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# Deconstructing neoliberal childhood: Towards a feminist antipsychological approach

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## Abstract

This article analyses child development *as text* to highlight newly emerging contemporary tropes of northern, normalized childhoods in relation to gender, racialization and familial organization. A recent UK marketing campaign for the washing powder Persil is analysed for the ways it mobilizes discourses of childhood and child rights. This indicates some key consolidations, especially around the configuration of gendered and racialized representations as ushered in through recent modes of psychologization and feminization. Discussion focuses on how text such as this deconstructs the opposition between popular cultural and expert (developmental psychological) knowledges to mediate their mutual elaboration and legitimation. The article ends by reflecting on the consequences of the focus on psychologization and feminization in relation to possible alliances and antagonisms of inter- and cross-disciplinary approaches to childhood, and their contributions to challenging wider development discourses.

## Keywords

Banal developmentalism, capitalism, feminization, normalization, psychologization, regulation, social hygiene

This article interrogates emerging tropes of normalized childhoods through analysis of a recent UK marketing campaign for a washing powder, which is analysed in terms of the ways this articulates both childhood and motherhood and so exemplifies wider concerns of the relations between those. I suggest that the discourses of childhood and child rights mobilized not only consolidate traditional gendered and racialized representations, but also are intensified through recent modes of psychologization and feminization. These warrant urgent critique by critical childhood researchers as well as critical psychologists and other critics of psychological culture. Hence I begin by reviewing the contribution of critical psychological approaches to and for debates around childhood, as resources

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informing the analysis that follows, before concluding with some brief considerations of further disciplinary implications for the status of such critiques within childhood studies.

## **Antipsychology as a resource for childhood studies**

Critical psychology has made substantial interventions within and about modern mainstream, Anglo-US dominated psychology (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Henriques et al., 1984), and critics of developmental psychology have been an important, if numerically small, constituency within this (e.g. Morss, 1990, 1996; Motzkau, 2009; Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992). Antipsychology arises as a response to psychology, interpellating a constituency of (in this case antidevelopmental) antipsychological psychologists. Importing a specifically feminist engagement, notwithstanding the contested relations between childhood and feminist analyses (Thorne, 1987) and the equally contested debates about and between feminists and feminisms (Burman, 1998b), there are two key, and related, contexts for the analysis of childhood: psychologization and feminization. Psychologization, the incitement to work on oneself and one's relationships, has become a key feature of neoliberal governmentality (De Vos and Gordo Lopez, 2010), especially in the postindustrial economic transition to a knowledge society that privileges relational skills and emotional literacy (Popkewitz and Bloch, 2001). This has corresponded to a feminization of work, that for most people extends the insecurity and low pay of women's traditional working conditions to men, so instigating new forms of oppression that far outweigh the few successful women who have made it through the 'glass ceiling'.

Hence psychologization and feminization are fatefully intertwined in their explicit focus on instrumentalizing the domain of the personal (including the home, the domestic, relational qualities and so on). Both are linked to histories of individualism and the sedimentation of newer practices of individualization that separate people from each other and prevent wider reflection on the conditions producing such subjectivities. So while women's work has perhaps always stood outside the domain of patriarchal capitalist production (Staples, 2007), its affective features as well as temporal and cultural capital are being colonized into global capitalism. Alongside the contraction of public sensibility and engagement under neoliberalism there has been an expansion of the psychological domain from specialist expertise to 'self-help'. Incitements abound to grow, learn, change yourself, make yourself better; in sum, to develop and demonstrate the flexibility and determination to optimize oneself (Fendler, 2001). These features are reflected within the current social policies of advanced capitalist countries in terms of their ideas and curricula for early education (Ailwood, 2008; Lister, 2005, 2006).

A feminist critique of these practices highlights how feminization is not feminism, and that women have much to worry about in the celebration of supposedly feminine relational and intuitional qualities now entering business and education (Burman, 2006a). In the global South, gender mainstreaming and tactical engagements with UNDP and World Bank initiatives have reconfigured women's traditional work into entrepreneurial activity ripe for investment via microcredit schemes (Batliwala and Dhanraj, 2007; Pearson, 2007). A key challenge is to address the complex and intersecting ways women's and children's rights are configured, with attention to their

specific effects (Burman, 2008b). This article addresses how these features are now filtering through into models of childhood, including (some rather perverse renderings of) child rights as they invoke and produce particular emotionally inflected understandings of (children's and others') activities.

## Childhood as text

Nieuwenhuys (2008) clarified multiple and spurious contestations between culturalist and universal approaches to childhood pointing out that, while both 'rights' and the normative developmental psychological claims that underlie these have been associated with the 'universalist' camp, they are rendered cultural and culturally specific in every transaction and communication. A similar strategy elaborated by feminist and other critics of psychology has been to treat psychology's claims as culturally formulated and situated text (see also Burman et al., 1995, 1996; Parker, 2007; Parker and Shotter, 1990; Parker et al., 1999; Richards, 1997). Treating mainstream psychological theory and practice as text disrupts its scientism and naive realist claims, and facilitates attention to how the knowledge, 'facts', norms and models are the outcome of specific contextual productions and interactions.

Many wider routes and resources support this kind of antipsychological consideration of childhood as text – in particular from historical and cultural analyses (e.g. Rose, 1985, 1990). Further, the affective investment in childhood, the hold that images of childhood seem to have on the northern cultural imaginary (e.g. Burman, 1997, 1998a), invites analyses of psychologization and feminization. Hence this article addresses how representations of childhood link with calls to memory, attachment, self-hood, interiority. While this analysis focuses on some perhaps familiar and insignificant material, I suggest that such banal texts are worthy of attention precisely because of the clues they provide about the shaping of assumptions that become normalized into absence (Burman and MacLure, 2005). Like banal nationalism and racism (Billig, 1995; Burman, 2010), banal developmentalism should exercise our attention, rather than being overlooked or excused by virtue of its 'trivial' status.

Moreover, it is particularly appropriate to treat notions of childhood as text. Carolyn Steedman (1995) traces the emergence of this set of significations, formulated alongside the origins of cell theory, romantic philosophy and psychoanalysis, through which the child came to be configured as the quintessential modern subject. 'The child' has come to function as signifier of the authentic self. Whether potential, actual or even past, this self inhabits the contemporary northern cultural imaginary and beyond, through practices of globalization, and – lost or regained – continues to circulate as a significant cultural trope, with its ambiguities and varieties occluded by reference to an assumed universal and timeless model of childhood.

Further, this cultural history also helps to explain the affective power exercised by the trope of childhood, around which layers of emotional response seem to coalesce. Hence although cast in terms of a textual analysis, this also includes addressing the ways affective responses (of identification, anxiety and guilt) are mobilized and managed by such marketing campaigns. It is the equation between self and child which helps to explain the persistence of the commitment to a particular notion of childhood;

while exposing its obvious inadequacies and untenability in the face of the diverse, ambiguous and mobile character of childhoods enables these to be mobilized as critical resources (Burman, 2002).

Conceptions of 'the child' therefore feature in this article as both topic and text to highlight mutual tensions between these competing representations, and their implications for the ways in which children of the North and South figure within and are configured by these. Analysis of the text also brings into question the relations between rights and developmental discourses. Since the campaign is called 'Dirt is Good' or 'D.I.G.' for short, the theme of hygiene turns out to be a significant intertextual link, recalling how social order and disorder have historically connected the bodies of women and children with the 'body politic' of the nation-state (Yuval-Davis, 1998). More surprising perhaps is just how literal the link between moral and physical hygiene becomes.

To be more specific about its rationale, my focus on the Persil campaign arises for seven reasons. First, Persil was the first commercially available laundry detergent (invented in 1907), and the first to mount TV advertising campaigns (in the 1950s). Hence it is positioned at the cutting edge of capitalist strategy. Second, it is the multinational Unilever's premium UK brand.<sup>1</sup> Third, it has some national policy influence, with the 'Dirt is Good/D.I.G.' campaign attracting attention within government policy on rural development and leisure.<sup>2</sup> Fourth, there are political economy considerations, since Unilever is the world's second largest food business (after Nestlé), exerting pressure on the World Bank and UNDP (in relation to its position promoting GM foods, for example). Also, as the world's largest tea company, there are reports of bullying tactics to regulate its prices.<sup>3</sup> Fifth, Unilever and its subsidiaries in India, Pakistan and the Philippines have been documented as perpetrating major employer abuses including intimidating workers and violating their rights to unionize, while promoting outsourcing and casualization of labour.<sup>4</sup> Sixth, there are ecological considerations. Unilever has been accused of dumping toxic mercury in Tamilnadu. Finally, and perhaps particularly significant in relation to this article – in terms of the forms of childhood occluded, as well as formulated, by its textual practices, Unilever has been accused of being involved with bonded child labour in cotton seed production in Andhra Pradesh, India, including paying very low wages, demanding long hours, and no protection from the health hazards of pesticides and insecticides.<sup>5</sup> Such global material considerations help frame more local readings of the cultural politics of washing and washing powder, to which I now turn.

### **The playing child: 'D.I.G.'**

Contemporary pedagogies are contradictory, with consequences for parents, especially mothers, in the modes of interaction and play prescribed by psychological theory for their children (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). Child-centred discourses of 'sensitive mothering' and 'authoritative parenting' not only socialize children (in gender-normative ways), they also regulate mothers. Post-Second World War social policies invoked psychological models of anti-authoritarian parenting as the route towards promoting democracy and social harmony (and, significantly, efficiency). These were actively promoted by such key figures of developmental psychology as Piaget and Gesell (see Piaget, 1933;

Gesell, 1950), giving rise to a discourse of sensitive mothering as class-coded and culturally encrypted to privilege white, middle-class mothering practices.

Turning to my specific text, the 2006–7 UK poster and television campaign ‘Dirt is Good’ (or ‘D.I.G.’) for the washing powder Persil<sup>6</sup> portrayed scenarios involving children (and in the case of interior scenes, also homes) getting dirty: getting muddy as a baby first crawls; spilling food over garments and bedclothes in ‘bringing mummy breakfast’; in the football field with the slogan ‘It’s not dirt – it’s the man of the match’. ‘D.I.G.’ in its double meaning (as both acronym and – imperative form of – verb) emphasizes the importance of self-directed, agentic, purposeful activity. The message is that children should not be stopped from engaging in activities on the grounds that they create a mess, or mess up their clothes.<sup>7</sup>

### ‘Dirt is Good’

Persil believes that dirt is good. For children, getting messy is a natural part of learning, having fun and enjoying everything that life throws at them. Whether they’re riding their bikes through muddy puddles, climbing a tree or creating a work of art with finger prints, your little ones are developing important skills and finding out more about the world around them. And let’s face it, dirt is fun too! After all, it’s not much of a football match without a few grass stains or mud splatters.

The good news is that no matter how dirty your family’s clothes get, a wash with Persil will ensure that they emerge white and bright again – so you and your children can go out and be as active as you like. To give you a bit of inspiration just click on the links below. You’ll find a host of fun weekend activities, as well as 33 things our kids simply must do before they’re 10 – and yes, their clothes will get wonderfully dirty in the process, but with Persil’s help, it won’t matter. ([persil.com/DirtIsGood.asp](http://persil.com/DirtIsGood.asp))

This is the first and only mention of ‘family’ in the campaign, website text or the magazine supplement to be discussed later – presumably because typically ‘mums’ end up doing everyone’s washing, not only children’s, and despite the fact that the product is hailed as supporting women’s changing positions towards equality.<sup>8</sup> What remains unmentioned is that not only will the clothes get dirty, but also the children’s bodies, and perhaps the house.

‘Dirt is Good’ counters the implied claim that dirt is bad. Purity and cleanliness have, of course, long been associated; as also mental and physical hygiene (Valverde, 2008). The class and racialized connotations scarcely need elaborating. The message is that, with Persil’s help, you need (and indeed should) not inhibit your children’s activities out of fear that they will get dirty.

What remains unsaid is that ‘dirt is good’ because it can be easily washed to be become ‘whiter than white’ (another slogan from the same brand’s earlier marketing campaign, perhaps now avoided for its overtly racialized overtones – hence offering a significant intertextual link with the African-Caribbean family portrayed in the ‘United Kingdom of Dirt’ discussed later). Also unspecified is the work that the ‘mother’ does in cleaning the ‘dirt’ up. Given Persil’s longstanding status as a middle-class household washing powder,<sup>9</sup> this imagery precisely exemplifies Walkerdine and Lucey’s (1989)

analysis of the class-differentiated, but equivalent, oppressions meted out via the child-centred discourse of 'sensitive mothering'; in particular, how women's household labour is rendered invisible. Hence, so the story goes, only working-class (and the implication is that these would then be) child-insensitive mothers would intervene in these 'natural' activities promoting children's development because of something as trivial and adult-centred as wanting to limit their washing load.

Persil's poster and UK TV campaign ('United Kingdom of Dirt') extends the work of 'naturalness' from children's association with the outside, and with spontaneous play, to male sexual curiosity and voyeurism. A poster depicts two boys 'getting dirty' by scrambling up a wall to spy on the girl sunbathing next door. This is not harassment, it seems, but good, 'developmental' fun. Since 'dirt is good', thwarting or otherwise interfering with this is bad (see Walkerdine, 1981). The product (a mere washing powder) recedes into the relative background, in the face of the compelling moral power associated with children and childhood. Instead of merely exhorting us to buy, we are instead encouraged to invest in something priceless (Zelizer, 1985): childhood. An industry of (pseudo-) research is cited with references to reports and claims about developmental needs and risks, also indicating the rhetorical importance of contemporary developmental psychology. At the level of culture, claims to development imply something that is incontestably good: if play, like dirt, is good; then it is rendered outside the realm of criticism. Various critics (e.g. Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997) have highlighted how the developmental literature understates the social, political, and often physical, dangers of so-called 'play'. In 'Persil-land' an unreconstructed traditional narrative of the developing child flourishes as the active, spontaneous, self-directed boy (Burman, 1995), now intensified by the gloss that this 'child' has been undermined by adult and child-led concerns with fashion and consumption, and the decline of active play because children now spend so much time watching television and using computers, and – crucially – because they are not allowed to 'play out' for fears about their safety (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Women 'washing whiter' is semiotically linked to maternal imperatives that extend from cleaning clothes to all kinds of morally sanctioned activities. Thus women's work is not lessened by Persil, but rather redirected into proper parenting.

## Play as work or play vs work?

The obvious partialities of the 'D.I.G.'ing children call forth other juxtapositions, in particular around the question of play's relationship with work. Through the developmental/pedagogical dictum of 'learning through play', while in the North children's play is their work, since children of the South work they are deemed robbed of their childhood, or at best of their education (posing the spurious opposition between work and schooling; Wells, 2009). While there remain important debates about the status of (including the desirability of and conditions for) child labour, a key feature of contemporary academic and policy discussions is not to presume *de facto* that all working children are thereby necessarily exploited. Yet the polarization of northern vs southern childhoods remains structured around discourses of childhood labour, that is, in terms of *which children's* 'work' is 'play' as the developmental accumulation of cultural capital in the form of investing in future health and skills, and *which children's* work is focused on more

immediate economic purpose. (This, of course, is not to say that working children do not also play – as Katz, 2004, for example, demonstrates.)

It is significant (and market efficient) that specification or age limits to childhood are avoided. Nevertheless, the proposed activities, style of address and ‘mummy-centredness’ all suggest young children, as does also the ‘33 things your kids must do before they’re 10’. This achieves at least three crucial things. First, it conveniently avoids concerns with sexuality and more obviously dangerous forms of play (gang violence, drugs, high risk sports, etc.). Second, as is so often the case with representations of children, this younger age facilitates greater societal abstraction and interior focus (Holland, 1992): the child is portrayed as at home with ‘Mum’, who is not therefore presumed not to be working outside the home. Finally, and perhaps most relevant here, it takes children’s and young people’s (paid and unpaid) work out of the picture, effected via the dominant cultural motif of ‘play is children’s work’ – so marginalizing or pathologizing the very significant involvement of children – including British children – in (paid and unpaid) work.<sup>10</sup> This overlooks children’s agency, economic autonomy, and especially the threat of disorder historically associated with an economically independent young population (Hendrick, 1990).

Just as the discourse of play admits only a very selective understanding of children, only the ‘good’ parts of the ‘dirt’, so the erasure of work in the privileging of play maintains an infantilization of children. Moreover, this infantilization shifts to the mothers, the possibility of whose household or paid work outside the home – aside from turning their childcare into play with their children – is also rendered out of the picture. ‘D.I.G.’ constantly addresses ‘busy’ mums,<sup>11</sup> but how or why they are ‘busy’ remains unspecified. Mothers are presumed not only available and in favour of promoting gross physical activity (exercise), but are also enjoined to join in the ‘fun’ themselves (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). Psychologization takes a new twist in relation to the market so that not even soap powder can be about something as mundane as washing clothes but is rather attached to a much greater moral-political, rather than material(ist), ‘good’ concerned with child rights and development. The mother too, then, becomes rendered childlike, indicated also in the mobile shift of address from ‘Mum’ to child, and the pedagogical, thinly disguised, imperative or suggestion modes which position her as lacking in ideas, inspiration and in need of ‘tips’. Mother as expert soon shifts into deficit subject, as easily as does the child.

There are significant class-coded and cultural presumptions of the proposed ‘33 things to do before you’re 10’<sup>12</sup> in terms of spatial arrangements (including which families have access to these) and the access to material resources that are presumed. Further, coding these activities as ‘fun’ invites the interpretation that they are not ‘serious’ or necessary (cf. ‘grow vegetables’; ‘pick strawberries’; ‘feed a farm animal’; ‘plant a tree’) including agricultural work, which children the world over engage in to secure their and their families’ livelihoods.

## Every child has the right ...

In 2008 Persil’s ‘D.I.G.’ campaign gained new momentum<sup>13</sup> launching its ‘Every child has the right’ television, website and poster campaign, framed around five ‘rights’ that



qualify the overall 'right' to 'be a child': 'to play, explore, create, imagine, experiment'. Under the heading of these 'rights', familiar pedagogical/developmental issues are expressed: 'not only is it fantastic fun, but it also helps children to develop important social and problem-solving skills, as well as giving them a chance to be independent and express themselves'; 'Play time is a great time for children to stretch their legs and let off steam. Not only is it good exercise, but play. Play also nurtures creativity and provides ample opportunities for self-expression.' The recurring formulation of 'not only, but also' presents each claim complementary but somehow cumulative (perhaps a grammatical form that itself performs a specific theory of development), mobilizing an excessive redundancy of reasons to persuade (suggesting that the reader might be sceptical of some or all of the claims?). Yet, indicating a wider cultural banalization of the discourse of 'rights',<sup>14</sup> the proposals verge on the tautological.

The key focus of the 2008 campaign, going beyond the previous claims for 'dirt is good', was the emphasis on 'free' or 'unstructured play' – 'the sort of activities where children can explore, learn and investigate on their own terms'. Exemplifying the tensions within child-centred philosophy (Sharp and Green, 1975; Walkerdine, 1984), the ambiguity between 'free' and planned/structured activity had to be managed; of facilitation vs imposition, and with no lessening of parental responsibility. Exhortations to 'invest in exciting activities' link monetary and psychological domains. Some activities do involve money, although there is only one 'ask Mum to' that suggests 'Ask[ing] Mum to buy . . .'. The money is spent instead, presumably, on buying the product (Persil), while the investment is also the emotional investment in the relationship with the child, and in one's fantasy about childhood in general; as lived, as it should be lived and (perhaps) as it should have been lived.

## **New democratic actors and experts**

Alongside the pedagogical continuities between child-centred approaches and contemporary neoliberal voluntarism (Avis, 1991), the incitement to individual, parental self-regulation illustrates the discretionary character of the contemporary neoliberal emphasis on freedom, autonomy and choice as being premised on making the 'right' choices. Such concerns fill in the gaps in the dominant story of 'D.I.G.', in particular in relation to themes of racialization and its relationship with class. For while business may be as usual, in terms of the ways developmental psychology is mobilized to support the regulation of families and consumption practices, there are yet more twists and turns in this story. Capital always looks for new niche markets, and is therefore eager to reach/include new kinds of racialized subjects. The 2006 Persil campaign website even dared to play with the colour associations, depicting black (African-Caribbean) parents and children with the slogan: 'It's not dirt, it's the 100m dash' (from 'Welcome to the United Kingdom of Dirt sponsored by Persil'). The obviously racialized, stereotypical image of black people as being good at sports, and the proximity of blackness to a discourse of 'dirt' was perhaps risky but, insofar as it could allude to and then refute such meanings, it could do so precisely because of the allocation of equality through affluence. Hence the overall discourse of inclusion mobilized was of a multiculturalism clearly predicated on common (middle-) class

credentials, alongside the portrayal of a happy, heterosexual, two-parent, two-child (one boy, one girl) family.

There are also ambiguities over ownership of knowledge, with some equivocation over whether 'Mums know best' or not. This could be said to add new complexities to the question of how parents are addressed in advice literature. While Newson and Newson (1974) traced the shift across the 20th century in childcare advice from authoritarian, medicalized childcare advice to a quasi-egalitarian enlistment on the part of a friendly expert, a trend documented also in subsequent treatments (Alldred, 1996; Marshall, 1991; Urwin, 1985), all such accounts note how overt prescription moves over time to become covert normalization, such that those who do not fit the norms are rendered deficient or pathological.

On the 'D.I.G.' 2008 website 'Mums' (and it is almost always only 'mums', with 'parents' mentioned only twice) are addressed as experts. Explaining 'our campaign key facts', and under the heading 'Researching childhood – the facts', is a description of research commissioned complete with 'vital statistics – key findings listed', including a claim to 'have conducted a global survey on childhood . . .'. What is meant by 'global' is not explained, while no details of the survey are supplied or indicated, except its title: 'Giving our children the right to be children: A mother's perspective'.<sup>15</sup> While the research is largely based on the company's own market research,<sup>16</sup> this is turned around to sound consultative and to position the consumer as the expert: 'By listening to your opinions as Mums in the UK, we have tried to understand a mother's hopes and concerns for a child growing up today.'

Like reality TV, this could be understood as a new populism: consumers or the public are the new experts (and like reality TV such 'research' is cheap to produce). Hence facts or knowledge is (re)circulated in a loop of (mis)information. Within the frame of turning the professional gaze around, that is, mobilizing current the policy trope of participation, research 'facts' emerge formulated by no experts other than 'Mums'. Yet this apparent democratization of modern expertise unravels itself, for this is described as 'Mum's opinions', 'hopes' and 'concerns', not 'knowledge'. The material remains 'our findings' so that the key 'facts' end up turning mothers into the objects rather than subjects of the research activity. Persil's market research is even turned into a manifesto for children's rights. The commentary appropriates the British parliamentary discourse of social policy innovation to emphasize its significance: 'Because we believe the research into childhood is so important, we produced a white paper and listed our key findings below'. But these findings turn out to be something of an anticlimax. Even the 'vital statistics' of the 'findings' talk up some very unsurprising answers.<sup>17</sup> While the language of facticity conveyed through numbers (with the odd numbers in the percentages conveying precision and specificity), it is clear that these were simply ratings of provided statements on a yes/no questionnaire ('agreed'). Similarly the device of an 'opinion poll' of parental concerns is somewhat circular (e.g. 'want[ing] to protect children's rights to childhood').

## **Instabilities of rights and developmental claims**

A significant feature of the 'D.I.G.' website is that it both combines and moves between rights and developmental discourse. This may be a feature of having to navigate the shift

from discretionary status to (indirect) pressure to do the 'right' thing. Clearly this move also links with wider, more specifically child-welfare focused discourses, including how major INGOs such as Save the Children and UNICEF, having initially been child protection organizations, have now shifted into wholesale adoption of child rights discourse. As an example, in its August 2010 emergency appeal in the wake of the floods in northern Pakistan, the UNICEF logo carries the strapline 'denying children's rights is wrong. Put it right' and the appeal coupon is headlined 'please help protect children's rights'. While it is clear that discourses of needs and rights are neither equivalent nor absolutely separate (and are both equally ideological, see e.g. Woodhead, 1990), the casting of a humanitarian response in terms of children's 'rights' seems a new discursive departure. Significant as these shifts may be, nevertheless linking rights and development works to confirm development as an unquestionable 'good'. Significantly, and despite the constant mobilization of the discourse of 'rights' in the Persil campaign, there is no substantive mention of any of the key Articles or features from the 1989 Convention, nor its UK version (the Children Act 1990). The only possible covert reference is the rather trivial but significant discursive crossover from 'rights' to 'campaign' (except in this case it is of course actually an *advertising* – rather than political – campaign). Thus the proliferation of rights talk (and, as already indicated, Persil does elaborate at least five, and maybe even nine 'rights') becomes reconfigured into the neoliberal right to buy.

This disjunction between rights discourse and more jocular enlistment (rather than coercion) could be understood as arising because it would be interactionally inappropriate to maintain the authoritative (authoritarian?) or prescriptive register of rights claims (since on the website the addressee is likely the adult consumer). The text shifts to a normative, exhortative tone: 'just have a flick through the tips pages . . .' 'Give this a whirl' – emphasizing its discretionary character. But at a wider level this perhaps relates to (and even illuminates features of) the lack of enforcement structured within 'rights-based' claims (since they rely on moral precepts, rather than specific procedures). Perhaps it also works to covertly acknowledge the adversarial and competing character of adult (mothers') and children's rights/interests.

Hence the trope in Persil.com's text of 'fun tips', that is, tips that are – presumably – intended to generate fun for the child, rather than fun for the mother, is reminiscent of a womanandchildren elision (Burman, 2008a; Sylvester, 1998) that now converts the work of childcare into play. Indeed, far from being autonomous and independent play, 'Mum' seems to be quite extensively involved. Most of the tips start with an 'Ask Mum'. 'Mum' is both addressed directly 'as you', but also referred to in the third person. An indirect address to the mother is mobilized through the child, as in 'why don't you do some baking with Mum?' That is, the voice of the child is adopted to request the mother to generate activities with her child, thereby adding further pressure for compliance by positioning her as apparently refusing her child if she desists from the proposals. Nevertheless, the appropriation of rights discourse works to position Persil as enabling good parenting. References abound to 'helping' ('helping you give your children . . .', 'to help you encourage your child to play'), with many good intentions expressed. The authority is conveyed through rhetorical questions ('Have you ever . . .?') (assuming that you have never) as well as expert statements of the form 'We know (you know) . . . but/so you need some help', 'to share with you'. Thus, rather than overt prescription, mothers are enjoined

into particular culturally prescribed forms of work, as ‘parentcraft’, that mobilize the moral status of work through associating childcare prescriptions with specific products. Here we see the logical conclusion of the commodification of childhood – alongside the injunction to turn parenthood into work – that paradoxically reinstates the adult–child opposition: for you can set your child free to play by doing the correct parent work. So family life, that privileged domain of emotion and memory, and even ‘child’s play’ become configured as an arena of production devoid of time away from market pressure (Lafargue, 1883), albeit precisely secured via appropriate product purchase.

## Conclusion: Joining developments

The analysis here has moved between discussion of a specific textual corpus and wider political and ideological themes such material indicates. That this critique also includes a critical engagement with affective modes of viewing has been acknowledged as intrinsically involved with representations of childhood, although space does not permit extensive analysis (but see Burman, in press). Instead I return here to wider political and disciplinary considerations, and in particular how the marketing campaign discussed in this article echoes broader political currents and disciplinary challenges.

The discourse of the previous British government presumed that problems of access and distribution could be resolved by greater coordination between services. In the context of the current coalition government declarations of ‘big society’ politics, however, the key question turns out to be how to ‘join up’ the various developments (and childhoods) rather than to attend to how they are already joined up and implicate each other, especially in ways that actually preclude analysis of the ‘bigger’ (classed, ‘raced’, gendered and regional) disparities altogether in favour of an abstracted neoliberal individualist subject – here figured as both child and – as its micro-context – mother.

In terms of the broader disciplinary concerns that often exercise debates around childhood studies, it is worth noting that my approach here has not been to dispense with developmental psychology, but rather to highlight – via the close analysis of an everyday, relatively trivial text – how contemporary Euro-US discourse is so saturated with its ideas that perhaps we cannot do so. If, under current conditions, we cannot *not* think in developmentalist terms or, according to some radical development theorists (e.g. Salvadori, 2006), we should not try not to, nevertheless cracks or fissures within this hegemonic discourse can be identified. Drawing on a range of resources including deconstruction, postcolonial and feminist theory, this analysis indicates how – even within the dominant discourse of the market – resistances and alternatives can and do emerge. Such resistances or alternatives demand close interrogation (rather than celebration or romanticization). They are politically ambiguous precisely by virtue of being generated in relation to, if also perhaps against, dominant modes of development. But these ambiguities are played out across registers of gender, generation, class and racialization.

Hence, having opened with the call for an antipsychological approach, I end by returning to the question of disciplinary implications (which have also exercised the pages of this journal, see Lee and Motzkau, 2011; Thorne, 2007). To psychologists, this article has aimed to clarify how too easy slippage of psychological discourse secures the interests of

wider development agendas. To those who dismiss psychology, there are indications that not only psychology is complicit with and shaped by such agendas. Alternatively, to those (including psychologists) who overstate the importance of psychology, the analysis suggests how malleable and slight are the psychological claims mobilized, despite (or rather precisely because of) their wide (trans)cultural reference and circulation. Further, while the instability of rights and developmental claims identified can be read in various ways, they do at least prevent too easy separations between these. Finally, as a feminist antipsychological, antidevelopmental intervention, it is fitting to end by noting the mutual challenges this account poses for and by feminist approaches: to forge analyses that ward off the absolute separation of, or alternatively the merging, of women's and children's positions.

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### Notes

1. Persil also retails in Canada under the distribution of its German co-manufacturer Henkel, and is also available only through speciality importers in the US ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persil), accessed 29 September 2008).
2. See [www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk) – see Paper 3 'Health and outdoor recreation' (accessed 5 October 2008).
3. See [www.crocodyl.org/wiki/unilever](http://www.crocodyl.org/wiki/unilever), p. 7 of 13 (accessed 29 September 2008).
4. See [www.crocodyl.org/wiki/unilever](http://www.crocodyl.org/wiki/unilever), p. 8.
5. Even though the numbers of child labourers are reported to be declining, it has been suggested that this is because production has been moved to other parts of India ([www.powerset.com/explore/semhtml/Child\\_Labour\\_Issues\\_of\\_Unilever\\_in\\_India](http://www.powerset.com/explore/semhtml/Child_Labour_Issues_of_Unilever_in_India), accessed 28 September 2008). Further, Unilever is complicit through its subsidiary companies indicating 'a clear linkage between procurement prices and employment of child labour in cottonseed production' ([www.powerset.com/explore/semhtml/Child\\_Labour\\_Issues\\_of\\_Unilever\\_in\\_India](http://www.powerset.com/explore/semhtml/Child_Labour_Issues_of_Unilever_in_India), p. 4 of 5).
6. See [saltlondon.com/case-persil.php](http://saltlondon.com/case-persil.php) (accessed 12 October 2008). The name is derived from combining the names of two of its principal ingredients (perborate and silicone). However as it is hard to pronounce in some languages, alternative local names are 'le Chat', 'Dixan' and 'Wipp' ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persil), accessed 29 September 2008). The same 'D.I.G.' campaign was associated with Ala – Unilever's most popular washing powder in Argentina.
7. This shift from whiteness to dirt was considered a significant shift in the marketing world: '[Persil] positions dirt as an essential part of a child's development, . . . the campaign explores the value of dirt and shows how Persil gives families freedom to live life to the full' (Ganczakowski, 'ITV 50 years of fame: Private view – Persil', [www.brandrepublic.com/Campaign/News/518811/](http://www.brandrepublic.com/Campaign/News/518811/), accessed 28 September 2008).
8. [www.brandrepublic.com/Campaign/News/518811/](http://www.brandrepublic.com/Campaign/News/518811/).
9. Persil has maintained its key role as the major, if not main, washing powder in the UK – at the time of the launch of the 'D.I.G.' campaign it was outselling all other washing powders ([www.intangiblebusiness.com/Reports/The-UKs-Most-Valuable-Grocery-Brands-2007-941.html](http://www.intangiblebusiness.com/Reports/The-UKs-Most-Valuable-Grocery-Brands-2007-941.html), accessed 28 September 2008).
10. Clearly motivations and conditions in which children work differ across the North and South (Mizen et al., 1999; see also Burman, 2006b; Nieuwenhuys, 1992, 2007).

11. Such representations of time-pressured (but conscientious and developmentally aware) mothers include, but do not explicitly mention, mothers who work outside the home. Correlatively, the people addressed as supporting/promoting children's play (and doing the washing) are presumed to be mothers (rather than fathers, any other family member or friend, or private or state childcare provision).
12. [www.persil.com/ThirtyThreeThings.aspx](http://www.persil.com/ThirtyThreeThings.aspx).
13. Even in 2010, the 'dirt is good' campaign remained the primary tagline with which variations of the 'every child has the right' slogan were maintained – in June 2010 UK bus shelters carried posters for Persil with the claim 'every child has the right to have a go . . .' – a somewhat diminished rendering of participatory rights – along with the now familiar 'dirt is good' logo.)
14. Examples here include the notices on walls of British public buildings about 'consumer rights', that ultimately do nothing to alter prevailing structural inequalities and material differential distributions of resources.
15. A press release on a separate website claims 2000 'mums of children 12 years old and younger were interviewed over the telephone or in person across 10 countries'.
16. The final page of the 'white paper', in the 'Notes to editors' section (since this document is a press release), claims 'This global study has been commissioned by Persil in conjunction with leading experts in youth development and play; Doctors Jerome and Dorothy Singer of Yale University' ([www.persil.com/medialibrary/Persil\\_Every\\_Child\\_Has\\_The\\_Right\\_Key\\_Findings.pdf](http://www.persil.com/medialibrary/Persil_Every_Child_Has_The_Right_Key_Findings.pdf), accessed 28 September 2008). Jerome Singer is currently Professor Emeritus at Yale, and Dorothy Singer Professor. Jerome Singer's website links to various 'learning through play' programmes, but Persil does not appear to be mentioned.
17. See [www.persil.com/scrapbook/OurCampaignKeyFacts.aspx](http://www.persil.com/scrapbook/OurCampaignKeyFacts.aspx), accessed 31 July 2008.

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