, rather than a concern of potential risk to any one child. These populations range significantly, including populations defined by geographic location, family and financial status, or medical condition.

For my secondary selection criteria, I eliminated the first category of episodes, those featuring issues of concern to no specific group of children. This is because they feature an issue of potential concern to any one child, regardless of any other individual characteristics. In these episodes, the issue itself is the main concern, not children themselves. These episodes portray these issues as ‘risks’ of concern to children on a national scale, not as issues which situate particular children as ‘in need.’ While the media’s presentation of risks to children is no doubt related to its representation of ‘children in need,’ it is beyond the scope of this research project. I further eliminated episodes from the second category, those that concentrate on a specific group of children, that feature ‘risks’ rather than ‘needs.’ I did so by examining the main subject of each episode and determining if it is presented as a potential risk or danger for children (for example, the Nightline episode “Underage and Caffeinated;” featuring the health risks of pageant girls being given high sugar energy drinks) or rather a current need that children are actually experiencing now (such as the Nightline episode “City of Tin;” featuring children suffering from poverty in Texas shantytowns).

These criteria produced 19 broadcasts which I used for my analysis. Most were single episodes or one segment of an episode, while a couple were broadcasts that spread across a couple days and show times. See Table 1 for the complete list of broadcasts used.

Table 1. List of episodes used in analysis

Title of Episode/Series of Episodes	Date broadcast	Main issue of focus	Featured population
	<i>NBC</i>		
	<i>Dateline</i>		
Children of the Harvest	7/17/11	Migrant farm labor	Migrant worker children
Friends & Neighbors	7/25/10	Poverty	Poor children and families in rural Ohio
	<i>ABC</i>		
	<i>Nightline</i>		
Don't Shoot: I Want to Grow up	10/19/12	Dangerous shooting, violence	Kids in Chicago ghettos
Hollywood's Children	7/19/12	Paparazzi	Kids of celebrities
Hooked at Birth	7/11/12	Babies born drug addicted	Babies born to drug addicted mothers
City of Tin	4/25/12	Poverty	Kids in Texas shantytowns
Hunger at Home	8/24/11	Hunger, Food insecurity	Kids of unemployed parents
The Blueberry Children	10/30/09	Migrant farm labor	Migrant worker children
Camp of the Brave	7/26/07	Parents serving overseas	Military kids with parents overseas
	<i>ABC 20/20</i>		
Kids with OCD	3/31/12	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	Kids with OCD
Children of Hoarders	3/10/12	Hoarders as parents	Children with hoarders as parents
Generation Meds	12/2/11	Prescription narcotics	Foster children, esp. those given drugs
Children of the Plains	10/14/11	Poverty	Pine Ridge Indian Reservation children
From Happy to Homeless	1/28/11	Homelessness	Homeless teens, runaway youth
No Place Like Home	3/20/09	Homelessness	Kids w/ homeless and near families
Children of the Mountains	2/13/09	Poverty	Kids in Central Appalachia
Waiting on the World to Change	1/26/07	Poverty	Kids in Camden, New Jersey
	<i>CBS 60 Minutes</i>		
Hard Times Generation	6/26/11	Homelessness, poverty	Homeless kids in Seminole Co., Florida
Children in the Fields	5/22/11	Migrant farm labor	Migrant worker kids
Total	19		

I collected the full transcript from each broadcast and used these as my data. In order to conduct a qualitative content analysis of the transcripts, I created a 26-category coding frame, with most of these categories being open-ended for putting the words and actions from the broadcast into lists. See Appendix for complete coding frame. The purpose of the coding frame was to reduce the data into instances of events and phrases occurring within the broadcast in order to analyze them and perform a discourse analysis. I compiled the categories used in the coding frame using a combination of concept-driven (coming from the literature) and data-driven information (emerging from the transcripts themselves). Combining concept-driven and data-driven categories is a common practice when conducting qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012). Concept-driven categories are useful in applying other research to one's own, while data-driven categories ensure that relevant variables found in the data are included in the coding frame. I added many of the categories as I conducted the coding because I encountered relevant data that warranted a new category. This way, I am confident that almost all relevant content within the transcripts were included in my coding, as the majority of all content made its way into the coding frame.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Operating on the premise that ‘need’ is a socially constructed category rather than an inherent property, we must ponder which needs and which children are featured in the news broadcasts and how they are portrayed. I want to point out here that while the phrases “children in need” or “child in need” are used commonly in the media, policy, and colloquial language, and this usage is what prompted this research project, the actual broadcasts I am using do not employ these exact phrases. Perhaps this is because the phrase “children in need” often serves as a shorthand for any of a large range of categories of children that fit into the general term, while the broadcasts I am analyzing seek to tell an entire story of the children and their identified needs, so the term is not needed in that way, but further study would be needed to determine this. Regardless, I feel that my data speaks to the conceptualization of ‘children in need’ as a general notion, as it problematizes certain children’s lives in some way.

So then, who are these children and what is their need? The most prevalent answer to this question is that they are poor. Nine of the nineteen broadcasts reveal poverty or directly related issues such as hunger and homelessness as their primary issue. Yet four more feature populations of migrant farm worker children and children in a Chicago ghetto, two groups typically in poverty, and discuss their economic struggles. Tables 2 and 3 summarize main themes and occurrences in the content. These tables highlight the manifest content – explicit references to the themes and categories. The following paragraphs discuss these themes in detail and expand on latent content.

Table 2. Themes in descriptions of the children featured in the news programs

Theme	Total number of references to theme, number of episodes that reference theme	Examples
Children and issues as hidden	34, 14	<p>*Migrant farm children described as ‘invisible hands in America’s food chain.’</p> <p>*Homeless teens described as living ‘under the radar.’</p> <p>*ABC episodes part of series called “Hidden America.”</p>
Children as brave, strong, resilient	43, 10	<p>*Homeless teens described as ‘some really courageous kids.’</p> <p>*Child in Texas shantytown a ‘tough little flower.’</p> <p>*Foster children ‘incredibly brave and resilient.’</p>
Children having hopes, dreams	56, 15	<p>*‘Children with the least have the biggest of dreams’ in Texas shantytown.</p> <p>*Camden kids as ‘the children with so much hope’.</p> <p>*Kids in various stories give message to not lose hope.</p>
Children having abnormal lives	21, 9	<p>*Contrasting featured kids to ‘other’ or ‘most’ kids’ lives.</p> <p>*For migrant kids, summer does not mean ‘playing, swimming, going to camp’.</p> <p>*Children of hoarders experience ‘total absence of the normal’ and lack ‘average adolescence’.</p>

Patterns in Descriptions of Children¹

Featured children as hidden, invisible

The first pattern I want to discuss is the description of the children and their issues featured in these programs as hidden. Fourteen of the nineteen episodes make some reference to “hidden” or “invisible” children or their problems². Dateline’s “Children of the Harvest” describes the migrant farm worker children it features as “invisible hands in America’s food chain,” working illegally “off the grid.”ⁱ The children and families living in the poor south Texas shantytowns, or “the hidden people,” also live “off the grid.”ⁱⁱ Both homeless childrenⁱⁱⁱ and the children of chronic hoarders “suffer in silence.”^{iv} A foster child “feels like she has disappeared from everyone’s view,”^v while homeless teenagers live not “in cardboard boxes or under bridges, but under the radar”^{vi} and the poor families in rural Ohio live in “a hidden America” and feel invisible and forgotten.^{vii} Therapy for the kids with OCD is “an all-out battle to unlock the child you know is still within.”^{viii} The children in Nightline’s broadcast about hunger are “the hidden faces of hunger all around us,”^{ix} and kids in Chicago live in “killing fields hidden in plain sight.”^x In fact, five of the broadcasts I analyzed are part of ABC’s series *Hidden America*, described by one journalist as “a division-wide commitment to telling the stories of the invisible among us.”^{xi} These invisible include the babies born addicted to the prescription painkillers taken by their mothers,^{xi} a problem called “a hidden epidemic,” along with children on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation^{xii}, in Central Appalachia^{xiii}, ghettos of Chicago^x, and Las Colonias in Texasⁱⁱ.

¹ These themes that I have identified are not specifically mutually exclusive in terms of underlying meaning. For instance, resiliency and hope have similar meaning. However, I coded each reference to one of these themes using manifest language in the transcripts themselves, and only coded each reference as belonging to one theme.

² Interestingly, the main concern in the broadcast “Hollywood’s Children” is the opposite of the kids being hidden – their constantly public lives as they are hounded by the paparazzi.^{xvii}

Featured children as brave, strong, resilient

Another characteristic that appears often in the representation of the children is their courage and strength. This characteristic appears most strongly in the episode “Children of the Plains” about Native American reservation children.^{xii} These children are described as resilient, survivors, modern day warriors, as strong as their warrior ancestors. Six year old Tashina is called resilient because even after her father is killed in a drunk driving accident she dances and is full of joy. Robert and Louise both have alcoholic mothers but remain strong and look to their futures of college. The children on other episodes are similarly brave, such as the central Appalachian children: “young fighters” who have “so much spirit in the midst of so little,” and will renew the viewers’ “faith that Americans are made of very strong stuff,” according to the news anchor.^{xiii} Similarly, the children in Camden, “fighting so hard to get up and out,” have a strength that is said to astonish the audience.^{xiv} A child suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is also portrayed brave and courageous as she pushes herself through treatment^{viii}, and the homeless teens similarly so as they search for a better future^{xv}. The foster children are shown as brave and resilient survivors.^v

Featured children as having unending hope and dreams

Another prominent emphasis in the representation of the children featured is their having hopes and dreams, often ones that persist despite difficult circumstances. This was mentioned in fifteen of the nineteen episodes. For instance, a child killed by gun violence in Chicago is remembered as “the little diva who loved singing about hope,”^x while the Camden kids are “the children with such hope.”^{xiv} The “forgotten children” of central Appalachia are described as “cling[ing] to hope” and “fighting to hold on to their dreams.”^{xiii} The boys interviewed in “Children in the Fields” still believe they can make their way through college,

“despite the odds and obstacles” of the high dropout rate of young farm workers like themselves.^{xvi} The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is “a soulful American crossroads of chronic poverty and boundless dreams,” and the children there are dreamers with “an impossible, radiant hope” while “facing crushing poverty that cannot crush their songs and dreams.”^{xii} The news anchor on the episode “City of Tin” tells viewers that the Las Colonias shantytowns are a place where “some of the children with the least have the biggest of dreams.”ⁱⁱ Furthermore, on a few of the shows the children themselves provide messages of hope. For example, a homeless teen on “No Place Like Home” says that “you got to know that there’s hope in the future, it’s not always gonna be like this”ⁱⁱⁱ and a teen with OCD remarks that there is hope because if you fight the disease it will back down.^{viii} In fact, it seems that hoping and dreaming is portrayed an essential and universal quality of children. For instance, Diane Sawyer notes as she reveals the lives of children in Camden that “it’s worth remembering that whatever a little kid sees out the window on the horizon, kids and their dreams start out the same everywhere.”^{xiv} As the Camden kids are compared to kids from the neighboring affluent suburb Moorestown, their opportunities and lives are said to be vastly different, yet both have dreams such as being superheroes or going to college. A young teen in foster care “has dreams like so many other girls” (of a future with Justin Bieber).^{3v}

A major occurrence in the programs is the kids saying what professions they want to go into in the future, present in ten of the nineteen episodes. The vast majority of their desired future jobs are in the professional sector, with doctor, veterinarian and politician being particularly popular.

³ However, the episode “the Blueberry Children” does not describe the children as hopeful and dreamers; in fact, the inability to dream and “see past junior high or high school” is noted as a problem and result of their farm labor.^{xviii}

Featured childhoods as deviant from the normal

Another pattern I want to discuss is the representation of the children's lives – i.e. their childhoods – as abnormal. This is done in a few different ways. First, the programs make explicit statements that the circumstances shown are not normal. For example, the migrant labor lifestyle that migrant worker children experience is “not a normal life,”ⁱ while celebrities' kids also lack “a normal upbringing.”^{xvii} Children of hoarders' lives are described as “a total absence of the normal.”^{iv}

Second, the programs compare the featured children and childhoods to a generic childhood supposedly experienced by ‘most’ or ‘other’ children. For example, migrant children “collect rocks in a manner unfamiliar to most kids in America,”^{iv} while a recent high school grad does not have “what other kids can afford” when he goes off to college.^{xiii} Two of the programs ask poor children if they are jealous of ‘other’ kids, for example when they know that “other kids wake up to so much more.”^{xii},^{xiv} Third, this comparison to other American children is juxtaposed with statements about specific circumstances that should characterize the featured children's lives but do not. The best example of this is Ann Curry's statement that “When most children in America think of summer, they think of swimming, playing, and going to camp. But for some children, summer means hard labor in the hot sun.”ⁱ Statements such as this set up ideal childhood circumstances (in this case, swimming and playing), convey that these are the normal circumstances (i.e. ‘most’ children experience them), and express that the featured children's lives are deviant from this norm (‘but for some children. . .’). Another poignant example is the matter of fact explanation that while 5 year old Ivan from Camden sets out to kindergarten just like the thousands of other American children, they have logged 1700 hours of reading time and receive an average of \$500 in new

school items but he only has one oversized uniform and “can only hope for books in his life.” Similarly, while “it’s lucky to be a kid in America” because of lush lawns on thousands of parks, kids in Camden cannot play in their parks because they are overrun by drug dealers.^{xiv} Furthermore, homeless teens should be worried about football games, prom, and movies but have other things they must worry about,^{xv} while hoarders’ kids lack “an average adolescence,” defined as being able to invite friends over for sleepovers and pizza parties.^{iv}

Finally, just by making the details of these children’s lives public, by pointing them out and making note of them, the media entities imply that there is something noteworthy (and therefore not common or normal) about them. Some of these details of these children’s childhoods are clearly portrayed as negative and undesirable, while others are merely pointed out and left for the viewer to interpret their significance. Yet I would argue that by simply noting certain details, a sense of unusualness and shock is apparent. Otherwise, why would air time be used to note, for example, that soda is put in babies’ bottles in central Appalachia? (Certainly this would not be the case if milk filled them instead.⁴)^{xiii}

American emphasis

Several of the shows make explicit statements confirming that the featured kids are American. These include migrant farm children, the kids in Texas shantytowns, and the kids on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. For instance, Dateline’s “Children of the Harvest” comments that the parents of the migrant family shown are legal residents and their children

⁴ In addition to pointing out how the featured childhoods differ from the ideal, the programs indicate that children everywhere share inherent qualities. For instance, Diane Sawyer notes as she reveals the lives of children in Camden that “it’s worth remembering that whatever a little kid sees out the window on the horizon, kids and their dreams start out the same everywhere.”^{xiv} The foster children are just “typical kids” with braces, freckles, glasses and bashful smiles⁸, and little Maria in a Texas shantytown is “in some ways like most other American children” because she finds happiness in playing the flute, wants to look her best, and rides a yellow school bus. These examples demonstrate the emphasis that regardless of their social conditions, children are children no matter who or where they are.

are U.S. citizensⁱ, while Nightline’s “blueberry children” are described as “Americans as young as 5 years old forced to work fields in blistering heat.”^{xviii} The half a million people living in Texas shantytowns are “mostly American citizens” who pay taxes.ⁱⁱ Finally, the Lakota Sioux featured in 20/20’s “Children of the Plains” are deemed “the first Americans” as a brief history of their oppression by the US government is provided.^{xii} Notably, this declaration of the kids’ American citizenship appears in the three programs about Hispanic children and the one about Native American children.

A recurring pattern as the news programs discuss the children’s social conditions is to construct them as unnecessary to exist in the U.S. For example, the episode “the Blueberry Children” frames child labor’s persistence as “an American disgrace,” and all three episodes on migrant child labor reference the prohibition of most types of child labor in the early 20th century. The programs make reference to America’s strengths and goodness when they say that “a staggering number of American children [are] now living in poverty in this land of plenty” and ask “in this land of equal opportunity, what is it to be a child dreaming of your future on Pine Ridge?” yet the programs use these statements to demonstrate the apparent inequality existing between these featured children and other American children.

Patterns in Symptoms and Effects the Children Experience

Table 3 identifies issues or effects that the children in the programs are explicitly identified as suffering from. This is an important aspect to evaluate because it identifies what specific ‘problems’ make the children noteworthy enough to be featured on national television; indeed, such symptoms and effects are what deem them, at least explicitly, as ‘in need.’ Some of these issues are the principal focus of the news programs, while others are brought up as symptoms of effects of the main issue featured. For example, hunger is the

main issue in “Hunger at Home,” while it is brought up as a symptom of the poverty featured in “Children of the Mountains.”

The concern appearing most often in the programming is children experiencing fear and anxiety, mentioned in more episodes in my data set than not. The apparent causes of this effect range from financial stress to having OCD to living in a high crime zone. Hunger, struggling in school, and living with many people in one house are also common concerns mentioned. It seems that the symptoms and effects can be categorized into two general groups: larger social problems and personal discomforts, both appearing often. Issues such as hunger, homelessness, poor academic performance, and addicted parents are issues that are identified as social problems by the general public, the media, and government policy, for example. Their prevalence and their negative effects not just on the children who experience

Table 3. List of symptoms and effects that children experience, if mentioned in at least 2 episodes.

Symptom/Effect	Number of Episodes	Symptom/Effect	Number of Episodes
Fear, anxiety	10	Raised by family other than parents	3
Hunger	9	Lack of privacy	3
Struggles in school	8	Poor quality of housing	3
Many people in one house	8	Suicide (attempted or succeeded)	3
Prevented from playing	7	School dropout	3
Sleep on floor/shares bed	5	Exposure to harmful pesticides,	2
Homelessness	5	death	
Cold	4	Exhaustion, body aches	2
Feels alone/unwanted	4	Live in dangerous neighborhood	2
Depression	4	Child death from gun violence	2
No electricity	4	Parents fighting	2
Alcoholic/drug addicted parents	3	Parent killed	2

them but on the larger society are recognized to a large degree. On the other hand, several of the effects mentioned in the shows are not so much social problems as they are uncomfortable experiences the featured children suffer from. This includes the kids having to share a house with many other people, mentioned eight times, and having to sleep on the floor or share a bed with others, mentioned five times. These effects seem related to the lack of privacy, mentioned three times.

Emphasis on higher education

Throughout the episodes there is a significant emphasis on higher education and related issues. As shown in Table 3, children struggling in school and high dropout rates are problematized explicitly in a number of the episodes. There is also a strong pattern of the kids wanting to go to college. Some aspire to be the first in their families to do so. As mentioned above, almost all the careers the children say they aspire to are in the professional sector and require advanced education. Showing the kids' desires for college is juxtaposed with statements about the obstacles they face getting there. For example, one show features a once homeless seventeen year old, living on her own and supporting herself, who dreams of college but "how can that be possible for a kid who's all alone making 8 bucks an hour?"^{vi} (Later in the episode we learn she received a full ride scholarship to college). A family of migrant farm children and their parents want the kids to "break the cycle" of farm work and attend college, but the news anchor notes that "getting that education can be a struggle" given unfavorable statistics and a poor economy.^{xvi}

Furthermore, many of the 'success stories' that the programs feature highlight college success. For instance, the "Children of the Harvest" broadcast's main featured child, Uly, is behind in school but, coincidentally, his school teacher is a former child migrant worker

herself who was the first in her family to go to college and helps Uly to catch up and encourages him to remember his hard work in the field to push himself through school.ⁱ College seems to be, essentially, the definition of success in the perspective of the news entities. This is demonstrated in “Waiting on the World to Change” after a non-profit organization called Urban Promise is shown as one of the positive efforts of change in the city of Camden.^{xiv} Although the director of the organization cites on camera the goals of the program as getting children off the streets and into safe programs and to challenge them academically, spiritually, and socially (perhaps related to college attendance but not its ultimate focus), the news anchor grabs onto the organization’s 90% college attendance rate statistic to point out as evidence of its success. Although there is a large and diverse array of featured ‘successes’ of the children and their needs (ex. a baby successfully weaned off narcotics^{xi}, the daughters of a hoarder getting a clean house^{iv}), college attendance is the most prevalent.

ⁱ (2011, July 17)

ⁱⁱ (2012, April 25)

ⁱⁱⁱ (2009, March 20)

^{iv} (2012, March 10)

^v (2011, December 2)

^{vi} (2011, August 26)

^{vii} (2010, July 25)

^{viii} (2012, March 31)

^{ix} (2011, August 24)

^x (2012, October 18)

^{xi} (2012, July 11)

^{xii} (2011, October 14)

^{xiii} (2009, February 13)

^{xiv} (2007, January 26)

^{xv} (2011, August 26)

^{xvi} (2011, May 22)

^{xvii} (2012, July 19)

^{xviii} (2009, October 30)

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Why does the media construct the ‘child in need’ in the way that it does? What overall messages does it send? What effects does the discourse have on the representation of the featured children and communities?

The ‘Child in Need’ and the ‘Normal Child’

As discussed above in the findings section, the ‘child in need’ is represented as lacking a ‘normal’ childhood. Therefore, another child appears in these news programs as well: the ‘normal child.’ This conceptual child is who the news programs refer to when they mention “the average American child,” the generic “other children,” or “most kids in America.” So then, who is this child standing in opposition to the ‘child in need’? First, he does not have to do manual labor, since the episode “Children of the Harvest’s” main child, migrant worker Uly, “collects rocks in a manner unfamiliar to most kids in America.”¹ The ‘normal child’ also associates summer with swimming, playing, and going to summer camp.² As a teenager he does not have to worry about much other than things like prom, football games, and homework, and gets to celebrate high school graduation with a supportive family. Furthermore, she is able to invite friends over and have sleepovers and pizza parties. The ‘normal’ child is able to play often in safe places, as “it’s lucky to be a kid in America. . .playing outdoors in the sunshine. . .on some of the thousands of parks” in this country^{xiv}. As the ‘normal’ child heads to school each year, he has new clothes and school supplies and has

¹ Although the topic of stringent school work has been a topic of some popular culture debates, it does not appear in these programs. In fact, school is highly portrayed as a necessary and positive reality for the children. For example, “Children of the Harvest” is explicit in saying that summer school is “where migrant children should be,” rather than in the fields.

² The examples in this paragraph all come from explicit comparisons in the program content of the featured children to the ‘normal child’. Also, I use the gendered pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ based on which gender the reference refers to, mostly for the purpose of avoiding the awkward “he or she” throughout the paragraph.

been read to 1700 hours (although the specifics of this statistic, i.e. the age of the child and time frame and source are not provided).^{xiv} He or she has a stable home with access to plenty of food. Finally, she lives in peace and quiet, as conditions of hoarding,^{iv} OCD,^{viii} and publicity^{xvii} do not allow for this aspect of a “normal life.”

So then, who is the ‘child in need’ as constructed by the television programs? Why is he or she in need; what is lacking? For one, the child in need lacks that which the normal child has, since the circumstances of the featured children’s lives are contrasted explicitly with the “normal,” “average,” etc. Furthermore, the symptoms and effects shown in table 3 are a significant part of how the children’s needs are constructed. A prominent pattern is the emphasis on emotional disturbance. Fear and anxiety is the effect mentioned most, and depression, feeling alone, and suicide are mentioned in several episodes as well. The ‘child in need’ also lacks personal space and privacy, since he has to share a bed with others, has little privacy, and shares a living space with many others. His house is often cold, dark, and in poor condition. His parents may be absent or unpleasant to be near, as he may be raised by family other than parents, they have been killed or are serving overseas in the military, they are prone to fighting with each other, or are drug addicts. Also, the ‘child in need’ has a tendency to struggle in school and be at high risk to dropout before high school graduation.

In summary, the child in need is portrayed collectively in the news programs as lacking a carefree life, a likelihood of succeeding in school and attending college, and a traditional nuclear family³. These things which the child in need lacks (and the normal child possesses) correspond with the things considered necessary for the ideal form of childhood

³ There is, of course, a level of ambiguity and contradictory portrayals of the children and their needs. For example, although I have identified ‘lack of a traditional nuclear family’ as one thing that defines the ‘child in need,’ the episode “Generation Meds” highlights a residential treatment center for foster children, which does not fit the traditional family model, as a positive solution to the children’s need for love and stability.

that predominates in modern Western society. My data (table 3) reveals a strong problematization of situations which undermine the children's ability to have a carefree and protected childhood.

These representations emphasize that which the featured children do not have – a 'normal' childhood. This normal childhood – represented collectively as the ability to play and live a carefree life – is what the 'child in need' lacks. By setting up both the normal or ideal childhood and the featured childhoods as lacking it, the news entities serve the function of marking the specific childhoods that they broadcast as deviant from the ideal, and therefore as what I call 'defective childhoods'. Although the children may suffer from difficult social conditions such as poverty, hunger, and child labor, a large part of what makes them 'in need' is not these conditions themselves but their consequence – the lack of the normative cultural standard for childhood. The 'normal' childhood conditions represented in these broadcasts, such as the ability to play, go to summer camp, and have a stable nuclear family structure, are reminiscent of the dominant modern American standard of the ideal childhood. The epitomical representation of the 'child in need' is one who can no longer be a child: the foster child whose prescription drugs make her comatose^v, the migrant worker child who cannot merely be 'just a kid'ⁱ, or the girl who has to care for her own drug addicted mother^{xiii}. Two of the featured childhoods are described as being taken away by adults and stolen, and this seems to be an explicit depiction of what defines a 'child in need:' a child without a childhood (that is, a childhood that does not look like the ideal).

By comparing the conditions of the children featured to other, preferred conditions and pointing out how they are not being met, the programs set up the featured childhoods as deviant from what they also set up as the normal and ideal childhood. As Sharon Stephens

(1995) discusses that the global media has played an important role in making Western society conscious of the difficult and shocking social conditions of many children worldwide, she argues that notions of deviant childhoods not only point out differences in children's realities but also make the notion of a universal ideal childhood legitimate. I see this as a global example of what my data does at a national level. Framing the 'deviant' childhoods as undesirable and comparing them to an ideal childhood constructed as 'normal' sets up the ideal as morally superior and the deviant childhoods as marked for reform. Furthermore, because the television programs seek to apply the ideal notion of childhood (innocence, play, education) to a variety of supposedly deviant childhoods (OCD, poor, celebrity, etc.), the belief that this ideal should be universal is reinforced.

Notions of 'normal' and 'deviant' childhoods are often central in social constructions of childhood. For example, as 'young carers' – those under eighteen who provide substantive care for a disabled family member – have come under focus in British policy in recent years, discussion about these kids' lives has been done so by contrasting them with an ideal 'normal' childhood; thus, the young carers are sympathized with for losing out on their childhood because their responsibilities conflict with the ideal childhood (O'Dell, Crafter, de Abreu, & Cline, 2010). Aldebot-Green (2011) and Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003) maintain that, in the case of the discourse on street children worldwide, diametric oppositions are crucial in setting up ideal constructions of family, childhood, etc.; street children are seen as immoral and detrimental because they are compared to the 'morally superior' 'normal' children living in stable family homes. This case study may help explain why notions of 'deviant and 'normal' childhoods often accompany each other, in the same way the news

programs I have analyzed frame the ‘child in need’ as abnormal compared to a ‘normal’ childhood.

Constructing the child

The concept of a ‘normal’ childhood or the notion that most children in America experience any similar conditions is weak when we consider the diverse realities of American children’s lives today. For instance, only 69 percent of children lived with two parents (step, biological, or adopted) in 2009, and more than 10 percent lived with a grandparent. Almost 16 percent of children lived in a blended family of some kind, defined by the presence of a stepparent, stepsibling, or half sibling. Approximately 21 percent of children lived with either a relative besides parents and siblings or a non-relative (Kreider and Ellis, 2011). Furthermore, the implication that the conditions that the children featured in the programs experience, which are apparently what define them as ‘in need,’ are unusual and rare underestimates the prevalence of such issues and of the contradictory nature between childhood realities and the ideal. Merely calculating the number of children that the episodes put into the ‘in need’ category calls into question the very legitimacy of this category. Based on the statistics provided by the programs themselves, conservatively at least 22.3 million children are placed in the ‘in need’ group⁴, making up approximately 31 percent of the total U.S. child population of about 73 million (America’s Children, 2012). Although still a minority, this percentage constitutes close to one third of all American children, a large proportion to deem as ‘abnormal.’

⁴ This number is based on the following numbers stated in the episodes: 17 million kids food insecure;^{ix} 155,000 children with a parent overseas in the National Guard;^{xix} about a million kids with OCD;^{viii} millions of children living with hoarder parents^{iv} (I counted 2 million to be conservative); tens of thousands of foster kids given narcotics^v (I counted 20,000 to be conservative); hundreds of thousands of children as migrant farm laborersⁱ (I counted 200,000); one baby an hour born addicted to prescription drugs.^{xi} No number was given for celebrity children suffering from the paparazzi,^{xvii} and I did not include the numbers from the other populations with high poverty because those numbers would likely overlap with the statistic including 17 mill kids being food insecure.

As discussed above, the programs frame the ‘normal child’ as being able to live a carefree life full of play and without stress. Ann Curry remarks in “Children of the Harvest” that “when most children in America think of summer, they think of swimming, playing, and going to camp.”¹ Yet only about 10 million children attend summer camp every year (Fassler, n.d.), around 14% of all US children. While this is a large number of children who attend camp, it is far from the more than 50 percentage needed to qualify as ‘most.’ Furthermore, while data on how many kids have access to swimming pools is not available, Curry’s statement ignores the fact that pools are not easily accessible to many children in America, such as those living in inner cities. And while migrant labor inevitably prevents the children from playing during their work time, the episode still shows the children rolling down a hill (albeit, one made of chicken manure), playing video games, and singing as they work. Furthermore, the journalists do not address the contradiction between the problematization of lack of play with their statement that migrant children should be in summer school, which would also diminish their play time.

One of the issues associated with the featured ‘children in need’ is depression and suicide, appearing in the episodes portraying homeless teens, migrant worker children, children of hoarders, kids with OCD, kids on the Pine Ridge reservation, and foster children on narcotics. The programs rely on the kids themselves or mental health professionals to inform that they suffer from depression or suicide attempts, so there is likely a high level of validity to the claims. The programs indicate that the kids’ depression is a direct effect of the issues the children suffer from, such as poverty, work, cluttered houses, and psychotropic drugs. Certainly, it is likely that these difficult social conditions do, in fact, trigger the kids’ depression. However, to imply that depression is a condition which primarily only effects

children in these types of conditions is misleading. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services determined that in 2009, 8.1 percent of all children nationwide had a “major depressive episode,” with percentage for poor children at 7.4, near poor at 8.6, and not poor at 8.1. Percentage for children in large metros was 8.0, small metros at 8.1, and nonmetro at 8.5. White children had a rate of 8.3, black children at 7.9, American Indian at 7.5, Asian at 7.6, and Hispanic at 7.7 (Substance Abuse, 2010). Therefore, the programs peg this issue as a problem of specific groups and of the particular families, kids, and communities they feature when in reality such problems afflict children and families of all communities, social classes, and ethnicities. If depression is something that marks a child as ‘in need,’ then the representation that the news programs produce is incomplete because it ignores the children who are depressed but do not belong to a specific group that can be categorized and discussed in the way the featured children’s groups can be. The representation is also misleading in that it indicates that all, or at least a majority, of children in the featured groups suffer from the issues. For example, when a nurse working with a migrant health program says that “We see really tired kids; we see depression in children; despair, the inability to dream,”^{xviii} the generalization is applied to the entire group of migrant kids, regardless that surely some of the kids in the group are not seriously depressed. In fact, the other two episodes on migrant child labor depict the children as hopeful for the future and having dreams.

This same form of representation of the issues and the kids can be seen with other topics in the episodes. For example, many of the children in the episodes are shown to be suffering because a parent is missing for some reason from their daily lives. This is the primary issue in the episode “Camp of the Brave,”^{xix} whose children have one or both parents

deployed overseas. Parents separated from children also appear as a symptom children experience in the episodes “Children of the Harvest,” in which migrant child Uly “turns eleven without his parents”^{xi} because they are at work in the fields, “Hollywood’s Kids” because celebrity parents spend much time working and traveling away from their children^{xi}, and in “Hard Times Generation” when homeless families have to split up parents and kids between relatives’ houses.^{xx} Children are also separated from at least one of their parents in the 20/20 episodes on Central Appalachia,^{xiii} Camden New Jersey,^{xiv} and the Pine Ridge reservation^{xii} because of the parents’ drug and alcohol abuse. These circumstances do produce separation of kids from parents, but so do many other circumstances that are not discussed in the programs. For instance, parents divorcing separates thousands of kids each year from a parent, but this cause is not mentioned. Instead, the representation indicates that parental separation is a specific problem of these particular groups of children. However, in reality it affects children across social boundaries for reasons such as divorce and is not rare in America. Only 69% of all kids in America in 2009 lived with two parents, including biological, adopted, and stepparents (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Although this is a majority, the 31% minority is a large percentage to consider as ‘in need’ by the implication that being separated from a parent is a qualification for such. (This percentage would actually be higher if it included children separated from one parent but who still live with the other parent and a stepparent). More generalizations and misleading representations are discussed regarding the portrayal of parents and communities of the children in the section ‘Constructing the Viewer.’

I bring up these examples to illustrate that both the concepts of the ‘child in need’ and of the ‘normal child’ are at best only partially rooted in reality. I am not suggesting that the

representations are entirely fabricated or even false; in fact, I feel that they bring attention to issues related to injustices and inequalities that are quite real and problematic. However, we must understand that they are only that – representations. In the process of representation, some issues have been highlighted and others ignored; some children highlighted and others ignored; some perspectives highlighted and others ignored. As Bourdieu (1998) puts it, “the [television] set is there in front of viewers, and what they see hides what they don’t see – and what they don’t see, in this constructed image, are the social conditions of its construction” (p. 34). Media representations are products of a highly competitive news media market, in which producers tend to emphasize entertainment value and dramatize their framing to attract higher ratings. Many viewers may not be consciously aware that the ‘realities’ they are seeing on their televisions are representations based on the specific goals and interests of the producers and ‘see’ the featured children through their perspective.

Constructing the Viewer

The news episodes I am analyzing here, like all commercial media productions, were produced for an audience. Although the news networks do not have direct control over who will watch their programming, the episodes in my analysis appear to construct the viewer, through language, as a specific person: primarily, as an outsider unfamiliar with the children, their communities, and their circumstances. The television programs employ several patterns which serve to construct the audience as uninformed outsiders to the children, issues, and communities they feature. First, several of the shows make explicit statements to the viewer, typically through the use of the word “you,” spoken directly to the audience. This is shown, for example, in the opening lines of “Children of the Plains” when the news anchor informs the audience that ABC conducted one and a half years of filming on the Pine Ridge Indian

Reservation “so that **you** could see [the stories we found] too” (emphasis mine) and that “[the kids’] stories will really touch **your** heart.”^{xii} Similarly, the preview for “Don’t Shoot: I Want to Grow Up” ends with “we take **you** inside **their** world, next.”^x Phrases such as these invite the viewer in to experience something supposedly new to them. This perhaps helps to explain the pattern I discussed previously about referring to the children as hidden or invisible; the television programs indicate that the children and their conditions are previously unknown to the viewer. We see this likewise as the people struggling in the recession in Southeast Ohio are called “Americans you don’t hear about often”^{vii} and the living conditions of the children of hoarders are described as “unimaginable chaos,”^{iv} which naturally can only be unimaginable to those who have not seen it.

In a few cases the news programs ambiguously use the words “us” or “we” to represent what appears to be both the journalists and the viewers combined to form a general collective entity to think about and react to the children. For example, “Waiting on the World to Change” pauses its programming for a special note to the viewer: “If we (the journalists) change their lives we would not be bringing you the truth about what happens when journalists are not there; we hope at the end of this evening **you’ll** join us in thinking about the things **we** can all do to make a difference.”^{xiv} Similarly, “Generation Meds” asks, “Is there something else **we** owe these children who have already endured so much?”^v This phrasing gives a sense of responsibility to both the audience and news network. The programs also make statements indicating that this collective ‘we’ thinks about the issues a certain way. This is seen when “The Blueberry Children” remarks that “when we hear the phrase child labor we think of tropical fields overseas, but an ABC News investigation brings it right here to home”^{xviii} and when “Children of the Mountains” comments that “we all know

the stereotypes about mountain people, but before you make up your mind, the reality for some in those hills.”^{xiii} Similarly, “Waiting on the World to Change” begins its broadcast with “We all say over and over, ‘success doesn’t come from what’s around you, success comes from what’s inside you’; well, tonight go with us as we meet 3 small citizens of a city called Camden and they’re going to tell you about their lives.”^{xiv} These statements not only indicate that they know what most of the audience is thinking, but they also imply that they want to change that thinking to some degree.

Furthermore, the programs make explicit statements to the viewers that what is being shown on the television screen is unfamiliar to them. For instance, the Texas shantytowns are called “a place few of us can imagine,”ⁱⁱ and conditions in central Appalachia are described as “a kind of poverty a lot of us cannot imagine.”^{xiii} The shows also contrast the viewer (and journalists) with the people featured in the programs by statements such as that the Chicago ghetto is “a hidden America most of us will never see”^x and “most of us are making Christmas lists” in December but the children in Camden wish for things such as food, curtains, and a better job for parents.^{xiv} This latter example makes a general sweeping statement that the majority of ‘us’ (Americans, presumably) participate in consumerist Christmas gift giving and implies that the children in Camden do not. Yet this generalization overlooks the fact that some Americans, such as members of non-Christian religions and participants in the new alternative gift-giving trend, do not make Christmas lists, while most children in Camden do. Undoubtedly there are children in Camden who do not receive Christmas gifts because their families are too poor, but most do, or at least wish for toys for Christmas. Therefore, when the programs make statements such as these, they exaggerate the differences between the children and the children’s communities that they feature and the

rest of the country and the rest of the country's children. In other words, they manufacture a larger boundary between the audience and the featured children and families than actually exists.

Although exact data on who views these television programs is unavailable, it is reasonable to conclude that at least some of the viewers of these programs are somewhat familiar with the issues afflicting the children featured, especially poverty. For example, Diane Sawyer remarks that her report on "Children of the Plains" will feature "a kind of poverty you have never seen."^{xii} Yet poverty itself is not rare in America (between 12.5 and 15 percent of the entire American population in 2007-2011) and has been generally increasing each year since 2000 (Asst Secretary, 2012). Is she presuming that the viewers happen to be the Americans who have not experienced poverty, or that this poverty is particularly unique, an unusual spectacle? It is true that the poverty on the reservation is quite rampant, but many other aspects of their lives are shown that may be related to poverty but by no means a sole effect of it. Alcoholism is a main item of focus in the episode, noting how many of the kids' parents are addicts. Perhaps it is this extreme prevalence of the disease in this community that causes Diane to remark it to be a kind of poverty the viewer is unfamiliar with. Alcoholism is also shown significantly in the 20/20 episodes on poverty in Camden, New Jersey^{xix} and Central Appalachia,^{xiii} along with other drug abuse. While substance abuse is a prevalent issue in these places (80% adult alcoholism rate on Pine Ridge; prescription drug abuse twice the rate of major cities like New York in Eastern Kentucky, according to the episodes), and I agree that having alcoholic parents has negative effects on most children, the programs show the alcoholic family members in a poor light (screaming, attempting suicide, neglecting children) and portray these communities

negatively because of the alcoholism. What is missing in the representations of these communities and the alcoholism that effects them is the other children in other communities and social classes for whom alcoholism is also significant. The programs, in contrast, give the perception that alcoholism is a problem plaguing these communities and that it deems the children in them as “in need,” yet they ignore the fact that alcoholism affects parents and children across racial, class, and status barriers.

Child-Saving Functions

As I have discussed extensively, the news programs analyzed above approach the children and their conditions with a problematic perspective. They go beyond just basic ‘news’ in the sense of reporting what is happening and portray the reported conditions as undesirable. Although explicit statements that the conditions are wrong and must be fixed are uncommon, the programs very strongly construct them as such. This is done in several ways. One way is the use of dramatic phrasing to describe conditions. For example, the episode “Children of Hoarders” describes the situation as “millions of children living in the wreckage with [the hoarders],”^{iv} and “Children of the Mountains” uses the metaphor that “for every adult dealing or using drugs a child begins to drown.”^{xiii} Furthermore, most of the programs assign blame for the conditions and many engage in discussion about how to alleviate the conditions. The solutions discussed range greatly. For instance, law enforcement, specifically the U.S. Department of Labor, is blamed for lax enforcement of child labor laws, and companies such as Walmart and the Adkin Blueberry Company are called out for producing and buying produce picked by children. Local and federal governments are blamed for ignoring the tax paying citizens of Las Colonias, Texas,ⁱⁱ not following through on President Kennedy’s promise to help the people of Appalachia,^{xiii} and

for oppressing the Native Americans of Pine Ridge Reservation and forcing them into a system of dependency.^{xii} The episode “Generation Meds” calls for the federal government to regulate the amount of psychotropic drugs given to foster children and for the states to provide them with more therapy.^v Finally, the programs frame the issues they discuss as needing to be fixed by discussing solutions to them, even at times urging the viewer to take action. These solutions range from economic development on Pine Ridge^{xii} and in central Appalachia,^{xiii} to loving homes for foster kids and mentors for kids in Camden, New Jersey,^{xiv} to anti-violence groups in Chicago.^x

These media techniques set up the television news programs as legitimate makers of value-judgments about the conditions of the kids they depict. For example, three of the shows feature migrant farm labor. Although they never explicitly say that children working in the fields is wrong, they strongly construct it as so. This is what the child-savers near the turn of the 20th century did - they took note of specific social conditions of the day that effected children and then started a campaign and movement based on the premise that these conditions were undesirable and should be ‘corrected’. The news programs, therefore, serve a child-saving function because they mark specific child realities as problematic and needing correction. Yet the medium of national television broadcasts is significantly different than the techniques employed by the original child-savers, despite some of their concerns and targets being very similar.

Many of the ‘needs’ portrayed in the news programs are very similar to the issues targeted during the child-saving movement. Poverty and its symptoms such as hunger and child labor were the most overt targets of the Progressive era reformers, while hunger is the second most prevalent ‘need’ mentioned in my data (see Table 3), and many of the other

negative effects the children in the television programs experience are directly related to poverty (homelessness, poor housing, etc.). Child labor was a prevalent target of the child-saving movement and is a topic featured in all three of the news networks I analyzed. Seeking to eliminate child labor has not changed, although the details of it have. The original child-savers primarily sought to reduce urban child labor in the factories and ignored rural farm labor, while farm labor is the type of child labor in the modern media's focus. Both cited physical harm as reasons for child labor's abolition: in factories machinery could chop off children's fingers and on modern-day farms pesticides cause health problems. The child labor laws pushed forth by the reformers in the early twentieth century opposed children working in factories, mines, or the streets, but left child farm labor alone because it was considered morally valuable to the children performing it (Mintz 2004). The reformers drew upon the discourse of sentimentality in their quest to change the laws and practices, relying on the "notion that all children, regardless of class, deserved a protected childhood, one devoted to play and education" (Mintz, 2004, p. 181). The three episodes in my data that target child labor also rely upon sentimentality to frame their problematization of the farm labor the children perform. This is seen, for example, in "Children of the Harvest," where farm labor is described as "oversized work for undersized bodies" and as the reason the kids' "eyeblink of childhood" is being stolen from them. Furthermore, the Progressive era reformers fought for federal restrictions banning many forms of child labor, and the modern media features the perspective that these laws should be expanded and better enforced on farms. The latter is done by featuring human rights workers calling for reform. Based on this, it appears that the discourse of sentimentality is still being used as justification for ending child labor and that the legal system is still targeted as the site of reform, while farm

labor is no longer considered benign but an infringement on the ideal of a protected childhood.⁵ Although further study would be needed to determine if the modern news networks intend their programs to serve a reformist function, the episodes I have analyzed emphasize heavily the need for changes in the law and law enforcement.

There are, of course, issues mentioned in the news programs that are uniquely modern. Obsessive compulsive disorder, hoarding, and the paparazzi did not exist, at least in society's consciousness, until relatively recently. Yet many of the symptoms of these modern conditions conflict with the child-saving movement's emphasis on childhood being a time for play and innocence. For example, not being able to play in normal ways such as swimming, seeing friends, and riding a merry-go-round without fear are mentioned as sufferings of children with OCD.^{viii} So although some of the causes behind the infringements on childhood 'carefree-ness' are new, the symptoms that the modern media problematizes match the symptoms that the Progressive era child-savers targeted.

Lower-class emphasis

The concerns mentioned in the news episodes heavily match the concerns of the Progressive era child-saving movement. Another similarity remains as well: poor, working class, and immigrant groups being primary targets for reform efforts. Out of the nineteen news programs in my data, eleven clearly fit into these groups: the three on migrant farm labor (immigrant populations); "Don't Shoot: I Want to Grow Up"^x and "Waiting on the World to Change"^{xiv} (poor ghetto populations); "City of Tin,"ⁱⁱ "Children of the Mountains,"^{xiii} and "Children of the Plains"^{xii} (underclass, poor populations); "No Place Like Home,"ⁱⁱⁱ "Hunger at Home,"^{ix} and "Friends & Neighbors"^{vii} (working class and poor populations). I do

⁵ Further study could investigate potential reasons for this change in views on child farm labor, such as the shift from farm labor being done mostly by children on their family's farms to now being done mostly by migrant children on large-scale commercial farms.

not list the episode “Hard Times Generation”^{xx} here because the homeless families featured are described as “formerly middle class” or the episode “From Happy to Homeless”^{vi} because the homeless youth have been turned out from families whose social class is not clearly revealed. Although five of the episodes feature issues where the children do not come from a specific social class (hoarding, OCD, military kids, addicted mothers, prescription narcotics), and one features celebrity children, the episodes still primarily target lower class and immigrant groups.

Why does the modern media feature these groups heavily? Like the original child-savers, poverty and its effects appear to concern the news programs the most. Therefore, featuring lower class and immigrant groups is, at least on the surface, a natural extension of this concern because these groups are the most likely to experience poverty. However, as I discussed in the literature review, the Progressive era reformers also were motivated by the desire to transform the ‘wayward’ ways of these groups to fit the middle class model of child-rearing, and they “often confused delinquency and neglect with the realities of life under poverty” (Mintz, 2004, p. 155). Does this perspective also inform the way the news media constructs the ‘child in need’ and frames their reports? Although I cannot conclude from only analyzing the news transcripts if the news producers and journalists have any intention to do so, the framing they employ portrays these populations in a variety of negative ways.

In many instances, the news episodes feature specific individuals, typically a parent or other family member of one of the children, in an unfavorable light. Furthermore, the communities of the kids, particularly those that make up a culture somewhat distinct from the mainstream American norm, in some cases are showcased as unusual, unique, and

dysfunctional. The episode “Children of the Mountains” provides a clear demonstration of this. The episode features people in the poor rural areas of central Appalachia, the main issue being severe poverty, with substance abuse, unemployment, and health problems also significant. The episode mentions a variety of reasons why these issues persist and place blame on entities such as the coal companies for taking billions of dollars in profit from the mountains and then abandoning the towns, the government for not providing services like trash cleanup, and pharmaceutical companies for misleading information about addictiveness to prescription drugs. Explicit language also praises the people there, emphasizing their pride and strong faith and calling them “descendants of pioneers driven by their dreams. . .to create an American continent.”^{xiii} Viewers are told that these people produce a significant amount of America’s electric power in coal and have lost more people in America’s wars than any other region of the country. Hence, the programs explicitly set up the people as decent Americans and cite inequalities and exploitation to explain their poverty.

However, a contradictory portrayal persists as well: of these Appalachians as strange and culturally deviant. For instance, the people are depicted as participating in violent feuds and littering their land. One child’s mom receives a fourth DUI citation, while another’s stepdad drinks too much to attend his football game and a child’s family has a shameful incident of incest. The miners pack mostly soda and junk food in their lunch boxes, and many kids and people have lost teeth from drinking too much Mountain Dew. Although few would deny that substance abusing parents and family incest are detrimental to children’s welfare, this portrayal sets up the central Appalachians as irresponsible, outrageous people not just for these behaviors but for breaking larger American norms by the tendencies such as littering and consuming large amounts of soda. The portrayal of this group of people as

toothless, uneducated, and unruly makes them a spectacle for the audience to witness, confirming the show's description of them as "a world apart." The families of two of the three children featured in "Waiting on the World to Change," about Camden, New Jersey, are also represented as chaotic and dysfunctional when it shows seven year old Moochie's parents screaming at each other while she covers her ears, and five year old Ivan's grandmother shouting at the camera.^{xiv} These images conform to the stereotype of inner city ghetto residents as loud and erratic and indicate that this behavior characterizes Camden, despite the fact that family dynamics vary immensely within the city, and that parents yelling at each other takes place in families of all classes and communities. This type of portrayal of these poor communities does more than merely bring awareness to their poverty; it displays their lifestyles in a derogatory fashion.

Another practice apparently common in Appalachia, according to the episode, is to put soda, particularly Mountain Dew, in babies' bottles.^{xiii} This practice likely seems shocking to most viewers, and the journalists must consider it to be unusual since they take air time pointing it out. But it is not just a benign particularity; even without the episode showing children with lots of cavities many viewers would find the practice unhealthy and even deplorable. Yet the episode does not inform viewers that soda costs less than milk, a significant fact for those with such low incomes. Reminiscent of the Progressive era child-savers mistaking neglect for life under poverty, the news program represents the adults as irresponsible and negligent without providing full information. Similarly, the episode "Children of the Harvest" discusses the financial need that causes a father to take his children to work in the fields with him, but also calls this "trading away education and long-term health for immediate financial need" and says that the father knows the law but breaks it

anyway.¹ An ambiguous representation emerges as the reasons behind the parents putting their children to work are legitimated while simultaneously critiquing the parents for doing so. The episode also problematizes the children “down[ing] uncooked hot dogs as they [drive] to the next field” and lack of family time while the parents work the fields⁶ (despite the fact that earlier in the broadcast the mother of this particular family remarks that she looks fondly on summer months spent together in the fields as a close family). Yet no obvious justification for deeming these circumstances as problematic exists; the news media implicitly makes a value judgment that these practices and circumstances are unfavorable, even though the people experiencing them do not necessarily consider them so.

Finally, many of the episodes show children living with extended relatives in the same, often crowded, household. Again, this circumstance appears from a problematic perspective, with the related ‘symptoms’ of being raised by family other than parents, lack of privacy, and sharing a bed with others (see Table 3). As discussed above, these realities stand in opposition to representations of the ‘normal’ childhood, which includes having a traditional nuclear family and individual space. Yet as Froma Walsh (2012) points out, constructions of normality tend to favor dominant groups, and “notions of normality sanction and privilege certain family arrangements while stigmatizing and marginalizing others” (p. 4). Therefore, by marking extended family households as characteristic of the ‘child in need,’ the news programs mark them as abnormal and stigmatize the children, families, and communities in which they are prevalent. However, various types of families and households exist in the United States. For instance, multigenerational households have

⁶ There seems to be a ‘double standard’ of sorts as the programs peg certain childhoods as ‘in need.’ This episode problematizes lack of family time while parents work and the fact that children are not in summer school, yet many professions take up parents’ time and most children do not attend summer school. Other families and groups of people who fit this description are not criticized while migrant families are marked as deviant.

increased steadily in recent years, with 16 percent of all Americans residing in them in 2008 (American Association, 2011). Although the prevalence of extended family and multigenerational households for the children featured in the programs is in part reflective of the high poverty rate of many of the children's families and hence their need for sharing living spaces, many lower class and minority groups do not share the middle class ideal of single family housing, and extended family structures play a crucial role in their social networks. Yet the television programs deem family dynamics and the associated living situations that do not match the traditional nuclear family model as part of what makes a child 'in need.'

Although the media's framing of the 'child in need' may be motivated by the desire to give all children the ideal childhood of innocence and 'carefree-ness,' it also continues the child saving movement's function of demonizing populations on the margins of society for not conforming to the 'normal' manner of child-rearing and social life. Many of the shows discuss social injustices and inequalities which disadvantage the children deemed as 'in need,' but they also broadcast the children's cultures and communities as abnormal in an unfavorable light. Therefore, the shows mark these children as being 'in need' not just because they are poor, hungry, have to work, etc., but because they are part of these 'deviant' cultures.

Television and Child-Saving

The Progressive era child-savers conducted their campaign primarily through mechanisms such as public campaigning, opening schools and orphanages, and legal reforms. The news programs perform a child-saving function, but through the much different avenue of television broadcasts and journalist influence. Several of the episodes discuss how the

journalists have specifically called out individuals and corporations for their actions, in some cases with direct results. For instance, the episode “the Blueberry Children” informs viewers that that when federal labor inspectors learned of ABC’s investigation of the Adkin Blueberry Company for using underage workers, they served the company with child labor violations. Furthermore, ABC’s investigation spurred Walmart and other grocery stores to discontinue business with this company pending further information.^{xviii} In the episode “Generation Meds,” Diane Sawyer confronts a representative of the Food and Drug Administration directly about the use of powerful psychotropic drugs on foster children;^v whether the FDA made any changes because of this is unknown. And a preview to the episode “Children of the Mountains”^{xxi} reports that when ABC contacted the Pepsi company for a response to the large consumption of Mountain Dew by children in Appalachia, the company called the news report irresponsible news and said the people need to have common sense; however, six days later Sawyer reports on the show Good Morning America that the Pepsi company has now responded to criticism and will donate a van for mobile dental work in the region.^{xxii} These are examples of the media’s reporting and framing having direct child-saving results.

Moreover, the news programs produce child-saving action through the responses of individual viewers. Eight of the nineteen episodes in my data set end their broadcasts with an invitation to the audience to help the kids and people featured by going to the news programs’ websites to find links to non-profit organizations to contribute to. There is evidence that viewers respond to these invitations. ABC reported on Good Morning America four days after “Children of the Mountains” aired that after the episode “millions and millions” of viewers responded directly to ABC wanting to help the children featured.^{xxiii}

This reaction resulted in an education trust fund for one girl, pretty boots sent to another from a family in California, a baby shower for a 19 year old's new infant, and a college scholarship being offered to another teenager.^{xxiv} ABC's World News with Diane Sawyer reported that after the episode "Hunger at Home," 23,000 dollars were donated by viewers to the food drive featured and a family who saw the broadcast now delivers groceries personally to the family of a ten year old boy who the show featured.^{xxv} 20/20 also broadcast follow-up specials on the episodes "Waiting on the World to Change" and "Children of the Plains," reporting that viewers donated enough money to provide four year old Ivan and his mother,^{xxvi} previously homeless, with monthly rent money and offered to help fourteen year old Louise with school fees,^{xxvii} for instance. Finally, the author's personal experience with the organization Urban Promise in Camden, New Jersey, which was featured on "Waiting on the World to Change," reveals that after the episode aired this particular organization received thousands of dollars in donation from viewers and gained volunteers from around the country who had previously been unfamiliar with either the organization or the city of Camden (S. Gonzales, personal communication, 2007).

These real-life actions are direct results of the news programs' reports. When viewers respond compassionately to the children they see on their television screens, they do so because they have been moved to include the children, previously unknown to them, in their "moral conscience," which Hoijer (2004) maintains is an effect of televised accounts of 'far away' human suffering. The audience can feel a connection to the children they 'meet' through the news reports because of the "mediated intimacy" that Orgad (2012) writes about (p. 6); viewers learn personal details about the children's lives despite never having met them in person. The television is a vehicle for the audience to know, understand, consider, discuss,

and act upon children and their issues in ways that otherwise may not occur. The news programs' broadcasts mediate child-saving actions by spurring people to respond to the children on television.

^{xix} (2007, July 26)

^{xxxx} (2011, March 11)

^{xxi} (2009, February 12)

^{xxii} (2009, February 18)

^{xxiii} (2009, February 17)

^{xxiv} (2009, February 20)

^{xxv} (2011, November 24)

^{xxvi} (2007, November 9)

^{xxvii} (2011, October 17)

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Summarizing Argument

I have discussed two main themes in the news programs' discursive construction of the 'child in need.' First, the 'child in need' is represented as abnormal and lacking a 'normal' childhood. Second, the audience is constructed as outsiders to the children's lives and communities. Furthermore, I have compared this modern media representation to the goals and actions of the child-saving movement in the 19th and 20th centuries and have argued that the news media continues the legacy of a negative bias towards lower class and marginalized children. Together, these patterns have the effect of marking the featured childhoods, mostly lower class ones, as defective. Children who suffer from OCD, perform farm labor, live under the paparazzi's cameras, live in poor ghettos, mountain communities, or Native American reservations, are homeless, have a military parent overseas, are born addicted to drugs, live with a hoarder, or are in foster care have a 'defective childhood' because their circumstances take away their ability to have the modern Western ideal notion of a protected and carefree childhood.

As Pickering (2001) eloquently writes, "The media engage continuously in the representational practice of othering: they hierarchize, exclude, criminalize, hegemonize and marginalize practices and populations that diverge from what, at a specific moment in time, is seen as central, safe, legitimate, normal and conventional" (as cited in Orgad, 2012, p. 54). The news programs analyzed here, through their framing of the 'child in need' as abnormal, the audience as outsiders to the children and communities featured, and the lower class children's communities as culturally deviant, serve this function of othering 'children in

need' and their families, lives, and cultures because they diverge from what is considered "safe, legitimate, and normal." Furthermore, since "notions of deviant childhoods have been a way of acknowledging differences in children's lives while also legitimizing universalized notions of an ideal childhood" (Stephens, 1995, p. 16), these news programs not only contribute to the construction of the 'child in need' but also reinforce a universal ideal of childhood.

Why It Matters

In this thesis I have examined television news' social construction of the 'child in need' and discussed the representation produced. This representation is important because it produces a source of knowledge that impacts how people think of and react to children and children's issues. Television producers have the ability to "show things and make people believe in what they show" (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 21), as evidenced by the examples discussed above of real-life action taken by viewers. The modern news media possesses strong influential powers through its function of applying subjective meaning to social phenomena and presenting them as reality. I maintain that through what Norman Fairclough (1995) calls the media's signifying power – its "power to represent things in particular ways" and "to influence knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations and social identities" (p. 2) – the news programs I have analyzed and their discursive construction of the 'child in need' impact the way America views children, the communities they come from, and the social construction of childhood.

Further Study

This study has examined the language and subject matter of four national news programs' broadcasts on children deemed as 'in need.' Although this has revealed

significant findings, there are many other avenues regarding the media's discussion of children that could be explored through further sociological investigation. A more complete study would trace the larger discursive practices that these news programs are situated in, and the discursive contexts they produce and are produced from. For instance, what aspects of the media's production environment influence what children are featured and how they are framed? How do the journalists view their role in highlighting issues of concern regarding children? Also, examining how viewers respond emotionally and cognitively to the programs could reveal what type of work they do in shaping viewers' understandings of the children and their lives. Furthermore, as I discussed above some real life examples of the programs causing action, an important question is what other actions occurred as a result of the broadcasts, and how do these affect the children involved? Finally, how do the individuals and communities featured on the programs feel about how they were portrayed by the news media?

APPENDIX:
CODING FRAME

1. What is the main issue?
2. Descriptions of the main issue
3. Population of focus
4. Description of parents, population, and the place, if one in particular
5. What other issues are stated or alluded to?
6. Symptoms/effects of issue(s)
7. Who/what is to blame?
8. Whose responsibility to fix it?
9. Descriptions of the children
10. Names for the children
11. Actions the children do
12. Other things that happen to the children:
 - a. Positive
 - b. Negative
 - c. Neutral
13. Metaphors about childhood
14. Things compared to kids missing out on
15. Other things compared to
16. Successes of individuals featured?
 - yes
 - a. Describe the successes
 - no
17. What do they need to succeed/possible solutions? (explicit)
18. Organizations/programs/other solutions
19. Reasons for hopeful outlook/positive factors for potential success
 - a. Last sentence?
20. Reasons for poor outlook/negative factors for personal success or broad positive reality
21. References to the past
22. References to the future
23. Who is called upon to speak to the problem (other than journalists)? (experts, social workers, philanthropists?)
24. Sense of surprise/shock?
 - a. That it takes place in America?
25. Journalists' descriptions of the story itself
26. Other things/notes

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