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Childhood prism research: an approach for enabling unique childhood studies contributions within the wider scholarly field

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a childhood prism research program with a view to encouraging unique childhood research contributions to the wider scholarly field. It is argued that such a program must embrace both classical and emergent lines of thinking, and be underpinned by a unique childhood studies identity. Besides the fact that childhood offers a unique case for exploring many issues, its potential for making unique contributions is rooted in the generational order perspective. Thus, the suggested research program offers a rethinking of the field that detaches the generational order perspective, and the concepts of 'generational order' and 'generationing', from their specific theoretical origins and replaces them with a relational ontology and a flat epistemology, making use of the fact that childhood can constitute an extreme or paradigmatic case and can therefore potentially offer a diffractive sociological microscope on certain issues.

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Introduction

For the past 15 years, a conversation has burgeoned regarding the need to reinvigorate theoretical thinking within, and even to reorient, the field of childhood studies in order to engage more with broader societal issues. Many scholars regard new lines of thinking within the broader social sciences, such as actor-network theory, and new materialist and post-humanist philosophies, as a promising route, and have suggested to decenter childhood studies through attention to nonrepresentational elements of children's lives in order to re-center childhood studies (e.g. Spyrou 2018a; Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018; Kraftl and Horton 2018). This article aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation by suggesting that these calls may be met not only by engaging with these new lines of thought but also by engaging with classical concepts and approaches from childhood studies, such as the generational order and generationing – an approach also advocated by Rachel Rosen (in Spyrou 2018b) and Samantha Punch (2020). I suggest that the term 'childhood prism research' captures a way of thinking that could embrace both various new lines of thought and more classical approaches, enabling unique contributions to the wider social sciences and humanities.

My argument unfolds around three axes: (1) Prism research as a means not only to acknowledge the situatedness of knowledge (Harraway 1988), but also to enhance unique childhood studies contributions to the wider scholarly field (2) The generational order perspective as the advantageous hallmark of childhood studies, which challenges fundamental assumptions in the humanities and the social sciences, thereby potentially underpinning the uniqueness of such contributions. (3) A relational

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ontology and a flat scale epistemology with a twist, which propose that children and childhood can, in some cases, be regarded as a sociological (diffractive) microscope on broader issues.

The article begins by unfolding the term 'childhood prism research', starting with the notion of 'prism research'. Next, I turn to the medium of the prism, which I argue must re-engage with an opening up of the generational order perspective in line with a relational ontology and flat scale epistemology. The latter is then developed and refracted through a discussion of childhood and children's lives as extreme and paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Prism research and the childhood prism metaphor

The prism metaphor is inspired by an article written by Laura Richardson in 1994, in which she suggests 'crystallization' as an alternative to triangulation. Crystallization – rather than testing and striving for validation/falsification – means to present various possibilities pertaining to multiple truths. The prism metaphor has been used in the social sciences and humanities by researchers subscribing to branches of philosophy of science where research is not regarded as describing an already existing and stable reality, but is, rather, located within reality and seen as both affected by, and affecting, the processes that 'make' reality, as in post structuralism and nonrepresentational theories (Saukko 2003). Scholars working within the prism research paradigm have emphasized the privileged nature of situated knowledge, which offers 'alternative' answers and pictures of reality that contradict accepted scientific truths. This quest for 'alternative' realities is grounded in a critique that science has historically been, and still often continues to be, conducted from the position of the white, privileged, Western, male who frames definitions and decisions in a certain way with far-reaching consequences for our lives, all in the name of unbiased scientific 'objectivity' (Harraway 1988). The field of childhood studies was inspired by feminism from its inception; however, it was grounded in the critique that science and society were characterized by adultism – a point that was (and still is) neglected in the majority of feminist research. It thereby reflected a similar (but not identical) critique and quest for 'alternative' realities, although this critique was not exclusively rooted in the same branches of philosophy of science, but also in structuralism and critical realism. However, childhood studies have nonetheless been criticized for similar failings, notably for tending to universalize theories and concepts developed in minority worlds (Punch 2020).

The prism metaphor abstains from claims of universalism and neutrality, emphasizing instead the situatedness of research, and notably how research re-presents rather than represents (the hyphen between 're' and 'presents' indicates the constructive/perspectival character of the presentation). The concept of 'diffractive analysis' developed by Harraway (1992) and Barad (2007) constitutes a related metaphor, as an optical prism diffracts light (i.e. it transforms light *both* as an optical phenomenon *and* as a material force, Clough 2000, 162), by separating white light into a spectrum of colours. The resulting configuration depends on the angle of the incoming light wave *and* the medium of the prism. Both metaphors thereby express the idea that a given situated phenomenon may be re-presented in multiple ways as it is crystallized through the incoming light wave, and that the research process is not only representative in the sense of 'depicting' something but can also be transformative. However, in diffractive analyses (as proposed in childhood studies by e.g. Lens Taguchi and Palmer 2013; Davies 2014; and Spyrou 2018a), the medium of the prism is Barad's agential realism (which constitutes one stream among the new lines of thought). Conversely, the medium of the childhood prism should be a specific attendance located within, and constituting a distinct feature of, childhood studies, which enhances unique childhood studies contributions to the wider scholarly field. This should be combined with a philosophy of science approach that is sensitive to the heterogeneity of the field and opens up rather than closes down when it comes to use of specific theoretical approaches. Thus, childhood prism research is not defined in terms of, or confined to, child-decentred studies, nor to child-centred approaches. Rather, it goes beyond this by reconstructing or refining more general theories and concepts, adding new perspectives to methodological/ethical discussions, and providing alternative answers to more general research questions

by channelling these through the lens of a unique childhood studies attendance. In line with the prism metaphor, the alternative answers that result depend on our research questions, which must be more general (the incoming light wave is not confined to a specific prism), approaches and research designs which can differ from project to project and might stem from 'the classics' as well as from new lines of thought (this constitutes 'the angle' of the incoming light wave, which is not confined to a specific prism either), and a distinct childhood studies identity (the medium of the prism). It is this prism medium that enables a distinct contribution from the childhood prism, compared to if a given research question were tackled using a different research prism, whereas it is the incoming light wave committed to more general questions that paves the way for contributions to the wider scholarly field.

The medium of the prism

However, childhood studies are not, and never has been, an homogeneous field. Rather, it was characterized by two separate origins: a constructionist origin with a focus on children's lived (everyday) lives, perspectives and agency; and a structural origin with a focus on childhood as a social phenomenon (Alanen 2020). Today, it is further differentiated by the so-called new wave, that is the new lines of thought inspired by actor-network, new materialist and post-humanist philosophies. Thus, it seems to lack a shared underpinning philosophy and specific identity that might enable it to make a distinct impact beyond the field of childhood research (Punch 2020). Therefore, the field of childhood studies does not immediately seem to offer the necessary medium for the childhood prism. Punch suggests that one explanation for the relative failure of childhood studies to establish a distinct identity that enables it to make an impact on the wider scholarly field was 'an early shift away from the "generational order" as it became criticized early on rather than really grappled with and extended or adapted' (Punch 2020, 138). Conversely, Alanen argues that although the structural approach remained marginal in childhood studies, insights from this approach 'succeeded in underlining the usefulness of an (inter)generational perspective in diverse sorts of studies on children and childhood, across social scientific disciplines' (Alanen 2020, 142). Moreover, she argues, that various researchers actually engaged with this perspective empirically and conceptually. I agree, and regard the generational order perspective as an advantageous hallmark of childhood studies – in the 1980s, it constituted a key axis for the upcoming scholarly field's challenges to existing approaches to childhood and the social order. Since then, it has underpinned an (often unspoken) philosophy of a large portion of so-called child-focused or child-centered research that, in recent years, has been problematized for looking too inwards and limiting 'its potential for wider impact on ongoing debates' (Spyrou 2018a, 4). Regrettably, only a few other scholars have engaged in developing the concept further. However, I have seen several recent attempts to revitalize the generational order perspective. Punch's article itself may be regarded as one contribution to this project. The same goes for the book 'Reconceptualizing agency and childhood. New perspectives in childhood studies' (Esser et al. 2017); Rachel Rosen's post in a conversation between emergent childhood studies scholars (in Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018); John Wall's work on 'Childism' (Wall 2013, see also his contribution in this volume); and Nigel Thomas' (2019) argument for studying childhood as a social phenomenon. I will return to these revitalizing contributions shortly.

Another explanation is that an intertwined adultist and scalar hierarchical epistemology dominates the wider scholarly field. This epistemology assumes that knowledge gained through studies of the local is confined to the local, and that adult-centered studies provide knowledge about society and human life more broadly, whereas knowledge gained through child-centered research is regarded as confined to childhood. Based on a relational ontology of children and childhood, and an insistence on childhood as a social phenomenon, the field of childhood studies has opposed the adultist dimension of this epistemology from its very inception (e.g. Qvortrup 1987; Alanen 1988). Thus, this critique is, so to speak, integrated in the generational order perspective itself. Later, Stephens (1995, 20) pointed to children and childhood as crucial sites 'for exploring and

theorizing capitalist society and its historical dynamic', and Ansell (2009, 103) argued for a 'flat ontology' that views 'children as nodes in networks' that are not confined to the local, also critiquing the above-mentioned intertwined, adultist and scalar hierarchical epistemology. Other examples include Katz's (2004) analysis of globalization processes seen through the lens of children's everyday lives in Sudan and the US. Another example is the double special issue of Children's Geographies, 'Global Childhoods: Why Children? Why now?' from 2007, edited by Aitken et al.; and a third is Evans and Honeyford's (2012) analysis of the position of young people in sustainable development policy as a lens to explore the temporal logics governing such policy (to mention but a few). These studies demonstrate the point made in early childhood studies, which has also been foregrounded in recent debates (e.g. Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018; Hart and Boyden 2018; Kraftl and Horton 2018; Trajber et al. 2019), that the study of children's lives, albeit very locally, not only reveals knowledge about these, but also about more general social features and change processes. Thus, the act of challenging adultist hierarchical epistemology, underpinned by an overall relational ontology (while recognizing that significant philosophical differences exist within this overall approach), constitutes another hallmark of childhood studies, embracing both 'the classics' and the new lines of thought.

This hallmark of childhood studies, which I term a 'flat epistemology, added the twist that childhood studies can sometimes offer a privileged lens through which to study cultural norms and assumptions, as well as societal changes, constitutes another essential element in the medium of the childhood research prism. These two elements (the generational order perspective and the flat epistemology with a twist) not only constitute hallmarks of childhood studies, but are also underpinned by the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are necessary to enable the field to 'speak back' and transform existing knowledge and conceptualizations of society and human life. I now develop these two ideas, starting with the need to re-engage with the generational order perspective in order to unfold its crystallizing potential.

Re-engaging with the generational order perspective

The generational order was a key concept in the foundation of childhood studies as a distinct field of research in the 1980s. Although this is probably common knowledge, retelling the story of how the childhood studies project became intertwined with the generational order perspective, as well as of criticism of this concept, is useful as a basis for presenting the re-engagement project.

From its 'birth', childhood studies were characterized by a new manner of thinking in which a reconstruction of Mannheim's concept of 'generation', and the development of the generational order concept, constituted key axes that responded to the critique of adultism in science and society. While the Mannheimian concept of generation addressed a historically positioned age group whose similar socialization process (due to their historical position) 'brings about a shared frame of experience and action' (Alanen 2009, 164), structuralist pioneers within childhood studies argued that in industrial society, generation – just like gender and other categorization axes – constitutes a significant axis for the societal positioning of children (and adults), resulting in childhood becoming a social position (Qvortrup 1987; Alanen 1988). To address this structural feature, they developed the concept of 'generational order', inspired by, and as a parallel to, the concept of 'gender order'. The concept was 'meant to point, not at one inter-/intragenerational structure, but at an 'inventory' of a range of generational structures once these have been explored and identified in empirical studies' (Alanen 2020, 141). In continuation, Alanen and Mayall (2001), drawing on a relational (Bourdieu-inspired) approach, developed the concept of 'generationing' to addresses the generative mechanisms through which individuals acquire the social quality of 'childness' and 'child' status in a dialectic with 'adultness' and 'adult' status' (Alanen 2011, 163).

Critique of the generational order and generationing concepts

However, from the outset, these concepts were met with criticism for being too fixated on the child–adult dichotomy, thereby producing an unproductive, overly structuralist view (Punch 2020). This critique comprised multiple points.

First, the child–adult dichotomy was criticized for fostering blindness to the impact of context and other ordering categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity (James and James 2004), as well as to the impact of age *within* groups of children and adults (James 2010). Rather than being a dichotomy, child–adult represents a continuum, both in an individual's life and as a societal position, argued Närvänen and Näsman (2004), among others. Consequently, they proposed that life phase and age were more appropriate analytical categories than generation. James and James (2004) suggested using the concept of 'childhoods' in the plural rather than the singular in order to account for the impact of space, place, age differences and intersections with other ordering categories, and to depict children as active agents, thereby overcoming overly structuralist accounts. Although these suggestions are useful in analysing children's lives, they seem to have little to offer when it comes to consolidating a distinct identity for childhood studies. It is not a hallmark of childhood studies either to use the category of life phase and age, or to acknowledge the impact of agency and context or an intersectional approach. Moreover, these criticisms appear a bit overstated, probably partly due to a misreading of the generational order concept as addressing one single universal structure (Alanen 2020). Thus, Adrian James' (2010) suggestion to integrate the diversity perspective and the generational order perspective is both more helpful and quite straightforward due to the latter's attention to intra-generational relations – indeed, the generational order perspective was originally intended to address a range of generational structures.

Second, the critique of the concepts of 'generational order' and 'generationing' emerged from childhood scholars inspired by the 'new wave'. What these new lines of thought share, despite their differences, is a 'turn to matter' (also termed the 'ontological turn') which takes account of networks/fabrics/assemblages/hybridities/entanglements of human and non-human species and materiality. Thus, they rely on a 'flat ontology' (Ansell 2009) that perceives all objects – children and adults, human and non-humans, including imaginary objects – as having the same degree of being-ness, and regards being-ness as a question of the ability to affect another object.

One critique based on these lines of thinking was raised by Prout, who argued that early childhood studies ignored the body and biological life processes due to an emphasis on the social example in the theoretical concepts of generational order and generationing; and was overly eager to criticize traditional models of childhood for the purpose of denaturalizing children's position in the social order (Prout 2005). Scholars have shown how this approach led to a narrow emphasis on children as beings and to a celebration of the agentic child, as well as to blindness to the fact that children are also becomings subject to structures (Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018). Paradoxically, this approach led to a lack of connection between the concepts of children's agency and generational ordering (Esser et al. 2017). Another related critique came from Oswell (2013), who argued that the generational order perspective was inappropriate to grasp the complexities that shape children's identities and agency, and that the generational order is not always the most important aspect of these complexities.

It is hard to disagree with these critiques, and I certainly do acknowledge their various benefits for theoretical and empirical analyses of childhood that engage with the ontological turn. However, they still fail to offer a hallmark for childhood studies, as the generational order perspective does. I certainly agree with the point made by Esser et al. (2017) concerning the need to integrate a flat ontological theorizing of children's agency with the concept of 'generational ordering', though not only for the purpose of improving the theorizing of children's agency, but also to enhance distinct childhood research contributions to the wider scholarly field. While childhood studies have somewhat neglected the body/biological dimension, this and especially the exaggerated emphasis on children as agentic beings at the expense of a simultaneous becoming and structural perspective, are not logical or necessary consequences of the generational order perspective. Basically, the concept of generationing is based on a structural approach which does not prescribe either an agentic or a purely discursive approach, rather the opposite. Consequently, I suggest that this concept may be regarded as open to an ontological turn, as also suggested by Esser et al. (2017). Thus, I regard some of the critiques of the generational order perspective as misleading, and based on misunderstandings of

the approach and its related concepts. I agree with Punch (2020) that rather than dismissing these concepts, we should (re)think them as open to new ways of thinking. I will return to this after putting forward arguments in favor of a generational order perspective.

Why is a generational order perspective useful?

The concept of 'generational order' offers a promising point of departure for unique childhood studies contributions since it critically addresses childhood as a social phenomenon. It offers a critical lens through which to interrogate the commonplace overarching logic regarding childhood in science, policy and everyday life that is informed by development psychology and, increasingly, neuroscience. The generational order concept thus enables a critique of the othering of children as (solely) becomings, and by extension as 'less than'. Thus, it enables a de-naturalization and critical analysis of the generative mechanisms that shape children's as well as adults' positions (or beingness), including how these are legitimized and reproduced in scientific theories and ethical guidelines for research.

I do not intend to imply here that scholars outside the field fail to use the concept of generation, but rather that it is typically used to denote a cohort rather than the meaning suggested in childhood studies, and that in such cohort studies children's othering is usually taken as natural. I should add here that denaturalizing children's othering does not mean implying that children are the same as adults, but rather challenges dichotomies such as becoming versus being, incompetent versus competent, and dependent versus independent, replacing them with a both-and, interdependency approach.

Throughout the history of childhood studies, scholars within this field have countered the othering, and related discrimination, of children through empirical studies showing how children are active and agential, including as political agents (e.g. Kallio and Hakli 2015). Scholars have also generated insights from children's points of view, including giving voice to children themselves (Skelton, Evans, and Holt eds 2017); and by effecting policy changes based on children's perspectives through action research (e.g. Trajber et al. 2019). This attention to the agentic child and to children's perspectives in childhood studies has been criticized for 'valorizing children's agency to the point of a fetish' (Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018, 3), resulting in blindness to the social-material/bodily shaping of children's agency (Prout 2005). However, this is not a necessary implication of researching children's agency or perspectives, and even less of adopting a generational order perspective – rather the opposite. Indeed, a considerable number of these studies explicitly draw on relational ontologies connected to the generational order perspective (e.g. Kallio and Hakli 2015; Trajber et al. 2019, Warming 2006, 2011). Moreover, John Wall (forthcoming, see also this issue), argues in favor of 'childism', which is a perspective that makes use of children's perspectives and differences in order to transform social relations and reconstruct social assumptions in science and society. His approach draws on a critique of generational order-based discrimination against children, and at the same time acknowledges children's social-material/bodily difference from adults. Thus, by generating insights (and effecting changes) from children's points of view or social-material/bodily being-ness, as well as by documenting children's (relational confined and framed) agency and contributions to societal processes, the empowerment of children has been, and still is, an important task for childhood studies and one of its hallmarks, albeit one whose methodological and theoretical development is ongoing.

However, rather than suggesting these approaches as the medium of the prism, I see them as possible angles through which different issues can be channeled through the childhood research prism. Keeping the generational order perspective as the medium in the sense of paying attention to childhood as a social phenomenon – a perspective that is lacking in other research fields – paves the way for more differentiated contributions from both new lines of thought and classical and emergent child-centered approaches, including empirical analyses as well as more philosophical/theoretical de- and reconstructions.

Theoretical de- and reconstructions based on the generational order perspective

By mobilizing the focus on childhood as a social phenomenon through the generational order perspective, several childhood scholars have reconstructed existing influential theories in the social sciences and humanities; and have deconstructed models of what were regarded as children's universal and natural development trajectories, as well as of binary constructions of children as becomings and adults as beings. I will exemplify this point by outlining research that seeks to reconstruct Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, starting with Nigel Thomas (2012) analysis of how Honneth (1995), in his tripartite conceptualization of recognition, takes the othering of children, and thereby also their discrimination, as natural in addressing what he conceptualizes as the legal sphere and the social sphere. Based on a critique of this stance, Thomas reconstructs Honneth's theory of recognition, arguing that recognition in these spheres is just as relevant for children as for adults (Thomas 2012). I take the reconstruction of Honneth's theory further by addressing emotional recognition, arguing that Honneth (drawing inspiration from development psychology represented by Winnicott's object relational theory), bases his conceptualization of emotional recognition on a dualistic model of children as (only) care-receivers, and adults (in relationships with children) as exclusively care-givers (Warming 2015). I thus reconstruct his theory to embrace an idea that has also been put forward by other childhood scholars, namely that both children and adults can be care-givers as well as care-receivers in relation to each other (Evans 2017, Wihstutz 2017 and others). Thus, this example – among many others – illustrates the point that the generational order perspective can and has been used to enable theoretical de- and reconstructions that reach beyond the field of childhood studies, which is another valid reason for retaining this perspective as the prism medium.

Generationing as a lens to study adults' and children's positioning

Finally, engaging with the generational order perspective and the concept of generationing offers a lens to empirically analyse the material, social and cultural processes through which the political identities of adults and children come into existence, for instance in identifying discrimination. While this may be obvious regarding children and young people in the light of analytical insights from childhood studies (e.g. Kallio and Hakli 2015; Millei and Kallio 2018, Warming 2018), and Wall's childism approach (forthcoming), this perspective is rarely used to identify discrimination against adults. However, there is clearly potential for this too. One example of discrimination of (subgroups of) adults which can be identified and analysed using the concepts of generational order and generationing is when adults are codified as childish, thus legitimizing discrimination in the form of not being taken seriously, being less influential, etc., and in cases where this codification is perceived as demeaning in itself. Another example involves the opposite situation in which the positioning of a person as an adult causes discrimination in access to social care, as I found in an analysis of everyday practices, and institutional and spatial organization at a residence for young people suffering from social and mental distress. The analysis showed how residents aged over 18 were given less preferential treatment compared to younger residents, illuminating how a differentiated and discriminating pedagogical practice came into existence through the entanglement of the generational order as inscribed in neoliberal youth and social work policy, limited staff resources and the architecture of the house (Warming 2018).

Reconstruction through refinement and detachment

Along with the early critique of the generational order perspective, other scholars did engage with the concept of generational order, not only applying it in empirical analyses or de- and reconstructions of theories, concepts and norms, but also with a view to refining it by developing related concepts. Alanen and Mayall's (2001) concept of generationing, as well as the concept of generational ordering itself (Alanen 2009, Bühler-Niederberger 2011), constitute such moves, and are aligned with a structuralist approach. Based on Bourdieusian thinking and the related concepts of habitus and field, these concepts offer a theoretical framework for analysing the complexities that shape children's identities and agency that Oswell (2013) called for, but do this using a different approach than he

suggested. The concept of habitus addresses subjectivity in terms of embodied material/cultural/social processes and power relations, and in that way resonates with – but is not identical to – Ansell's flat ontology (Ansell 2009), which like Oswell's call is based on actor-network theory. The habitus concept has been criticized by numerous scholars (e.g. Jenkins 1992) for being overly structuralist and determinist; however, the concept of habitus doesn't address 'the replica of a single social structure but a dynamic, multiscalar, and multilayered set of schemata subject to 'permanent revision' in practice' (Wacquant 2016, 64). Thus, I agree with Alanen that the recurrent critique of the generational order perspective for being overly structuralist is based on a misreading of its underpinning philosophy. Other scholars have used the term 'hybrid habitus' to explicate an understanding of habitus as dynamic, multiscalar and multilayered (Decoteau 2013; Meng-Cheng and Stacey 2008). I suggest we could extend this by using the term 'hybrid generational order' in order to explicate the point made by Alanen (2020) that the generational order is not a single structure but rather a complex set of (multiscalar and multilayered) generative mechanisms.

Another development, or rather translation, of the generational order perspective has been offered from a post-structuralist perspective by Leonard (2016), who suggested the concept of 'generagency' to capture the idea of agency as generationed. Thus, generagency denotes the performance of generation. Another example, that deploys an interactional praxis theoretical approach, can be found in a chapter by Bollig and Kelle (2016), who use the concept of generationing to address 'the construction of (inter-/intra-)generational categories by participants in ongoing interaction, i.e. in practices of 'doing generation'' (Alanen 2020, 2).

These examples show that the generational order perspective is compelling within different approaches. They also constitute moves to overcome the dichotomies in early childhood studies between structure and agency; and they avoid the recurrent (though misplaced) accusation of being overly structuralist, instead actually addressing the complexities that shape children's identities and agency. However, seen from a flat ontology perspective, they still suffer from an overly vague treatment of, and/or inattention to, more-than-human agents. Nevertheless, I propose retaining the generational order perspective as the medium of the prism, while detaching it from its Bourdieusian roots – not in order to replace the latter, as scholars have proven its power for theorizing and analysing children's childhoods (e.g. Alanen, Brooker, and Mayall 2015) – but rather to enhance the openness of the generational order concept to different analytical approaches. Generationing, defined as the 'material, social and cultural processes through which individuals acquire the social quality of 'childness' and the status of the 'child'' in a dialectic with adultness and the status of the adult (Alanen 2011, 163), has proven to be compelling when addressed using alternative theoretical angles (e.g. Leonard 2016, Bollig and Kelle 2016). This could also be the case regarding new lines of thought that draw on flat ontologies. Thus from the latter perspective, we could for example ask: how does the hybrid generational order affect, and how is it affected by, other forces? How does the hybrid generational order come into being-ness as a more or less important matter? And how is this being-ness of the hybrid generational order embodied by children and adults?

I suggest that these approaches could constitute some of the angles through which a research question might be channeled through the childhood prism, all the while keeping the medium of the prism trained on the generational order perspective. Combined with this, generationing can be used as an open concept underpinned by a relational ontology, which may be refined by intertwining it with the lines of thinking that are used to approach a given theoretical/methodological/ethical/empirical question. With this opening up of the generational order perspective and related concepts, the prism would not determine the research approach, nor would it insist that the generational order is always the most important aspect to focus on in reconstructing social theories, or in the analysis of children's lives, child – adult interactions or societal changes processes. However, it would ensure recognition of generationing as a likely dynamic in social/cultural/material/bodily processes, an aspect which is always worth exploring and being critical towards, including as it manifests in scientific (re-)presentations, theories and concepts.

A flat epistemology with a twist

I shall now return to the other component of my prism medium, namely the flat epistemology, and I will elaborate on the phrase 'with a twist'. While a flat epistemology assumes that the study of children's lives can reveal knowledge about adults' lives and vice versa, and that the study of local life is not confined to knowledge of the locality in question, this does not mean that it doesn't matter whether one focuses on children's lives or adults' lives, or on the study site. The 'twist' refers to the seemingly trivial argument that childhood and children's lives can be treated as cases, and that – depending on the research question – they may offer what Flyvbjerg (2006) terms extreme and paradigmatic cases.

Extreme cases are defined as being either especially problematic or especially good, and 'often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied' (Flyvbjerg 2006, 229). Moreover, they 'can be well-suited for getting a point across in an especially dramatic way' (Flyvbjerg 2006, 229). Paradigmatic cases are defined as highlighting 'more general characteristics of the society in question' (Flyvbjerg 2006, 232) and thereby enabling deep insights into these. Thus, when childhood or children's lives constitute an extreme or paradigmatic case in relation to a given phenomenon, they offer a 'sociological microscope' for studying this phenomenon. A microscope makes 'things' easier to see due to enlargement, however, is at the same time diffractive, since what is made visible, clear and enlarged, and how, depends on the lens (as in a specific childhood case of a general issue and approach).

Examples

One example in which childhood may be seen as an extreme and paradigmatic case concerns procedural research ethics. Here, childhood might be seen as an extremely illuminating case when it comes to protection, but as a bad case when it comes to participation rights. This is because when it comes to children, it is commonly thought that participation and protection are contradictory, and as a result protection is often prioritized. Thus, guidelines and requirements for ethical approval are typically underpinned by dualistic child–adult constructions in which adults are assumed to be able to give informed consent on their own behalf, as well as on behalf of the children in their care, based on a project's written documents. This is not the case for children, however. Instead, the researcher must seek the consent of parents or others with care duties, before seeking assent from the child. The underlying assumptions are, first, that the research project and participation process are fully predictable, communicable by the researcher, and fully understandable to a normal (adult) human being, based on written material. This assumption is, in my view, overly optimistic, and based on a very simplistic understanding of the research process. Second, there is an assumption that the adult who must give his/her consent on behalf of the child can and will act without any conflicts of interest or lack of insight into the best interests of the child. I regard this as quite naïve and idealistic, despite the fact that most adults might regard their (denial of) consent on behalf of children in that way. Finally, this assumption also overlooks the fact that participation does not only pose a risk, but can in some cases also enhance protection, e.g. by revealing neglect by adults with care duties or by extending the social and cultural capital of a young person. Based on these reservations about its underlying assumptions, it seems that not even in the 'good case' of childhood are the guidelines and requirements regarding informed consent thoughtful and able to safeguard the research process when it comes to protection. However, the guidelines and requirements do, to some extent, compensate for some of this in subsequent phases, requiring the researcher to act extra carefully, to avoid social harm, to enhance participation, and to work with the possibility of withdrawing assent on an ongoing basis in projects with children. Also in that sense, research ethics in regard to children – as found in guidelines as well as in research projects – constitute an atypical case of the 'especially good' kind, and reveal more information because more basic mechanisms are activated. Moreover, both the researchers who carry out the project and the

reviewers often engage more in these issues than in studies relating only to adults. Thus, more general mechanisms, such as ethical dilemmas and ways of navigating these, may be highlighted in childhood research, offering an information-rich, paradigmatic case through which to explore these.

Childhood as a paradigmatic case of social change processes

I shall now argue that in the light of various characteristics and dynamics of today's societies, childhood constitutes a paradigmatic case for exploring social change processes, in the light of 'othering' configurations of children such as, for example, the future of society (Aitken, Lund, and Kjørholt 2007). Although the roots of these constructions can be traced far back, scholars have demonstrated how they manifest today in ways that push childhood to the forefront of policies and beyond.

Back in 1989, Rose pointed out how childhood has become 'the most intensively governed sector of personal existence' (1989, 12). Indeed, children have become key objects of 'community governance', a form of governance that is directed towards a certain group due to its identified features of 'strengths, cultures and pathologies', rather than targeting the whole population (Rose 1996, 331). Thus, children are targeted as the raw materials of the investment state (Lister 2009), seen from a combined strengths/risks perspective. This makes childhood a paradigmatic case – and thereby a sociological (diffractive) microscope – for studying neoliberal governing, as also argued and demonstrated by Evans and Honeyford (2012) in their analysis of temporal logics governing sustainable development policies (see also Atkin et al. [2007] for more examples). In continuation, Kjørholt (2007), as well as Gulløv and Gilliam (2014; see also this issue) and others, analyse how childhood has become a symbolic space or field of struggles over symbolic values. Moreover, back in 1990, in their analysis of individualization and love, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim pointed out how children have moved to the forefront of parents' hopes, ambivalent desires and struggles for independence, love and happiness. Katz argues that these developments, through which 'childhood has become a spectacle – a site of accumulation and commodification – in whose name much is done' (Katz 2008, 5), are deeply associated with ontological insecurity in the form of anxiety about the future.

Despite the differences between these contributions (and although the above presentation is far from exhaustive), they all identify childhood and children as the focus of hopes, fears and ways of understanding and dealing with ongoing societal changes and challenges, making childhood a paradigmatic case for exploring these.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I have outlined a childhood prism research program that embraces various more or less oppositional positions in the ongoing conversation on how to approach the much-needed reinvigoration of theoretical thinking in the field of childhood studies. The basic premise has been that the aim of such a program is to promote *distinct* childhood research contributions to the wider scholarly field. Thus, I have argued for a program that is based on a re-engagement with the generational order perspective with a view to fostering distinct childhood research contributions, however this re-engagement should open up this perspective to various theoretical angles rather than closing it down to one specific theoretical approach, or restricting it to either child-centered or child-decentered approaches. This is not just a pragmatic move, but is motivated by a recognition that both approaches – and not least re-engagement with the generational order perspective – are crucial if we are to succeed in leveraging childhood research as a platform for offering significant and distinct contributions to the wider scholarly field.

Several scholars in the field have already demonstrated the power of child-decentered approaches for reinvigorating theoretical and ethical thinking in a way that connects childhood and children's lives and agency with wider societal change processes, thereby enabling contributions to the wider scholarly field. However, the oft posited rationale for the need to reimagine childhood and children's agency may be regarded as an attack on a strawman – I am thinking here of critiques of the field's

one-sided insistence on children as beings rather than becomings, and by extension the field's supposed 'valorizing [of] children's agency to the point of a fetish, making of it a moral and analytic bulwark against the encroachment, or perceived encroachment, of anything that feels like psychological, biological or, indeed, structural ways of knowing' (Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018, 3). I wonder if anybody in the scholarly field of childhood studies would actually argue that children are solely beings, rather than regarding them as both being and becomings, even though this is not always explicit and perhaps even less often theorized. Likewise, I have never heard or read any claims that psychology and biology have nothing to offer the study of childhood – only the observation that a critical stance to these disciplines is needed in order to counter the truisms that inform and legitimize adultism in science and society (e.g. Thomas 2019, Wall this issue). Furthermore, I have demonstrated how the agentic child pitfall that characterizes some child-centered approaches has already been addressed by more classical lines of thinking through the generational order perspective. Thus, although many studies have been produced that document children's perspectives and agency without much theorizing, some scholars throughout the history of childhood studies have offered analyses and theorizations that address children's perspectives and agency as embodied experiences of engagement with the world using a generational order perspective that draws on Bourdieusian, poststructuralist and interactionist lines of thinking. My point is that conducting child-centered research by analysing children's perspectives and agency does not imply ignoring structuring processes. Likewise, the new lines of thought do not necessarily imply refraining from engaging with children's perspectives – rather the opposite. Indeed, I agree with Thomas (2019) that critical materialist attention to the global, distributed influences of late capitalism and climate change that children as a generation will have to live and deal with for much longer than adult generations make studies of children's embodiment of these conditions especially relevant.

Moreover, a critical need for addressing blindness to the generational order in social and political theory persists – not only because this blindness 'may serve to reinforce the practical exclusion of children from many aspects of social, political and economic life', as argued by Thomas (2019, 329), which is important in itself – but also for the purpose of theoretical reconstruction in terms of recentering children and childhood in the theories concerned (Thomas 2019, Wall forthcoming and this volume). Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook (2018) as well as Esser et al. 2017, in opposition to other scholars that have turned to new materialism and non-representational approaches, explicitly acknowledge the achievements of the last 30 years of childhood studies, including the steadily increasing importance of the generational order perspective. In this article, I have argued that theoretical reconstructions based on the generational order perspective still hold untapped potential which we risk losing if we exclusively conduct child-decentered studies. I agree with Wall (this volume), that one route to avoid this is to build on children's lived experiences. Another is to use childhood as a (diffractive) sociological microscope.

What I suggest is neither a complete synthesis nor eclecticism. The medium of my childhood prism averts the danger of an 'anything goes' approach, and ensures a distinct childhood research contribution, while still allowing diverse perspectives within an overall umbrella of a relational ontology and attention to the generational order(s) and generationing(s), and to childhood as a sociological (diffractive) microscope.

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