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Exploring Children and Young People's Relationships Across Majority and Minority Worlds

Editorial for special issue of Children's Geographies, August 2012

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How can we learn from research and practice in both Majority and Minority World contexts? How can we challenge the current academic area of childhood studies, with new and revised theorisations around children and young people's agency and relationships? This special issue addresses these questions, capitalising on the intensive seminar series funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. The series, titled "Exploring Children's Relationships Across Majority and Minority Worlds", was held between April 2010 and October 2011. It was organised by the Co-Directors and Associate Directors of the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), a consortium research centre of Scottish universities. Many of the ideas presented in this special issue emerged out of lively discussions at these seminars and we gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all seminar participants.

We use the terms 'Majority World' and 'Minority World' (see also Panelli *et al.* 2007) to refer to what has traditionally been known as 'the third world' and 'the first world' or more recently as 'the Global South' and 'the Global North'. This acknowledges that the 'majority' of population, poverty, land mass and lifestyles is located in the former, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and thus seeks to shift the balance of our world views that frequently privilege 'western' and 'northern' populations and issues (Punch 2003). The dichotomy does risk over-simplicity: for example, the 'rising powers' of countries like Brazil, China and India do not sit easily

within either category, and each category contains considerable and salient differences. At the same time, the dichotomy has proved a useful device to challenge thinking throughout the seminar series, particularly given the lack of learning across research conducted in these contexts. Across the papers, we generally use ‘children and young people’ to refer to the age group under the age of 18, as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This phrase aims to respect that many older children prefer the category ‘young people’ to ‘children’. Papers may use ‘children’, when referring particularly to childhood studies, children’s rights, and when using quotations.

A central concern of the ESRC seminar series was to explore the current state of childhood studies. The ‘new’ sociology of childhood of the 1990s carved out attention to children and childhoods (e.g., James and Prout 1990/1997, Qvortrup *et al.* 1994, Corsaro 1997/2004, James *et al.* 1998). Key assertions were developed: childhood is socially constructed; children are social actors and have agency and are not passive subjects of social structures and processes; childhood is differentiated by structural processes and social variables like gender, ethnicity and class. These ideas have run alongside policy developments, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which have globalised attention to the provision for, protection and participation of, children and young people (Hill and Tisdall 1997, van Beers *et al.* 2006, Hartas 2008, Lansdown 2010). However, the sociology of childhood is no longer so new. It has become increasingly multi-disciplinary, with other disciplines picking up and extending ideas, such as anthropology, education, law, health studies, history and political science (represented by the trend towards calling the academic area ‘childhood studies’). In particular, within geography a sub-disciplinary group of ‘children’s geographies’ has been formed.

Childhood studies has different complexions, in the different countries where it has taken root (see Mayall this volume). For example, Bühler-Niederberger’s (2010) review of ten countries identifies at least three differences. First, children, concerns about childhood and children’s policy have been more marginalised in some countries than others – and this has shaped childhood studies. For example, she writes of early childhood sociological interest in Finland and child-oriented egalitarian legislation at the beginning of the twentieth century, in comparison to the Netherlands, where the

“bourgeois family model” (p. 375) dominated until recently. Second, certain child research traditions and scientific cultures impacted on the emerging childhood sociological research. She comments on the influence, for example, of actor-oriented educational science in Germany and the concern about ‘risks’ (while Mayall this volume notes the interest in structural concerns from Germany); France, in contrast, has a strong tradition of educational sociology; Scandinavian countries, the UK and the US have been more influenced by feminist scholars and cultural studies. However, Bühler-Niederberger (2010) also finds common elements in childhood sociology. Children are recognised as a marginalised group, in terms of public life and public recognition. There is a discourse of ‘crisis’, with children depicted as social problems either as victims or as a current or future danger. Her review confirms that attention to the generational order, the difference between childhood and adulthood, is an important starting point across the ‘new’ sociology of childhood (see also Shamgar-Handelman 1994, Alanen and Mayall 2001).

Most research in childhood studies tends to be based on one dominant discipline, such as sociology or geography, rather than being inherently inter-disciplinary (see also Prout 2011). Similarly, in relation to new academic departments and degrees in childhood studies, Thorne (2007) comments that often, rather than being inter-disciplinary, these tend to bring disciplines together in a pluri-disciplinary manner. Thus, childhood studies is the umbrella term for multiple disciplines working in the area of childhood, but in practice most work is not inter-disciplinary (for some exceptions see Hill and Tisdall 1997; Thomas 2000; Kehily 2013, Montgomery 2013; the work of Young Lives: <http://www.younglives.org.uk>).

Multi-disciplinary collections of childhood studies have emerged in recent years (Pufall and Unsworth 2004, Qvortrup 2005, James and James 2008, Kassem *et al.* 2009, Qvortrup *et al.* 2009) and it is no longer easy to keep up with the proliferation of empirical studies which explore children and young people’s social worlds. Childhood studies has reached a stage where its own orthodoxies, patterns of inquiry, and unarticulated assumptions need to be examined (see also James 2007, James 2010, Prout 2011). This special issue aims to contribute substantially to such developments and build on discussions within children’s geographies (such as Horton and Kraftl 2005, 2006, Horton *et al.* 2008, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011). It

considers how recent theorisations of relationships and relational processes can move childhood studies forward, particularly in relation to re-thinking claims of children and young people's agency and uncritical assertions around children and young people's participation and voice.

Alanen and Mayall (2001) use the concept of 'generationing' as a relational way of thinking about the ways in which child-adult relations are socially constructed (see also Mayall and Zeiher 2003). Carsten (2004) has used the term 'relatedness' and Smart (2007) 'relationality' to re-emphasise that personhood and individuality in all societies are constituted by close personal relationships and that such significant personal relationships are rarely restricted to kin relationships. While this special issue tends to use the term 'relationships', in fact the emphasis is on relational processes, that are changing and enacted, rather than fixed and given. An inclusive approach to the study of relationships can advance our understanding of social change (Jamieson *et al.* 2006, Jamieson and Milne this volume). A focus on children's relationships can contribute to these theoretical developments, as well as moving forward childhood studies.

Childhood studies emerged in part as a reaction against tendencies towards a false universalisation and normalisation of childhood, arguing that childhood should be seen in context and as socially and culturally constructed. However, it risks concentrating unduly on the Minority World and not fully integrating learning from development studies, and the growing work exploring Majority World childhoods (e.g. see, Punch 2003, Ansell 2005, Tisdall *et al.* 2008, Wells 2009). A negative consequence of the dominant Minority World conceptualisations of childhood is that international standards set for work or education tend to reflect Minority World views, which sometimes lead to more harm than good (Boyden 1990/1997, Kaufman *et al.* 2002) or to further marginalise or 'other' Majority World childhoods that do not conform to notions of appropriate childhoods (Kesby *et al.* 2006, Payne this volume). This special issue contributes to the recent but limited work that pulls together literatures and empirical data from both Majority and Minority World contexts (Chawla 2002, Katz 2004, Panelli *et al.* 2007, Jeffrey and Dyson 2008, Montgomery 2013).

It is timely to consider a more global approach to childhood studies. Globalisation is not new but a consideration of how global processes shape the lives of children and young people is relatively new (Aitken *et al.* 2008). It is increasingly said that we are living in a global world, evidenced by high levels of mobility and migration, emerging transnational families and technological changes leading to new forms of communication. Whilst the impacts of globalisation may be both positive and negative, they are particularly uneven often resulting in greater inequalities between Majority World and Minority World countries as well as within them (Kaufman and Rizzini 2002). Lund argues that many children “have become more (not less) vulnerable with globalisation” (2008, p. 146). The papers in Aitken *et al.*’s volume on Global Childhoods demonstrate that “the future of economic transformation and the wholesale betterment of the world through universal consumerism and material gain is questionable” (Aitken *et al.* 2008, p. 9). However, such edited collections tend not to provide dialogue between Majority and Minority Worlds, rather they bring together papers from different countries to address a particular theme. In this way the global focus offers different perspectives rather than attempting to engage in dialogue between Majority World and Minority World childhoods.

In the exceptional publications where there is dialogue, the ensuing ‘conversations’ illuminate commonalities and differences, and also the testing of assumptions. For example, the edited volume by Panelli and colleagues (2007) juxtaposes chapters of rural children and young people from different world areas around three themed sections of identity, agency and power. Differences emerge in the material inequalities for many rural parts of the Majority World and the cultural expectations of children and young people’s intergenerational responsibilities across the lifecourse. Commonalities include their relative lack of mobility and inadequate transport, insufficient opportunities for work or education often leading to migration, enhanced opportunities for asserting their agency in rural areas and the importance of emotional connections to place. A striking similarity across global contexts is:

...the simultaneous here-now and there-future weavings young people make of their coincident present realities and possible imaginaries of later life. From Mexico, Tanzania, Bolivia, and Indonesia to Norway, eastern Germany, and the northern United States young people undertake both present configurations and

future imaginations about their lives. Identity, together with notions of agency and action provide potent concepts for exploring these multiple tactics further. (Robson *et al.* 2007, p. 223)

Jeffrey and Dyson (2008) reveal several cross-learning opportunities from global portraits of young lives, including the various ways in which youth is being restructured in different contexts. At times the period of youth is cut short, whilst for many youth across both the Majority and Minority Worlds it is being extended:

... structural adjustment programs in the global south and not dissimilar processes of economic restructuring in Euro-America have delayed or prevented people from acquiring financial independence from their parents and establishing separate economic and familial units. In other situations, neoliberal economic change has prevented young people from acquiring the skills, welfare goods, and social support required to manage a transition to adulthood. (Jeffrey and Dyson 2008, p.5)

Commonalities across global contexts also include the sense of ‘crisis’ for the categories of childhood, youth and adulthood as well as the contested and entangled identities of youth, many of whom are living their lives under duress, where both the remarkable and the mundane are starkly juxtaposed (Philo and Swanson 2008).

Chawla (2002) compares children’s perspectives on urban areas across eight countries equally mixed between the Majority and Minority Worlds. Key similarities in the positive qualities that children mentioned across the case studies included social integration, peer gathering places, safety and freedom of movement and a cohesive cultural identity. Children’s descriptions of alienating urban spaces included stigma and social exclusion, boredom, fear of harassment and crime, racial tensions, lack of basic services, geographic isolation and a sense of political powerlessness. Interestingly out of the five sites where children indicated most satisfaction with their urban environments, three of these were in the economically poorer parts of the Majority World. Such studies illustrate the benefits of learning across Majority and Minority World boundaries.

Katz explores children's changing childhoods in the USA and Sudan, in the light of global economic restructuring, revealing the "unexpected connections among disparate places" (2004, p. xiv). Her cross-cultural work demonstrates that different forms of neoliberal capitalist development can lead to deskilling and community destabilization which can result in the displacement of young people from their local environment. This special issue of *Children's Geographies* calls for more work in childhood studies to establish dialogue between Majority and Minority World contexts.

Two papers begin the special issue, to provide a critical discussion of key concepts, theories and research. The first, by Tisdall and Punch, gives an overview of the 'new' sociology of childhood, for those less familiar with the paradigm, and considers subsequent 'insider' critiques of it. The paper takes forward the growing contestation of children's 'agency' as fixed and individualist, and the related contention of children's rights – particularly in its application across Majority and Minority World contexts. The second, by Jamieson and Milne, mines the ever-growing interest in theorising and researching relationships, providing definitional anchors and theoretical resources. They link these ideas with social change, as demographics alter, family structures and stability change, and different forms of transnational relationships become prevalent and possible.

Six papers follow, using the particularities of topics to address the special issue's overarching concerns. 'Challenging behaviour' within a youth club, in a Minority World setting, is used by Plows to move beyond the dichotomies of child-adult, agency-structure, to consider the processes of negotiation between young people and adult workers within particular spaces. A key strength of this paper is that Plows questions why intergenerational power struggles tend to refer to the 'resistance' of young people and the 'control' of adults. Her research challenges these assumptions by focusing on the interdependencies of young people and adults' interactions. Her empirical material illustrates the relational nature of both power and agency.

Payne reports on her ethnographic research, with 'child-headed households' in Zambia. She draws out the complexities of siblings and non-kin relationships, to show changes in support financially, practically and emotionally over time, between and

within households. Siblings feature in Bacon's paper, where empirical research on twins is used to question and take forward the childhood studies' paradigm of social construction. The paper draws out the importance of body and spatial materiality, as they are combined and intertwined with twins' negotiation of identity as they are also socially constructed by others.

Van Blerk's paper follows childhood studies' appreciation of ethnographic observation and 'participatory' methods to demonstrate how the 'street children' in Cape Town, South Africa were positioned relationally in-between the street, their home communities and their family lives. Family relationships can be protective – e.g. older brothers protecting younger brothers on the street – and others are coercive and problematic – e.g. in their family home and/or local community, such as older male family members' pressure to become part of gangs. In this way, Van Blerk challenges the common assumption that 'street children' are isolated on the street. Konstantoni's ethnographic and participative research, undertaken in two Scottish early years settings, provides an in-depth consideration of the characteristics influencing young children's friendships. She documents the inclusion and exclusion of friendship groups, frequently but not inevitably divided by gender, age and ethnicity.

In her afterword, Mayall provides a historical account of the development of the sociology of childhood within the US, Europe and the UK. She explains why UK work on childhood studies has a particular character, which has been shaped in part by its anthropological roots and priorities of funding bodies. She comments on the centrality of the generational order and the importance of understanding relational processes.

The papers in combination show both the heritage of childhood studies, particularly within the UK, and where it may be going. The main themes which emerge in detail at times and to some extent across all the papers include negotiated power (Plows), agency across contexts (van Blerk) and negotiations of identity (Bacon, Payne, Konstantoni). All the papers value the children and young people's perspectives, as central contributors to the research evidence. Several of the papers utilise ethnographic observation and 'participatory' methods as productive fieldwork tools

(Payne, van Blerk, Konstantoni). All the authors suggest how an interest in relationships – and particularly social, material and spatial relations – can assist in reconsidering the opportunities and limitations of children and young people’s agency. Bacon challenges a static and taken-for-granted notion of children and young people’s agency and Plows and van Blerk extend this by emphasising its relational nature. Ideas such as ‘negotiated interdependencies’ (Punch 2001, 2002), generationing (Alanen and Mayall 2001) and materiality (Bacon this volume) may provide resources for a more nuanced and productive understanding of children and young people’s lives – while maintaining the political and normative benefits of recognising children and young people as (potentially) active participants and not (solely) as passive dependants.

Several papers demonstrate the gap between childhood studies theory and practice. For example, Payne concurs with childhood studies that children are social actors but that the practices of NGOs do not recognise this agency of children and young people who are heads of their household. Hence, by trying to put an adult back into child-headed households, NGOs are drawing on traditional ideas of childhood where children are perceived as vulnerable and in need of adult protection. Payne’s research also emphasises that NGOs are imposing Minority World assumptions about childhood as a time of protection and being cared for onto Majority World realities where children and young people are caring for each other as a result of highly constrained contexts in which they live (such as of extreme poverty or households affected by AIDS). Her study shows that some NGOs are thus not embracing the Minority World-based ideas of children and young people’s agency.

In contrast, van Blerk suggests that the agency of street children has been over-emphasised, leading to their perceived marginalisation of being ‘alone’ on the streets and not recognising their connections to their families and community. She argues that this tends to result in a policy approach which considers street children as isolated and disconnected, and that a more holistic approach to understanding the relational aspects of their lives is required. These papers indicate that similar to the gap in the Minority World between childhood studies’ theory and policy/practice (Mayall 2006), childhood has not been mainstreamed into development policy and practice. Within development studies there is research that focuses on childhoods in the Majority

World, and specific NGOs work with children and young people as their target group. However, whilst in recent decades gender has become more mainstreamed within development policy and practice, generation and age still have a long way to go. Most development projects in the Majority World would be expected to include women's views and a consideration of gender issues whilst recognising the value of doing so; however, children and young people's lives and perspectives have yet to be taken into account to the same degree (see also Ansell 2005). A nuanced and contextual understanding of the opportunities, limitations and complexities of children and young people's agency continues to be lacking (Rosen 2007). The challenges of mainstreaming age and childhood within development policy and practice echoes the difficulties of mainstreaming childhood studies within larger disciplines. Hence, further critical and analytical dialogue of the similarities and differences between Majority World and Minority World childhoods could enable a more global discussion of childhood studies.

Both of the empirical papers based on Majority World contexts (Payne, van Blerk) draw on childhood studies literature from the Minority World, suggesting that some of the theories, concepts and debates are applicable to the Majority World. What is less clear is the extent to which theories developed in Majority World environments can enhance or speak to Minority World data. One example is where Plows and Bacon draw on the concept of 'negotiated interdependencies' which was originally used to explain adult-child relations in rural Bolivia (Punch 2002). Plows illustrates the usefulness of the concept to explore power relations between children, young people and adults in Scotland whilst Bacon extends it to consider intra-generational sibling relations in England. Thus one of the aims of this special issue is to add to the limited but growing cross-world dialogue that could enhance a more integrated global approach to childhood studies. Another goal is for the cross-cultural conversations and learning to use relationships as a lens for driving forward some of the current debates of childhood studies.

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