

Reflexive Essay

Protecting Queer Childhood: Bill C-6 through the lens of childhood ethics and queer theory

Writing a thesis that provides an analysis of conversion therapy through the lens of childhood ethics and queer theory and conducting the research required for this study has been a genuinely enriching experience. This process has enabled me to reflect on my position in the social world, on my personal experiences and how they differ or resemble those of others and has taught me valuable lessons that I will be heading in the future. I will be using this essay as an opportunity to self-reflect on and evaluate my experiences throughout the research and writing process of my thesis. I will first reflect on the ways in which I affected my research and writing. Indeed, I have tried throughout the entire research and writing process to stay aware of the fact that I am an embodied writer, and that my own social, political, and cultural experiences have an impact on the way I approach research and how I analyze my findings and frame them in my writing. Researching and writing at the intersection of childhood ethics and queer theory has helped me personally develop, not only as a thinker but also as a writer and researcher. I will therefore reflect on these lessons and evaluate the impact they can have, not only in my future research and writing endeavors, but also in my personal life and in that of others.

The first issues I want to highlight relate to the ways in which I shaped my research and writing. First by being part of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community, and second by being a young adult. Being part of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community and having grown up as a queer child was part of what pushed me to conduct research and write about queer childhood and conversion therapy in the first place. I quickly realized however, that my personal experiences could not be taken as universal. Although I had not gone into this study with the assumption that they were, I was not expecting my overall positive experience of growing up queer to be so minorly shared by other queer individuals. This put the grave injustices faced by many queer youths in an even starker contrast with the privileges that many relatively advantaged individuals—like me—enjoy in their own lives. This had two major impacts on my research and writing. First, this realization made me understand the importance of the study I was conducting. Additionally, it pushed me to include caveats in the text of the thesis, in order to inform the reader that, although I strive to be objective

and to build on reliable and embodied sources, the views I express are inevitably influenced by my social background and own experiences.

Being in my early twenties, I qualify as an adult. Yet I am also still very close to childhood. Before starting my research on childhood ethics, I sometimes put pressure on myself to act ‘mature’ and ‘like an adult’, especially when interacting with people who were older than me—even if just by a few years. This might reflect a need that certain young adults have to prove that, by the age of eighteen or twenty-one, we have earned the right to have our voices heard. Conducting research in the field of childhood ethics and learning about some authors’ theories on children’s moral capacity has changed the way I think about and act in relation to those who are younger and older than me. Understanding the value and necessity of listening to children’s voices has changed the misconceptions I had. Going forward, I am sure to give more importance to what children say, and I will certainly be more attentive to the amount of space I give them to express themselves.

The second issue I want to focus on consists of speaking for others. Speaking for communities I don’t identify with was a delicate task that taught me many things. This is an issue I was confronted with as soon as I delved into the intersectional nature of queer childhood. Because children and queer individuals are such wide and diverse groups of people, it was no surprise to come across a plethora of intersecting identities. I soon came to realize that the intersecting identities that undergo the most injustices, that are most at risk of being subjected to conversion therapies and that are the most marginalized, are not part of social, cultural or racial groups that I myself identify with. While this did not hinder my research in itself, it did press me to take additional care when analyzing and writing about those experiences that I have not—and might never—share. Because I am convinced that including diverse points of views on and experiences of queer childhood enriches my analysis, I opted to devote additional time to overcoming this issue rather than giving up on the inclusion of diversity all together. This meant doing additional research on how to speak for others. Through this process, I learned how to decenter myself from my writing and rely on the writing and research conducted by those who have experienced or are concerned by the specific issue I want to analyze. This detour from my original research ended up being highly beneficial, since I will carry the lessons I have learned into my future academic work.

Overall, researching and writing my thesis in the field of queer theory and childhood ethics has been an experience that has changed me as a person, I believe for the better. Not only has there been a shift in the way I think about others and their personal experiences, but I have also enriched my research and writing skills.

Annotated Bibliography

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Ashley, Florence, “Homophobia, conversion therapy, and care models for trans youth: defending the gender-affirmative approach” (2020) 17:4 *Journal of LGBT Youth* 361.

This article is a response to critiques that gender-affirmation is homophobic. Relying on clinical studies and observations, Ashley argues that gender-affirmative care has a protective factor and is beneficial for trans youth. She draws very sharp distinctions between gender-affirmative care and conversion therapy, which can be drawn upon to respond to concerns that gender-affirmative care would fall under the scope of Bill C-6.

Carnevale, Franco A, “A ‘Thick’ Conception of Children’s Voices: A Hermeneutical Framework for Childhood Research” (2020) 19 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 160940692093376.

Carnevale proposes a new conceptualization of children’s voices which would allow for what they say to be given more weight. He advocates for using a “thick” rather than a “thin” conception of voice, which calls for recognizing the impact which relations, politics, culture, and the social world bears on what and how children express themselves. This conception is of particular use to understand how giving more weight to children’s voices can be done in practice while avoiding certain pitfalls.

Carnevale, Franco A et al., “Childhood Ethics: An ontological advancement for childhood studies” (2020) 35:1 *Child Soc* 110.

By drawing on empirical research completed with young people aged 3 to 17 years old, Carnevale demonstrates why children should be considered as having the interests and capacities to meaningfully participate in different aspects of their lives. This framework has been useful for my paper since it allowed me to make claims for the greater inclusion of youth both in the law-making process and in the medical decision-making process.

Carnevale, Franco A et al., “A Relational Ethics Framework for Advancing Practice with Children with Complex Health Care Needs and Their Parents” (2017) 40:4 *Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Nursing* 268.

In this article, the authors highlight some of the ethical questions relating to the care of children with complex healthcare needs which traditional notions are unable to adequately answer. The concerns they bring up are resolved by having recourse to a framework of relational ethics, which relies on hermeneutical interpretation and the understanding of children as capable individuals. While this article was useful to delve deeper into notions of childhood ethics, it is limited by the fact that it is solely focused on the Anglophone world.

Carnevale, Franco A et al., “Interdisciplinary Studies of Childhood Ethics: Developing a New Field of Inquiry” (2015) 29:6 *Child Soc* 511.

This earlier text from Carnevale et al. looks at the issue of striking a balance between the goals of the best interest standard and of prioritizing children’s agency. In doing so, the authors develop important notions regarding the way youth are conceptualized in the fields of law, psychology, medicine, and social studies. As an earlier contribution to the study of childhood ethics, this text brings a valuable understanding of the founding notions of the field.

D’Angelo, Roberto, “The complexity of childhood gender dysphoria” (2020) 28:5 *Australia Psychiatry* 530.

This text follows the general thesis emitted by Carnevale that children should be given a greater space in the decision-making process. Unlike Carnevale however, D’Angelo dips his toes into the field of queer theory by comparing and contrasting notions surrounding gender dysphoria to those around gender-affirming care. By diving into Western academia’s current understanding of gender-affirmative care, contemporary developmental theory and prevailing hospital guidelines, D’Angelo puts together a rich explanation of the current discussion surrounding gender identity and gender-affirmative care.

Dyer, Hannah, “The Contested Design of Children’s Sexuality” in *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood* (Rutgers University Press, 2011) 124.

This text aims at understanding the ways in which different notions of childhood influence youth’s lives. Specifically, Dyer analyses the relation between the figure of the child and the notion of futurity. What the author criticizes in this respect is the harmful politicization of children as a

battleground for various notions of development and ideas of what a nation's future should aspire to.

Dyer, Hannah, "Queer futurity and childhood innocence: Beyond the injury of development" (2017) 7:3 *Global Studies of Childhood* 290.

Dyer's thesis is premised on the observation that conceptualizing youth as non-sexual is counterproductive, since it hinders the discussion of sexuality. In analyzing the way in which the myth of childhood innocence has been used by queer theorists, the author also touches upon issues relating to education and racialization. This text's melding of queer theory and childhood ethics creates a unique perspective which has informed my approach of Bill C-6.

Gill-Peterson, Julian, "Toward a Trans of Color Critique of Medicine" in *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) 1.

While Gill-Peterson is renowned in the field of queer studies, her research very heavily overlaps with the interests of childhood ethicists due to her strong focus on trans youth. As she explores the 'hidden' history of trans children in the 20th century, the author uncovers the instrumentalization and injustices which trans youth of color in particular have had to face within the medical field. This powerful and emblematic compilation of texts is concluded with the affirmation that trans youth must be recognized and their self-knowledge and expression valued.

Holford, Naomi, "Children and young people negotiating gender in context" in Victoria Cooper & Naomi Holford, eds, *Exploring Childhood and Youth*, 1st ed (Routledge, 2020) 35.

This text showcases one of the few ways in which academia has used queer theory and childhood ethics in conjunction. Holford's thesis centers around the claim that children's gender expression is influenced by various externalities, which forces youth to 'negotiate' their identity with the rest of society. Although the meaning of gender is currently changing, Holford still believes that persisting norms do not create a prime environment for gender non-conforming children to grow up in.

Karkazis, Katrina, "Wanting and Deciding What is Best" in *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 179.

Karkazis offers a novel perspective, in that she is interested not in queer children's experiences of health care, but rather on the experiences of their primary caregivers. While this study is several

years old, it has not been reproduced recently and is therefore still extremely valuable. Holford specifically analyses each step of the medical decision-making process that caregivers of gender non-conforming children go through, from birth up to life after gender assignment surgery. Of particular interest for this paper is Holford's conclusion that no matter the medical decisions taken by caregivers, the way they adapt to their child's "condition" is the most impactful factor on these children's well-being.

Kooiman, Heather et al, "Minododazin: Translating an Algonquin Tradition of Respect into Youth Well-being in Rapid Lake, Quebec" (2012) 10:1 *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*.

While Kooiman's text is not recent, it provides a valuable insight into how issues of childhood ethics are approached in the Indigenous Algonquin tradition. The authors rely on a qualitative method to include Algonquin children's voices into their study, a practice which would put them in the good graces of many childhood ethicists. Even though this study concludes that Algonquin practices are aligned with what mainstream researchers prescribe for children's well-being, I have strived to rely on Kooiman et al.'s own analysis in an effort to decolonize my paper.

Mokashi, Arati et al, "Trans and Non-Binary Youth Accessing Gender Affirming Medical Care in Canada: New Research From the Trans Youth CAN!" (2020) 4 *Journal of the Endocrine Society* 1086.

This text briefly analyses the results released by a study conducted amongst trans youth. Important findings that are highlighted reveal the low mental and physical health and discrimination that ensue from delayed access to gender-affirmative care. The announcement of these results is valuable since they have been produced by a recent study on queer Canadian youth—the exact subject matter of my paper.

Montreuil, Marjorie et al, "Children's Moral Agency: An Interdisciplinary Scoping Review" (2018) 43:2 *J Child Stud* 17.

This text clearly inscribes itself in the field of childhood ethics by providing a review of the varying conceptualizations of youth's moral agency. The authors consecutively analyze five different ways in which this subject matter can be approached. Without explicitly stating that one perspective is better than the other, the contributors of this article conclude that each conceptualization of moral

agency will influence relationships between children and adults. Their final recommendation therefore states that service provider's practices would benefit from homogenizing these perspectives.

Noiseux, Justine et al, "Children need privacy too: Respecting confidentiality in paediatric practice" (2019) 24:1 Paediatrics & Child Health e8.

This article looks at practices of confidentiality in pediatric care through the lens of relational ethics. Analyzing the specific practices in Canada, the authors make recommendations to improve the care of children. Of particular relevance for this thesis was their recommendation that youth should have a say in their health care through systems of consent or assent, and that they be awarded increasingly strong privacy rights in accordance with their capacities.

Pyne, Jake, "Building a Person': Legal and Clinical Personhood for Autistic and Trans Children in Ontario" (2020) 35:2 Can J Law Soc 341.

Pyne recounts the way in which the trans community has fought against conversion therapy while contrasting these advances with those made by advocates of autistic children. Because both groups of children have historically be subject to behavior modification efforts yet only trans children have been awarded protection from conversion therapy, Pyne argues that this right has been gained 'at the expense' of autistic children. This brings a valuable insight to the analysis of the intersection between autistic and queer identities.

Robinson, Kerry H, "Difficult citizenship': The precarious relationships between childhood, sexuality and access to knowledge" (2012) 15:3/4 Sexualities 257.

In this critical piece, Robinson doubles down on the use of the figure of the innocent child. For him, this notion not only wrongly reflects reality, but is also capitalized upon to restrict children's sexual education. This finding is relevant for all areas of childhood ethics including in the context of the legal protection of children, since Robinson states that denying children such knowledge has a negative and long-term impact on their well-being.

Sadjadi, Sahar, "Deep in the Brain: Identity and Authenticity in Pediatric Gender Transition" (2019) 34:1 Cult Anthropol 103.

In this article, Sadjadi explores the ways in which gender non-conforming and trans youth are treated in clinical settings. Focusing on the different notions of 'self' and 'identity' which are relied

upon in the medical setting, Sadjadi reveals that the notion of identity as innate and interior to the self might not be as accurate or beneficial as queer right advocates previously thought.

Sadjadi, Sahar, “The Vulnerable Child Protection Act and Transgender Children’s Health” (2020) 7:3 *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 508.

Sadjadi produces a critique of the South Dakota legislation which criminalizes medical gender transition for children younger than 16. For the author, this law instrumentalizes children by using the pretext of their protection to target gender minorities. The arguments used are borrowed from childhood ethics, centering around children’s role in decision-making and the importance of youth’s lived experience.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay” (1991) 29 *Social Text* 18.

This landmark piece in queer theory gives an insight into how queer children’s future was imagined in the early 1990s. This paper is particularly interesting in the context of Bill C-6 because of its focus on the effects of psychoanalysis and psychiatry on long term mental health. This text is not only interesting because Sedgwick is a foundational author of queer theory, but also because the ideas developed therein can be applied to today’s legal context, more than two decades later.

Thoreson, Ryan, “Youth and Sexual Rights” in Zowie Davy et al, eds, *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities* (1 Oliver’s Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020).

Thoreson’s interest is centered around children’s sexual right and the impact of culture and sexual orientation and gender identity (‘SOGI’) on the enjoyment of this right. The author mainly laments the fact that children’s rights are often restricted because of the anxiety which surrounds their SOGI. Thoreson joins Carnevale in his conclusion by stating that youth are simultaneously vulnerable and in need of protection, and capable and worthy of holding rights and having them be respected.

Trans Youth CAN!, *Who are the People Served by Canadian Trans Youth Clinics?* (2020), online: <<https://transyouthcan.ca/results/trans-youth-infographic/>>.

This poster was created by Trans Youth CAN! on the basis of a study whereby 174 youth were asked about different aspects of their identity. The statistics produced are valuable since they reflect both the real makeup of the queer youth community and how these youth live and describe

their personal experiences with SOGI. I choose to rely on this study over other similar ones that exist because it gave such a high importance to children's voices, as is prescribed by childhood ethicists.

Travers, Ann, *The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids (and Their Parents) are Creating a gender Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

Travers's book compiles interviews held with trans youth aged 4 to 20 into different analyses of how these children express their gender identity in different settings. Renowned amongst queer theorists, this study is also interesting for the field of childhood ethics since it showcases the lived experience of a diverse range of trans children, as told by themselves. The author's advocacy for gender self-determination and their redefinition of queer childhood also falls in line with the values of childhood ethics since it gives moral weight to youth's expression and shows interest in their actual lived experience.