

Constituting parental alcohol 'misuse' and 'vulnerable' children in Australian health and social policy: A critical discourse analysis

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BACKGROUND

Australian policy frameworks articulate priorities aimed at addressing policy 'problems'. Over a decade of research in Australia and internationally identifies, as a problem, various ways in which children may be affected by their parents' drinking¹⁻³. This raises the question of how this problem is addressed in Australian policy.

Examining how policy 'problems' are constructed and framed is important because policy responses are shaped by these representations⁴. Policy discourse is neither neutral or objective. Rather policies are embedded within broader social, economic, cultural and political contexts, reflecting and reinforcing existing power structures⁵. Policy does not simply respond to societal issues, rather, policy actively shapes and defines what issues warrant policy attention⁶.

This paper analyses national health and social policy frameworks from Australia, to examine the representations of, and responses to, parenting in the context of alcohol consumption and the implicit assumptions regarding parents who drink and their children.

METHODS

A critical discourse analysis⁶ was conducted on ten Australian national health and social policy frameworks to examine representations of, and responses to, children affected by parental heavy alcohol consumption.

We chose to confine the analysis to national policy frameworks, as these play a substantial role in shaping both the national and the state and territory policy agenda, by constructing which policy 'problems' are recognised and highlighting areas for policy action⁷.

Policy documents were examined to identify representations, underlying assumptions and discourses about parental alcohol consumption and its effects on children. Keyword searches were performed to identify content relevant to addressing the research aims.

ANALYSIS

Our analysis identified three central representations of parental alcohol consumption and children and three key effects produced through the policy texts. We have labelled the representations, *constituting problematic alcohol 'use'* and *harm as inevitable*. The third representation, *children's vulnerability as a mechanism for governance*, also includes the effect of the representation. The remaining two effects produced through the policy texts were, *erasing men's accountability*, and *diffusing responsibility*.

Constituting problematic alcohol 'use'

All policy frameworks used a range of terms interchangeably to describe practices of, and relations, with alcohol.

'misuse', 'abuse', 'alcoholic', 'dependence', 'heavy use', 'problem use', 'excessive use', 'intake', 'disorders', 'harmful use' and 'issues'

These terms were deployed uncritically alongside 'use' and 'consumption' which obscured distinctions about the kinds of consumption that was constituted as a 'problem'.

While a wide range of terms to describe parental alcohol consumption were evident in the frameworks, the terms, 'misuse' or 'abuse', were most commonly deployed. This usage serves to evoke a moral judgement about individual drinking behaviours. Framing alcohol consumption as 'misuse' or 'abuse' also serves to place responsibility upon the individual's behaviour, reflecting the ideals of neoliberal consumerism.

Harm as inevitable

An implicit assumption was that parental alcohol 'use' is an intrinsic 'harm' to children. Parental drinking was largely represented as the direct 'cause' of childhood adversities such as maltreatment or neglect.

While the number and range of policy actions presented in the frameworks were limited, where actions were proposed, they tended to argue for efforts to reduce alcohol consumption based on the assumption that this will reduce negative outcomes for children.

The *National Alcohol Strategy* (2019, p.25) suggests to "reduce parental alcohol consumption and improve child development prospects"

Children's vulnerability as a mechanism for governance

Children are constructed as 'vulnerable' across most policy frameworks and protecting 'vulnerable' children is framed as the justification for punitive interventions.

Emphasis was placed on parents to provide a 'safe environment' for children, and where parents fail to meet this expectation, state intervention is justified under the guise of protection.

"All Australians need to work together to keep children safe and to achieve the best outcomes for vulnerable children and those experiencing disadvantage." *The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* (2021, p.2)

Erasing men's accountability

Mothers and fathers were rarely discussed separately within the frameworks; rather, they are conflated into categories of 'parents' and 'families'.

The *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* fails to acknowledge gendered distinctions or to move beyond normative assumptions of 'parenting'. Instead, the framework assumes a gender-neutral stance on 'alcohol issues' while placing the responsibility of keeping children safe on women. The framework suggests that women's reluctance to report harm (to children) perpetuates violence, holding women accountable for children's wellbeing and overlooking the role and responsibilities of men in these contexts.

Diffusing responsibility

A clear lack of policy actions (or policy 'responses' or 'priorities') is notable among the frameworks.

Accountability is obscured by statements that are used to evoke a sense of collective responsibility. This neoliberal discourse emphasises the role of 'all Australians' which represents the shifting of responsibility from the state to individuals. Fundamental to these neoliberal notions is the absence of addressing or even acknowledging the role of social and structural drivers of inequalities.

These broad and undefined processes (i.e. 'working together') reflect bureaucratic tendencies to produce idealistic but vague statements that are more symbolic rather than offering practical solutions.

CONCLUSION

Children's experiences of parental heavy drinking are rarely considered in Australian health and social policy frameworks. Where these experiences are considered, they are embedded with harmful stereotypes of parents who drink and assumptions regarding children's perceived lack of agency and autonomy. These stereotypes perpetuate stigmatising assumptions that parents who consume alcohol are unable to provide adequate care for their children, therefore justifying state intervention. Importantly, the dominant neoliberal ideology that underpins these policies has implications for the justification and framing of policy responses which are constrained by the representations of the 'problem'. We argue that Australian policy frameworks need to move beyond individual 'risk factors' to address gendered and other socio-structural contributors to this issue of social concern.

Frameworks used in analysis	Date published
National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022 – 2032	2022
National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*	2021
Healthy, Safe and Thriving: National Strategic Framework for Child and Youth Health*	2015
Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021 – 2031	2021
National Aboriginal Early Childhood Strategy	2021
National Alcohol Strategy 2019 – 2028	2019
National Drug Strategy 2017 – 2026	2017
National Preventative Health Strategy 2021 – 2030	2021
National Women's Health Strategy 2020 – 2030	2018
National Men's Health Strategy 2020 – 2030	2019