



EDITORIAL

Crafting the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies

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Childhood studies is often described as an interdisciplinary field of study. What, in specific sites and instances, does that claim mean? What animates some scholars and practitioners to move across the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines? Which cross-disciplinary paths are well-traveled, which seem blocked and foreboding – and why? What are the grounds for fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration in the study of children and childhoods? Are we creating distinctive types of inquiry, or mostly marking the intersections of separate, well-established paths of knowledge?

These issues have emerged in discussions at interdisciplinary conferences and research centers and in collaborative projects involving scholars from multiple fields. Shared interest in complex problems has provided especially generative grounds for cross-disciplinary research. For example, issues relating to children's labor and children's rights have mobilized extensive dialogue among anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, scholars in law and in international development studies, and policy-makers and NGO workers from varied disciplinary backgrounds.

Social movements sometimes generate compelling questions that reach across well-established disciplinary divides. In the 1970s, feminists and anti-racist scholars asked, 'Where are the women – and where are historically subordinated racial-ethnic groups – in the study of history, politics, economics, social institutions, culture, literature, art?' These questions opened new interdisciplinary spaces for knowledge creation. The history of fields like women's studies and racial-ethnic studies can provide useful guidance in the crafting of an interdisciplinary field that seeks to bring yet another group – children – from the margins to the center of knowledge. In all of these knowledge formations, border concepts like 'discourse' and attention to relationships between representations and practice have provided useful tools for questioning taken-for-granted and naturalized categories, and for linking the humanities and the social sciences.

In this editorial I want to highlight the relatively recent cross-national emergence of interdisciplinary curricula and degree-granting programs in childhood

studies. The practical tasks of defining, producing – and in the increasingly commodified language of higher education – marketing a new and named field of study put a distinctive spin on the challenges of cross-disciplinary knowledge work.

A bit of ‘googling’ can help one map the landscape of degree-granting interdisciplinary programs in childhood studies. Masters programs in childhood studies have been running at the Institute of Education of the University of London and at the University of Edinburgh for several years. These have recently become part of a European Network of Masters Programmes on Children’s Rights (www.enmcr.net), which also includes programs in Germany, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Romania, Malta, Serbia, Norway and Sweden. In a parallel and connected effort, the Latin American Network of Masters Programmes (www.redmaestriasinfancia.net) links interdisciplinary programs on children’s rights in Peru, Ecuador, Columbia, Nicaragua and Bolivia.

Including, but also extending beyond issues of children’s rights, the UK Open University BA Programme in Childhood and Youth Studies focuses on childhood in diverse historical, cultural and global contexts. Creators of this curriculum also developed accompanying videos and four new textbooks (jointly published by the Open University and Wiley), with authors from the fields of education, cultural studies, language and communications, anthropology, sociology, history, child development and psychology. At a more advanced degree level, the Department of Child Studies at Linköping University in Sweden offers an explicitly interdisciplinary PhD program, which, according to its website, embraces a range of methodologies and seeks to theorize childhood and children’s life conditions. In the US, several undergraduate minor programs predated the most ambitious effort to date: Rutgers University, Camden recently created a Department of Childhood Studies that plans to offer explicitly interdisciplinary PhD, MA and BA degrees.

New academic departments and degree-granting programs deserve attention as sites in which the *interdisciplinary* challenges of childhood studies come into sustained and focused view. It is relatively easy to draw together and cross-list courses forged in separate disciplinary contexts, such as the history or sociology of childhood, children’s literature, child development and early childhood education. Bringing them together, like items on a restaurant menu, results in *pluridisciplinary* knowledge – arrayed for picking and choosing, and leaving it to students to try to make sense of the whole. A far greater challenge lies in the design and teaching of core or integrative courses for students who aim to get a BA, MA or PhD in childhood studies. The framing of a coherent mandate for an interdisciplinary department and degree-granting curriculum challenges the designers to articulate shared turf. If the curriculum is campus-wide, some of the designers may represent bodies of knowledge that are paradigmatically distant, and perhaps even actively at odds.

In late September 2006, a Rutgers University, Camden planning committee of faculty from child psychology, religious studies and English convened a group of scholars from other campuses to discuss the future of childhood studies in the US. The participants came from anthropology, sociology, human development, educational psychology, social work, cultural studies, women's studies, literature, religious studies, law and criminal justice. John Wall, the chair of the planning committee, asked each of us to prepare a 'brief' organized around several substantive and/or methodological questions that, from the point of view of a particular discipline, 'invite larger interdisciplinary inquiry on children and childhood'. The planning committee hoped that the organization of discussions around questions rather than answers would provoke fresh thinking about ways to shape this field of study, interrogate disciplinary boundaries and explore connections between theoretical and applied approaches.

The result was an intensive and generative discussion, sometimes conflictual, and occasionally laced with misunderstandings (we discovered, for example, that various participants meant different things when they used the term 'children's agency'). The organizers plan to develop an edited volume from expanded versions of the briefs and from themes that emerged in our conversations. Here I will share some ideas from my brief.

I first asked: What's in a name? What are the virtues and what are the pitfalls of the terminology of 'childhood studies'? 'Childhood' has a more historical, cultural and social constructionist – as opposed to naturalized – valence than 'child', 'children' or 'child development'. The concept of childhood broadens the field of study to include not only individuals and groups located in a particular historically and culturally defined age category, but also the varied circumstances of their lives, including ways in which they are defined and treated by others. On the other hand, although the field emphasizes variability and change, the concept of childhood often tends to be reified. Contemporary western/northern idealized assumptions infuse the term, which invokes the image of a separate and protected space. For example, contemporary Americans talk about 'childhood' as a unitary thing that may have been happy or sad, a thing that can be given, stolen or taken away; a childhood is even something to which one may have a 'right'. Do we want to make these contemporary western assumptions foundational to a field that seeks to understand diverse historical and cultural contexts? We should interrogate our starting assumptions and organizing categories, including the long history of western scholars imposing their frameworks on the less privileged.

The notion of 'childhood studies' may, in fact, be too narrow and limiting. The interdisciplinary field of women's studies made a quantum leap forward by taking gender as a basic category of analysis, while continuing to bring women from the margins to the center of knowledge. Analogously, the field of childhood studies – and academic fields organized around other socially constructed age segments, such as youth, midlife adulthood and old

age – might benefit from more unified and systematic attention to and the theorizing of age. Like gender, racial ethnicity and sexuality, age is an embodied form of difference that is both materially and discursively produced and embedded in relations of power and authority (these words echo the editorial I wrote for *Childhood*, Vol. 11(4), November 2000; note that the study of generational relations is a related, broadening form of theorizing and inquiry).

In my brief for the Rutgers discussion, I also raised a question that has long nipped at my heels as a sociologist of childhood: How can the approaches clustered within the ‘new social studies of childhood’ be brought into more fruitful dialogue with the well-established, better funded and much more hegemonic approaches of developmental psychology? There has, by now, been extensive dialogue among sociologists, anthropologists, historians and cultural geographers who highlight the social construction of childhoods and who seek to document children’s practices and meanings. This cluster of disciplines comes immediately to mind when reference is made to the ‘new social studies of childhood’, an approach that emerged in explicit opposition to the framing of children primarily in terms of ‘development’ and ‘socialization’.

Many of us have criticized the universalizing, essentialist and linear assumptions of conventional developmental psychology, approaches driven by biological images of growth and, all too often, embedding western, middle-class assumptions about the contexts in which children grow up. Developmentalists that are guided by Vygotskian notions of social practice have increasingly grappled with these problems and are moving in a social constructionist direction. But, in my observation as an outsider who occasionally takes a few steps across the divide, developmental psychology – at least in the US – is such a large and well-funded field that it tends to be inward turning and relatively impervious to the work of anthropologists, sociologists, historians and geographers of childhood.

I regret the continuing wall of silence between the ‘new social studies of childhood’ and the field of child development because I believe that the complex articulation of different types of *temporality* – historical, generational, chronological, phenomenological, developmental, biological – should be central to the study of children and childhoods. Questions about individual growth and the shifting constitution of persons over time, which are central to the study of human development, have the potential to enrich the anthropology, sociology, geography and history of childhood. But this will only happen if approaches to human development are more fully historicized, informed by meaningful attention to culture and social structure, and enriched by close attention to the ways in which children negotiate the process of growing older and participate in a range of social institutions. It will take extensive mutual dialogue to transcend this particular wall of silence. It’s a tall order, methodologically and conceptually, but surely no one believes that understanding the whole of children’s lives will be a smooth and easy task.

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This issue begins with Gerald Cradock's discussion of a 'responsibility dance' set in motion by the erosion of the welfare state and its ethos in Canada. Cradock analyzes two recent juridical decisions that reframe relationships between foster children, foster families and the government. In these decisions, the government (while still the legal guardian) minimized its responsibility for foster children. Foster families, in turn, succeeded in limiting state involvement while also defining foster children as moral hazards. Cradock argues that this approach undermines children's rights while also reflecting the tendency of neoliberalism to govern from a distance.

Virginia Caputo explores another facet of neoliberalism in Canada: the increasing privatization of education and its effects on the spaces and experiences of childhood and motherhood. She found that promotional materials for private elementary schools in Ottawa highlighted home-like notions of 'care' and 'safety', as well as the goal of giving children a head start in a competitive world. In interviews, mothers of children in these schools expressed anxieties about protecting children from risk and about giving them a competitive edge in the future. Thus, Caputo argues, an intensified, spatially circumscribed idea of childhood intersects with an ideology of intensive mothering.

In the next article, Michael King draws upon Niklas Luhmann's social theory to assess basic tenets of the 'new sociology of childhood', especially the image of the child as a competent and autonomous human agent. While organized around a binary code of adult/child, this image highlights similarities between children and adults. King argues that this image has been facilitated by broader developments such as the global movement for children's rights and, within sociology, an emphasis on identity groups, and the ascendancy of theories of agency over those of structure. King raises questions about the scientific status of the new sociology of childhood.

In a contribution to the sociological history of childhood, Jane Pilcher examines a century of school-based health education in England and Wales, starting in the 1870s. State-sponsored handbooks of health education have framed children's bodies (and minds) as unfinished business and promoted specific kinds of 'body work' in order to ensure the health and fitness of 'the Nation'. Although the content shifted, health education publications continued to be preoccupied with the problematic bodies of girls.

Using another sort of method, Pål André Aarsand analyzed videotapes of Swedish family members engaged in computer games. He found that children assumed the stance of experts, even when a bit of bluffing was involved, while a mother, and in another episode, a grandfather, presented themselves as novices. Thus, both parties helped display a generational digital divide, but for somewhat different strategic purposes. Children gained a sense of control, while adults showed lack of knowledge to celebrate the competence of children and to make them the center of attention.

Seeking to understand the meanings that children ascribe to various forms of work, Beatrice Hungerland, Manfred Liebel, Anja Liesecke and Anne Wihstutz conducted interviews with children, ages 9–14, in Berlin, Germany. The children, who engaged in varied forms of paid and/or unpaid work, valued acting independently and gaining approval for their work. They wanted adequate payment, but money was not a necessary motive for working; broadening their scope of experiences and activity was especially important to them. In short, children understood work as a 'path to participatory autonomy'.

Finally, in a timely 'Opinion, Dialogue, Review' piece, Manfred Liebel criticizes the 2006 International Labor Organization Global Report on Child Labor. Liebel questions the ILO's claim that the end of child labor is 'within reach,' and he lays out specific problems with the data and analysis on which this claim is based.

Barrie Thorne