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Not so ‘new’? Looking critically at childhood studies

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The ‘new’ sociology of childhood emerged over 20 years ago, arguing for the social construction of childhood to be acknowledged and for the recognition of children and young people’s agency and rights. Other disciplines joined this growing academic area, from children’s geographies to law, so that the phrase ‘childhood studies’ has become a popular label. Policy and practice both influenced, and were influenced by, childhood studies, particularly in relation to promoting children’s rights. This paper provides an insider’s critique of the current state of childhood studies, with attention to theoretical challenges and its applicability across Majority and Minority Worlds. From a childhood studies’ perspective, the paper suggests the potential of notions of relations, relationships and reciprocity.

Keywords: children; childhood; children’s rights; childhood studies; Majority World; Minority World

Introduction

It has been over 20 years since the ‘new’ sociology of childhood emerged out of a strong critique of the dominant child development and family studies’ paradigms. Leading theorists and researchers took insights, particularly from sociology and social anthropology, to argue for childhood as a structural component of society, with children and young people as contributors to the division of labour (Qvortrup 1985, 1994, 2009, Wintersberger 1994). Rather than focusing on the norms of child development, the ‘new’ sociology of childhood emphasised the social construction of childhood particularly within the UK (Mayall 2012), as well as a respect for children¹ and childhood in the present rather than a focus on adults and adulthood as the ‘golden standard’. Children should be perceived as social actors and holders of rights rather than seeing them as passive and dependent on the private family (Qvortrup 1994, Mayall 2002). Other disciplines and research areas have joined the sociology of childhood – from geography to education to law – creating an academic area of interest often termed ‘childhood studies’. This paper considers the current state of this not so ‘new’ childhood studies.

There have been close affinities to policies and practices, with mutual support between academic childhood studies and children’s rights (Ennew *et al.* 2009, Moran-Ellis 2010). Of particular note has been the promotion of children and young people’s participation in decision-making about their own lives and collectively (Tisdall and Bell 2006, Percy Smith and Thomas 2010), which fits neatly within childhood studies’ interest in children and young people’s agency and

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the novelty of setting out children and young people's participation rights within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The UNCRC is the most ratified international convention. Passed by the UN Assembly in 1989, the UNCRC's 54 articles cover civil, economic, social and cultural rights for children and young people – or, more frequently, divided into protection, participation and provision rights. Ratifying countries are obligated to turn the rights in the UNCRC into reality; the legal significance of ratification currently depends on a country's legal system as well as the realities of policy implementation. International donors – from UNICEF to a host of children and young people's charities like Plan International and Save the Children – have worked to a children's rights agenda and thus frequently require receiving governments and non-governmental organisations to accept and promote children's rights.

But while the popularisation of childhood studies and the UNCRC may have gained increasing cross-national attention, criticisms continue about the applicability of Minority World conceptualisations and priorities to the Majority World (Hart 2006). As with human rights in general, notions of children and young people's agency and rights have been accused of continuing colonial imperialism and of introducing ideas antithetical to certain cultures and traditions (see below). These criticisms are particularly salient as most children and young people, in fact, live in the Majority World and typically are the Majority of the population there (Punch 2003). Those working in development studies are increasingly articulating a critique of childhood studies, for failing to incorporate Majority World's childhoods into its theory and practice.

This paper outlines the basics of childhood studies, particularly as articulated in the UK, for any reader less familiar with the territory. It then summarises certain critiques from within childhood studies, picking up the disavowal of development psychology, the false universalisation of childhood constructions, and the privileging of agency. This leads into a more developed look at children's rights and the UNCRC, before concluding.

The 'new' sociology of childhood

Groundwork for the emerging 'new' sociology of childhood was carried out in the post-war years, notably in USA and Germany (Mayall 2012). By the 1980s and 1990s, a sharp critique of theorisation and research on children had been articulated. Traditional theories, such as Parson's socialisation theory and Piagetian child development, saw adults as mature, rational and competent whereas children were viewed as 'less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete' (Jenks 1996, p. 10). Qvortrup (1994) made the explicit connection between the social construct of childhood as 'human becomings' rather than 'human beings', and the ensuing exclusion of children:

... adulthood is regarded as the goal and end-point of individual development or perhaps even the very meaning of a person's childhood. They are however revealing for the maybe unintended message, which seems to indicate that children are not members or at least not integrated members of society. This attitude, while perceiving childhood as a moratorium and a preparatory phase, thus confirms postulates about children as 'naturally' incompetent and incapable. (p. 2)

From constructions of children as 'human becomings' came arguments that children were not citizens and, further, they did not even have rights because they lacked rationality, they lacked competence, they needed protection not autonomy and they must be socialised into 'good citizens' (Purdy 1992, Phillips 1997).

Childhood, the sociologists of childhood argued, had been wrongly seen as natural, 'an enduring, historically consistent and universal' construct (Goldson 1997, p. 19). Childhood studies

offered alternative conceptualisations, which have influenced childhood research in numerous countries around the world (Bühler-Niederberger 2010). These alternative ideas were neatly encapsulated by Prout and James (1990) and have been embraced over the past two decades to varying degrees, as illustrated in Table 1.

The reconceptualisations of childhood have led to an immense growth of childhood studies' research, which in the UK tends to privilege 'children and young people's voices' and has developed methodologies of working directly with children and young people. Methodological debates have focused on: the extent to which researching with children and young people is similar or different to researching with adults (Punch 2002a, Lewis *et al.* 2004, Christensen and James 2008, Tisdall *et al.* 2009); ethical issues (Thomas and O'Kane 1998, Hopkins and Bell 2008, Alderson and Morrow 2011); the development of innovative methods and tools (Punch 2002b, 2007a, van Blerk and Kesby 2007, Thomson 2008); and the extent to which children and young people are active participants in the research process (Kirby *et al.* 2003, Ennew *et al.* 2009, Gallagher 2009, Tisdall *et al.* 2009).

Certain critiques from 'within' childhood studies

Childhood studies generally, and children's geographies specifically, have been internally critiqued for producing many empirical accounts of children and young people's everyday lives while becoming complacent and uncritical on a more theoretical level (Horton and Kraftl 2005, 2006, Vanderbeck 2007, Horton *et al.* 2008, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011, Holt 2011). James (2010) comments on the abundant research on children and young people's perspectives of their everyday worlds:

This is not to suggest that such research is not valid in its own context and frame of reference – it does, however, require us to reflect upon the extent to which a continued proliferation of studies that demonstrate, yet again, the fact that childhood is socially constructed and that children are active social agents in the construction of their own childhoods, contributes either to the furtherance of our theoretical understanding of childhood or the development of childhood studies. (p. 486)

Perhaps then, we are left feeling a little overwhelmed by the empirical examples and underwhelmed by the theoretical debates within childhood studies? Theoretical suggestions and conceptual discussions may become lost among the sheer volume as well as the detail of empirical accounts. However, Mayall (2012) argues that childhood researchers have been developing theory since the 1980s. Within the 'new paradigm' there has been a considerable body of conceptual development, such as in relation to identity politics, inclusions and exclusions, plays of power which interlink with insights from feminist, post-colonial and political-economic research agendas.

Childhood studies set itself up as a counter-paradigm, severely critical of what had gone before. This led to the creation of 'mantras', which can be seen almost invariably in childhood studies' publications, particularly within the UK: mantras about childhood being socially constructed, recognition and focusing on children and young people's agency, and the valuing of children and young people's voices, experiences and/or participation. Only more recently have such childhood studies' mantras been interrogated more critically, and theorisations started to become more rich, nuanced and diverse (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, James 2007, Gallacher and Gallagher 2008).

Certain 'insider' critiques of childhood studies are considered below, of potential salience for this special issue. The first is developmental psychology's fight back for due recognition, followed by Prout (2005, 2011) and Lee (2001) both attempting to move away from modernist dualisms and towards more flexible concepts. The subsequent sections draw particularly on

Table 1. To what extent has the paradigm shift occurred?

	Extent to which ideas have been consolidated in academic discourse, policy and practice by 2012
The 'new' sociology of childhood: issues proposed in 1990 by Prout and James	
Childhood is understood as a social construction	Fully embraced within academic discourse in childhood studies (Vanderbeck 2008, p. 396). Tendency in policy (such as UNCRC) to universalise some aspects of childhood (Bentley 2005)
Childhood is a variable of social analysis	This idea has been widely accepted within childhood studies, but it continues to remain on the margins of mainstream disciplines (Horton <i>et al.</i> 2008, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011). For example, the sociology of childhood and children's geographies consider age as a key social variable, but, particularly within the UK, each sub-discipline struggles to encourage the disciplines of Sociology (Mayall 2006, p. 15) and Geography (Hopkins and Pain 2007, Vanderbeck 2007) to mainstream childhood and age
Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right	Totally embraced within childhood studies as a wealth of empirical studies over the past two decades have emerged often published within specialist journals: <i>Childhood</i> (first issue in 1993); <i>Children & Society</i> (since 1987); <i>Children's Geographies</i> (began in 2003); <i>Children, Youth and Environments</i> (rebranded in 2003) and <i>Global Studies of Childhood</i> (new in 2011). Increasing numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate, multi- or interdisciplinary, childhood studies degrees offered. Furthermore, international conferences and specific panels within conferences are regularly devoted to childhood studies (Montgomery 2009, p. 5)
Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and of the societies in which they live	Academically, the notion of 'children as social actors' is fully recognised within childhood studies (Holt and Holloway 2006, p. 136, Vanderbeck 2008), but there is still a gap between theory and policy/practice (Gill and McNeish 2006). For example, Mayall (2006) comments that for professionals there is a 'continued dominance in the UK of positivist development psychology' (p. 13). Children's participation is gaining increasing legal and policy acceptance, in certain countries, although reality does not always deliver (Percy Smith and Thomas 2010)
Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood	Recognition that ethnography is one of many approaches to studying children's lives (James 2007, p. 264). Many innovative methods as well as traditional ones are used to research with children (Punch 2007a, Bingley and Milligan 2009); participatory approaches tend to be popular particularly in rights-based research (Kirby <i>et al.</i> 2003, Ennew <i>et al.</i> 2009, Tisdall 2012a)
Proclaiming a new paradigm of childhood is also part of reconstructing childhood in society	Many developments in policy and practice but complexities still exist in relation to operationalising children's rights (Hartas 2008, Lansdown 2010, Jones and Walker 2011) and recognising children as active agents in their own lives (Mayall 2006, James 2007). For example, there can be tensions between adult roles of caring for and protecting children versus children's participation rights (Thomas 2000, Hartas 2008, Tisdall and Morrison 2012)

insights from those working in the Majority World, who have questioned the globalisation of childhood constructions and especially of children and young people's agency.

Theoretical critiques

Developmental psychology was firmly rejected in the seminal text by James *et al.* in 1998. Piaget's work was particularly criticised, for justifying adulthood supremacy and its fixation on universal, standardised and inevitable developmental stages (James *et al.* 1998, p. 18). Yet, as Woodhead (2009) writes, Piaget was trying to be child-focused, to respect children's own ways of thinking. At times Piaget's work is caricatured in childhood studies, failing to incorporate the full range of his theories and focusing more on the imperialism of those using Piaget (for example, in education) than on Piaget's own research work. Doubtlessly, Piaget's work had flaws in recognising children's competencies in context (Donaldson 1978) and developmental psychology has moved on (Smith *et al.* 2011). But developmental psychology, posits Woodhead (2009), continues to have salience as childhood is by definition transitional, as well as culturally constructed. With major changes in physical size, maturity, relationships, identities, skills, activities and perspectives, developmental psychology remains relevant in studying such changes, with new-found attention to considering different socio-economic and cultural contexts (Woodhead 2009). Children's geographers, like Matthews and Limb (1999) and Matthews (2003), demonstrate the potential threads from a child-centred approach to 'environmental psychology' to a socio-cultural geography of children and young people's lives, spaces and encounters.

Theoretically, developmental psychology has alternatives to Piaget, with the popularisation of Vygotsky's (1978) social-cultural theories. Vygotsky posits that higher forms of cognition come from social interactions. The expert partner assists the child, structuring the task to provide the bridge between the child's current development and her potential development until the child is able to do the task on her own. Radziszewska and Rogoff (1988) and Rogoff (2003), for example, have developed such ideas in Majority and Minority World settings. Smith (2002) describes the potential for such theories:

[they] suggest that development, rather than unfolding in a predictable fashion from infancy to adulthood through the outward expression of innate biological structures, involves participation in social processes. There is no one pathway for development (such as the Piagetian progression towards rationality), rather development depends on cultural goals. (p. 77)

Thus, within developmental psychology itself, there are theories that emphasise relationships, cultural variations and contexts.

Prout (2005, 2011), one of the leading theorists of the 'new' sociology of childhood, has himself suggested moving away from the narrowness of dichotomies, including the pitting of psychology against sociology. Such dichotomies, he argues, are symptomatic of the modernist focus of childhood studies. He particularly critiques the division between the social/cultural and the natural, created by the mantra of social constructionism. Childhood studies has retained a modernist agenda, while the rest of sociology has been 'decentering the subject', 'searching for metaphors of mobility, fluidity and complexity' rather than permanent social structures (2005, p. 62). Prout suggests instead that we use languages of 'non-linearity, hybridity, network and mobility' (2005, p. 82), drawing on actor-network and complexity theories, for example.

He rejects social constructionism for unduly focusing on human action and meaning. Instead, society can be seen as 'produced in and through patterned networks of heterogeneous materials; it is made up through a wide variety of shifting associations (and disassociations) between human and non-human entities' (Prout 2005, p. 109). Relationships, then, might be considered equally

between children and young people and physical materials, spaces and entities in hybrids that do not sharply distinguish between the social construct and nature.

Lee (2001) counters the widely accepted distinction, in childhood studies, between the flawed view of children and young people as 'human becomings' and the favoured view of 'human beings'. At the start of his book, he takes a predominantly historical approach (Chapter 1) to argue that adults lack finished stability in terms of their working lives and intimate relationships. With adults in a perpetual search as human becomings, then children and young people are equally in this 'age of uncertainty' (p. 19).

Both Prout and Lee turn to Deleuze and Guattari (1988), to consider theoretical resources to understand change and multiplicity. Assemblages bring together heterogeneous elements, creating a stability from 'encounters between humans, animals and metals' (Lee 2001, p. 115). Each assemblage may last for a while but, through further possibilities and encounters, can change and become something different. There is no set order but rather 'many incomplete orderings that remain open to change' (p. 115). Thus, within childhood studies, there is potential to reclaim and consider ideas that incorporate change, transitions, contexts and relationships, moving beyond concepts that are unduly fixed and static, with unhelpful dichotomies and ignorant of cultural and contextual variations.

Development studies

In a much more practical way, development studies has criticised the construction of childhood within childhood studies, as well. A growing crescendo is being heard from development studies' academics and/ or those working in development settings, about the (mis)application of the 'global child' to children and young people in Majority World settings (Aitken *et al.* 2008, Philo and Swanson 2008, Penn 2011). Rather than being universal, such notions of the child are quintessentially from the Minority World, focused on protecting children and young people, on enlisting parents and governments to do so, and offering limited avenues for children and young people's participation (Valentin and Meinert 2009). For example, from a Minority World perspective, participation should not include engagement in paid work as a major experience of childhood but should involve being spatially and conceptually in schools or family homes and being heard by adult decision-makers in particular ways. These norms are being globalised, when in fact even in the Minority World they exclude large swathes of children and young people who work, who do not live with their biological parents, or who are otherwise excluded (e.g. by ethnicity or sexual orientation) or are out of place (e.g. on the street, traveller families, those applying for asylum or refugee status). Thus, these Minority World norms are very particular notions of appropriate participation for children and young people and not even universal in their own contexts.

The critique is especially sharp when such global norms are imposed through international institutions and international law. So, for example, Pupavac (2001) is virulent about displacing political accountability and parental rights, by the professional experts mandated by the UNCRC to intervene in the 'best interests' of children and young people in war and other situations. Long-standing arguments against the 'rescuing' of street children and of child labourers, popularised in the Minority World media and successfully raising charitable funds, have gained ground: children and young people's experiences on the street and in work are more complex than the campaigns project and a simple rescue strategy in fact has proved damaging to many (Ennew 1995, Ansell 2005, Wells 2009). Such debates are joined by recent attention to child soldiers (Hart 2006, Rosen 2007), to independent child migrants (Punch 2007b, 2009, Hashim and Thorsen 2011), to children and young people who take on particular responsibilities due to (parental) HIV and AIDS (Bray and Brandt 2007, Payne 2012), to global reactions to disasters

like the 2004 tsunami – all of which frequently frame childhoods in terms of welfare and protection, emphasising ‘returning’ children and young people to their childhood (Wells 2009). The UNCRC is frequently cited as promoting this (false) global childhood (Pupavac 2001, Bentley 2005, Wells 2009).

Questioning agency

Within childhood studies, many empirical studies provide examples of children and young people as competent social actors and emphasise their agency (Hutchby and Moran Ellis 1998) – but often do not question or problematise what such agency really means for different groups of children and young people:

... anthropologists have both asserted and clearly documented children’s agency, singly and in groups, in a number of situations. What is less clear is the degree of agency, the impact of that agency, let alone the nature of that agency – points that could also be made about the agency of adults – singly or in groups. Children, like adults, do not escape structural constraints. (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, p. 242)

James and Prout (1990, p. 8) provide a definition of children as social actors who are ‘active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live’. Mayall (2002) builds on this by distinguishing between actor and agent:

A social *actor* does something, perhaps something arising from a subjective wish. The term *agent* suggests a further dimension: negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints. (p. 21)

Hence, as James (2009, p. 41) argues, the concept of children’s agency focuses on ‘what it means to act’ since while they act ‘there are any number of misunderstandings, ambiguities and difficulties that children need to resolve and interpret on the way’. Given children’s generational position in society (Mayall and Zeiher 2003), their multiple social positions within inter-generational and intra-generational relationships ‘all offer different opportunities and constraints for children to act and, in doing so, exercise their agency’ (James 2009, p. 43).

Childhood studies has perhaps been more likely to stress the notion of children and young people as competent social actors to counteract traditional views of children as passive dependents (see also Holt 2011). For example, researchers have been keen to attribute agency to child soldiers (Rosen 2007), child prostitutes (Montgomery 2009) and street children (Hecht 1998), to offer an alternative to the stereotypical image of such children and young people as helpless victims. The limitations of children and young people’s agency in these constrained contexts is certainly acknowledged but perhaps not sufficiently problematised.

Robson *et al.* (2007a, 2007b) discuss a continuum of agency, which varies depending on opportunistic and constrained contexts, created and expected identities, positions of power/lessness, lifecourse stage and state of emotions and wellbeing. Taking this further, Klocker (2007) suggests a notion of thick and thin agency can be helpful in understanding this continuum of children and young people’s constrained agency in different contexts:

... ‘thin’ agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives. ‘Thick’ agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options. It is possible for a person’s agency to be ‘thickened’ or ‘thinned’ over time and space, and across their various relationships. Structures, contexts, and relationships can act as ‘thinners’ or ‘thickeners’ of individual’s agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices. (p. 85)

If we combine this notion of thick/thin agency with Ansell's (2009) discussion of the limitations of children's agency, we could argue that there is a 'thickness' for children to be involved and influence many local situations, but a 'thinness' at more macro and policy levels. This reflects the spatial limits on the 'reach' of children's action spaces.

More recently, Bordonaro and Payne (forthcoming 2012) have introduced the concept of 'ambiguous agency' for use when children and young people's agency threatens or goes against the grain of the existing moral and social order in society and iconic notions of childhood, rooted in Minority World perspectives. Agency can be accepted uncritically as being a positive thing. Hartas (2008, p. 97) points out that children and young people's participation can be over-regulated and can put too much pressure on them. Just as children and young people should have the right not to participate, they should also be able to choose not to assert their agency. Children and young people's agency should certainly be a contested and scrutinised concept rather than one which is taken-for-granted, unproblematised or assumed inherently to be positive and desired by all children and young people.

Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007) raise the important question: what happens to vulnerability with so much focus on agency (see also Philo 2011)? For example, are child soldiers innocent victims of war in need of protection or moral agents who should be held responsible for their violent acts (Rosen 2007)? This example illustrates the tensions between recognising children and young people's agency versus acknowledging their position of vulnerability in a context of extreme structural constraints (such as times of acute poverty, political instability, war or natural disasters). It shows the potential benefits of bringing in the structural emphasis of the broader European childhood sociologists (Mayall 2012), so that macro factors that affect children and young people are given sufficient attention.

There is now plenty of evidence that children and young people are *potentially* competent social actors, but there is still space to consider the limiting contexts where that may not be possible (see, for example, Ansell 2009) or the circumstances in which children's agency is perceived as negative, challenging or problematic (at least from adults' perspective) (Bordonaro and Payne forthcoming 2012). However, while this issue of competency is usually only discussed in relation to childhood, it is not solely a childhood issue. Adults are also *potentially* competent social actors, who have limitations placed on their abilities to act as agents in certain circumstances and who are not fully independent beings. As White and Choudhury (2010) point out: 'If children's agency is shaped by structures, so too is the agency of adults. . . . The adults, just like the children, are only partially aware of what is going on in and through them' (p. 46–47). Both adults and children/young people are linked to others by ties of interdependence and '*all people* are simultaneously both active agents *and* constantly in a state of becoming' (Kesby *et al.* 2006, p. 199).

Furthermore, Holt (2011) argues that, while children and young people's agency has been key to the development of children's geographies and to the inclusion of children and young people's perspectives in academic discourses, it 'is paradoxically integral to the marginalisation within contemporary societies of children and young people (and others, such as disabled people) who cannot achieve this ideal of independence and autonomy' (p. 3, see also Ruddick 2007, Tisdall 2012a). Problematising children and young people's agency illustrates the complexities and ambiguities of applying theoretical ideas in practice (see also Vanderbeck 2008), particularly when social realities are complex and contradictory.

Critique of the UNCRC and children's rights

Rights constitute one of the most powerful discourses globally. As Freeman (1983, p. 32) writes, rights are particularly valuable 'moral coinage' for those without other means of power. Detailed philosophical and legal arguments have been made for children's rights conceptually (Freeman

1983, Archard 1993), with affinities to childhood studies' arguments that children and young people are falsely seen as human becomings and incompetent, with adults wrongly perceived as fully competent and rational. The UNCRC is the practical accumulation of much lobbying around children's rights internationally, heralded as 'undoubtedly the most significant recent policy development intended to promote and protect children's rights' (Franklin 1995, p. 16). The UNCRC is particularly welcomed as positively constructing childhood, with children and young people seen as social actors and human beings with their own rights (Hart 1992, Lansdown 2010). The participation rights are described as 'radical enfranchisement' (Reid 1994, p. 19) and are certainly new introductions compared to previous international instruments for children and young people.

The UNCRC can be seen to have certain advantages. It creates a balance between welfare and participation, vulnerability and agency, which requires a child's view to be duly considered (Article 12) while ensuring the child's best interests are a primary concern (Article 3) (Marshall 1997). Practically, the UNCRC brings together international law pertaining to children and young people into one binding instrument and has led to advocacy for children and young people at local, national and international levels – with certain attributable results.

The UNCRC, from early on, also faced critics. A compromise document, it ironically did not substantially include children and young people within its development (as would be required, presumably, by its Article 12) and its creation was dominated by Minority World countries (Van Bueren 2011 for an insider perspective). It has been criticised for its Minority World focus (Bentley 2005). It incorporates certain ideas about childhood (e.g. definition by age) and certain issues but not others (e.g. child military service, which mostly affects boys, but not child marriage, which mostly affects girls (Olsen 1992)). The Convention has been so popular in its ratification perhaps because it lacks 'teeth' in terms of enforceability, at least at an international level: the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child receives reports, can request more information and interrogate civil servants and politicians should they come to the Committee, and can embarrass governments in the Committee's reports. Until recently, there are no stricter international enforcement mechanisms, although States will now be able to opt into an international complaints procedure. Further, like many international conventions, the UNCRC's phrasing allows for considerable interpretation, at best, and manipulation, at worst (for example, what are 'best interests', Article 3).

At its core, the UNCRC is promoting the rights of children and young people. The notion of rights, especially combined with ideas of children and childhood, has created a controversy in certain settings. The concept of rights, and indeed arguably its moral power, has philosophical and historical traditions. Particularly important in Anglo-Western thinking is Enlightenment philosophy, which made links between natural rights, individualism and liberty. The 'moral coinage' of rights rested upon their universalism and their inalienability ('trump cards' in political terms, Dworkin 1984), as protections for individuals' liberties and freedoms from state intervention.

Much theorisation has been developed on rights since the Enlightenment, such as considerations of group rights (Jones 1994) and the 'interest' theory of rights which emphasises basic human needs rather than individual liberty (MacCormick 1982, Eekelaar 1992). Indeed, leading philosophers have argued for the subjectivity of rights: that they are not universal, that they must be seen in their social, cultural and economic contexts (MacIntyre 1981). But arguably, the power of the rights concepts lies not in their subjectivity but in their Enlightenment heritage, as articulated by Arneil (2002):

More importantly, while the concept of 'rights' has been extraordinarily elastic, it cannot escape its origins ... a rights-based argument is ultimately concerned with a change in status for the individual, a state commitment to the principles of both non-interference and enforcement ... and a society constituted by associational relationships of mutual self-interest. (p. 86)

The power of rights relies on liberal democracy, with particular relationships between the citizen and the state, with presumptions about the ‘free, autonomous, rational, choosing’ (Wells 2009, p. 166) individual citizen.

In the Minority World, alternatives to rights-based justice have been articulated. For example, the ‘ethics of care’, emerging from feminist critiques (Gilligan 1982, Arneil 2002), focuses on responsibility and relationships for moral development, rather than rights and rules, and wants to recognise and support interdependencies. Communitarianism in its various forms argues at its core that people exist not as autonomous individuals, but relationally in society (Sandel 1982).

In the Majority World, critiques are similarly made about the unhelpful practice of perceiving children and young people as individuals, rather than as having responsibilities, living relationally intergenerationally and in their communities (Valentin and Meinert 2009). For example, tensions between the UNCRC and African conceptualisations of child responsibility led to an alternative articulation of children’s rights in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990). Article 31 of this charter articulates ‘responsibilities of the child’:

Every child shall have responsibilities towards his family and society, the State and other legally recognized communities and the international community. The child, subject to his age and ability, and such limitations as may be contained in the present Charter, shall have the duty;

(a) to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need;

(b) to serve his national community by placing his physical and intellectual abilities at its service;

(c) to preserve and strengthen social and national solidarity;

(d) to preserve and strengthen African cultural values in his relations with other members of the society, in the spirit of tolerance, dialogue and consultation and to contribute to the moral well-being of society;

(e) to preserve and strengthen the independence and the integrity of his country;

(f) to contribute to the best of his abilities, at all times and at all levels, to the promotion and achievement of African Unity.

Many households in Majority World contexts tend to be based on interdependent family relations, both across and within the generations, which are negotiated throughout the lifecourse (Punch 2002c). Similarly, Kabeer (2000) talks about the inter-generational contract and how responsibilities and reciprocity change over the lifecourse. Prolonged family ties are more marked in many parts of the Majority World where state welfare systems are limited or absent (Klocker 2007, Robson *et al.* 2007a, 2007b). However, constrained and negotiated interdependencies are not only confined to family relations but may also be evident in children’s relationships with other adults and peers (de Lima *et al.* 2012).

A commonality can be seen in the critique of, and alternatives offered, to rights-based approaches: that of people being in relationships and embedded in relational processes. But these alternatives can be problematic as well. For example, the ‘ethics of care’ may helpfully point to the lived interdependencies of people but it fails in one of the key benefits of children’s rights: that is, ensuring children and young people are not hidden in households, subjected to patriarchy, and children and young people’s own wellbeing ignored. The emphasis on responsibility may recognise that children and young people are indeed already contributing to their families, their peers, and their communities. But the emphasis can fall into a hectoring focus on the ‘deviant’ child or young person, who must learn to be more responsible and compliant; it has been used politically in the UK to make citizenship conditional and vulnerable (Lewis 2003). A potential alternative, that can respect the dignity of all contributors, could be ‘reciprocity’ (O’Neill 1994). This is a philosophical area under-represented in children’s rights literature but one that is promising:

Thus we can see that reciprocity is, in fact, the tie that binds other values such as responsibility, respect and entitlements. Not only does it help us to understand attitudes towards concepts such as inalienable human rights, but also, it allows us to gain a deeper insight into the context in which children's rights are implemented . . . (Twum-Danso 2009, p. 430)

Conclusions

Childhood studies has a particular and recent history, of carving out a place for itself within academia and research more generally. In the UK, it has done so by positioning itself against previous dominant modes in developmental psychology and sociology, and adopting certain mantras in theory (the social construction of childhood, children and young people as social actors) and in methodology (a focus on ethics, a privileging of 'voices', a welcome of ethnography and micro-studies). It has become increasingly multi-disciplinary, with involvement from a wide range of (but not all) disciplines, although possibly still dominated by the sociology of childhood, the anthropology of childhood and children's geographies. Childhood studies has been informed by, and has informed, a process of policy and practice development that has privileged children and young people's participation alongside concerns for their welfare, and children's rights more generally. The UNCRC has been a leading international instrument for promoting children's rights.

As childhood studies itself has 'matured', certain tenets of its theory, methods and policy implications have begun to be scrutinised – although selectively and somewhat tentatively. A key question for this special issue is what can Majority World research on childhood offer to childhood studies, in both the Majority and Minority Worlds? Undoubtedly such research makes empirical contributions, along with the unsettling of certain childhood constructions. Beyond a critique of existing (modernist) theory, there might be a challenge to childhood studies' researchers generally to access more 'bottom-up' theorisations from the Majority World, including more consideration of 'indigenous' theorisations (e.g. recent work on 'cultures of participation' in Brazil (Butler and Princeswal 2010)). What are the worthwhile alternatives, or developments, to the still dominant ideas of social constructionism?

Childhood studies' research, particularly within the UK, is replete with examples of children and young people as socially competent agents, with little space for alternatives. Are the negative potentials for children and young people's agency adequately considered? What of children and young people who do not want to be agents and/or to participate? Key aspects of the 'paradigm shift' (Holt and Holloway 2006) are now well established: listening to children and young people, children and young people as social actors and their participation in both society and research. However, there is still room to critique or go further with each of these (see also James 2007, Tisdall 2012b). Focusing on children and young people's perspectives, agency and participation is no longer sufficient; greater emphasis is needed on the intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people's lives across both Majority and Minority World contexts.

In differing ways, the critiques and alternatives discussed in the article here question this focus on individuality and personal agency and point to the value of considering relationships (see also Jamieson and Milne 2012). For example, theoretical advances in developmental psychology suggest the need to contextualise children and young people's development. The popularity of Vygotsky and now Rogoff, in particular, highlights the importance of relationships for learning. The critique of modernist notions within social constructionism, and the unhelpful distinction between human beings and human becomings (Lee 2001, Prout 2005), offer revised possibilities in relationships between not only people, but spaces and materials. Minority World conceptualisations of childhood, and children's rights in particular, suggest an individual that detached from the reciprocity, responsibilities and relationships embedded in various cultural contexts.

The adult–child dichotomy, so central to childhood studies (Shamgar-Handelman 1994), has less centrality in situations where families have many siblings and extended kin (Punch 2001), or there are substantial numbers of children, or young people are taking on household responsibilities due to parental HIV/AIDS (Payne 2012), or children/young people are undertaking paid work and/or are in public spaces (van Blerk 2012). A multiplicity of relationships becomes evident, along with recognition and potentials for reciprocity that go beyond the narrowness of (at least UK) debates about rights and responsibilities. Thus, while this paper has argued for a more problematised and nuanced understanding of key concepts within childhood studies, such as agency, it also suggests that a focus on relationships can shed light on the complexities and interconnections of childhoods in a globalising world.

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Note

1. At times, the paper solely uses ‘children’, when referring particularly to childhood studies, children’s rights, and when using quotations. More generally, ‘children and young people’ is used to refer to the age group under the age of 18, as defined by the UNCRC. This phrase aims to respect that many older children prefer the category ‘young people’ to ‘children’.

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