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## When intersectionality met childhood studies

**Citation for published version:**

Konstantoni, K & Emejulu, A 2017, 'When intersectionality met childhood studies: The dilemmas of a travelling concept', *Children's Geographies*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 6-22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1249824>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/14733285.2016.1249824](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1249824)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Children's Geographies

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Children's Geographies* on 07/11/2016, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14733285.2016.1249824>

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# When Intersectionality Met Childhood Studies: The Dilemmas of a Travelling<sup>1</sup>

## Concept

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## Abstract

Childhood studies/geographies have a longstanding interest in questions around multiple social inequalities and identities in diverse socio-spatial contexts, but have not yet seriously considered the politics of intersectionality. Importing intersectionality into childhood studies is neither a straightforward nor an unproblematic process. We suggest that the question that childhood studies/geographies scholars must confront is how intersectionality can be used in this interdisciplinary field in ways which recognise and take seriously the intellectual history and labour of Black women and preserve the integrity of intersectionality's radical praxis of emancipatory knowledge production and collective action for social justice. This article examines how intersectionality and its emancipatory politics

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<sup>1</sup> Note, we are equal co-authors

might be preserved, strengthened and enhanced when it is operationalised in a context of childhood studies/geographies.

### **Keywords**

intersectionality, childhood studies/geographies, inequalities, race, praxis, embodiment

What happens when intersectionality travels...is a question of which differences make a difference in situated contexts of time and space. (Lewis 2013, 882)

### **Introduction**

The interdisciplinary field of childhood studies is undergoing an important transformation. This field has traditionally focused on critical understandings of the social construction of childhood and children's agency, participation and rights.

However, Punch and Tisdall (2012, 241) have called for 'new and revised theorisations around children and young people's agency and relationships'. This call is the culmination of work to expand the boundaries of childhood studies to problematise children's agency (Prout 2005), draw on both Minority and Majority world<sup>2</sup> (Punch 2015) contexts while researching and theorising childhood, provide a

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Majority world' is used in this paper to refer to the majority of the world's population who live in Africa, Asia and Latin America and seeks to shift the balance 'of our world views that frequently privilege 'western' and 'northern' populations and issues' (Punch and Tisdall 2012, 241). Understandings of childhoods oftentimes privileges experiences and perspectives from the Minority world—Europe, North America and Australia. The use

more nuanced analysis of ‘relations, relationships and reciprocity’ within childhood studies (Tisdall and Punch 2012, 249) and move beyond a social constructionist analysis of childhood by including critical analyses of the body (Prout 2005).

We seek to heed the call of Punch and Tisdall (2012) for new and revised theorisations by trying to understand how intersectionality, as both a theoretical framework and a politics for liberation, might illuminate, challenge and expand scholarship and debate about children and childhoods in different spaces and places across the globe. By ‘intersectionality’ we mean ‘the simultaneous and interacting effects of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and national origin (and others) as categories of difference’ (Bassel and Emejulu 2010, 518). The field of childhood studies has a longstanding interest in questions around multiple and complex social inequalities and identities in diverse socio-spatial and cultural contexts (e.g. Connolly 1998; Corker and Davis 2000; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001; Thorne 2004; Renold 2005; Van Blerk 2006; Morrow and Connolly 2006; Konstantoni 2012; Tisdall 2012; Watson 2012). Within this body of work, exploring particular intersections while analysing childhood identities and inequalities is not necessarily ‘new’ (e.g. Connolly (1998) explored children’s experiences of race, gender and social class). However, the extent to which an intersectional analysis is operationalised varies, as does the extent

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of the words ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ world are problematic, as they homogenize both world regions, however, the use of the above terms ‘at least invites reflection on the unequal relations between them’ (Punch 2003, 278).

to which childhood studies uses, explicitly or implicitly, intersectionality as a theoretical framework for politicising childhood and children's agency.

Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) refer to the three ways in which the field of 'intersectionality studies' has been used: the first applies intersectional frames of analysis to research; the second draws attention to intersectionality as theory and methodology; and the third explores intersectionality as praxis that extends beyond academia. The childhood studies/geographies literature is diverse and vast, and it is not possible to review all relevant literature in this paper. However, we choose to draw on a few key studies as examples of how intersectionality has been used in this field. For example, although some studies do not explicitly use intersectionality as a framework, they include intersectional elements of analysis, like in Morrow and Connolly's editorial (2006) and examine the place of gender, ethnicity, social class and disability in the everyday lives of children. However, intersectionality in the above studies is not explicitly used as a theoretical or methodological framework nor a praxis and no direct links are made to the Black feminist origins of intersectionality. Similarly, there is a variation in childhood geographies literature in relation to the extent to which a study names its intersectional theory and analysis. For example, Evans and Holt (2011, 279) state in their editorial for their recent special issue of *Children's Geographies*:

Most of the papers in this collection, either explicitly or implicitly, explore the ways that the everyday lives, social networks and identities of children and youth are shaped by the intersection of age with gender and other socio-cultural differences.

There are other childhood research studies that explicitly name intersectionality while analysing childhood identities and inequalities (in early childhood see: Skattebol 2006; Rosen 2015a; in children's geographies see: Worth 2016). Although intersectionality is explicitly used in some of these texts, they do not always theorise an intersectional framework, methodology and/or praxis or make explicit links to the origins of intersectionality. Within children's geographies scholarship, more specifically, there is sporadic but ongoing debates about the 'politics of children's geographies', the importance of focusing on diverse childhood experiences and power differentials, moving beyond political uniformity and political silences, which homogenise childhoods (Aitken 2004; Vanderbeck 2008). This paper builds on this body of work by highlighting the important contribution that intersectionality can offer. It is important to highlight however, that children's geographers, in particular, have been using intersectional frameworks to understand children's and young people's lives (e.g. O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2014; McLean Hilker 2014; Rodó-de-Zárate 2015; Evans and Holt 2011; Hopkins 2010; Hopkins and Noble 2009;

Hopkins and Pain 2007). However, this research mainly involves young people and there are few works that focus on young children's geographies. Moreover, in O'Neill, Gutierrez and Hopkins' introduction to a themed section in *Children's Geographies* (2014, 3), they state that the papers all contribute to the first approach that was suggested by Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013), that is, that they draw on intersectional frames of analysis to research with young people and by relating this to literature they 'offer theoretical insights into the ways in which an intersectional framework' provides a better understanding and re/presentation of everyday experiences.

Although there is now an emerging body of work that uses an intersectional framework (e.g. Thorne 2004; Amoah 2007; Morris 2007; Taefi 2009; Kustatscher 2015; O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2014; De Graeve 2015) childhood studies and geographies have yet to seriously consider the politics and practices of intersectionality (Kustatscher, Konstantoni, and Emejulu 2015). As Burman (2013, 234) states: 'while intersectionality now features within discussions of childhood, it has yet to figure as a topic of analytical debate, perhaps because the concept and debate has largely arisen within feminist studies.' Thus, there is yet to be a wider critical and analytical debate about the theories, methods and practices of intersectionality within the childhood studies field (Alanen 2016)—as is currently

taking place in other allied disciplines such as philosophy, political science and sociology—and there is a need to better position the existing debates about childhood and difference in relation to influential discussions about intersectionality (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2006; Mirza 2015). We argue that childhood studies/geographies, in turn, have much to offer to the wider debates about intersectionality, particularly in relation to age, how it interacts with other categories of difference, and how it might offer a resource for children’s agency and activism (Thorne 2004). Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013, 807) state that ‘further elaboration of intersectionality’s theoretical and practical content can be advanced through collaborative efforts across and within disciplines, sectors, and national contexts’. We position our paper in this space to understand the generative potential of bringing together intersectionality, childhood studies/ geographies.

However, importing intersectionality into childhood studies is neither a straightforward nor an unproblematic process. Intersectionality, as both a theory and practice, is constituted by a particular set of arguments about race, class, gender, knowledge production and activism that cannot simply be ‘set aside’ in a rush to apply intersectionality to childhood studies. Indeed, when we look to the debates currently taking place within feminist political science and sociology about intersectionality, we see that much is at stake when intersectionality travels across disciplinary boundaries and is unhooked from its original focus of understanding the



lived experiences of Black women and their collective actions for social justice (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Lewis 2013; Tomlinson 2013; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Intersectionality is not *simply* a framework to analyse the complex interactions within and between social identities and political institutions. It is a counter-hegemonic praxis that seeks to challenge and displace hegemonic whiteness in the naming and legitimating of particular kinds of politics, policymaking and knowledge production. It is through the operationalisation of intersectionality that women of colour and particularly Black women, are recentered in the public imaginary as active, competent and political agents (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Jordan-Zachery 2007; Mirza 2015). The question that scholars of childhood studies/geographies must confront is *how* intersectionality can be used in this interdisciplinary field in ways which recognise and take seriously the intellectual history and labour of Black women and preserve the integrity of intersectionality's radical praxis of emancipatory knowledge production and collective action for social justice—particularly for women of colour.

In this article we explore the politics of intersectionality and how the contestations about what intersectionality is and how it is constituted raise important questions for the field of childhood studies. We begin this article by first exploring the recent contestations when intersectionality 'travels' across disciplines and its focus shifts

away from the study of women of colour, their complex inequalities and their political agency. We then move on to examine how intersectionality and its emancipatory politics might be preserved and enhanced when it is operationalised in a context of childhood studies/ geographies, by drawing on an early childhood empirical case study and an example from a recent knowledge exchange initiative with young people (Konstantoni et al 2014).

### **Reclaiming intersectionality**

How does one define intersectionality and why does it matter? This is a central question in the debate about what intersectionality is—and what it is not—because, depending on how this concept is defined, its particular intellectual history and emancipatory politics can be obscured. Given intersectionality's current popularity across a range of social science disciplines, it is oftentimes defined as a way to understand difference and complexity in social and political life. For instance, in Davis' (2008, 68) highly influential text, she defines intersectionality as 'the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power'. In this sense, intersectionality is constructed as an analytical framework for understanding how hierarchies of race, class, gender, disability, sexuality and age (re)produce structural inequalities for certain groups. At

first glance, this seems like a succinct and comprehensive definition of intersectionality. However, as Tomlinson (2013, 255) reminds us, ‘our academic debates are *always already* situated within fields of power’. Constructing intersectionality as *only* a framework for understanding how categories of difference interact is a power relation enacted by academics that, perhaps unwittingly, obscure the Black women founders of intersectionality and their radical project of liberation, from our academic debates about this concept (Alexander-Floyd 2012).

Alternatively, intersectionality can be defined in a way that recentres women of colour’s experiences, perspectives and activism for social justice. Mirza (2015, 4), for example, argues for an ‘embodied intersectionality’ that attends to ‘marginalised lives’ and that takes seriously the processes of “‘being and becoming’ a gendered, sexed, raced and classed subject of materialist discourse”. This focus on lived experiences makes it possible for women of colour to speak about their multifaceted experiences in a holistic way. Attempting to ‘recentre’ women of colour’s experiences is not a process of homogenising the differing ways of being a woman of colour but rather a political act to recognise women of colour as authors and agents in their lives and to resist concerted attempts at their erasure.

These struggles over the definition and operationalisation of intersectionality are not an exercise in academic navel-gazing but vital debates on the politics of knowledge production and whose knowledge counts in academic scholarship—a central concern of intersectionality (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000; Alexander-Floyd 2012). The particular ways in which intersectionality is defined *matter* because we are witnessing the depoliticisation and cooptation of intersectionality by academics who appear to be more concerned with the status of their knowledge in the (positivist and white male dominated) academy than in the production of knowledge for the liberation of marginalised groups (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Lewis 2013; Tomlinson 2013). As Bilge (2013) persuasively argues, race, racialisation and racism are currently being disarticulated in intersectionality as it traverses different disciplines. Bilge (2013, 413-16) argues that the depoliticisation of intersectionality takes place as neoliberal academics seek to ‘purify’, ‘extract’ and ‘evacuate’ race from intersectionality in order for it be applicable and acceptable to hegemonic whiteness. In the academy’s stampede to claim and operationalise intersectionality, women of colour and Black feminist academics—whose views and experiences are already marginalised within the academy—pay a heavy price as they are ejected from an intellectual tradition that they created. The stripping of race from intersectionality matters particularly in European contexts where race and racism are

denied and deactivated categories for analysis and action (Goldberg 2006; Tomlinson 2013).

Our position in relation to intersectionality is that we agree with a range of scholars (for example see: Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000; Alexander-Floyd 2012; Tomlinson 2013; Bilge 2013; Mirza 2015; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016) who argue that intersectionality is firmly placed within the intellectual history and traditions of Black feminism and that race plays an important role in the operationalisation of this concept. Other scholars disagree with emphasising race and the prioritising of Black women's experiences (McCall 2005; Nash 2008; Carbin and Edenheim 2013). In particular, Hancock (2007a, 2007b, 2016) has argued that intersectionality has a much wider applicability and does not necessarily have to include race and the experiences of Black women for it to be deployed in important ways in the social sciences. We respectfully disagree with this understanding of intersectionality as we do not think this analytical framework can be separated from the Black feminist tradition from which it emerged without employing symbolic violence on Black women through the erasure of them as knowing agents. For the purposes of this paper, we are interested in the challenge of not eschewing race and Black women's experiences but of grappling with Black feminist concepts and ideas in the field of childhood studies/geographies.

What do these debates about intersectionality mean for childhood studies? Childhood studies has strong connections with intersectionality, such as a focus on agency and structural inequalities, power relations, embodiment and emancipation. However, shared understandings of social problems do not guarantee that intersectionality will retain its radical praxis—indeed, quite the opposite seems to be true. As intersectionality encounters childhood studies, we argue that scholars must engage with these debates about the meaning and purpose of intersectionality—in particular, its foundations in the Black feminist tradition—and that childhood studies must confront and grapple with these issues in order to take seriously the complex processes of inequality in children’s lives. We will discuss this analytically in the next section.

Childhood studies can heed the call from Punch and Tisdall (2012), Bilge (2013) and Alexander-Floyd (2012), by taking seriously the process of preserving and expanding the radical praxis of intersectionality for children living in both the majority and minority worlds. Childhood studies can operationalise intersectionality in ways that avoid deauthorising Black feminist scholars and that attend to the complex dynamics of race, class and gender—alongside age, disability, sexuality and other categories of difference. We propose that this can be achieved by taking a two-pronged approach to

applying intersectionality in childhood studies by (1) operationalising intersectionality as embodied and relational, focusing on children's lived experiences in different spaces, which focuses on the intersections of age, re-inserts race and focuses on power (2) practising intersectionality by recognising children as competent and knowing agents who we can, in solidarity, work with in social justice campaigns. We expand on this approach in the following sections.

### **Operationalising intersectionality in childhood studies**

Childhood is considered a 'particular cultural phrasing of the early part of the life course, historically and politically contingent and subject to change' (James and James, 2004, 13). James and James (2012, 47) acknowledge that childhood studies has a long tradition of recognising the diversity of childhood experiences, alongside a recognition of childhood as a 'developmental phase in the life-course, broadly linked to chronological age', which is 'a social space' and phenomenon, which can be recognised by its 'generational differences from adulthood'. Moreover, authors like Mayall (2015) and Qvortrup highlight childhood as a structural form, 'a permanent form of any generational structure' (2009, 23). Childhood is thus 'both constantly changing and a permanent structural form within which all children spend their personal childhood period' (Qvortrup 2009, 26).

We will now consider the application of intersectionality in childhood studies by first examining the dilemmas that intersectionality generates for the theory and practice of childhood studies/geographies, and then, using an empirical case study example and evidence from a knowledge exchange series where we worked with young people, examine what difference an intersectional framework makes to scholarship in childhood studies/geographies.

As we demonstrated above, some Black feminists call for re-inserting race in intersectionality. However, this call for the reclaiming of race raises a specific dilemma for childhood studies/geographies. Black feminists begin their analysis of intersectionality by prioritising race, class and gender (Bilge 2013; Alexander-Floyd 2012), whilst childhood studies begin with an analysis of age and its connections to other categories of difference (Reynaert et al 2015) or age as a structural form in relation to adults (Mayall 2015; Qvortrup 2009). Age has been recognised as an axis of difference (Hopkins and Pain 2007), alongside other categories, that shapes our lives and influences the extent to which one can exercise agency (De Graeve 2015, 153). Worth (2016, 2) argues that although we can think about age in terms of biology and time (chronologically), ‘geographers have been interested in investigating age as a social construction that changes over time and space’; age has thus been positioned



within discussions on lifecourse and generations (Hopkins and Pain 2007). Where does race fit in the context of childhood studies?

First, even though childhood studies has a key concern with age as a social category, there are many different childhoods and 'childhood' is not a universal and homogenous experience (James and James, 2012). Childhoods are constituted by the particular dynamics of gender, race, disability, sexuality, class and geography.

Perhaps intersectionality and childhood studies are closer than might first appear. If the starting point of understanding childhood is not necessarily a homogenous and universalising notion of 'age' but, rather, 'difference', as structured by the particular dynamics of race, class, gender, geography and other categories of difference, this creates a powerful link between intersectionality and childhood studies that does not de-prioritise race but puts age in the context of race and other axes of difference.

Given the diversity of the childhood studies/geographies literature, the extent to which different scholars have taken race and its intersections varies considerably. For example, some scholars recognise the origins of intersectionality and have explicitly analysed race, alongside other axes of difference (e.g. Morris 2007; Scott 2002; O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2014). Some childhood studies/geographies scholars have also focused on race and its intersections (see Connolly 1998; Mac Naughton,

Davis, and Smith 2009; Rosen 2015b; Moore 2003); however, they do not theorise intersectionality and attend to the debates we have outlined above. Furthermore, there are scholars interested in complex childhood identities and inequalities who discuss complexity—some even use intersectionality as a theoretical framework—however they do not include an analysis on race (e.g. Renold 2005; Hellman, Heikkilä, and Sundhall 2014). Lastly, important work within the childhood/youth fields on participation, activism and social change like for example Houghton’s (2015) work with young survivors (ages 15-19) of domestic abuse and their participation in research and policy-making, does not really explore intersectional experiences. Thus, we cannot take for granted that race necessarily travels with intersectionality as it is applied unevenly in both scholarly and participatory work in childhood studies/geographies.

Another key element of intersectionality is a concern with power relations and how power is (re)produced through social groups’ interactions with institutional structures (Crenshaw 1989; Tomlinson 2013; Bilge 2013; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016).

Childhood studies has long advocated for an analysis that is focused on children’s lived experiences, views and agency. If we are to ensure that race is not erased in applications of intersectionality, how can we make certain this is not an adult directive that undermines the ways in which children know and understand their

social worlds? Here again, perhaps childhood studies and intersectionality are not so far apart. Mirza (2015), in an attempt to reclaim intersectionality and refocus on race alongside other axes of difference, argues for the importance of ‘embodied practices’ that foreground the lived experiences of Black women. Childhood studies/geographies have also placed emphasis on the importance of embodiment and the imperative to understand children’s lived experiences and views in different spaces, places and times (Hopkins and Hill 2010; Holt 2010; Hockey and James 2003; Prout 2000). Intersectional embodiment (Mirza 2013, 2015) can contribute to this body of work by emphasising complex analyses that ‘illuminate how intersecting axes of power and inequality operate’ (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013, 795) within the field of childhood studies. Such understandings of intersectional childhood embodiments could also contribute in turn to theories of intersectionality more widely.

In order to repoliticise intersectionality by taking race seriously alongside other axes of difference, we argue that it is possible to construct an ‘intersectional childhood framework’ that starts from a position of the recognition of difference—whilst also emphasising children’s agency. In order to work through our conceptual debates about intersectionality and childhood studies, we will now turn to operationalise our

intersectional childhood framework using an empirical case study example from early childhood.

### ***Contexts and Methods***

We draw on findings from a one year (August 2007 to July 2008) research project which was based in two nursery schools in Scotland—one predominantly white, the other ethnically and racially mixed. The study employed an ethnographic and participatory approach to data collection (participant observation, informal conversations, interviews with educators and parents/caregivers, drawing activities, persona dolls). Kristina attended the nurseries four days a week, two days in each nursery, spending on average for about three hours each day. Permission was secured from the local authority, head teachers and staff, parents/caregivers and the children. Leaflets about the study and consent forms (including translated leaflets in Polish and Urdu) were provided to all staff, parents/caregivers and children. Kristina also secured both written and verbal ongoing consent from children throughout the research process (Konstantoni 2011). In this paper, we will draw on data gathered via participant observation and informal conversations. Informal conversations would take place naturally either with individuals or with larger groups of children on an everyday basis. Detailed descriptions of observations were written in a field notebook, one for each nursery. A reflexive diary was also kept for each nursery, which included

records of Kristina's thoughts and feelings and notes of how Kristina's presence might have influenced the environment, as well as any theoretical ideas that emerged.

This study was mindful of power relations, which were present, negotiated and shared depending on the context (see Konstantoni 2011). Kristina's role differed according to context; however, it can be described as that of 'not knowing' (Mukherji and Albon 2010: 76). Participants were invited to explain what they were doing and why, and Kristina sought to understand participants' experience and knowledge. This role was closely linked to that of the researcher. Kristina also adopted the role of the friend and generally a 'less-controlling role', ensuring that participants felt free to express their views. However (in some rare instances), when a member of staff was not near, Kristina also took the role of 'adult as protector'/'helper', to ensure that children were safe (which was expressed through dialogue and respect, e.g. when children were fighting) (see Konstantoni 2011).

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data. For further information on ethical and methodological issues (see Konstantoni 2011). This paper focuses on the multi-ethnic nursery which was located in the city centre and the class had 25 children in total, 22 of which participated in the study. Six children were identified as white Scots and 16 children were minority ethnic or children with multiple ethnic identities.

To illustrate the complexity and nuances that intersectionality offers childhood studies, we will now turn to the experiences of young Scottish Pakistani Muslim girls in the multi-ethnic nursery.

### **On embodied intersectionality and exclusion in children's spaces**

Farah (4, 6 Asian/Pakistani Other Muslim, Punjabi/Urdu), Aleemah (4, 5 Asian/Pakistani Scottish Muslim, English/Punjabi), Seema A (4, 1 Asian/Pakistani British Muslim, Urdu), Hana (3, 10 Asian/Pakistani Other Muslim, Urdu) and Nahida (4 Other (Pakistani) Scottish Muslim, English/Urdu)<sup>3</sup> formed the dominant girls' group in the nursery and they oftentimes referred to their shared (although not identical) intersectional identities based on their race, ethnicity, religion and gender—such as their bilingualism, gendered religious and cultural traditions and physical traits. Affinity between the girls was developed based on these shared characteristics and for those adults and children that they trusted, but who did not share their experiences and traditions, the girls expressed a desire for these others to be more like them. For example, the following observation reflects many conversations that two

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<sup>3</sup> All participants' names are pseudonyms. Information regarding children's social characteristics was provided by the nursery school secretaries and from the forms that parents/caregivers completed while registering their child. The research however explored children's own perceptions of social identities and indicated the complexity of these labels. Also, not all families identified with a religion.

Scottish Pakistani girls made about links between hair colour, religious practices and a desire for Kristina to be more like them.

(Field notes, 20/06/08)

*Farah says to me*

*Farah: I wish you have black hair.*

*Kristina: Why?*

*Farah: Go to the hairdressers and make your hair black, you can go to the mosque only if you have black hair, just like me.*

*Kristina: Why is it important? Why does that matter?*

*Farah: 'Cause then you can go to the mosque and things. You won't be able to go inside if you don't have black hair, you can't go inside, and you can only eat at the mosque.*

*Kristina: So if I went to the hairdresser and make my hair black can I come then?*

*Farah: Yes, but if you don't, you can't.*

In this short exchange, we can see how intersectionality is embodied and relational through Farah's understanding of her particular religious practices, about how these practices are not universally shared and how these practices, at least in her experience, are linked through physical characteristics such as 'black hair'. Based on Farah's

affinity for Kristina, Farah seeks to include Kristina in her particular faith and (racialised) community.

We can see embodied and relational intersectional identities play out in another way in terms of group inclusion and exclusion. All the girls in this nursery, except Hana, self-identified as Scottish: they talked about living in Scotland, speaking Scottish and grouping themselves with the white Scottish children in the nursery. However, their strong sense of group identity—based on their intersectional identities—appeared to be strongly linked to and dependent on exclusionary practices towards other children who were perceived as different to them (Jenkins 2008). Specifically, when girls of other races and ethnicities wanted to be part of their group and play with them, the Scottish Pakistani girls prevented them from joining their group.

*(Fieldnotes, 1/11/07)*

*Seema A, Hana, Aleemah and Farah have made faces of themselves using construction paper. With the exception of Hana who used white paper and seems to show a preference for whiteness, the rest of the Scottish Pakistani girls have used brown paper and happily discuss this. They are around the table waiting to put their names on their drawings. Laura [4.1 White/UK, Scottish English(language)] comes along, she wants to join them.*



*Laura (asks Aleemah): Can I play with you?*

*Aleemah: No (says negatively and abruptly)*

*Laura then turns to Farah.*

*Laura: Can I play with you?*

*Farah: No (says negatively and abruptly)*

*Laura is very sad, she immediately mentions this to an educator that is nearby. The educator tries to intervene.*

It is important to note that during Kristina's everyday observations and conversations, the children were generally quite open to discuss aspects like gender and age, whereas this was not always the case for ethnicity and race (especially in relation to discrimination) and these conversations took more subtle and implicit forms (see Lane 2008). Race and ethnicity were mainly considered taboo subject matters among the children although they appeared to understand what race was and its implications through their interactions and relations with others. Thus, the Scottish Pakistani girls would not explicitly discuss the reason they would not play with other girls and boys different from them. However, they would emphasise their preference towards their shared experiences and traditions, something that they knew was acceptable within

the nursery context and was actively promoted by the staff, and were more subtle and indirect about their exclusionary practices.

The Scottish Pakistani girls also excluded boys from their group but, on occasion, were more open towards playing with the only same aged Scottish Pakistani boy.

Furthermore, no friendships were developed with a younger and less competent Scottish Pakistani boy than them.

A key strength of using an intersectional childhood framework is the ability to analyse power relations and to examine the complexities of social relations. Anthias (2013: 10) discusses how intersectionality spotlights ‘concrete relations of positionality and hierarchisation’; however, ‘these do not necessarily work in a coherent way, nor are the places or positions mutually exclusive. These may lead to complex forms of hierarchy across a range of different dimensions’. With the Scottish Pakistani girls, to understand how their experiences of positionality and hierarchy play out, we must understand the spaces in which these social relations occur. The girls’ exclusionary practices were contingent and dependent on the spaces created in that specific multi-ethnic nursery.

Even though the Scottish Pakistani girls were the majority in their particular class and would often exercise power by excluding others who were different from them, they knew that within the broader Scottish society they were part of a minority ethnic group and had to navigate intersectional discrimination based on their race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion and gender. This cognitive dissonance, of inclusion and domination in their nursery space and of exclusion and subordination in public space, was evidenced by their ambivalence in discussing aspects of their ethnic, religion, cultural and gender traditions that marked them out as Other. Whilst the girls appeared to be very proud of their gendered cultural practices—which were demonstrated through embodied and relational experiences such as showing off their custom made *salwar kammez* and their *mehndi* and explaining to Kristina the importance of prayer (see Konstantoni 2011 for examples/exceptions)—they simultaneously showed a lack of confidence in discussing these practices with white adults that had yet to earn their trust. The girls understood their difference and expected to be disrespected because of it—possibly because of previous racist encounters. This was evident on many occasions, with the Scottish Pakistani girls using the phrase ‘I will tell you but don’t laugh... promise you won’t laugh’ towards educators who asked them about their home language, or using words in Urdu or Punjabi to describe their cultural practices.

*(Fieldnotes 5/03/08)*

*Hana made another drawing of mehndi, she says that it is her hand, she talks about the various things that she has drawn*

*Kristina have you done this?*

*Hana: My sister has done this*

*Farah is commenting about the picture as well, trying to remember the name of it*

*Farah: It is... (then gets shy, she is shy to say it, some time passes and then she says)*

*I will tell you but don't laugh, you mustn't laugh.*

*Kristina: I will not laugh*

*Farah: It is mehndi (she says with a quite and shy voice whilst her eyes look down)*

Kristina noted that Farah lacked confidence when talking directly about *mehndi* whereas later on that day, Farah was with her friends, Aleemah, Seema, Nahida and Hana, and she was saying confidently to them that '*mehndi* is not for boys... boys don't wear *mehndi*'. Farah was also telling Kristina about it. The girls' lack of confidence and the reassurance they needed that we would not laugh at them when they would speak in their first language was also mentioned by Helen (Scottish with a French background, educator).

Even though the Scottish Pakistani girls in this study were legitimated and affirmed in the spaces of their nursery they seemed to be very aware that this ‘safe space’ was contingent and certainly not replicated in the spaces outside of the classroom. In this way we can see how an intersectional childhood framework enhances our understanding of children’s geographies, as it captures complex and intersectional positionings (Nash, 2008). Like other minority groups in Scotland (see Bassel and Emejulu 2010) these Scottish Pakistani girls appear to be picking and choosing aspects of their Scottish and Pakistani cultural traditions in order to construct identities that are meaningful to them. This process of identity construction is an expression of agency that is actively encouraged in their nursery space. However, the girls are also aware that their agency is circumscribed by structural inequalities which can be seen in their defensiveness and protection of those aspects of their intersectional identities that mark them as Other. Thus, we see how an intersectional childhood framework can be used to understand children’s agency, inequalities and the co-creation of spaces that they and adults occupy. Moreover, an intersectional childhood framework assists us in documenting the contradictory ways in which power operates in different spaces and times through relational practices.

We will now turn to explore what intersectionality's radical praxis of liberation might look like in the context of childhood studies/geographies.

### **Intersectionality as emancipatory practice**

Intersectionality is not only an analytical framework to recognise complex inequalities, it is also a counter-hegemonic praxis that seeks to challenge and displace hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy. Within this framework, women of colour are not constructed as passive objects but active agents of change (Bassel and Emejulu 2014). This understanding of intersectionality as praxis, which addresses asymmetries in power through collective action, can enrich childhood studies.

Childhood studies developed alongside landmark international policy interventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) and has advocated for children's rights, such as rights to non-discrimination and the right to participate in public life. There has been an increased emphasis in childhood studies/geographies on children and young people's participation in research and policy (Tisdall, Gadda, and Butler 2014). In this way, children have increasingly been constituted as competent, knowing agents (Cairns 2001; Lansdown 2004). Thus, childhood studies and intersectionality appear to share a politics of recognising marginalised groups as active agents for social change. However, this recognition of

marginalised groups and the implementation of processes of social change varies across childhood studies, as does recognition of the emancipatory and activist dimension of children's rights approaches. The implementation of Article 12 and children's and young people's participation has faced many difficulties in relation to its translation into practice (Tisdall, 2015). Children's meaningful participation varies according to children's agency but also by social structures and power relations (within inter-generational and intra-generational relationships) that can either enhance or restrict children's autonomy (Desmet et al 2015).

For example, the case of early childhood is particularly challenging: despite a growing amount of research which shows that very young children, for example, under 5s, are recognised as competent and active agents, in practice the implementation of the UNCRC in the early years is still limited (Konstantoni 2013). Furthermore, emerging intersectional childhood research has mainly involved older children and thus younger children are often excluded and further disadvantaged (Kustatscher, Konstantoni and Emejulu 2015).

The operationalisation of intersectionality as praxis in childhood studies/geographies could provide an analytical and practical tool to challenge and displace exclusionary practices for different kinds of children in different spaces and places. Adopting

intersectionality as praxis within childhood studies commits various actors to work towards an emancipatory and activist agenda, with the ultimate goal to challenge multiple discriminations and promote complex social justice claims. For our recent knowledge exchange initiative (Konstantoni et al 2014) one of the organisations with whom we worked closely was Article 12 in Scotland, a civil society organisation committed to advancing the social, political, civil and economic rights of young people. One of the organisation's largest projects works with young Gypsy/Travellers to claim their rights. Alongside a framework of children's rights, the organisation operationalises intersectionality as praxis through its everyday work with young Gypsy/Traveller women. Specifically, the young women use intersectionality as both a theory to help them identify, analyse and articulate the complex social forces that influence their lives and as a practice to support their collective action in tackling the intersecting inequalities that they experience by virtue of their gender, race, ethnicity and class. For our project, the girls discussed in detail what intersectionality as praxis means to them:

[Our] multiple identities are experienced as both privileges and disadvantages dependant on where they happen for us...A constant power imbalance within such interlinking identities can generate particular inequalities for us in shaping our social identities and impacting on our everyday life experiences...



We felt that we were written off immediately as a result of our ethnicity  
(Konstantoni et al 2014).

As agents of change, the young women use intersectionality to challenge the multiple oppressions they experience. The girls work with Article 12 in Scotland to help them articulate and practice their rights for the purpose of ‘provid[ing] us with legitimate “status” within our own community. This has also aided our understanding of oppression, what it means, where it happens and the ways in which we can challenge it’ (ibid 2014).

What intersectionality as praxis means for these young women is a collective process of coming together to identify and articulate shared experiences and take action on those issues that are most important to them. As scholars, we have an obligation to move from the academy to the streets and support efforts such as Article 12 in Scotland to help children and young people understand the multiple oppressions they experience and assist them with collective actions at the grassroots and in policymaking processes in order to combat intersecting inequalities. Indeed, the focus on practical work with groups both inside and outside academia is one of the most important aspects of the repoliticising of intersectionality for which Black feminists insist. The goal must be to produce knowledge with and for children and young

people so that they can know, understand and take action in the world to address the multiple oppressions that impact on their everyday lives, on terms they define for themselves. Of course, various childhood scholars work closely with children and young people to help them name the inequalities they experience and take action in public space (for example Consortium for Street Children <http://streetchildren.org/>).

However, there has been some pushback by some childhood studies scholars about a focus on difference and politicising childhood. For example, Qvortrup (2005) argues that too much emphasis on diverse childhood experiences, complexity and plurality, devalues the recognition of childhood as a structural and social category which in turn could undermine the cohesiveness and unity of childhood studies and the children's rights movement. We think children of colour pay a high price for these insurances on 'unity' in childhood studies. Too often, children of colour's experiences and interests are subordinated and erased for the sake of constructing a false category of homogenous childhoods. For example, Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2014) —using an intersectional approach — demonstrate how African American girls are disproportionately punished in schools for minor infractions which places them in a so-called 'school to prison pipeline' in which they are more likely, in comparison to their white counterparts, to be prosecuted, placed in juvenile detention centres and have a criminal record. Thus, 'being a child' and 'having a childhood' mean different

things to different children by virtue of their race, class, gender and geographical location. Consequently, we argue for the recognition and action on the complexity of childhoods and the intersectional inequalities many children experience.

If the diverse field of childhood studies is serious about adopting intersectionality as praxis, it needs to consider the following questions from Emejulu (2013) in relation to working with *all* children and young people:

- Which ‘children’ count in the mainstream practices and campaigns in childhood studies, children’s rights and children’s geographies? Which children are silenced and why?
- How do the dynamics of race/class/gender/sexuality/disability shape children’s lives?
- How do these dynamics serve as resources for children?
- What kinds of alliances need to be built across different groups to effectively address children’s intersectional inequalities?

Such questions make possible the practical application of intersectionality.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, we have examined what happens when childhood studies seeks to operationalise intersectionality. Using intersectionality in childhood studies/geographies is not a straightforward process. If we seriously consider the Black feminist critique that intersectionality, as it travels across disciplines, is being depoliticised and that both race and the Black feminists founders of the concepts disappear in the rush to apply intersectionality in different academic subjects, then there is both important conceptual and practical work to be done to repoliticise this praxis. We think that childhood studies can operationalise intersectionality and its radical praxis by rethinking childhood in complex and heterogeneous ways. Through a framework of intersectional childhoods, we can put age in an embodied and relational context with other categories of difference. In so doing, it becomes possible to spotlight the particular dynamics of race, age, gender, sexuality, class and disability that shape the ways in which children think about themselves and how they encounter their social worlds. Thinking about age in relation to other categories of difference also forces childhood studies scholars to dismantle hegemonic conceptions of what it means to be a child by locating children in particular spaces, places and times which are shaped by specific institutional dynamics.

Furthermore, childhood studies can avoid the pitfalls of other disciplines by maintaining the radical praxis of intersectionality through an emphasis on children's

rights and agency both within and outside the academy. Childhood studies scholars can convert these normative ideals into practical politics with children and children's organisations to work with and alongside them to produce knowledge useful to them in order to combat intersecting inequalities. We are currently witnessing a struggle over the meaning and purpose of intersectionality in the academy. Childhood studies can constructively contribute to these debates by insisting on the importance of understanding the dynamics of race, racialisation and racism *whilst simultaneously* seeking to explore how race intersects with other categories of difference that shape the life chances of different kinds of children across the globe.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank all the people who commented on an earlier version of this article including Prof Kay Tisdall, Prof John Davis, Dr Marlies Kustatscher, Cara Blaisdell and the two anonymous reviewers.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council [grant number PTA-031-2006-00428] and Scottish Universities Insight Institute – Knowledge Exchange Programmes

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