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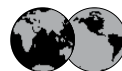

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Childhood Studies: A sustainable paradigm?

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Abstract
This article interrogates what are frequently taken to be central commitments of Childhood Studies: the idea that children are worthy of study 'in their own right', that childhood is a 'social construction', that children are and must be treated as active agents, and that participatory methods are the gold standard. It is argued that while these ideas have been fruitful in some respects, they involve fundamental problems.

Keywords
Agency, autonomy, Childhood Studies, constructionism, participatory inquiry

In this article, I want to examine what are often presented as central commitments of the field of Childhood Studies. These include the idea that children are worthy of study 'in their own right', that childhood is a 'social construction', that children are and must be treated as active agents, and that participatory methods are the gold standard. These commitments are frequently treated as constituting a new paradigm, one that developed in the 1980s and 1990s (see, for example, James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 1996; Kehily 2009).[1]

A central theme in the rationale for this new paradigm has been the claim that childhood and children were previously marginalised by conventional disciplinary research. While its adherents recognised that developmental psychologists had carried out a considerable amount of research on children, and that the socialisation of children had been given some attention by anthropologists and sociologists, they argued that, in general, both these sorts of research were inadequate in theoretical and/or methodological terms, and perhaps even unethical and/or politically regressive.

Proponents of Childhood Studies have criticised developmental psychology both for how it studies children and for its assumptions and conclusions. They argue that the dominant method employed by psychologists – the experiment – assumes, and effectively ensures within its own practice, that children respond *passively* to interventions

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and that it thereby fails to capture children's agency in the ordinary contexts in which they live, where they shape their environments rather than simply responding to the behaviour of adults. Relatedly, developmental psychology is criticised for what is taken to be its conclusion, or perhaps assumption, that young children are incompetent – in other words cognitively, emotionally and morally deficient by comparison with adults. It is sometimes argued that this implies that they only become human in the later stages of their development, so that they are incapable of making sound decisions on their own behalf. Here, we can see how points about methodological and substantive failings are closely related to ethical and political concerns.

There was also criticism of mainstream anthropological research for focusing primarily on how children come to be socialised into (adult) cultures, rather than on children's particular experiences and position in society, and on the ways in which they generate their own distinctive cultural patterns. And much the same criticism has been made of *sociological* research on socialisation.[2] It is argued that this has relied on adult views and practices and has generally failed to take seriously the experiences and perspectives of children. For example, a great deal of it has studied children in institutional settings, such as schools, and addressed issues relevant from an institutional perspective. Similarly, the huge body of research on the causes of delinquency among children and young people has stemmed largely from a criminological interest in how and why some people become criminals, and what can be done to discourage this. As a result, it is suggested, the focus has been on background factors and personality characteristics, social processes and structural determinants, often with little attempt to understand the viewpoints and activities of the children labelled 'delinquent'.[3]

So, the central complaint is that previous research has been framed by adult concerns and has been carried out on the basis of adult assumptions; in effect, adopting a deficit conception of children as 'not-yet-adults' or employing other categories – such as 'delinquent' – that reflect adult perspectives. As with many of the arguments used to support and justify new disciplines or fields, these criticisms contain important truths, but they are also exaggerated or misleading in some respects. For example, it is ironic that developmental psychology is criticised for adopting a passive view of children when, in fact, to a large extent it has been dominated by constructivist accounts of human learning that treat this as an active process rather than merely the establishment of stimulus–response patterns through contact with the external environment (Woodhead, 2009). Of course, part of what is at stake here is what the term 'active' means, and I will discuss this later.

A similar partial defence could be mounted for anthropology and sociology. While there has certainly been work in these disciplines which has portrayed socialisation as a matter of *internalisation*, a more interactionist view has sometimes prevailed, in which people not only take on social roles but necessarily interpret and remake them (Turner, 1962). And, even before the rise of Childhood Studies, this perspective had been applied to relationships between adults and children by a few sociologists (see, for example, Denzin, 1977; Dreitzel, 1972). Furthermore, a pioneering text on the sociology of childhood by Shipman (1972: 31), while relatively traditional in its sociological orientation, nevertheless treated socialisation as a two-way process, so that children are portrayed as active agents, to some degree at least.

It was on the basis of these criticisms of existing work on children and childhood that the new field of Childhood Studies developed, to a large extent relying on the commitments I listed earlier. In the remainder of this article, I want to examine each of these commitments and assess how far they are sustainable.

Children as worthy of study in their own right

At face value, it might seem that this first commitment merely points to a set of topics that (it is claimed) have not previously been given the attention they deserve. These include what it means to be a child in different societies, how life is experienced by children, how they develop their own patterns of social activity, how they relate to one another, and so on. However, usage of the phrase 'in their own right' hints that the meaning of this commitment goes further, implying that in the past their identity as children has not been respected by researchers. In this way, a claim to establish a new academic field is linked in the writings of some commentators to support for a form of identity politics, in much the same manner as with some other transdisciplinary fields, notably Women's Studies.

It is argued that children and adults occupy quite different positions in society and therefore have very different experiences and perspectives, so that those of children should not be assumed to be the same as, nor to be deficient versions of, those common among adults. The implication is that adult perspectives on children and their worlds must not be treated as authoritative, in the way that is common in society at large. This is in line with a general proposal, promoted strongly within sociology from the 1960s onwards (see, for example, Becker, 1967), that social scientists must not simply accept the dominant hierarchy of credibility within a society: they must adopt a more detached, perhaps even critical, point of view. Subsequently, there have been claims to the effect that subordinated or marginalised groups have perspectives that provide more genuine insight into social reality than those of dominant groups, or at least that they offer accounts that can open up the prospect of new and different forms of social life (Harding, 1993; Smith, 1987). In the case of children, this links to a theme that can be traced back at least to Rousseau. He believed that if children were allowed to develop naturally, they could to some extent overcome the corruption and degeneration brought about by civilisation, in which most adults (at least those in the urban middle and upper classes) are hopelessly embroiled.

Much the same opposition to treating adults as authoritative can be reached via the principle of cultural relativism that was enshrined in a great deal of 20th-century anthropology. From this point of view, it can be argued that the distinctive cultures to be found among children must be viewed as valid in their own terms. Also relevant here is that there has been increasing recognition, on the part of both anthropologists and sociologists, that there are diverse local cultures within large complex societies, and that these need to be investigated via an 'appreciative' (Matza, 1969) stance. One aspect of this has been the study of youth subcultures in ways that, among other things, celebrate their cultural significance (Gelder and Thornton, 2005). Thus, a key feature of Childhood Studies has been an extension of this general approach to the study of younger children (see, for example, Corsaro, 2003).

It is important to recognise, however, that several rather different orientations on the part of researchers are being run together here. Contrary to the way in which it has often been interpreted, and the apparent implication of the title of his article, Becker's (1967) 'Whose side are we on?' did not suggest that researchers should side with subordinates, only that they ought to give at least as much attention to *their* perspectives as to official points of view (Hammersley, 2000: Chapter 3). Indeed, Becker explicitly recognised that inverting the established hierarchy of credibility threatens the likely validity of research findings just as much as taking official accounts at face value: he dismissed it as 'sentimentality' (Becker, 1967: 246). Similarly, Matza's (1969) contrast between an 'appreciative' and a 'correctionalist' stance did not entail treating the perspectives of those labelled deviant as of superior validity. Nor does anthropological cultural relativism carry the implication that non-Western cultures are superior, even if it has sometimes been treated as doing so.

There are also questions to be asked about the focus of Childhood Studies on the distinctive experiences and perspectives of children. There is an instructive parallel here with Women's Studies, where the significance of the fact that there are important differences *among* women soon came to be recognised: between those belonging to different racial or ethnic and social class categories, those with different sexual orientations, and those with and without disabilities. Moreover, the implication of the intersectional character of identity in the case of children is not only that their experiences and perspectives are likely to vary considerably but also that *most of this variation will reflect characteristics that they share with adults*. This represents a challenge to the idea that childhood can be studied 'in its own right'.

An associated problem that arose in Women's Studies came from the post-structuralist attack on 'essentialism' and was subsequently reinforced by the transgender movement and by arguments for post-humanism (see Ferrando, 2013). Involved here is a challenge to the idea that being a woman has any stable meaning at all, independent of multiple discursive constructions of femininity. This seemed potentially to undermine the idea that womanhood could form a legitimate basis for a field of study or, for that matter, for a political movement (Nicolson, 1990). And parallel problems arise with the category of 'child' and its role in relation to Children's Studies. Paradoxically, given the strong emphasis on sociocultural variation that is built into this field, and the downplaying of cultural universals, it might be concluded that the only stable content that can be given to the category 'child' is biological. Yet, just as proponents of Women's Studies challenged arguments that gave social significance to the fact that women are biologically distinctive (because these arguments had been used to bolster inequality and oppression), so too have proponents of Childhood Studies usually rejected, or at least de-emphasised, arguments drawing on biology (Prout, 2005).

The result in both these fields is that the central concepts on which they rely tend to be undermined. Feminists have been caught between an inclination to deny that there are inherent differences between men and women, on one hand, and an insistence on the distinctiveness and value of women's experiences, on the other. The same sort of tension seems to operate within Childhood Studies: in some respects, differences between children and adults are played down, denying deficit views and promoting children's right to adults' rights, but on other occasions the differences between children and adults are

emphasised; this being essential to the rationale for Childhood Studies as a distinct field. Furthermore, in the case of children, even more than that of women, treating 'child' as the key identity of those being studied appears to locate them firmly in the subordinate status that is assigned to being a child in most societies, and this is of particular significance when 'child' is defined, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as anyone up to the age of 18 years – since it includes many 'children' who would regard themselves, and be regarded by others, as adults.

Equally important, since most children later become adults, it is difficult to formulate childhood in any other terms than degrees of competence or ability in relation to adult activities. That some adults are less competent in relevant respects than some children is important to recognise – but this does not undercut the main point that 'not yet adult' is a major component of what the term 'child' must mean. The upshot of this is, of course, that if the problems associated with treating 'child' as a homogeneous category are to be overcome, contentious judgements have to be made about the degree of relevant competence of particular children. But who should make these, on what grounds, and by what authority? These are questions which, I suggest, it is hard to find a basis for answering within the Childhood Studies paradigm.[4]

Childhood as socially constructed

Turning to this second central commitment in the field of Childhood Studies, we should note that constructionism is an approach to be found across many areas in social science today and that what it is taken to entail can vary considerably (Burr, 2015; Weinberg, 2014). As already noted, one core element of the idea that childhood is socially constructed seems to be that what it is to be a child differs quite dramatically across societies. Rejected here, then, is the idea that 'child' is a universal category, in the sense that what is most distinctive about children is what they all share: in short, the argument is that the character of childhood is socioculturally variable rather than biologically fixed. As I noted earlier, while it is usually acknowledged that children are somewhat biologically different from adults, the implications of this are downplayed in order to counter the tendency to view children as distinctive entirely or primarily in terms of biological immaturity.

While this idea marks Childhood Studies off from much developmental psychology, with its attempt to identify universal patterns of development, there is clearly an overlap with Anthropology, and also with History. In these latter disciplines, sociocultural variation in views about, and treatment of, children has been emphasised. At the same time, as I suggested in the previous section, the way this idea operates in these disciplines poses a threat to the first commitment of Childhood Studies since it suggests that the lives of children must always be investigated in the context of the wider societies or historical periods in which they live, *in other words to a large extent in the context of adult cultural practices and forms of social organisation*.

A second aspect of constructionism in the field of Childhood Studies is a tendency to regard any alleged deficiency on the part of children as being itself the product of adult stereotypes, either directly in simply misrepresenting the *actual* capabilities and motivations of children or indirectly through action based on these stereotypes which prevents

them from exercising or developing the relevant capabilities. This kind of constructionist argument occurs in a number of other fields too, for example in disability studies, the sociology of deviance, and the study of gender and ethnic differences in educational performance. It is a line of reasoning which certainly picks out social processes that may well take place and be of importance. However, when treated as a basic commitment that *defines* the field of Childhood Studies, there is a danger that the extent and effects of these processes will be exaggerated. Indeed, any call for *evidence* about the operation of such processes may come to be treated simply as at odds with commitment to the field.[5] Yet, at the same time, few would deny that young children lack some of the capabilities that most adults have. The difficulty that arises is determining which ones and to what degree, as well as the causes of these differences. But the importance of this is obscured by arguments suggesting that the differences are socially constructed. The tendency is to assume that any suggestion of lack of capability or motivation on the part of children is not only false but also politically reactionary.

A further problem is that, here, constructionism is being applied selectively: only to those phenomena that are regarded as undesirable. Yet, the logic of the constructionist argument applies to *all* social phenomena.[6] Thus, it is not just childhood that must be seen as socially constructed but also, for example, children's voices and their rights. In fact, a constructionist approach could be applied to Childhood Studies itself, in the manner of those versions of the study of social problems that focus on how moral entrepreneurs identify particular issues as problematic, how they promote them up the public agenda, and so on (Holstein and Miller, 1993). From this point of view, Childhood Studies comes to be seen as just such a social movement, concerned with *constructing* the current treatment of children as frequently unfair or abusive. An even more challenging constructionist move would be to apply the labelling theory of deviance, one of the earliest sociological forms of constructionism, to paedophilia.[7] It is not hard to understand why there would be reluctance to push constructionism this far, but it is necessary to address the question of on what grounds its selective application can be justified (Foster et al., 1996: Chapter 1).

In some other fields, constructionism has sometimes gone beyond recognition of sociocultural variation and of the effects of stereotyping and differential treatment. At an ontological level this involves rejection of any tendency to treat the perspectives, experiences and actions of people as if they were phenomena existing in the world, that are subject to the causal effects of social, cultural and economic conditions or the distorting effects of stereotypes and discriminatory practices. Instead, it is argued that actors contingently construct all social phenomena *in and through their actions*, or that phenomena are constituted by *discursive processes*, so that the focus of analysis must shift to those processes of constitution or construction by which phenomena come to be what they are taken to be.

If this more radical version of constructionism were to be applied in Childhood Studies, it would presumably require the focus of investigation to be shifted towards a concern with who is identified as a child in what interactional contexts, and how this is done.[8] This would result in very different kinds of work from most of what currently makes up the field. Clearly, this raises questions about the significance and implications of the commitment to social constructionism for the field of Childhood Studies.

Children as active

The idea that children have agency – that they play an 'active' role in social life or can exercise autonomy – has long been a central theme in Childhood Studies. However, while agency has generally been treated as a positive feature, there has rarely been much clarity about what it involves.[9] Furthermore, agency is a complex concept, not least because it can be interpreted in both factual and normative terms, with the latter necessarily dependent on the former.

In factual terms, at a minimum what is involved is rejection of those models of human behaviour that treat it as fixed reactions to internal or external stimuli, whether theories appealing to instinct or those of a more behaviourist or socially determinist kind. As already noted, rejection of these models is characteristic of much developmental psychology, but Childhood Studies researchers view children's behaviour as primarily sociocultural rather than psychological. Also, while to some degree they share this with Anthropology and Sociology, as noted earlier they reject what they regard as the tendency for these disciplines to treat socialisation as involving the *internalisation* of norms or patterns of behaviour: a form of *sociocultural* determinism that they believe denies agency.

Yet, there is a danger here of treating agency in a dichotomous fashion that is misleading: simply opposing a passive model of children to one where they are wholly unconstrained or undetermined in their behaviour, and therefore can exercise autonomous will. The history of social science generally has witnessed frequent oscillation between these two poles, in various forms. A famous quotation from Marx – to the effect that people make history, but not in conditions of their own choosing – encapsulates recognition that neither extreme is satisfactory. And we might add that while people also *make themselves* to an important degree – this is, of course, a crucial part of Marx's thesis – they also *inherit* a great deal. We can only make history, and ourselves, by drawing on the resources we have inherited, and using these in the particular material circumstances that we face. This sophisticated middle position demands judgements about *degrees* of autonomy. So, in factual terms, children, like adults, must be seen as active in some respects and to some extent but not in any absolute sense.

Some work in the field of Childhood Studies has recognised this, for example, Robson et al. (2007a, 2007b) treat agency as a continuum, while Klocker (2007) has proposed a distinction between thin and thick agencies, the former referring to situations where choice is limited to only two or three predefined options, and the latter to decisions where a broader range of options is available. However, this seems to assume that agency is a property that varies along a single dimension, whereas there are good reasons for arguing that it is necessarily relational in character (Jamieson and Milne, 2012; Oswell, 2013: 15; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; passim). In judging whether or not children, or adults, are autonomous, we must specify from what they are free, and/or what they should be free to do: freedom in abstract is meaningless. The central argument of Immanuel Kant's ethics demonstrates this since he sees rationality as freeing us from what we might naturally will as a result of instinct, socialisation, and so on; yet, at the same time, it involves subjugating ourselves to 'rationality'.[10] So, judgements about whether or not we are, or should be, free are always relative to what we want to do, might want to do, or ought to

want to do. Given this, it is necessary to be explicit, in any particular case, about to what types of restriction, and/or to what possible courses of action, any particular claim to, or ascription of, freedom, autonomy or agency relates; and what judgements underpin it about what would and would not be desirable goals or modes of choice-making.

This links to the normative aspect of the idea that children are active not passive, which appeals to a powerful stream of modern Western thought that treats autonomy as a supreme value, perhaps even as the defining characteristic of human beings. Kant is representative of this position, albeit in a form in which autonomy is treated as isomorphic with rationality: as already noted, for him, to be free is to act rationally. He argued that while we usually regard the physical world as controlled by the operation of deterministic laws, this results from the perspective we adopt (and cannot avoid adopting) towards it, rather than from the nature of that world in itself (which we cannot know). By contrast, the ways we have of understanding human beings necessarily treat them as capable of exercising free will, indeed as able to govern their own behaviour on the basis of rational principles, thereby transcending the causal nexus in which physical science suggests they are enmeshed. In the 20th century, this idea of autonomy as a defining feature of humanity came frequently to be framed in terms closer to the Fichtean idea of creative self-determination or self-realisation (typical of Romanticism – see Cranston, 1994: 29), rather than Kant's emphasis on rationality. And here an absolutist notion of freedom prevails.

If autonomy is treated as involving the transcendence of all external, and indeed internal, constraints, then any actual constraint must be regarded as restricting what it is to be human and therefore as undesirable. In other words, this principle of autonomy prompts the immediate judgement that any purported constraint is unnecessary and unacceptable. As a result, views that portray children as 'passively responding' to biological, psychological and/or social determinants may be treated not only as factually inaccurate but also as politically or ethically unacceptable, on the grounds that policies and practices based upon them place constraints on the active potential that children have. Indeed, any claim that children are necessarily subject to constraints may be dismissed as false simply because it is judged to have undesirable consequences. Yet this is misguided.

The fact that there are problems with the ideal of children's (or, indeed, adult's) autonomy, interpreted as freedom from all constraints, should be obvious. One of these is highlighted by what I referred to earlier as the sophisticated middle position on this issue, characteristic of Marx and others. From this point of view, *as a matter of fact*, the behaviour of children, like that of adults, will always be at least partly determined (by biology, social circumstances, local culture, etc.), so that the ideal is unrealisable in anything approximating to a full sense. For example, the 'voices' of children, rather than being autonomous expressions of their authentic individual being, or even of their distinctive cultures, very often consist of the recycling and reworking of adult talk (see Maybin, 2006).

Another problem is that if we recognise children's agency, then we must also recognise their *responsibility*: to the extent that they have agency they are potentially subject to blame as well as praise for their actions. Much discussion of children's agency seems to neglect the fact that responsibility is the other side of this coin.[11] Relatedly, the principle of respecting autonomy comes into conflict with other ideals, such as the avoidance

of harm. And the latter takes on particular significance in the case of children because there are respects in which they may be more vulnerable than most adults. The case of children being 'groomed' into sexual relations by adults raises this issue in particularly sharp form since the children involved often become strongly attached to these adults. So, in seeking to counter paedophile activity, it is often necessary to deny the wishes of children (sometimes 16- or 17-year-olds) to make choices for themselves, on the grounds that these choices are not an expression of autonomy but of malign influence. But how is this to be decided and by whom? Once again, these are questions that the field of Childhood Studies, as currently constituted, may not have the resources to answer.

Even aside from conflict between autonomy and protection from harm, there is also the potential for conflict in applying the principle of autonomy on its own since one person's exercise of freedom almost always places limits on that of others. Hence, assertions of the rights of children have often prompted complaints that these infringe the rights of parents to make decisions in the best interests of their children, in the communal interest, or for that matter in their own interests (see, for example, Twum-Danso, 2009). There are genuine difficulties here that cannot be resolved solely through appeals to agency or autonomy or even to some notion of equality. Instead, attention has to be given to what are and are not legitimate forms of autonomy (and responsibility), and this must be done in relation to both children and adults.

As all this makes clear, in the case of children, no less than with adults, there are issues about what people actually want to be free to do and what it is legitimate or desirable for them to be free to do. There are also questions about whether judgements about these matters should vary systematically according to whether the people concerned are children or adults, and how the boundaries of childhood ought to be defined. Declarations about the agency of children, of the kind to be found in much of the Childhood Studies literature, tend to obscure these issues, not least by reducing normative judgements to an apparently factual matter – the claim that children are 'active' or 'agentic'.

Research methods

While a variety of methods of data collection and analysis have been employed in the field of Childhood Studies, these have been predominantly qualitative in character. A basic commitment has been to the principle that the methods employed must allow the voices of children to be heard, whether this is through ethnography, open-ended interviewing or asking them to make drawings or produce photographs and videos.

Even putting aside the issue of whether children, as children, have distinctive, authentic voices, there are some problems with this, and especially with the more radical versions of the argument. These privilege the use of participatory inquiry methods, requiring children to be directly involved in making research decisions (Nind, 2014), perhaps even to take the lead or to carry out the research themselves (Kellett, 2005). There is, of course, considerable scope for variation in what this amounts to in practice (Hart, 2008; Nind, 2011), and in most studies I suspect that adult researchers have played a supervisory role at the very least (see Kim, 2015). Nevertheless, such participatory modes of inquiry are not only frequently seen as ethically preferable but also as performing a significant political role, not least by demonstrating that children have the competence to

make important decisions. In addition, it is frequently assumed that through giving children a role in the research process this will lead to their interests being served or at least protected.

Several justifications are offered for participatory inquiry, methodological as well as ethical and political. The methodological justification relates primarily to what is seen as the incapacity of adults to understand children, or at least their considerable difficulties in doing this: child participation is believed to increase the likely validity of the findings. It may also be argued that equalised relations between researcher and researched produce richer and more illuminating data. In addition, various political justifications are put forward: for example, participation in research may be presented as a right, often through appeal to the UNCRC). Finally, the ethical justification for privileging participation seems to treat it as an extension of informed consent, being designed to realise the ideal of autonomy more closely. In these terms, participatory inquiry may be regarded as 'ethically superior' (Nind, 2014: 29).

In my view, none of these arguments is convincing.[12] Indeed, I question whether participatory inquiry, especially where it is child-led, is a *research* method at all, although it may well have value as a pedagogic and/or as a political strategy. In methodological terms, I think it is important to recognise that social research is a specialised activity that demands knowledge and skills that a very small proportion of adults – and hardly any children – have, and ones that cannot be acquired quickly. Much depends here, of course, on how we define 'social research' and by what criteria we assess its products. But, at the very least, in terms of how it has come to be institutionally defined, whether in practical forms such as the work of polling organisations or applied research agencies, or in academic terms as judged, for example, in the UK's Research Excellence Framework or through PhD examinations, it requires a high level of expertise. To ignore this threatens the quality of research. Research involves responsibilities, both as regards seeking to ensure the validity of the findings *and* respecting ethical considerations – and researchers must be in control of research decisions if they are to live up to these responsibilities (Dyson and Meagher, 2001).

Focusing specifically on the methodological rationale for participatory inquiry, it is certainly the case that adults may face challenges in understanding children and their lives because children do often have different perspectives and experiences from adults. However, I think it is a mistake to assume that adults cannot gain any understanding of children's lives or indeed to assume that children find it any easier to understand one another (Kim, 2015; Tisdall, 2012). There are no good reasons for *assuming* that there are insurmountable barriers to understanding other people. If we were to do this, it would undercut not only the whole of social science but also social life itself. After all, if we believe that different categories of person cannot understand one another, the intersectionality of identities effectively implies that only each individual can understand herself or himself. And there are even questions about whether such self-knowledge is possible or at least whether it carries any epistemic privilege (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008).

The political rationales for the superiority of participatory inquiry seem to assume that the rights of children extend unproblematically to include participation in controlling research about themselves. However, the appeal to the UNCRC here is very questionable (Hammersley, 2015). Furthermore, in my view, *adults* no more have a *right* to

participate in research than do children. To believe that they do would imply that, to take extreme examples, if one were studying child abusers or members of racist political parties, they would have a right to control any research concerned with them. If it is said that this right only applies to oppressed groups, or to those judged worthy in some other way, how is it to be determined who comes into this category, and who is to decide this? Both paedophiles and racists may well see themselves as marginalised and oppressed. And we can hardly appeal to a consensus about who is and is not oppressed because there is unlikely to be general agreement in most societies that children are an oppressed group.

Finally, the ethical justification for participatory inquiry also faces problems. One is that it treats respect for others' autonomy as the primary ethical principle, when there are other important principles underpinning research ethics; and, taken together, these can have conflicting implications in particular situations (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Moreover, if any one of them is to be prioritised, surely it should be the minimising of harm. And respecting individual autonomy does not necessarily achieve this – indeed, it can have the effect of shifting responsibility for harm away from the researcher on to participants. There is also the problematic character of the principle of autonomy itself, as noted earlier: indeed, it is often criticised for being a Western liberal ideal or as masculinist – it has little place, for example, in feminist relational ethics.[13] This should not lead us to dismiss it, but it does indicate that it is not all-important and that it needs careful interpretation.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined some of the central commitments on which Childhood Studies has been put forward as representing a new paradigm, marked off from previous disciplinary approaches to the study of children. These included the idea that children should be studied 'in their own right', that a social constructionist approach ought to be adopted in studying childhood, that children must be seen as agents rather than as passively responding to internal or external factors, and that participatory forms of inquiry are the gold standard. While some of these assumptions can undoubtedly be very fruitful, I have argued that they involve inconsistencies and tensions that vitiate their capacity to form a coherent and effective approach.

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Notes

1. There have been challenges to several aspects of this paradigm (see, for example, James, 2010; Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Tisdall, 2012; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). There have also been

alternative formulations of the grounds for Childhood Studies, for example treating childhood as a structural feature of modern societies, or focusing on the concept of generation and intergenerational relationships (Mayall, 2002; Oswell, 2013; Punch and Tisdall, 2014; Qvortrup et al., 2009). However, the commitments I am focusing on here still tend to be taken for granted in much of the literature.

2. Jenks (1982: 19) portrays socialisation theory as dehumanising children, for example.
3. For a history of the sociology of childhood, see Mayall (2013).
4. By contrast, this can be and has long been done within developmental psychology, although, of course, in ways that are open to dispute (see, for example, Chandler and Chapman, 1991). For other approaches to the issue of competence, see Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998).
5. This is common in Disability Studies (see Shakespeare and Watson, 2001).
6. In this respect, Jenks' (1996) discussion of child abuse is unusual: he focuses on how this came to be treated as a major problem. He insists, however, that his discussion of the 'myth' of child abuse is not intended to 'prejudge or diminish the phenomenon' or to 'trivialise' it (p. 88).
7. For an examination of the moral rhetoric surrounding paedophilia, see Meyer (2007, 2010).
8. There have been some attempts to apply it in the study of youth groups (see, for example, Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). However, these have not been the predominant approach even in that field. Prout (2005: 144) seems to suggest something like this but without acknowledging that it undermines the existence of Childhood Studies.
9. Not all researchers concerned with children view the emphasis on agency in a positive light. For example, Lancy (2012a: 13) comments, 'I find the child agency literature almost useless in terms of advancing understanding and, ultimately, improving the lives of children'. See also Lancy (2012b).
10. And subsequent criticism of Kant's position, from Hegel onwards, has pointed out that any conception of rationality is socio-historically constituted.
11. The African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child differs from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in recognising that children have responsibilities as well as rights. See Montgomery (2016) on the tensions within anthropology regarding the issue of children's rights. Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007) raise the important question of whether the emphasis on children's agency obscures their distinctive vulnerabilities and need for protection.
12. For other criticisms, see Gallacher and Gallagher (2008), Holland et al. (2010) and Nind (2014: Chapter 4).
13. See Boyden (1997), Stainton Rogers (2009) and Lancy (2012a). On feminist relational ethics, see, for example, Bowden (1997).

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