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**Article:**

Spyrou, S., Arce, M.C., Eßer, F. et al. (2018) Emerging scholars of Childhood Studies. *Childhood*, 25 (4). pp. 422-442. ISSN: 0907-5682

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218788210>

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# Emerging scholars of Childhood Studies

Spyrou S, Arce MC, Eßer F, Rosen R and Twum-Danso Imoh A, *Childhood*, 2018

## QUESTION 1

All of you are actively participating in the ongoing discussions that are taking place in the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies through your own scholarly work and efforts to shape this dynamic field. What has brought you to this field and what do you find particularly interesting and fascinating in the work produced today in childhood studies? Feel free to refer to your own work and interests when discussing this.

### **Afua**

My interest in childhood studies was rather accidental I would say. After completing my BA degree in History and Sociology I decided to embark on a Masters in Development Studies as I felt that was the career path I wanted to follow. This was a decision I made after spending 10 weeks in Ghana the previous summer undertaking fieldwork for my undergraduate dissertation. At this point I was not aware of any debates in childhood studies and I was not especially driven to study development due to any special interest in children's wellbeing or welfare in the South. However, early on during my Masters degree one of my modules focused on complex emergencies and the issue of children involved in armed conflicts was raised. For some reason, this topic struck a chord within me and I became somewhat fixated on this issue. What seemed to interest me in particular was how childhood was understood in societies where children were involved in armed conflict. I completed my MSc dissertation on the issue of child soldiers focusing on Sierra Leone and Liberia (Twum-Danso, 2000). However, the question of how childhood is constructed and understood in different societies remained on my mind and eventually I embarked on a PhD project which sought to explore constructions of childhood in Ghana and the implications for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Twum-Danso, 2008). It was when I started my PhD that I began to engage with the childhood studies literature (theoretical and methodological). It was at this point that I encountered the works of key thinkers of the time in childhood studies: Allison James and her various colleagues (James and Prout, 1990; James et al, 1998), Aries, 1962, Mayall, 1994, Corsaro, 1997; Jenks, 1996, Stephens, 1995, Hendrick, 1997, Alanen, 1988, Alanen and Mayall, 2001 and this literature transformed the way I approached my research questions and the methodological approach that I wanted to take.

My PhD and other research studies I have conducted have underscored the extent to which there is a middle ground in children's lives with regards to children's rights. And this idea of a middle ground is what I appear to keep coming back to in my research. Hence, a lot of my writing seems to be in the direction of exploring not only the dissonance that exists between local constructions of childhood in sub Saharan Africa and the global hegemonic ideal, but also the connections and commonalities that also exist, especially when we consider a broader range of childhoods in our analyses. Such a conversation would open up many opportunities for more meaningful discussion between academics based in the North and South, but also between academics and non-academics. A number of academics have worked on this issue. The most notable is probably

Cindi Katz's seminal work, *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives* (2005), but there are others such as Panelli *et al*, 2007 and Hecht (1998). However, the academic whose work has both excited and inspired me in this area is Samantha Punch (2003, 2012-with Tisdall, 2015, 2016). I believe that she has raised critical questions that childhood studies researchers, no matter where they conduct their research, must engage with. I am interested in seeing where conversations about these commonalities and differences may lead us to within childhood studies.

### **Rachel**

Afua, it's interesting that neither one of us took a very direct route to childhood studies. For me it wasn't so much accidental as circuitous. I came by way of my participation in community organising for social and economic justice. With Grassroots Women and the Philippine Women Centre in Vancouver, Canada, I was involved in several participatory action research projects, including leading a study which examined the experiences of migrant, Indigenous, and other marginalized and working class mothers; childcare workers; and domestic workers within the largely for-profit and privatized childcare system (for a more detailed analysis of this research and related campaign see Rosen, Baustad, & Edwards, 2017). Drawing on 'global care chains' and feminist political economy literature, this project highlighted that economic precarity and fears about immigration and employment status provoked tensions between women, and between women and children, as tough decisions had to be made about care and sustenance in a climate of intensifying neoliberal state retrenchment from social reproduction. Children were central to our intellectual and political project, and the organisations made every effort to include children in our activities. However, analytically, children were treated as little more than the passive objects of reproductive labour; organisationally, minimal effort was made to consider the possibilities of *political solidarity* with children (Benson and Rosen, 2017).

It was reflecting on these omissions, based largely on reified assumptions about 'the child', that I came across and, later to, childhood studies. I was, and continue to be, inspired by efforts within the field to keep alive the 'question of the child' (Rosen, 2015b). By developing theoretical resources to understand the changing constitution of childhood, status of children, and adult-child power relations, the field offers an important corrective to much social theory and political organising in which childhood continues to be one of the last acceptable bastions of essentialism. Some of the most fascinating work in childhood studies, to my mind, is that which uses deep investigation of children's lives to not only write children into our narratives and conceptual understandings of social formations, but to expand, even fundamentally transform, understandings of broader phenomena, including social reproduction, (neo)colonialism, migration, inequalities, and social movement building.

There are many examples of such efforts, but like you Afua, Cindi Katz's work stands out for me. Every time I return to *Growing up Global*, I am reminded of the power of thick description and attention to the terrain of the intimate and embodied lives of children in ways which are grounded in an analysis of global restructuring in late capitalism. Her work pulls the quotidian matterings of people's lives out of obscurity, providing a pertinent reminder that raucous play, the tasks and responsibilities of 'life's work', and the spectacle of childhood(s), to give just a few examples, are deeply important, highly political, and worthy of sustained intellectual attention.

Along with other exemplary scholars in the field, Katz provides resources (e.g. 'countertopography' Katz, 2001, 2011) to both theorise and operationalise the political and intellectual project of childhood studies, and beyond, in ways which work beyond artificial binaries of local-global, north-south, adult-child, without negating the extreme inequities between people, social groups, and world regions.

### **Florian**

My first encounter with Childhood Studies took place while I was studying for my MA in Social Pedagogy in Germany. As a student I worked in a small research project in which we tried to analyse what children in care thought about their experience of social services. We failed miserably because the interview techniques we deployed were useless to start a conversation with those kids. I had this experience in mind when I studied at the University of Birmingham in the UK as an exchange student a few years later in 2005. There, I came into contact not only with the Youth Studies tradition of the former Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (which had unfortunately been closed down shortly before my stay) but also with the British tradition of Childhood Studies. These were pretty much the same key thinkers you already mentioned, Afua (such as James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, but also Corsaro, 1997 from the US). I particularly liked their idea of children as actors and used a critical methodology resulting from this for my Master thesis on children's agency in a playground scheme.

Around the same time I also became aware of the German tradition of Childhood Studies, which developed alongside the international discourse. Michael-Sebastian Honig's work was particularly persuasive to me (Honig 2009). He insists that children and childhood are interrelated but different categories. I became aware that in my own academic discipline—Social Pedagogy—*children* play a vital role as subjects of professional intervention but at the same time this is mostly not related to *childhood* as a social construction or the social conditions of childhood. This is pretty much where I felt that the interdisciplinary approach of Childhood Studies might be extremely fruitful for a discipline concerned with children like Social Pedagogy. Thus, my PhD thesis offered an historical analysis of the German offspring of the international Child Study movement around 1900 and addressed how (Social) Pedagogues were involved in the construction of a 'modern' scientific understanding of childhood. Being self-reflective about the ways we as academics and professionals are concerned with the effects of modern childhoods and at the same time are involved in the construction of childhood still seems to be one of the promising aspects Childhood Studies has to offer to a wide range of academic disciplines and child related professions.

Having finished my PhD thesis I came back to the issue of children's agency. With others I shared a concern about the current understanding of agency as a key concept of Childhood Studies (e.g. Prout, 2000; Spyrou, 2011; Oswell, 2013) but at the same time still found it to be an extremely important perspective for my own research. Relational Social Theory (e.g. Fuchs, 2001; Dépelteau, 2013) offered one possible way to reconceptualise agency (Eßer, Baader, Betz, & Hungerland, 2016). I tried to follow this perspective in a research project on the materiality and corporeality of children's agency in residential child care (Eßer, 2017 a and b) while staying at the University of Stirling, where I was happy to have Samantha Punch as an academic host—an academic relationship we both seem to share, Afua.

Today, after more than 25 years of Childhood Studies, it seems necessary to me to reflect on and maybe also review some of its basic principles in order to keep up with broader academic discussions (e.g. Ryan, 2011; Lee & Motzkau, 2011; Kraftl, 2013) but at the same time not to lose the focus on aspects of childhood which actually matter for children's everyday lives and the politics of childhood.

### **Matías**

I have a LLB and practiced as a lawyer for a few years in Chile before deciding to study an MA in Sociology of Law at the International Institute for the Sociology of Law in Oñati, Basque Country. There I took a course on International Children's Rights taught by Professor Michael King, and it struck me to know that children, unlike adults, had been granted a specific right to play in their Convention (art. 31 UNCRC). At the beginning I saw this as a progressive move, because I had been influenced by Humberto Maturana's understanding of play as one of the bedrocks of being human. Thus I delved into the subject and it eventually turned out into my Masters' thesis, which, after months of research, acquired a more critical standpoint: "The Ambiguity of Children's Right to Play" was its title, paraphrasing Brian Sutton-Smith's brilliant *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997).

By then, I had come to realize that this right to play was ideologically loaded with an understanding of play that was an heir to what I later came to know as *adultism*. Children's right to play was a right to a *specific, circumscribed* play, meant to "develop" and "socialize" children towards a docile and productive adulthood. Further, this play was (and is) completely disentangled from work, which is a historical and cultural anomaly that the insightful works of Cindi Katz and Samantha Punch, amongst others, helped me know, understand and be critical about (like the rest of you, in this I owe a big debt of gratitude to these authors). So, after my MA I went on to study a PhD in Sociology of Law and wrote a dissertation (Cordero Arce 2015b) where I tried to take the first steps towards an emancipatory discourse of children's rights: art. 31 UNCRC had been an eye-opener which revealed to me a mainstream understanding of children's rights that I deemed, and deem, prevents children from being full-fledged rights-holders and duty-bearers, i.e. citizens.

Amongst the many things I find fascinating in current research in Childhood Studies is the feeling I sense in some literature of renewed perplexity (for example, regarding children's agency), of precarious equilibrium; a feeling, as I get it, that shows that if we once thought we got things settled we were simply wrong. This has to do with the steady collapse of modernity's *polarities* – which has certainly affected Childhood Studies - and the concurrent emergence of diverse *continuums*, of only incipient theorization. Particularly relevant and stimulating to me is the play-work continuum which I think is a gold mine for researchers.

In my specific field of studies (children's rights), I believe there is still *everything* to be done (see Cordero Arce 2015a, forthcoming), which sometimes makes me feel like a voice that's crying in the wilderness, and maybe not always hitting the right key...

## **QUESTION 2**

And yet, despite the dynamism which childhood studies has witnessed in the last three decades, it is a field which is struggling to find a place in the wider world of scholarship, policy and practice. What is your understanding of this? Is there any one particular challenge that you are struggling with in your own work?

### **Matías**

I think that the diverse calls to take interdisciplinarity seriously need to be heeded. For instance, in my view, Childhood Studies has not sufficiently engaged in the necessary dialogue with the wide array of pedagogical theories, a circumstance particularly disquieting to me concerning critical and anarchist pedagogies (F. Ferrer i Guardia; C. Freinet; P. Freire; H.A. Giroux; b. hooks; P. McLaren and others) from which so much could be (un)learned. Likewise, we -- because I include myself in this-- have been keeping mainstream developmental psychology at a distance, conceiving it more as a foe to be confronted than as an inevitable partner in a much delayed conversation. Certainly, at least in the latter case, this has not been without reasons, but in both cases the risk is to turn Childhood Studies into a sort of endogamous interdisciplinary field, which is an untenable oxymoron.

In children's rights —my own field of research--, the discourse on the rights of children is present in many disciplines but doesn't properly constitute a discrete discipline (yet...). On the contrary, we have just an emerging, very messy and one-size-fits-all field of "Children's Rights Studies" which includes, basically, whatever *any* researcher, from *any* field, has to say about children's rights. Worse still, this approach is itself limited by an overwhelming tendency to circumscribe children's rights to the UNCRC's framing. That's why I think a more disciplinary and disciplined approach to children's rights is needed in order to specifically address the jurisprudential, legal-theoretical, politico-philosophical and socio-legal dimensions of children's rights, that is, the core dimensions behind the concept of "rights" (see Cordero Arce, 2015a: 283-291).

On the other side, legal scholars have not consistently engaged in a discussion of children's rights and the child legal subject. Concerning the latter, for example, they have said virtually nothing about her/him, or, better put, virtually nothing of relevance for an understanding of children's legal subjecthood that takes children and their rights seriously, i.e. for an understanding that should have drunk from the fountain of more than 30 years of Childhood Studies and of centuries of emancipatory legal scholarship. Contrariwise, they have insisted, time and again, on different versions of legal paternalism, that is, on "mini legal subjecthood", at the most (see Cordero Arce 2015a and forthcoming).

This, and other issues that I've discussed elsewhere (2015a, 2015b and forthcoming), should find a place in a discipline I like to frame as "Children's Legal Studies", which I see as a necessary thread of the larger field of Childhood Studies. It is urgent, for children, for legal research and for Childhood Studies, to address in one specific field of studies the core dimensions of children's rights *as rights*. And this is so because these dimensions either have been subsumed under different versions of legal paternalism by legal scholars, hence muting children's voices, disregarding their wills --thus art. 12 UNCRC, which is paternalism hidden in plain sight-, and

ultimately emptying the notion of “right”, or have been blurred and so not rigorously engaged with under the banner of “Children’s Rights Studies”.

### **Rachel**

I have been thinking a lot about these questions, prompted by my involvement in co-editing *Reimagining Childhood Studies (RCS)*, spearheaded by Spyros Spyrou with Dan Cook and myself as co-editors, and my responses are certainly shaped by these collective efforts. It seems to me that the struggles identified in this question and those which Matías describes, as well as the sorts of issues that are being raised by authors and editors involved in *RCS*, relate to both external factors and internal limitations.

Despite the stark critiques of developmental psychology characteristic of the early days of childhood studies, and more recent efforts to think with critical psychology, neither intervention seems to have had much impact beyond the field. In public and academic imaginaries, childhood remains the property of developmental psychology (and increasingly neuroscience). The intensity and durability of such views is astonishing. When I’ve given papers outside of childhood studies, I find myself rehearsing ‘the basics’ both anticipating and responding to the ‘yes, but you aren’t really saying that children can...’, often to the neglect of the broader concerns I would like to tackle. I’ve had students who, after 10 weeks of classes, sigh with relief when I suggest that we need to bring the body, growth, and change into the sociological study of childhood. Others comment that they struggle to be with children without immediately categorising them into detailed developmental typologies. A parallel issue has emerged in my research on play. The conflation of play with childhood and developmentalism, and play’s bifurcation from other aspects of people’s lives (e.g. work, as Matías mentioned previously), makes me worry that by simply writing about children’s play, I am contributing to this reification.

The limited impact of childhood studies is arguably linked to wider anxieties around complexity and ambiguity. A relentless questioning of the situated constitution of childhood, and those beings we call children, sits very uneasily in a context dominated by prescriptive concerns with ‘what works’ reflective of neoliberal, ‘evidence-based’ policy regimes (as Kristen Cheney also discusses in her *RCS* chapter). When job security, funding, status, and remuneration are tied to producing pre-determined developmental outcomes (e.g. payment by results in early childhood settings), engaging in the complexity of children’s lives can seem not only conceptually, but also materially, impossible (Rosen, 2015a). This is not to say that people aren’t engaged in exciting practice informed by childhood studies, but to take seriously the constraints of people’s lives as we look outward from the field.

The tendency to rehash ‘the basics’, unfortunately, also happens internally. There’s been a lot of important work ‘adding children and stirring’, in contexts of migration, work, family, and so on but far less on how this might actually transform conceptualisations within or beyond the field, the importance of which we all mentioned in response to the previous question. The rapidly changing global context – including financialization and indebtedness; austerity/global slump; and an increasingly xenophobic far-right political terrain – presumably means that childhoods are changing, but I’m not certain the field as a whole is keeping up either descriptively or

theoretically. Somewhat paradoxically given the field's emphasis on the social construction of childhood, this can result in an ahistoric and universalising presentation of childhood. Limited engagement with conceptual developments in parent disciplines, which are linked to changing global conditions, constrain our ability to speak with and to the concerns animating other fields. A key challenge then is how to mobilise seminal critiques put forth within childhood studies, without becoming 'doxic', suffocating the intellectual dynamism of the field. This makes efforts to give serious consideration to previously untouchable themes such as vulnerability (Mizen and Ofofu-Kusi, 2013), passivity (Cook, forthcoming), and temporality (Rosen, 2017; Uprichard, 2008) in changing political-economic contexts even more important.

### **Florian**

I totally agree with both of you that we have to develop and maybe also reconceptualise our key concepts (such as agency and/or childhood as a social construction). The various 'turns' in the Social Sciences (material, practice, body, etc) question our taken-for-granted understandings of childhood in many respects and need to be addressed. I also share your opinion, Matías, that the ongoing dispute with developmental psychology often paints an overly simple and quite outdated picture of developmental thinking. Instead of provoking a fruitful, maybe controversial but in any case lively interdisciplinary debate, we often seem to be fighting ghosts.

At the same time I wonder whether, in some respects, Childhood Studies and its key ideas have, on the contrary, not simply been too successful. It seems to be almost a matter of good etiquette in many academic fields to briefly refer to Childhood Studies and state that one is, of course, personally more than ready to acknowledge children's agency. Apart from the fact that this is quite a narrow understanding of Childhood Studies, I wonder whether the 'catchiness' of our key concepts (Ryan, 2008) and their success might turn out to be a problem in one way or the other. Let's take the example of research into children's wellbeing (by the way: Should we regard this field as part of Childhood Studies or not?): Proponents of child indicators research position themselves in line with the Childhood Studies idea of 'childhood as a stage in and of itself' and regard children as actors. At the same time, this understanding is mixed up with developmental stage theories (such as Urie Bronfenbrenner's) without considering any possible conflicts or epistemological questions resulting from this (Ben-Arieh, 2010: 10). I could have given other examples from Policy Studies or Pedagogy which all lead to the same question: How can we be meaningful to other disciplines without losing a certain 'edginess' and critical potential?

It might be helpful to differentiate between Childhood Studies' contributions to academic discourse and its place in the academic field. Regarding the latter, Childhood Studies' interdisciplinarity might be a strength and a weakness at the same time. The academic field is still very much separated into and organised along different disciplines and institutions which means that Childhood Studies is struggling to find its place. As a response to you, Matías, I can say that in Germany, for example, the links to Pedagogy are quite strong. In fact, I myself am a (Social) Pedagogue, like many of my peers contributing to Childhood Studies. Thus Pedagogues bring their knowledge into (German) Childhood Studies—but at the same time it seems much more difficult to justify the importance of a Childhood Studies perspective when speaking with those who do not already regard themselves as being part of the community. When I tell colleagues with a Social Pedagogy background that I am engaged in Childhood Studies they usually assume that I am interested in the theory and practice of Early Childhood Education and

Care. While it is widely acknowledged that, for example, gender is an interdisciplinary research object, the need for a perspective on something which seems to be as self-evident as childhood seems harder to explain. And, speaking frankly, within a great number of disciplines (such as Sociology, Geography, Policy, Cultural Studies, Geography and others) it is still quite difficult to build an individual academic career on children and childhood. The still prevalent social marginalisation of children and childhood also affects Childhood Studies and those contributing to the field.

### **Afua**

I agree with the points you have all raised. In particular, Matías, I share your opinion that there is a tendency (which I am also guilty of) to frame children's rights discussions within the framework of the CRC which is indeed limiting. I also agree with your point about the attempts that we have made, probably to our disservice, to keep development psychology at bay. Like you, Rachel, I welcome the opening up of space to discuss vulnerability as well as agency in childhood studies as called for by Bluebond-Langer and Korbin (2007). Also Florian, I enthusiastically read your point about how childhood studies remains a multidisciplinary, instead of an interdisciplinary, field which has been somewhat constraining.

I do think that while childhood studies' scholars have been enormously prolific, we have not been that great in our engagement with those who are not in childhood studies, many of whom do not appreciate the work that we are doing or its importance in academia. The following quote by Ambert (1986:16) is as relevant today as it ever was: 'the gatekeepers of the discipline...continue to place a high value on certain types of knowledge, data, theories and research methods...one does not become a household name in sociology by studying children'. Certainly in the last few years, at least in England, we have witnessed the struggle of childhood studies programmes and centres to simply survive within their institutions. Numerous reasons can be pointed out to account for this marginalization of childhood studies. Ansell (2009), for example, focusing her attention on children's geographies, points to the production of too many localised studies which do not make links to the 'larger picture'. While Ansell here is focusing her critique on children's geographies I think this point is also relevant to the broader childhood studies field. There is a need for us to move beyond the numerous localised studies we have produced as well as our arguably single minded focus on childhoods as social constructions and look more broadly at the bigger picture in academia and beyond. Also, the engagement between childhood studies and child-focused policy and practice has not been the easiest of relationships. I do think that to address the continuous marginalisation of childhood studies, there is a need for us to engage more effectively with those working in policy and practice. This may mean having to open up space to consider debates within development psychology which, as Matías and Rachel have both noted, has been something we have hitherto shied away from.

Another concern I have relates to the power dynamics that exist in knowledge production especially within childhood studies. In particular, childhood studies is simply too centred on, and in, Western Europe and North America. Most of the top journals and conferences are based in these regions and use the English language as their *lingua franca*. Most academics who become well known are based in these regions even if they write about the South. These dynamics are not exclusive to childhood studies, but in relation to the field it must be noted that concern and

frustration have persistently been expressed, especially by those in the South who feel marginalised within the field despite the extensive and valuable work they undertake. For a field that seeks to foreground the voices and experiences of many marginalised children, it is somewhat ironic that the knowledge production systems within which we work also engage in exclusionary practices. Ultimately this has implications that need to be considered.

### QUESTION 3

There is, it seems to me, no consensus about the role of politics in childhood studies among those who work in this field. What place does the ‘political’ (however you understand it) have in childhood studies for you and more specifically in your own work?

#### Matías

As I said earlier, I conceive my research as *foundationally* political. This does not imply “politicizing” research, since research, especially in a field like Childhood Studies, has always been politicized, as the works of Prout, James, Mayall and Alanen, amongst others, show (see Prout and James, 1997: 8; James et al., 1998: 28, 31; Mayall, 2002: 2, 178; Alanen, 2011: 150). It implies, rather, to understand and assume such politicization, and to act ethically in light of it (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2004: 4). And I speak of foundational politicization because our societies are founded on adultism which, like sexism, is a *system of oppression* that models the societies we live in directly impairing children’s lives (Cordero Arce, 2015a: 305-314). My research intends to advance an emancipatory discourse of children’s rights that can precisely help to overcome such cross-cutting adultism, just as feminist jurisprudence has been fighting for so many years to build a legal theory and practice that can dethrone sexism. It’s from there that I read the question with which we are constantly bombed, Rachel: “yes, but you aren’t really saying that children can....?”. I usually reply to it noting that the question is wrongly framed, mainly because of what we’ve learned from Childhood Studies (attention to biography, context, social stratification and the childhood each particular child inhabits). Now, that notwithstanding, I also add this first and foremost *political* statement: “of course *I am* saying that *children can* (just as women can, people with disabilities can, and oppressed minorities in general can)”.

This brings added difficulty to some of the things said above: it would be very hard (even harder than it currently is, as we all have already acknowledged) to have a conversation on children and childhoods with mainstream developmental psychologists if, before the conversation, we were to acknowledge explicitly our political commitments, because they would argue that they are talking about science, not politics: end of conversation. But I think this is the only possibility for a *fertile* dialogue, with developmental psychologists and with anyone in this big, messy, interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies. All parts in the conversation should put their worldviews on top of the table; for example: “I embrace certain core democratic and egalitarian values, and have a strong position on issues such as class, race, gender, age, etc.”. Only after that should the conversation begin, about “science”, the preconceptions that make us choose our research questions, our prejudices, known and unknown... That, I think, would be much closer to an honest, open and “scientific” dialogue.

I link this with our everyday experiences as adults with “non-researched” children. I work as an educator at a Young Offenders’ Institution and interact with teenagers (14-17 years-old) for

hours on a daily basis, assuming a variety of roles that shift alternatively from teacher, to cop, confident, role-model, friend, enemy, elder brother, “the System”, asshole... I’m also a father of a 7-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy, so I spend another daily lot of hours raising and being raised by my kids. Both experiences definitely influence the way I think and feel about children, youth and childhoods, but they are too close to me; actually they *are* me, so I’ve been steadily unable to detach from them in order to make them “research material”. Of course, there is a methodological logic for this inability; I’m “scientifically” unfit regarding these experiences. But they affect my perspective anyway, no matter what methodological caveats, so isn’t this something we, as Childhood Studies’ scholars, should have to bring up, share and discuss? “Childhood Studies’ Scholars as Parents/Educators”, “Parents/Educators as Childhood Studies’ Scholars”; that would be one challenging CFP...

### **Florian**

This is an interesting question indeed. I absolutely agree with you, Matías, that it is one of the major insights of Childhood Studies that societies are structured by generational orders which systematically disadvantage children (Alanen, 2011). Thus, as long as belonging to a certain generation is linked to certain privileges, Childhood Studies is certainly political. For me this would be something like a point of no return.

However, we have got to find an answer to the question how we theoretically deal with implications of the political. One possible answer would be to say that children are actors, like adults, and have the same abilities to participate if we only let them. Many of the early writings in Childhood Studies followed this line of argumentation (e.g. James & Prout 1990), as did the CRC to some extent. But at the same time there is this ongoing discussion on whether it is really fruitful to found children’s agency on an idea of their taken-for-granted ability to act as independent agents. As we are all aware, these competency-based models of children’s agency have been criticised for simply expanding a liberal Western notion of independent agency to include children (Cockburn, 2013; Larkins, 2014). In contrast to this and in line with feminist theories (Tronto, 1993/2009), it has been suggested that the foundations of ‘our’ (!) idea of agency should be questioned and reconceptualised with a more connected understanding which does not exclude everyone in caring relationships (I tried to summarise this discussion in Eßer, 2016a and developed my own understanding in Eßer 2016b). It think this also relates to your point, Afua, about how “Western” Childhood Studies are.

It makes a difference in terms of “the political” whether we claim the same (liberal) rights for children and adults or whether we question the notions that the assumption of individual agency is based on. I would argue that the latter is where Childhood Studies may bear fruit, insofar as it may show how the material and corporeal politics of everyday practices shape children’s realities (Krafft 2013)—and even their bodies (Eßer, 2017a). This shift from independence to interdependence also means that Childhood Studies may not be limited to the analysis of childhood. If we understand childhood as a relational category, adulthood has to be the object of Childhood Studies as well (Wyness, 2013; Fangmeyer & Mierendorff, 2017). Adulthood and childhood determine each other, and relationships between children and adults are not just oppositional but also productive for children and adults—which does not mean that in contrary they are not power relations.

The political, also, cannot not merely be reduced to generational aspects. While this is the analytical starting point of Childhood Studies, the discipline should not be reduced to that point. Other categories such as gender, class, etc., may become relevant to children as well (Kustatscher, 2017; Konstantoni, 2012) and therefore generation should not be regarded in isolation from these.

## **Rachel**

I am inspired hearing your commitments to challenging the subordination of children and other marginalised groups. Such political commitments are also what brought me to childhood studies and I try to keep these in the forefront of my work. (I say try because, maybe especially as an ‘early career researcher’, I am not immune to the publish or perish climate and the rat race of seeking external funding.) Having said that, it seems to me that there is a distinction between whether something *is* political (which you have both clearly articulated) and a commitment to a change-oriented, radical version of politics within research practice. I am less convinced that we can necessarily characterise the overall field in this second way, although I wish it was so!

I am reminded of the first time that I read Nancy Fraser’s (2009) article ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’. She argues that feminism has an ‘uncanny double’, a version of its own claims which is used by or supports neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. I remember nodding along as I read this piece thinking ‘yes, yes precisely’ about childhood studies (or childism to borrow from John Wall) as much as about feminism. For example, the near obsession with children’s ‘voices’, which although it comes out of progressive commitments, is easily turned into acts of ‘ventriloquism’ (Ruddick, 2007) where claims to represent ‘children’s best interests’ are often used against women (and frankly children themselves) (Twamley et al., 2017).

I suppose in some ways what we all seem to be stressing is the importance of scholarship which does take a stand: a political understanding of knowledge production as not just aimed at describing the world but changing it (if you’ll forgive the well-worn paraphrasing of Marx). It seems to me this involves paying attention to childhood studies’ ‘uncanny double’. In trying to do this in some of my recent work, I have been experimenting with ways of thinking and practicing ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005) and working in *solidarity* with migrant children.

In pilot research with Sarah Crafter from the Open University, we have been explicitly bringing ‘advocates’, ‘professionals’, ‘activists’, ‘academics’, and ‘separated migrant children’ together in various forums (and I realise that I have problematically presented these as completely discrete groups!) to formulate a project aimed at better understanding the care of migrant children, including by children themselves. It has been an interesting set of conversations as we debate political questions including what makes this project worthwhile and who it benefits.

In these dialogues, I have been struck by the different temporalities at which these ‘groups’ move. On the one hand, there is the (often frustratingly) slow and methodical pace of research, which can bring depth and clarity of understanding, compared to the necessarily fast pace of activism in a rapidly changing political context (Brexit, crisis of hospitality, etc) where the

seemingly pernickety debates about whether we should be using ‘separated’ or ‘unaccompanied’ to describe children on the move is viewed as less important than challenging practices which displace, demean, or otherwise marginalise migrant children. Migrant children themselves live with pressing and conflicting temporalities: fluid, uncertain and rapidly changing contexts, combined with long periods of waiting and stasis in camps or in ‘host’ countries which refuse to grant indefinite leave to remain.

These differences can be really challenging. But, collisions of varying knowledges, and grappling with diverse temporalities, can also be productive. They can provoke strategic questions about how ‘we’ (and I guess here I am bringing the discussion back to the ‘we’ of childhood studies) can engage collectively in critically-informed and change-oriented practices.

### **Afua**

My starting point for this question is that from my experience -both personal and professional-- there is very little in life that is not political in some way. Childhood Studies is no exception, not least because children’s day-to-day lives are essentially political (indeed like those of adults) based on who they are: their gender, race, class, religion etc. And since so much empirical work has been conducted in this field, we have to acknowledge the significant role the political (linked with the realities of power and inequality) which underscores children’s everyday lives plays in Childhood Studies. It informs the worldview of the researcher, the subjects that are foregrounded, the groups of children that are focused on and the approach (theoretical and methodological) that is adopted to study these groups and issues. One way I could highlight this point is to link this to the way childhoods in sub Saharan Africa (or indeed the sub-continent as a whole) tend to be portrayed in much of the literature. Much of the attention is focused on those children living in difficult circumstances– the child labourer, the child soldier, the AIDS orphan, the street child - and this has been done to such an extent that there has been an exclusion of studies into the lives of those who experience rather mundane or ordinary childhoods (see Punch 2003, 2015 – yet again, I am referencing Punch, but as I said earlier her work resonates quite deeply with me). This leads to a situation whereby the knowledge that is produced in relation to African childhoods, and then disseminated in articles, books, lectures, seminars, is largely negative. This is then reproduced by those who engage with our publications or lectures and ultimately, this becomes the dominant knowledge that is primarily available for consumption about a place or a group of people. That these topics have been foregrounded in much of the literature focusing on childhoods in sub Saharan Africa is political. In the same way, my decision to use this as an example in relation to this question is itself political as I could have drawn on numerous other examples to illustrate the point. This is primarily because my own approach to Childhood Studies has been driven -not always consciously- by my politics which is closely tied to my identity as an African woman who was brought up in a ‘middle class’ family and spent part of her childhood in an African city with an unproblematic access to schools, consumer goods, extracurricular and leisure activities including the time and space to simply play etc. Importantly, this was a household where my parents understood and respected their culture, but also had the capacity to critique it and be open minded to other forms of knowledge they encountered both in Ghana as well as in the other countries in which they lived. Understanding this background or positionality also contributes to understanding the desire I have, in my work, to change the way childhoods in sub Saharan Africa are studied in the hope that it will lead to

more holistic portrayals which take into account the experiences of those who are marginalised and those whose lives are rather mundane--maybe like my own childhood and those of the relatives and friends I grew up with. This is explicit in my more recent writings (e.g. Twum-Danso Imoh, 2016), but it is also evident in earlier writings especially those that have underscored the importance of acknowledging the existence of a middle ground in children's lives or foregrounding social change as well as tradition as a unit of analysis when exploring the lives of children on the continent. Rachel's point about how the political can manifest through the desire of some scholars to not only describe, but also change the world in some way is something I have noted in my PhD students whose politics, mainly the desire to initiate change and achieve social justice for children in their contexts, is the *raison d'être* for embarking on their PhD. It is always fascinating to watch how their positionality, which is informed to a large extent by their politics, affects how they approach their studies and how the process of conducting their research and reflecting upon their work enables them to become increasingly aware of the political positioning and how they deal with it as they complete their PhD. The central role of the political in childhood studies (in terms of the issues, the researchers, the participants, etc) underlines the importance of bearing in mind and adhering to good ethical practice.

#### **QUESTION 4**

As emerging scholars in this field, what direction do you personally think childhood studies should take in the future? And how likely do you think it will take that direction given where the field is today?

#### **Rachel**

In answering this question, I want to pick up on Afua's comment about our limited engagements with people beyond childhood studies. If we are to keep the study of childhood alive, dynamic and relevant, it seems crucial to counteract the 'endogamous' tendencies in the field (thanks Matías for that helpful concept-metaphor!).

One way that we can do this is to engage with theoretical developments in parent disciplines in a more sustained way, using insights from our field to challenge and contribute to discussions about broader phenomena. This also implies keeping abreast of changing social, political, and economic contexts which fundamentally shift the ground where children live their lives and childhood studies operates. One of the things that I have found really fruitful and exciting in this conversation is hearing about your efforts in this regard eg. emancipatory rights (Matías), agency and the body (Florian) and stratified knowledge production (Afua).

But, I think there is something else that we need to consider: has childhood studies reached the end of its life course?

This possibly seems like a heretical statement in the context of a discussion on ‘childhood studies’, within a journal called *Childhood*, in a field that continues to define itself on the basis of providing deep insights into the lives of those humans we call children and into childhood as a social, historical, and political institution. But in many ways, I think we are haunted by the effort of granting children and childhood ‘conceptual autonomy’ (Thorne, 1987). In seeking to resuscitate children and childhood from the oblivion of the pre- or anti-social, do we end up reifying ‘the child’, forcing false borders around our field which we then impose on the worlds that we study? Deconstructing ‘the child’, and attending to the multiplicity of childhoods, has become a central focus of the field, yet in naming our field in such categorical terms do we effectively homogenise our object?

Florian talks about relational understandings of childhood, which necessarily imply consideration of adults. I think this is also the continuums that Matías mentions which counteract modernity’s dualisms. I would certainly agree that working more persistently with ‘generationing’ (Alanen, 2011) is an essential move, but I wonder if we need to think about the implications of relational thinking at a more fundamental level.

By framing our field as ‘childhood studies’, our attention is focused on an object or thing, rather than a process or relation. The boundaries also serve to bracket out the ‘Others’ to childhood studies: adults, but also the elderly, youth, and often even infants, as David Oswell (2009) points out. And this is not only one of those ‘pernickety academic debates’ I referred to before. The focus on child-centredness, children’s interests, etc, has significant political implications. For example, the demand of children’s organisations, immigration lawyers, and childhood studies scholars of ‘child first, migrant second’ as a way to ensure that CRC provisions take precedence over contradictory migration policy can serve to problematically separate child and adult migrants, with the effect of denying hospitality and refuge to ‘undeserving’ adult migrants (Rosen and Crafter, in review).

The challenge as I see it is to avoid neglecting the particular conditions of the lives of those positioned as children, which can be very different than adults as a result of processes of generationing, while working with and developing intellectual resources to highlight the relational constitution of subject positions and social relations. In another project, I am working on – *Feminism and the politics of childhood* (Rosen and Twamley (Eds), 2018) – we take up these concerns when we look at the ways that women and children are often elided or set in opposition, and consider whether a conversation between feminism and childism might result in new approaches for activism and academia. The key question here is: what sort of framing will allow us to engage more fruitfully with others also informed by critical understandings of power, inequity, and exploitation?

To conclude: should we be moving to ‘Generation Studies’?

### **Matías**

Rachel’s contention that we might need to move from “Childhood Studies” to “Generation Studies” is thought-provoking. I’ll answer this last question of the conversation and by the end I hope I’ll have hinted an answer to her as well.

As I said in my answer to the previous question, Childhood Studies should conceive adultism as one of its main challenges. Thus, it should also dig into, embrace and promote research concerning experiences in which children are powerfully and meaningfully resisting adultism. One such experience is that of the NATs, i.e. the organized movements of working children and youth in the majority world, whose struggle is not only defying adultism, but also capitalism (see Cordero Arce 2015b and forthcoming), and sexism (see González 2010, Espinosa Spínola 2016 and Cordero Arce 2015b). This and the fact that the discourse about their struggles is radically dependent on the movements, leaves a very narrow space for the possibility of hijacking NATs' claims for lower purposes (Fraser's "uncanny double", timely mentioned by Rachel) (see Fraser 2013: 224).

As I see it, the NATs are not merely a great example of an "agentic childhood" on which researchers might focus but, more importantly: (i) a *model* of *children* as subjects of their own emancipation, (ii) a *model* of an emancipatory *childhood*, and (iii) a *model* for the building of full-fledged *citizenship* (subjecthood). Rights and citizenship only emerge through collective struggle (i.e. are always defined and conquered by the legal subjects themselves), and, to my knowledge, the experience in which children and youth are most conspicuously organized in a collective way to struggle for their rights and citizenship is the one of the NATs. Actually, the *collective*, *interdependent* and *inter-generational* struggles of the NATs help us rethink and reframe the idea of "agency" itself, in line with the ongoing debate within Childhood Studies that Florian mentions. "Agency" and the "agent", the debate goes and the experience of the NATs confirms, are growing increasingly distant from the modern idea of the independent autonomous individual—Marx's "isolated monad"—, and this is true for children *and adults* alike.

As a model, then, the reality of the NATs is one from which to learn and, politically speaking, a childhood that should fertilize other childhoods. This implies that *all* researchers in the field of Childhood Studies should pay more attention to working children, especially NATs and research with NATs (it is sad to see that seldom is the journal *Revista Internacional NATs* cited in Childhood Studies' literature, and in this I'm totally in tune with Afua's concern about the marginalization of research coming from outside the minority world's borders). It also means that *much more* research should be done with NATs. More generally, it implies that children's participation in social reproduction --under which I subsume "production"-- is of paramount importance for the study of children and childhoods, that children's play cannot be studied independently from children's work (or lack of it), that learning-as-schooling is an insufficiently problematized concept, that intra-generational rearing is as important as inter-generational rearing, and certainly, as pointed out above, that childhoods cannot be studied independently of adulthoods.

In sum, I think we must engage with NATs because their struggles speak to *every* child and *every* childhood.

With the NATs --whose struggle, historically, has just begun-- in mind and in the centre, I don't see Childhood Studies coming to an end yet. I think reality's plane is still too inclined to move to a straightforward relational approach regarding those who dwell in it. In other words, the knots of reality's net have starkly different weights, precisely for being *such* "underaged" knots. Besides, I can't conceive that end as coming from above: if Childhood Studies is really to be

engaged with children's struggles --"childism" is too equivocal a word to me--, then its future will be up to children to decide. Put another way: no matter how socially constructed is gender (read childhood), I don't see men (read adults) deciding the fate of feminism (read the discourse and practice of children's struggles).

### **Afua**

I got quite excited hearing both your responses and thoughts about possible directions for childhood studies, Rachel and Matías. With regards to an increasing move towards relationality and generationing (Alanen, 2003; Mayall, 2002; Huijsmans, 2016), this is something that I welcome as it contributes to a more holistic perspective of childhoods and the experiences of children in the contexts in which they live their day-to-day lives. This requires a shift in our theoretical and methodological approaches which I would also welcome. Like, Rachel, I also feel that there is a need for childhood studies scholars and students to make closer linkages between their work and broader social theories as well as engage with broader theoretical debates within our disciplines as well as across disciplines. Some scholars are already doing this. For example, with regards to childhood studies and intersectionality, some interesting recently published work include Alanen (2016) and Kustatcher et al (2015). Related to this, I do think we need to consider whether some of the dominant social theories we draw upon provide the most effective explanatory frameworks for understanding childhoods and children's diverse experiences of growing up in non-European contexts. To what extent can we identify and draw upon theories that have been developed in the South and how can we apply them to childhood studies? The work of Connell (2007, 2014) is insightful here as she explores a wide range of theories developed by scholars based in the South and working from different disciplinary perspectives in an attempt to illustrate the relevancy of their work to broader social theory. She further insists that dominant discourses must engage with these 'Southern theories' if social science is to become more inclusive. Finally, like I have previously said there is a need for a shift in knowledge production systems which will enable childhood studies to become more inclusive and less Northern-centric. How do we ensure that those based in parts of the South with poor access to the latest journal articles and books as well as limited (or non-existent) conference funding are able to engage in, and contribute to, ongoing debates taking place within childhood studies? How do we better integrate, and engage with, those scholars writing in languages other than English? In my opinion, the shift required to bring about this more inclusive childhood studies is critical for ensuring the pertinence of this field beyond Western Europe and North America, and hence, I would argue, its survival overall. However, as I write this I note the difficulty involved in achieving this change as the shift required involves not only academics, but also others who are involved in the process of knowledge production such as publishers. So while I note that this shift is desirable, or in fact, vital, at the same time I have a sense that the status quo is unlikely to change.

### **Florian**

When I try to sum up our conversation I feel that we all share a certain feeling of discomfort with the limited nature of contemporary Childhood Studies and are now asking ourselves how to move on. The question is where we locate the limits. I would agree with you, Matías, that despite all our claims to regard children as social agents we have failed to take them seriously as actors of Childhood Studies. In addition to your plea to politically engage with children's forms of self organisation, I would also like to add that we should further develop a participant research

agenda which acknowledges children as co-researchers (Larkins, 2014; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, Bottrell, 2015; Holland et. al., 2010).

I also totally agree with you, Rachel, that “childhood” often evokes a quite substantialist understanding of its object. I therefore very much appreciate your idea of moving from Childhood Studies to Generation Studies. But at the same time I wanted to ask another provocative question; that of whether “generation” might be the limit of Childhood Studies which we should try to overcome. I do not think that this is in opposition to what you stated, but maybe it is a slightly different way of framing the problem. We share the effort to come to a more “relational” understanding of Childhood Studies, and “generation” connects people of different generational belonging.

But at the same time—at least in our common understanding in childhood studies—this is very much about the human relations of which make up the ‘social,’ while contemporary Social Theory is developing less anthropocentric notions of societies. We all referred to (Post-)Feminist theorists and their claim for a more networked and rhizomatic understanding of subjects as well as the social. Haraway (2016) and others insist on the interdependence between living beings and inanimate things as well as between humans and non-humans. From this point of view the politics of childhood would also be rooted in mundane material, discursive, fleshy, ... practices (Law & Mol, 2008)—and not necessarily begin with either children or adults themselves. The aim would be to decenter childhood, including in terms of the different forms of relationality in which children—and adults—are embedded.

Peter Kraftl (2015) insisted on this point from a Children’s Geographies perspective by analysing alter-childhoods (and *after*-childhoods) as ‘more-than-social-childhoods’ with the attempt to widen the horizon of research. Maybe NATs might be understood as referring to such alter-childhoods, which imply a different entanglement with the world than we might expect from children. I myself tried to show how children’s eating practices are part of their different engagement with the world, which is itself deeply “political” (Eßer, 2017a).

So, to conclude: same same but different: Should we be moving to ‘Post-Childhood Studies’?

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