

Childism and Children's Protagonism

Manfred Liebel

12 November 2025

Commonalities 1

- Criticism of discrimination/oppression as a child/young person due to age and the disadvantaged/marginalized status of childhood
- Criticism of the ideology of (chronological) development from childish immaturity (lower abilities) to perfection (of abilities) as an “adult”
- Criticism of unequal power structures between young and “adult” people
- Criticism of social norms (including laws) that disadvantage young people compared to adults
- Criticism of patriarchal, racist, and sexist structures and practices (intersectional perspective)
- Emphasis on the differences in interests and perspectives between young people on the one hand and adults on the other

Commonalities 2

- Children are considered equal (in value) to adults and must not be denied fundamental human rights on the grounds of their “minority”.
- The legal protection of children must not come at the expense of their “maturity”/autonomy
- Every child/young person must have the legal and structural opportunity to influence adults and society as a whole; in other words, it is not enough to grant children “autonomy” in a space separated from society and subordinate to adults
- Trust in the creativity, strength, and initiative of young people to transform unequal power relations in society towards greater recognition and equality.
- Emphasis on the necessity (and possibility) for adults to learn from children/young people.
- Emphasis on ethical aspects in research involving children.

Differences

Childism ...

- originated in academic contexts
- aims to empower children/young people and “give them a voice”
- emphasizes the differences in interests between children/young people and adults in general terms
- aims to contribute to the decolonization of childhood
- aims to promote participatory critical children's rights research and pedagogy
- emphasizes the need for participatory and dialogical methodologies in research with children/young people

Children's protagonism ...

- arose from the practice of children's movements and systematizes their experiences
- expresses the voices and self-empowerment of active children/young people
- emphasizes the specific interests, perspectives, and resistant actions of children/young people who work and live in particularly precarious conditions
- is based on a decolonized understanding of “other” childhoods that differ from the bourgeois Western model of childhood
- is skeptical of pedagogical patterns of action and seeks above all to encourage solidarity among adults as neighbors and “collaborators” (co-protagonism)
- emphasizes the independent role of children/young people as researchers and calls for solidarity and support from professional adult researchers

Historical context

- Similar questions had already arisen in the 1990s, when children were discovered as actors and their “agency” was invoked in the “New Social Childhood Studies” (James & Prout 1990/1997), and when it was propagated that research should now be conducted “from the perspective of children” (Honig 1999; for the discussion at that time, see Liebel 2001). These questions are being raised again today in relation to a concept that is being discussed in Latin America and Spain under the term “*perspectiva niña*” (child/girl perspective) (Morales & Martínez Muñoz 2024).

Perspectiva niña

- “*Perspectiva niña* is to reinvent the way our societies define ‘being a child’. It involves disassociating childhood from innocence, immaturity, naivety and ignorance (yes, how horrible we adults are to define childhood so explicitly in terms of what it lacks), and starting to see it as an energy, strength or attitude that can reside in people throughout their lives. [...] *Perspectiva niña* is that adults should intervene in the world with curiosity, joy, and a keen desire to know, create, and transform. So, *perspectiva niña* means the invitation to live childlike throughout our lives.” (Morales & Martínez Muñoz 2024, p. 146)
- When we identify some challenges for the concepts of childism and children’s protagonism, they can also be related to the earlier discussion on agency and today's discussion on *perspectiva niña*.

Challenges for childism

- Clarification of the intersectional perspective: there is no such thing as the “absolute child” (Fonseca) and childhood is always a social construct that can have very different outcomes depending on life circumstances
- Differentiation of age categories and the child-adult dichotomy, taking future generations into account
- Greater attention to the specific experiences of children/young people in precarious situations and childhoods in the Global South
- Self-critical reflection on privileges and barriers to knowledge as researchers in academic contexts and the creation of conditions that enable children/young people to act as researchers
- Epistemic justice in research with and by children/young people

Challenges for children's protagonism

- Promoting self-determined communication and action among children/young people, especially those in socially disadvantaged and marginalized situations
- Critical reflection on the unequal relationship between children/young people and adults in children's movements (How can we avoid adult companions "talking too much" and "having the last word"?)
- Ensuring that the aspiration to be a "protagonist" does not turn into know-it-all behavior
- Countering the instrumentalization, dilution, and perversion of the idea of children's protagonism (e.g., in commercial or educational contexts)

Challenges for both concepts

- How can the concepts contribute to a better understanding of the regressive consequences of adultist discrimination/oppression and the associated authoritarian/submissive attitudes of children/young people (susceptibility to right-wing populism) and how can they be countered?
- How can the concepts contribute to a better understanding of the emergence of resistant behavior in children/young people and to creating conditions that enable/facilitate it?

References

- Biswas, Tanu and Wall, John (2023) 'Editorial: Childist theory in the humanities and social sciences', *Children & Society*, 37(4): 1001-1004.
- Cussiánovich, Alejandro (2001) 'What does protagonism mean?' In Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, Frankfurt/M and London: IKO, pp 157-171.
- Esser, Florian, Baader, Meike S., Betz, Tanja and Hungerland, Beatrice (eds) (2016) *Reconceptualising agency and childhood: New perspectives in childhood studies*, London: Routledge.
- Honig, Michael-Sebastian, Lange, Andreas and Leu, Hans Rudolf (eds) (1999) *Aus der Perspektive von Kindern? Zur Methodologie der Kindheitsforschung*. Weinheim and Munich: Juventa.
- James, Allison and Prout, Alan (eds) ([1990]1997) *Constructing and reconstructing childhood - Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*, London and New York: Falmer Press.
- Liebel, Manfred (2001) 'Working children's protagonism, children's rights and the outline of a different childhood: A comparative reflection on the discourses in Latin America and the "First World"', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, Frankfurt/M and London: IKO, pp 321-348.
- Liebel, Manfred (2007) 'Paternalism, Participation and Children's Protagonism', *Children, Youth and Environments*, 17(3): 56-73.
- Liebel, Manfred (2023) 'Children's protagonism: considerations for its reconceptualization', in M.L. *Childhoods of the Global South*. Bristol: Policy, pp 165-180.
- Morales, Santi and Martínez Muñoz, Marta (2024) *Adultocentrismo. ¿Qué piensan chicas y chicos?* Barcelona: Octaedro.
- Wall, John (2019) 'From childhood studies to childism: reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations', *Children's Geographies*, 17(6): 1-14.
- Wall, John (2025a) 'Theorizing adultism: From adult domination to normative disempowerment', *Childhood*, 0(0): 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682251367184>.
- Wall, John (2025b) 'Children's rights from a childist perspective: Theorizing social empowerment', in Valeria Llobet, Didier Reynaert, Afua Twum-Danso Imoh and Wouter Vandenhoele (eds) *Critical Children's Rights Studies: A Research Companion*, London: Routledge, pp 82-95.