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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a new lens or prism called childism for critiquing the deeply engrained adultism that pervades scholarship and societies and reconstructing more age-inclusive research and social imaginations. Childism grows out of childhood studies but also makes demands on social scientific and humanistic disciplines more broadly, as well as upon social practices. In this way, it is analogous to feminism and other critical movements while also making distinct theoretical and methodological contributions of its own. Ultimately, it calls for responding to structural experiences of age as vital to critical social understanding as such. To these ends, the article distinguishes childism from childhood studies, shows how it is emerging in diverse disciplinary contexts, explains how it differs from alternative uses of the term childism, and develops systematic theoretical grounds for advancing childism across the academy and society.

While it is generally accepted that scholars need to understand their subjects from diverse points of view – such as of gender, ethnicity, race, class, disability, and sexuality – there is one social dimension that does not influence academic research in quite the same way: namely, child and youth age. There are plenty of studies in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences that take the third of humanity who are children as a scholarly object. But rarely does youth function in the academy, let alone in broader society, as its own critical lens or frame of subjectivity. Like with early women's studies, studies of children's experiences remain for the most part limited to childhood specialists. Children's differences and exclusions do not make fundamental demands on broader scholarly projects, questions, or norms.

This article proposes a way to change this marginalized situation of children across scholarship and society through an approach that I call childism. Childism is meant here in analogy to concepts such as feminism, womanism, postgenderism, postcolonialism, decolonialism, environmentalism, and transhumanism. While 'isms' can be blunt tools, they can and do also provide powerful theoretical lenses for critical study and activism. In this case, since there are as many people under the age of 18 in the world as there are either men or women, and since the young are bound up with all aspects of social understanding and relations, any failure to employ a childist critique must be understood as rendering scholarship equally distorted and hegemonic as a failure to employ, for example, a feminist critique. Indeed, it is rarely noted that patriarchy involves the normative dominance of a *pater* or father who is not only male but also adult. Childism offers the needed critical lens for deconstructing adultism across research and societies and reconstructing more age-inclusive scholarly and social imaginations.

This article forges a critical lens of childism by considering, first, how it emerges from but is also different than childhood studies; second, how it is beginning to take shape in practice across multiple

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scholarly disciplines; third, what distinguishes it from alternative uses of the word childism; and finally, how it may be grounded theoretically by building on advances in childhood studies theory but deepening and radicalizing them into what I call a practice of reconstructionism.

Starting in childhood studies

Just as some forms of academic feminism grew in part out of women's studies, childism is emerging as an effort to develop upon the relatively new field of childhood studies. My own and others' work in childism is deeply rooted in childhood studies and is not meant to replace it. Rather, in addition to childhood studies (or any other studies of children and childhoods), scholars of any discipline, however directly concerned with children or not, need to understand themselves as functioning less critically without taking into consideration a childist lens.

To see the difference, let us first examine how the field of childhood studies has constructed its own aims over time. The original impetus arose in the 1980s, primarily among sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, as a new paradigm for the study of children and youth beyond the (then and still) dominant paradigm of developmental psychology. According to the model of childhood studies (or new sociology of childhood), children should be studied, not as developing adults, but in their own right as socially constructed agents. Research ought to approach children not as social 'becomings' but as social 'beings,' not as passive recipients of adult socialization but as active and diverse social participants in their own right (Qvotrup 1985, 132). As two of the movement's founders, Alison James and Alan Prout, put it, 'children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (1997, 4).

This initial framework for childhood studies has led to various groundbreaking scholarly advances. One key idea is that there is not just one natural or universal childhood but multiple childhoods and definitions and experiences of being a child. A childhood in a village in northern Sudan must be understood differently than a childhood in a city in the United States (Katz 2004). Additionally, children express themselves through their own distinctive voices (Pufall and Unsworth 2004). Young children dying of cancer, for example, interpret their situation more actively and complexly than parents and doctors tend to assume (Bluebond-Langner 1978). What is more, as social agents, children and youth exercise and deserve a wide range of social, economic, cultural, and political rights, including rights not just to protections and provisions but also to participation and power (John 2003; Freeman 2007; Woodhouse 2008). Such ideas helped to inspire the creation of the United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and particularly its new kinds of children's participation rights such as to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (UN 1989).

For many childhood studies scholars, such developments also make it possible to include children and youth as not only research objects but also research participants. Just as women researchers change what it means to study women, so also may children reshape research questions, hypotheses, and methods concerning children. This may mean, for example, taking a 'dialogical approach' that involves 'a shift toward engaging with children's own cultures of communication' (Christensen 2004, 174). It may prompt innovative research methods using video, narrative, drawing, and the internet (Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010), understanding how children interpret their own media expertise (Buckingham 2007), or direct child participation in academic and policy conferences (Kellett 2005). In addition, childhood studies is able to respond to the ways that children exercise participatory citizenship and shape social policy, such as through children's parliaments, youth councils, and child labor unions (Cockburn 2005; John 2003; Lister 2007; McEvoy-Levy 2011; Wyness 2005).

Finally, the field of childhood studies has edged toward what could be called an implicit or nascent kind of childism. While the field as described so far has remained focused on understanding children as specialized research objects, some scholars have taken steps toward broader critiques of the academy and society at large. While I will argue that it is possible to go further, and to do so in a more

theoretically innovative way, nevertheless there are at least two kinds of development within the field of childhood studies that start to take more outward-looking steps analogous to those found in feminism.

The first has to do with childhood studies efforts to support social and political activism by challenging adult-dominated norms in larger societies. Leena Alanen has argued for a 'critical childhood studies' that would take a 'normative turn' toward using childhood studies scholarship to challenge societal practices. Such an approach would be 'critical not only of our own research practices but the very practices and social arrangements that we study in the "real" world of children and childhood' (2011, 150). Others argue similarly that child-related activism depends on understanding children's everyday lives: 'Approaching activism through the lens of children's everyday lives affords an analytical engagement with activism that holds the lived experiences, relationships and, [sic] emotional complexities of activists' lives in mind' (Nolas, Varvantakis, and Aruldoss 2016, 262). Kirsi Kallio and Jouni Häkli claim that the role of the childhood studies researcher is not only to understand how children perform political activism, but, in addition, to help transform policy-making in response. For example, since silenced youth sometimes protest in non-voiced ways, 'we propose that taking voiceless politics into account in policy-making and administrative practice, such as urban planning, requires particular techniques for hearing the voiceless' (Kallio and Häkli 2011, 73). The suggestions here are that better understanding children's lived experiences is also a way to help critique larger social norms around childhood.

Other examples of this move toward critiquing social practices focus on rights and power. For example, Marc Jans outlines what he calls the possibilities for a 'children-sized citizenship' that would be framed in terms of not just adult-like rights to independence but rather age-inclusive rights to political interdependence (2004, 40). Barbara Bennett Woodhouse demonstrates how children's struggles for civil and criminal rights within the United States need to include, not just studying children themselves, but also 'fully exploring the concept of rights [in general] from a child-centered perspective' (2008, 11). Maria Rodó-de-Zárate suggests that studying young lesbians' negotiations of public arenas provides 'insights into larger social processes such as the heteronormalization and adultification of public space and the intersectional dynamics of power' (2015, 413). Again, studying children can help ground critiques of the broader social realm.

A second way in which childhood studies scholars have moved toward childism concerns scholarship itself in efforts to explore what children's experiences mean for understanding broader child–adult relations. One influential example is Berry Mayall and others' concept of a sociological lens of 'generation.' As Mayall puts it, 'generation is emerging as a key to understanding relations between childhood and adulthood' that enables sociologists 'to think from [children's] lives towards sociological understanding' (2002, 1). Comparing the approach from generations to Marxist feminism, Mayall argues that 'the underdog provides essential evidence of the working of the social order – the degree of 'fit' between assumptions and prescriptions of the ruling social order and people's experiences and understandings' (2002, 2). Leena Alanen similarly defines 'generation' or '(inter)generationality' as an additional dimension of 'intersectionality' that 'should be for the social study of childhood, the equivalent of gender in feminist studies and class in class studies' (2016, 60). As an example, Miranda Christou and Spyros Spyrou apply a generation perspective to studying migrant children in Cyprus, arguing that it shows why migration studies in general need to 'engage more deeply issues of emotions and embodiment' (2017, 61). Using generation as a lens for sociology, similar to uses of gender, empowers sociologists to make larger critiques of social systems in terms of how they construct child–adult relations.

Moving into childism

By placing children at the center of research, childhood studies has been able not only to understand children's agency and experiences in their own right, but also to develop critical understandings of child–adult relations and social practices. How, then, does childism both grow out of and distinguish

itself from these advances? The critical step is to use children's experiences as means for broader systemic critiques of scholarly and social norms. Childism focuses on transforming understandings and practices, not just around children themselves, or even around child–adult inter-generationality, but also around the pervasive normative assumptions that ground scholarship and societies overall. It suggests, in a similar way to recent forms of feminism, that the more fundamental problem for children and youth is not just how children and youth themselves are understood and related to, but also the social and political foundations on which children's lives and experiences are already imagined and pre-constructed. Social understandings and practices have historically been dominated by adults and adult points of view, leaving the entire edifice of human societies, cultures, language, rights, law, relationships, narratives, and norms built upon a powerful bedrock of adultism. It is this broader and more systemic problem to which childism makes a response.

An instructive model for this move from childhood studies to childism can be found in similar moves made in recent decades from women's and gender studies to certain kinds of poststructuralist feminism. I have in mind the work of so-called third-wave feminists such as Butler (1990), Irigaray (1993), and Heywood (1997), who argue that feminist research cannot content itself only with understanding and advocating for women's experiences, important though it is to do so. It should also concern itself with critiquing the larger normative frameworks that obscure and marginalize women's experiences in the first place, frameworks constructed chiefly from the historical perspectives of men. The research imagination needs itself to be restructured so as to demand that any study, whether directly concerning women or not, transcends the narrow horizons imposed upon it by normatively ingrained hegemonies of male power. Likewise, academic and social life should not only strive to include women equally to men, as broadly speaking in second-wave feminism, but *in addition* be subject to structural critique in light of underlying and largely invisible gender exclusions and diversities.

Likewise, childism as I wish to develop it here represents an effort in academic and social life not only to include children equally to adults, but in addition to respond to children's marginalized experiences by critiquing and reconstructing fundamental normative assumptions. It aims, in other words, to critically restructure historically engrained norms of adultism. Doing so requires approaching childhoods as not only research objects, but, in addition, lenses of social subjectivity with which to examine any research object whatsoever. Such lenses can be applied not only to children themselves and child–adult relations, but also to any social structure in which bedrock assumptions about childhood might be influential. Childhoods then become prisms or microscopes through which to deconstruct historical expressions of adultism and reconstruct more age-inclusive social imaginations.

This project of an explicit childism has in fact already been in development for over a decade and has started making its way into a diversity of disciplines. My own work has used a childist lens to examine ethical and political theory, arguing, for example, that children's political citizenship should include not just extending an adult right to vote to children, but fundamentally rethinking the right to vote itself. For all persons, even newborns, to be justly represented in a democracy, voting needs to be reconceived on an interdependent, 'proxy-claim' basis in which every citizen of any age who cannot vote on their own behalf receives an additional proxy vote from another, while anyone at any age can claim the right to vote for themselves whenever they wish (Wall and Dar 2011; Wall 2012, 2014a, 2014b). I have also applied a childist lens to reconceptualizing 'human rights,' beyond an adultistic binary opposition of autonomy versus dependence, as expressions of a more fundamentally human social interdependence (Wall 2008). I have applied similarly childist thinking to other issues such as family justice, poverty, education, and labor (Wall 2006, 2007, 2008, 2016).

My work has also used childism to understand and critique the patriarchalism of historical philosophy. Plato, for example, purveys adultist biases in his understanding of moral rationality, even while proto-childistically arguing that rationality is inherent rather than learned. John Locke discounts children's experiences as chiefly instruments for development into adulthood, though at the same time founds modern empirical science in part on the experiences of babies as primed to

accumulate and order sensory experiences over time. Indeed, almost every major philosopher and theologian of diverse historical traditions has uncritically adopted adultist social assumptions, even if in some cases they have also advanced implicit childist critiques (Wall 2010).

Others have developed this concept of childism in other disciplines, including in childhood studies. For example, Jeanette Sundhall (2017) incorporates 'childism' into the cultural sciences to provide an empirical critique of youth participation in democracy. When the Gothenburg Youth Council sought to fund a water slide at the annual Gothenburg Culture Festival, one bloc of the adult-run City Council opposed the funding because it represented the wages of five city workers which could be put to better use, while another bloc supported it because, while

> this is a priority that may seem strange to many adults … the idea of the youth council was not that all of its decisions should be like the ones that adults would have made, but that new perspectives should come through. (168)

Ultimately the second perspective prevailed. Sundhall argues that a childist analysis shows that in the first City Council bloc, 'adult norms remain naturalized' and 'invisible' (169); while in the second, children's differences are taken into account so that 'adult norms are … made visible (and thus challenged)' (168). A traditional childhood studies perspective would have looked for ways in which children exercise the same kind of 'agency' as adults, but in doing so would only have 'fit children into political constructions which take adulthood as their starting point, rather than challenging the constructions themselves' (166). Childism, in contrast, makes it possible to examine how adulthood is being 'naturalized' as an 'unmarked age,' thus making possible a broader scholarly analysis of 'how dominance relations are … challenged' and re-ordered by children and adults alike (165).

Other examples from the social sciences include Olof Franck's argument that a ''childist' approach' can be developed with reference to research done in preschool contexts, where young children interact with each other and with teachers, shaping teaching-learning processes that reach into epistemological and pedagogical, as well as ontological and existential, fields' (2017, 12). Julie Hanlon Rubio suggests that in family studies, applying a 'childist ethic' would mean that 'openness to the potential disruption of children ought to be applied, with appropriate limits, to families' (2010, 232). In girlhood studies, April Mandrona shows that 'childist' research challenges normative social perspectives to include how 'girls and young women bring unique voices to creative and cultural expression and also interact with social spaces in particular ways' (2016, 9). Again, the experiences of children are not only lifted up for analysis but also used to make broader social critiques.

Other examples of explicit uses of childism can be found in the humanities. The literature scholar Sarah Wadsworth advocates 'a turn to childism … [in which] literary studies may begin by internalizing the basic premise … that generation and stage of life constitute categories of difference that (perhaps paradoxically) inescapably define us all' (2015, 340). Anna Mae Duane uses childism to unpack the ways in which literatures of child slavery illuminate historical slave literature in general (2017, 2). In biblical studies, Julie Faith Parker uses what she calls 'childism as an affirmative term' to show that, 'just as we often do not acknowledge children's influence in families and societies, we have largely ignored their roles in the [biblical] text' (2017, 17). The religious ethicist Kate Ott using 'childism' to challenge adultist norms in Christian ethical theory (2019). Likewise, childism organizes a new collection of essays on biblical scholarship as a way 'to reassess the roles and impact of characters in the text and bygone persons from antiquity whose contributions and records have long been unnoticed or underappreciated' (Betsworth and Parker 2019, 3). More broadly, Kathleen Gallagher Elkins argues that,

> in the same way that feminists aim to make social structures more just and livable for women and men, scholars of childism attempt to use the experiences of children as a starting point for a more just world for people of all ages. (2013, 152–53)

In these and other ways, childism makes the crucial claim to critique adultism in any manifestation so as to restructure fundamental social norms. Children remain central, but now as subjectivities and

not just objects, lenses and not just specimens, prisms and not just waves of light, Archimedean levers for moving the world.

Beyond alternative childisms

Before developing childism's deeper theoretical groundings, it is necessary first to distinguish this concept from two other uses of the term 'childism' that have arisen in academia, one from literary theory and the other from psychoanalysis. Neither of these other concepts grows out of childhood studies, and as a result neither provides as academically or socially productive a way forward.

The earlier use of the term 'childism' was developed in the 1990s by the literary theorist Peter Hunt to propose a method for studying children's literature. Here, the purpose of 'childist criticism,' as Hunt calls it, is to 'invite adults to read as children' (1991, 191). The adult reader or scholar does this by 'taking into account personal, sub-cultural, experiential, and psychological differences between children and adults' (198). On this view, adults can more complexly interpret children's literature by putting aside their adult biases and reading from children's own points of view. As Sebastien Chapleau describes it, 'what Hunt wishes us to do, as critics, is acknowledge that children's reactions to literature are different from ours, which thus allows children's literature criticism to partake in post-structuralist debates' (2005, 16). That is, adult scholars need to recognize their own 'absence' of a child perspective – the fact that 'childist criticism is without a centre' – so as to open themselves to children's literature as a fundamentally decentering experience (Chapleau 2004, 137).

Few literary theorists – and, as far as I can tell, no scholars in other fields – have made use of Hunt's concept of childism recently, and even Hunt himself largely abandoned the term by the end of the 1990s (Hunt 1999, 5). One reason for this might be summed up in a criticism of Hunt's idea by the children's literature theorist Perry Nodelman, who points out that it depends on an essentialized imagination of the child's perspective: 'If there is no generalizable childlike response, then I can't pretend to read like a child' (2008, 85). Indeed, 'the flaw of 'childist' criticism is its dependence on assumptions about children that distort and limit the vast spectrum of actual or potential childhood capabilities and experiences' (155–56). Adults cannot 'read as children' because, just as for adults, there is no single type of reading that children perform. It would just as patronizing, one could say, as trying to 'read as women.'

My own critique of this notion of childism would go further. On the one hand, Hunt's term at least conceives of children as empowered meaning-making agents. But on the other hand, it fails to learn from the field of childhood studies what it could mean for children's agency to be understood as an object of research in its own right. One could, for example, instead of trying simply to imagine children's literary experiences, examine how children actually do in fact diversely experience children's (or any other kind of) literature. Once it is recognized that children's own experiences are not some vast unchartable territory, but just as available to research as those of adults, then it becomes clear that children's readings of literature can and should be studied in all their social and cultural diversity and constructedness.

The later, but in my view more problematic, use of the term 'childism' is developed by the psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and has gained wider popularity. Here, the term is defined to mean 'prejudice against children' (2009, 2011). Young-Bruehl formulates the concept of childism in analogy to concepts such as antisemitism, racism, and sexism. Indeed, her previous work before turning to children had focused on the psychology of prejudice across a range of racial, sexual, homophobic, and class dimensions (1998). As Young-Bruehl explains,

> my aim is to enable us, Americans and others, to move beyond editorializing over how much the care of 'antisocial' children costs, and to start thinking about the huge range of antichild social policies and individual behaviors directed against all children daily. The word I propose is childism. (2011, 4)

Childism is used here, then, as a lens for uncovering the psychological prejudices that support children's social oppression.

In her 2012 book (but not in her initial 2009 article on childism), Young-Bruehl mentions a 1975 paper in which the term 'childism' is used in a similar way. As far as I can tell, no one prior to Young-Bruehl has ever cited this earlier use of the term. The 1975 article is by two psychiatrists who argue that, even more than 'racism, sexism, and generationalism,'

> childism is the basic form of oppression in our society and underlies all alienation and violence, for it teaches everyone how to be an oppressor and makes them focus on the exercise of raw power rather than on volitional humaneness. (Pierce and Allen 1975, 267)

The word is used here to describe the psychological way in which children learn, through themselves being oppressed as children, to become in turn oppressors in diverse ways as adults. Young-Bruehl's concept is similar but not identical, since her focus is not on how children are educated to oppress, but on how they are victims of oppression on the part of adults.

Young-Bruehl's idea of childism has been picked up by academics both within and outside psychology. For example, the American studies scholar Claire Gresle-Favier uses it 'to underline how abstinence-only education programs can be seen to fit in a larger frame of discrimination against children' (2013, 715). Ann Marie F. Murnaghan in geography argues that 'the logics and actions of the [early twentieth century Toronto] playground movement can be seen as a form of narcissistic childism, where children are controlled by adults' disciplining of them in time and space' (2016, 128). In literary theory, Jack Zipes proposes to study 'the childist aspects of fairy tales and how the tales reveal prejudices against children and young people, and how they might partially socialize children to accept the abuse they suffer, even today, without realizing it' (2012, 1). Also in literary theory, Vanessa Joosen uses Young-Bruehl to argue that 'fiction and non-fiction can go hand in hand to give insight into childism and to offer alternatives for it, for the benefit of children and adults alike' (2013, 215). Michelle Superle likewise argues for the importance of 'disrupt[ing] childism in children's literature (as, for example, feminist literary theory disrupts sexism).' (Superle 2016, 150). Note how these literary scholars pick up on Young-Bruehl's rather than Hunt's earlier literary studies use of the term.

The problem with Young-Bruehl's concept of childism, however, is that it offers only a negative, deficit-oriented lens for studying childhoods, and not a positive, agentic one. Indeed, it is less about children's own activities than about adults' attitudes toward them. In this way, it fails to benefit from three decades of childhood studies research that has made it abundantly clear that, while children like adults can certainly be victims of oppression, also like adults they are socially empowered agents and constructors of meaning in their own right. Nor, indeed, does Young-Bruehl recognize that the term 'childism' was already in circulation in the childhood studies literature. Young-Bruehl's concept repeats a limitation found across much research in developmental psychology, namely that children are primarily framed as passive objects of adult socialization or harm.

Indeed, ironically, to study children and youth through this deficit concept of childism likely deepens their oppression. It assumes that only adults can act in child-empowering ways, thus disempowering children themselves as social actors. As a basis for social policy, it perpetuates a victim mentality in which children are either oppressed or saved by adults. Young-Bruehl's concept of 'childism' would be equivalent to identifying 'feminism' with only 'sexism' or 'prejudice against women,' a profoundly limited view that would rob the notion of feminism of its most important capacities to examine and advance women's empowerment. Besides, there already exist more useful, longstanding, and widespread terms for understanding children's oppression such as ageism, adultism, and patriarchalism.

The concept of childism that I am proposing here differs from these two alternatives fundamentally. The difference is chiefly based on advances made in the field of childhood studies, combined with a poststructuralist and feminist ambition for systemic normative transformation. Childism in the sense being developed here can include an element of Hunt's responsiveness to children's meaning-making differences, but only in a way that enables those differences to challenge adultist imaginations from children's own complex and diverse points of view. And childism can and should also

include a moment of Young-Bruehl's negative critique of prejudice against children, but only as part of a larger positive project of understanding and empowering children in and of themselves. Childism in this agentic and positive sense takes on the more radical critical task of responding to children's experiences by reconstructing scholarly and societal norms.

Building on childhood studies theory

Childism can function as a broad scholarly lens with the same power as feminism, postgenderism, and other critical approaches only insofar as it develops sophisticated and to an extent distinct theoretical underpinnings. As an expansive movement for normative critique, it needs to establish secure and transferable theoretical footings that enable it to operate across diverse scholarly fields and arenas of social activism. This theoretical grounding, I now wish to argue, can be developed by pressing theoretical advances in childhood studies beyond both their initial structuralism and their more recent moves into poststructuralism toward a post-poststructuralist approach that I would call reconstructionism. I can only sketch these developments here, but would suggest that they need to be just as groundbreaking as theoretical innovations in feminism, postcolonialism, critical race studies, and other socially critical movements, and in new ways that can offer critiques of those prior theoretical developments insofar as they remain in thrall to hidden adultisms themselves.

The field of childhood studies emerged in the 1980s chiefly under the umbrella of sociology, which at the time took its theoretical underpinnings from what in retrospect can be seen as a late form of structuralism. That is, childhood studies adopted the idea that social phenomena are best researched as a combination of broader social 'structures' and particular expressions of individual 'agency' within them (James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). Classical theorists like Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, and later Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan, had argued that scholarship should be about unearthing societies' deep structural patterns. But by the 1980s, especially in light of second-wave feminist and civil rights movements, social scientists had come to appreciate the role of individually empowered agents in contributing to structural change. As a result, theorists developed various ways of understanding how structure and agency are interrelated. Anthony Giddens, for example, cited in early childhood studies work by James and Prout (1997, 5), argues that scholars ought to study what he calls 'structuration' or the arena in which normative social structures and reflexive individual agents mutually constitute each other (Giddens 1984). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu, who remains influential in childhood studies, claims that sociology should study at once the ways that external structures are internalized into an agent's 'habitus' or habitual dispositions, and internal agency is in turn externalized through effects on the 'field' of social relationships (1977, 1984).

Childhood studies, as a result, initially grounded itself in this broadly structuralist idea that social phenomena are expressions of both social structures and social agency. Hence its two chief objects of study are childhoods' social constructedness and children as social actors. Children are to be understood as at once constructed by broader historical, cultural, class, and other kinds of social environment, and, just like adults, active participants in and interpreters of these environments in their own right. This theoretical basis enabled the new paradigm of childhood studies, among other things, to distinguish itself from the dominant field of developmental psychology, which largely overlooks both of these dimensions of children's lives by focusing instead on children's teleological socialization.

As scholarly theory has evolved over time, and as childhood studies has diversified into other disciplines including in the humanities, the field has increasing explored what can broadly be referred to as 'poststructuralist' forms of theoretical grounding. Poststructuralism is a diverse movement that came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s through appropriations of the work of philosophers and literary theorists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. Its key idea, if it can be simplified in this way, is that social phenomena are best understood, not in terms of structural patterns or individual agency, but in terms of lived experiences of social difference. Social structures are not neutrally transparent objects, but expressions of historically

hegemonic discourses that depend for their power and meaning on relegating experiences of difference or otherness to societies' invisible margins. Likewise, individual agency is not a simple realization of autonomous freedom, but rather the performance of either disciplinary dominance or a countervailing alterity or subalternity. A full or inclusive understanding of social relations requires, as a result, that social systems and norms be subject to critical deconstruction, a method that opens understanding up to previously invisible lived experiences of diversity and difference.

Poststructuralism has made its way into childhood studies in a variety of feminist, queer, postcolonialist, neo-Marxist, and other forms. Much theory in childhood studies has been influenced, for example, by the ideas of queer feminist poststructuralist Judith Butler (who herself, however, has not paid particular attention to children). Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes use Butler to argue, for instance, that in gender and sexuality studies, 'children's sexuality, like all sexuality, should be seen as a part and parcel of the body and dominant discourse – as something that is shaped by the social and open to refutation and resistance' (2009, 395; see also Taylor 2010). In political science, Butler's approach is used to explain how Palestinian children's lives are framed by policies of 'exceptionalism' which make them 'precarious' under a symbolic and political regime that 'conditions a liveable life – namely … who will count as a life and who will not' (Joronen 2016, 96 and 108). Education theory has made use of Butler's idea of 'difference' or the other's 'unknowability' to develop a political ethics of the classroom in which 'the sustained acknowledgement of the unknowability of ourselves and each other … confuses, disrupts and dispossesses us of our narratives' about marginalized students (Teague 2015, 403). In studies of youth Holocaust literature, Butler helps illuminate a 'normal/abnormal binary' in which 'some lives are grievable, and others [like the Romani] are not … [based on] exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and grievable death' (Dean-Ruzicka 2014, 3). Most radically, Butler can be used to suggest that any single interpretation of childhood is an impossibility, not just because children's lives are diverse, but because, for anyone, 'a stable, full, undivided and cognitively organised subjectivity … is never achievable' (Lesnik-Oberstein 2016, 22; see also Duane 2013, 10).

In addition to feminism, another major poststructuralist influence in childhood studies is postcolonialism, particularly as initially formulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. According to Spivak, the goal of scholarship and social action is, briefly put, to 'let the subaltern speak' (1988), that is, to deconstruct the normative horizons that reduce previously colonized groups to silence. While again Spivak herself does not focus on childhood, scholars like Olga Nieuwenhuys translate her approach into childhood studies by arguing, for example, that 'postcolonialism enjoins academics to abandon the high ground position from where they have usually sought to understand the world and to look up from a multiplicity of different, marginal positions' (2013, 6). For Sarada Balagopalan, a postcolonial lens makes it possible 'to critique the global circulation of a modern western childhood as the hegemonic ideal' (2002, 33) as well as to overcome a 'culturalism' in which children's diverse cultures tend to be viewed as 'static' instead of as 'the workings of power … mired in the creation of the "other"' (21). For Afua Twum-Danso Imoh, a postcolonial framework helps scholars 'to explore the pluralities that exist within childhood constructions and experiences in sub-Saharan Africa … as a result of the historical and global processes that have impacted many societies in the region' (2016, 456).

Poststructuralism is also being used in childhood studies to deconstruct child and youth politics. For example, Caroline Bath and Rauni Karlsson use the neo-Marxist poststructuralism of the philosopher Jacques Rancière to argue that children's political life is best understood as a practice of 'dissensus': 'The young child can be seen as both an "ignored" and an "ignorant citizen", that is, one who refuses a predetermined citizenship identity … enact[ing] this subjectivity through the "life-form" of play' (Bath and Karlsson 2016, 563). (Rancière himself did in fact write an early book about children, though it is less focused on children's own experiences than on those of being a teacher [1991]). Ana Vergara del Solar uses the example of present-day Chile to argue that childhood studies can mount a critique of global neoliberal discourses as they focus on 'development' to 'symbolically condense political projects, notions of subjects, conceptions of society and the future' instead of the complex, diverse, and unequal realities of societies in the here and now (2015, 443).

Childist reconstructionism

While structuralist and poststructuralist ideas have fueled childhood studies' groundbreaking research and activism, the question remains whether they ultimately provide sufficient theoretical bases for a broader kind of childism. What type of approach can move the conversation from not only understanding and including children's experiences to also, and at the same time, critiquing and transforming the adultism of larger scholarly and social norms? Here it is worth noting that not only did the major theorists of structuralism generally ignore children's agency, but it is equally the case that the major theorists of poststructuralism largely ignore questions of age, focusing instead on other dimensions of social marginalization such as gender, geography, and class. I would argue that these theoretical blind spots are not accidental. Rather, they suggest a need to move from constructionist and deconstructionist approaches to a new theoretical groundwork that may be called reconstructionist.

A childist perspective helps illuminate why poststructuralist theory marginalizes the particular marginalization of children. The reason for this neglect is that poststructuralism typically assumes that marginality is best and most authentically deconstructed by those occupying the margins themselves. Difference is so absolutely different, from this perspective, that it can only ultimately be empowered from the point of view of difference itself. It is subalterns who must speak on behalf of subalterns, women on behalf of women, the poor on behalf of the poor, and so on. While such a view is an improvement on historical white European male privilege, it is also the case that it becomes increasingly problematic as a theoretical lens the younger the age group under consideration. Seven-year olds are on the whole unlikely to gain university research positions from which to explicate their own subaltern alterities. Three-year olds should not be expected to lead the fight, at least not on their own, against societies' hegemonic oppressions against three-year olds. Newborns are not going to create political organizations to advance the social empowerment of newborns, at least not by themselves.

The problem raised by childism – not just for children but also for adults – is how to understand difference in not only its social independence but also, in a more complex way, its social inter-dependence. The question becomes how disenfranchised communities can be empowered in a way that is not simply reducible to empowerment on their own behalf. Childism uncovers poststructuralism's implicitly marginalizing assumption that difference emerges, and power is critiqued, only through differences' own self-performance. Rather, as the youngest among us demonstrate most vividly, but as is equally the case in diverse ways for us all, differences are demarginalized only interdependently: both on one's own behalf but also through responses on one's behalf from others. As in the Gothenburg study, the question is not only how the Youth Council is able to represent itself, but in a more complex way how it is able to change the dynamics of social representation and power across political relations. No marginalized group overcomes its marginalization purely on its own terms. Rather, difference emerges interdependently through at once its own interruption of dominant norms and others' norm-transformative responses from across the social spectrum. Difference is only empowered if it also makes a difference to others.

To see this more clearly, consider Spivak's central question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' Looked at through a childist lens, this expression does not in the end call only for empowering the subaltern. Rather, it centrally if implicitly engages two other groups: those asking the question, and those to whom the question is addressed. Paradoxically, in order to be empowered, the subaltern must become not just a subject in its own right, but also the object of a conversation between a not-so-subaltern questioner and addressee. The primary subjectivity of this question is in fact that of the invisible questioner – presumably Spivak, but also anyone else willing to ask the question with her – who is by definition *not* or *not as much* subaltern because, in asking the question, she already possesses precisely the power in question to speak. In asking that the subaltern be empowered to speak, someone is already in part speaking on the subaltern's behalf.

Likewise, the question's addressee – whoever is being asked to let the subaltern speak – is not, at least in their capacity as addressee, entirely subaltern either. If the subaltern group needs to be empowered to speak, then whoever can enable the subaltern to speak is to that extent by definition not (or not entirely, or not in the same way) subaltern. Spivak is asking the question of whoever controls the ability to speak, of others besides the subaltern who are necessarily *not* so marginalized or unable to influence social discourse. Rather, as again with the speaker, the addressee of the question is being asked to act in some way, even if only to stop speaking and listen, on the subaltern's behalf. And so, again paradoxically, the non-subaltern is being called upon to help empower the subaltern to empower herself. If the subaltern group could simply speak independently on its own behalf, there would be no need for Spivak's question in the first place.

Here is where childism helps to illuminate the deeper theoretical problem. Childism overcomes this thicket of paradoxes by recognizing that, in order to speak, the subaltern demands both to speak on their own behalf and to receive a response on their behalf from others. The subaltern is not empowered in-dependently, much less merely dependently, but rather inter-dependently: as a distinct member of a human community that is inextricably interconnected. Such is the case for any subaltern, child or adult. Such is the case, indeed, for any human (and non-human). Social difference requires a more rigorous social theory that allows for the fact that self-empowerment is fundamentally bound up with empowerment also from others. Without this recognition of interdependence, the dynamics of social power and marginalization is profoundly misunderstood. Liberation cannot be achieved without understanding that oppressed groups need both to perform their differences for themselves and to have their performances make a difference to the lives of others. A performance, after all, involves moving and surprising an audience.

Although there is not the space here to develop such theoretical groundings in further detail, I would like at least to suggest that they depend on moving beyond both structuralism and poststructuralism to what I would call reconstructionism (Wall 2005, 2006, 2010). Reconstructionism as imagined here rests on friendly criticisms of poststructuralism made by hermeneutical phenomenologists such as Paul Ricoeur (1981), Pamela Sue Anderson (1993), and Richard Kearney (2002). Such theorists argue that difference and otherness must ultimately also be understood as transforming the experiences and imaginations of difference-responding selves and groups. From the perspective of childism, understanding and empowering marginalized groups requires not just constructing understandings of their lives, or even deconstructing hegemonic discourses that marginalize them, but, in the end, reconstructing interdependent social relations as more radically and imaginatively difference-responsive. Childism shows that social theory needs to embrace the more fundamental potential for lived experiences of difference to expand rather than just break down social norms. An aesthetics of political agonism and destruction is only part of a broader aesthetics of political expansion and creativity. The purpose of studying any marginalized group, child or not, is to reconstruct more difference-inclusive social imaginations.

When it comes to research, reconstructionism suggests the need for critical scholarship that helps to transform broader normative imaginations in response to specific marginalizations of difference. Childism asks researchers to interpret hegemonically suppressed lived experiences into more expansive social understandings for all. It is not enough to present or perform children's or anyone else's differences in isolation. The more critical scholarly task is to respond creatively to those differences by transforming understanding of powerful social norms. Because human beings are at once different and interdependent, social research grasps the hidden recesses of lived experience only insofar as it helps to creatively reconstruct more expansive social imaginations.

Conclusion

I have argued that understanding and empowering children calls for not only childhood studies but also a broader and more radical childism. Childism is analogous but not reducible to feminism. It is the critical effort to respond to ingrained historical adultism by reconstructing systemic scholarly and

social norms. When it comes to research, childism provides a lens or prism for approaching children as not just objects but also subjectivities that creatively challenge engrained normative assumptions. Such an approach also ties scholarly research into broader social activism, not only by including children's agency and voices, but also by empowering children's experiences of difference to transform larger social norms and systems. Ultimately, childism calls for new ways of understanding social theory itself: as a groundwork for not only constructing or deconstructing social relations but finally also, and in a more complex way, reconstructing them difference-responsively. Children and adults are heard and seen by expanding shared social imaginations.

Disclosure statement

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