Parental responsibility for the illicit acts of their children

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis was to explore the psychological, political, legal, and parental notions of parental responsibility in Australia. The initial study involved an analysis of Australian print media over a four-year period (2001-2005) and highlighted how the representation of this topic has been weaved into public awareness. Political justifications of such legislation involved positioning parents whose children offend as either ‘bad’ parents or parents with poor skills. Once such parents were positioned as problematic then the benefits of the legislation to society, children and the parents was touted. Over the period of the study such representations increased in the Australian print media, with no articles published in 2001 on this topic, and 46 articles relating to parental responsibility by 2005.

The first empirical study involved an examination of the effect of the age and gender of the young offender, the type of offence (property or personal) and the severity of the offence (low or high) on attributions of responsibility to parents and children. Findings suggested that participants (93 parents) view children as mainly responsible when they offend regardless of age (10, or 13 years of age). However, results also indicated that as children mature, their responsibility increases. Parents were attributed significantly less responsibility for their children’s offending behaviour, with their responsibility decreasing as their children’s age increases. The responsibility of children and their parents also significantly increased as the severity of the offence increased. These findings were replicated in Study 2 (N = 177 parents) despite the inclusion of a
16-year-old offender. The older adolescent child was attributed more responsibility than the 10 and 13 year old offender, and the parent was attributed less responsibility for their child’s offending.

Data from Study 1 and 2 were qualitatively analysed and an analysis of the qualitative components of both studies indicated that parents attributed responsibility to children who were seen to understand issues of right and wrong, or when it was evident that children had planned the behaviour. Parents were attributed responsibility on the basis of their level of surveillance of their children, using supervision and communication to monitor their children appropriately. Inadequate parenting resulted in failure to control and supervise one’s children. Parents also employed various justifications to mitigate parents and their children’s responsibility, with children’s age being used to argue immaturity and therefore diminished culpability. Sixteen-year-old adolescent children were positioned as distinctly different from the two other age groups.
STATEMENT

This thesis contains no material, which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and to the best of the my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed: ______________________
Dated:  ______________________
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Nancy White.