Article

Childhood
2025, Vol. 32(4) 465–481

DOI: 10.1177/09075682251367184
journals.sagepub.com/home/chd
Sage

Theorizing adultism: From adult domination to normative disempowerment

John Wall
Rutgers University Camden, USA

Abstract
This article develops a critical theory of adultism that can help both childhood studies and the larger academy to make visible the normative marginalization of children as children. Going beyond existing critical theories concerning sexism, racism, colonialism, and the like, adultism is formulated as a theory of normative disempowerment. In this way, it can function intersectionally to uncover the distinctive role of dominating adult-child binary oppositions both in childhood and across societies generally. After unpacking the history of concepts of adultism, the article constructs a systemic theory of adultism across three dimensions of ontological human being, epistemological knowledge, and political power.

Keywords
Adultism, critical theory, empowerment, epistemology, ontology, power

Introduction

Scholars in childhood studies have developed a wide range of empirical and theoretical analyses of children's social marginalization. These include studies of children's racial inequality (Cox, 2015; Halliday, 2017; Phoenix, 2023), gender discrimination (Dyer, 2020; Hodgins, 2019; Rosen and Balagopalan, 2023), disabilities (Goodley et al., 2020; Runswick-Cole et al., 2023; Watson, 2012), and colonization (Balagopalan, 2019; Rollo, 2018; Tetteh, 2013; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2024). It is less common, however, to examine children's subordination in their status specifically as children (Daly et al., 2022; Wall, 2019a; Warming, 2024). There is a sense in which childhood studies automatically thematizes children's subordinated perspectives simply by studying children in their own

Corresponding author:
John Wall, Rutgers University Camden, 429 Cooper Street, Camden, NJ, 08102, USA.
Email: johnwall@camden.rutgers.edu

right. But my argument here is that the field as a whole lacks systemic theoretical tools for the critical analysis of the social marginalization of children as such. As a result, childhood studies not only fails to fully grasp children's specific exclusion as children, but it also cannot mount broader critiques of this problem in academic research at large.

In the following, I develop just such a critical theory through a normative conceptualization of adultism. The term "adultism" has taken on a variety of meanings in both childhood studies and other types of scholarship for over a century. It stands in different kinds of relation to cognate terms like ageism, patriarchy, and infantilization. But it has yet to be clearly formulated in a normative sense, that is, as able to offer structural critiques of social and scholarly assumptions. A normative concept of adultism would focus, not just on occasional instances of adult domination or control, but on adult-child binary oppositions that justify wholescale systems of understanding and power. It would provide a critical lens similar to those found in concepts like sexism, racism, and decoloniality (Biswas, 2023; Wall, 2023). Just as diverse critical theories offer intersectional types of social critique, so also is it possible for adultism to function intersectionally from its own distinct perspective. Indeed, understanding problems like sexism and racism depend in part on understanding adultism, not only as an important dimension of oppression in its own right, but also insofar as suppressed groups find themselves frequently coded as childlike. What the concept of adultism contributes most importantly, I suggest, is a lens for examining how constructions of adulthood function as broadly disabling systems of social disempowerment.

The history of a concept

Adultism and similar terms have been in use in English-language scholarship since the early 20th century. The concept has found, however, a wide range of meanings over time. In the following brief analysis of these diverse senses of the term, one can find a gradual evolution from non-systemic and non-normative uses to what may be called increasingly more critical and structural possibilities. It is only with the advent of the field of childhood studies in the 1990s that more fully systemic senses of the term start to develop, but even here they have yet to be formulated in fully normative terms. An examination of this history of concepts of adultism helps to lay out exactly what remains yet to be theorized if the term is to take its place as a broadly critical lens on social life.

The earliest known appearance of the word adultism is in a popular book for parents by education writer DuBois (1903) titled *Fireside Child-Study: The Art of Being Fair and Kind*. Here the term is used to describe parents' and teachers' acts of domination over the children in their care. Inspired by John Dewey and the child study movement, DuBois argues that "the undue interposition by the adult of his adultism—his adult point of view—between himself and the child is the main, if not the only real, hindrance to the child's proper development" (35). This domination over children in the home and school represents a personal attitude on the part of certain adults of "absolute possession, unlimited right, and infallible judgment" and "shows itself in the lust for authority" (8). Adultism here refers to adult control over children in direct and immediate ways. (Another early use of the term is found in Courbon (1933) to refer to sexual and criminal

"precocious growth" among youth, but this very different concept is not to my knowledge taken up again).

DuBois's notion of adultism is recovered and broadened in the 1970s and 1980s by the influential developmental psychologist Flasher (1978). Flasher looks beyond personal interactions to describe adultism as any adult's "misuse of power" over children (p. 517). Adults already have more power than children in most ways, and adultism describes the ways this power can be abused. In Flasher's view, the problem with adults' misuse of power is that it discourages children's "thought" and "autonomy" and therefore functions as a chief cause of children's "dissocial behavior" (p. 517). A related point is made around the same time by the psychiatrists Chester Pierce and Gail Allen (1975), who argue that children are oppressed by the "microaggressions" imposed on them by adults via socialization mechanisms like television, so that "the child is expected to accommodate himself to the adult-aggressor" and thereby also learns "to be an oppressor" in their own future adult life (though they use the term "childism" and not adultism to name this problem) (p. 18). The feminist scholar Elise Boulding similarly argues that what she calls "ageism" takes place when adults "segregate" children by denying children's (and the elderly's) needs and rights to support, nurturance, and care (1979). Likewise, the educationalist John Holt describes "adultism" as any "adult intervention" that suppresses children's full self-expression (1981, p. 222). These notions of adultism widen it into a critique, in part echoing feminist and civil rights insights of the time, of any misuse, whether personal or political, of adult power over children.

There is one further way that the concept of adultism develops prior to the emergence of new ideas in childhood studies. This further possible meaning, grounded primarily in developmental psychology, is first formulated by the activist and organizer John Bell. Bell argues that "adultism" arises from a broad social attitude of "disrespect of the young" (Bell, 1995: 14). Bell's argument is that it is this generalized societal disrespect that underlies children's mistreatment, such as by physical punishment, banning from public spaces, or lacking voices in families, schools, communities, and politics. Such a notion is also taken up by the renowned social work scholar Barry Checkoway as a way to explain why adults often fail to recognize or ally with youth activists. Arguing that "the essence of adultism is that young people are not respected," Checkoway claims that "adultism refers to all of the behaviors and attitudes that flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people, and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement" (1996: 14). A similar notion is described by the psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl to describe adults' pervasive and damaging attitudes of "prejudice against children," prejudices akin to racism, antisemitism, and homophobia that give rise to disrespect and violence (2012). Adultism from this perspective names a generalized social attitude that young people are not owed the same level of respect as adults simply because they are young.

Starting in the 1990s, adultism comes to be understood from a significantly different perspective in the then new field of childhood studies. Childhood studies turns the tables to examine adultism from the perspective not so much of adults as of children themselves. Adultism starts to evolve from a concept describing adult attitudes and behaviors, however broad, to one now describing children's own experiences as children. This new

set of ideas grows out of the notion articulated by Alison James and Alan Prout that children must be seen as "active in the construction and determination of their own social lives," and that "children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults" (1990, p. 8). Adultism, and much else, is examined from the point of view of children themselves. It is remarkable, in fact, that a century of prior analyses of adultism should have been conducted more or less entirely from the perspective of adults, itself an attestation to adultism's power. In short, in childhood studies the concept emerges of understanding children's marginalization in children's own terms.

From this new perspective, adultism comes to be defined initially as children's experience of adult oppression. The feminist scholars Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman, in their book *Colonize This!* (2002), compare children's experiences of "adultism" to those of sexism and racism, inasmuch as adultism points to the ways that children encounter being "colonized" by "the institutional power adults have to oppress and silence young people" (p. 101). Children in this sense find themselves systemically barred from acting in the world and making their voices heard. Unlike in Young-Bruehl and others above, the comparison to sexism and racism is about the impact on children themselves, rather than the attitudes of adults. A similar childhood studies notion is developed by sociologists Lucien Lombardo and Karen A. Polonko, who argue that "similar to sexism, racism and classism, adultism refers to a system of structured inequality or oppression that permeates relationships between children and adults" (2010: 94). Adultism on this view manifests as a system of attitudes and practices built into age relations that limit and undermine children's own senses of their opportunities for social influence.

A second formulation can be found in childhood studies around the notion of adultism as a social construct. Here, the emphasis is placed less on children's silencing and more on children's inequality. The most prominent examples can be found in sociologists Barry Thorne and Berry Mayall and their concepts of "age" and "generation." Thorne models "the study of age" on "the study of gender, racial ethnicity, sexuality, [and] social class" and argues that age can be used as a lens for "examining multiple lines of difference and inequality" (2001, pp. 403-4). The perspective of age helps unpack children's experiences of the social constructions that force their lives into a secondary status compared to adults'. In a similar way, Mayall draws on feminism to argue 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, p. 2). What she calls a "generational" analysis enables scholars to "think from [children's] lives towards sociological understanding" (2002, p. 1). Or, as Leena Alanen likewise puts it, "the notion of a generational structure or order refers to a complex set of social processes through which people become (are constructed as) 'children' while other people become (are constructed as) 'adults'" (2001: 20-21). This notion of adultism lays bare the ways that constructions of childhood force children into an unequal status.

A third and slightly different formulation arising from childhood studies can be found in more recent uses of the term adultism to describe systems of social discrimination.

Adultist discrimination refers to social structures of anti-child bias. For example, postcolonial feminist scholar Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha uses the term adultism to explain how children experience themselves as "not-yet-citizens" or "second-class citizens" (2005: 371 and 374). Children encounter intergenerational discrimination because of underlying historical biases against them. Psychologists Jocelyn Gregoire and Christin Jungers similarly describe "adultism" as an issue that therapists need to address in child counseling because of the harm caused to children by "prejudice and accompanying systematic discrimination against young people" (2007: 65). And in a book titled *Facing Adultism* (2015), the political activist Adam Fletcher shows that adultism in the form of "discrimination against young people" is the chief obstacle facing children and youth in making meaningful impacts upon their social environments. Understood as a form of discrimination, adultism broadens the scope of analysis from children's particular experiences of child-adult relations to children's encounters with biased historical systems.

This brief history of the concept of adultism and its cognates yields two main conclusions so far. First, scholars and activists have learned over time to think of adultism as less about the actions and attitudes of adults and more about the experiences and struggles of children. This shift makes sense when one considers that sexism and racism are likewise better understood from the perspectives less of the oppressors than of those being oppressed, that is, in the marginalized group's own experiences of silencing, disrespect, and domination. And second, adultism is not occasional but structural. That is, the term is more usefully employed to describe, not just particular experiences of being disrespected, important though these are to understand, but also underlying systems of relations and biases that construct the fundamentally second-class status of childhood itself. Adultism is again akin to other forms of marginalization in that, while it has many different particular manifestations, especially as inflected by intersectionality, these are empowered by societally shared and historically enforced social structures. Overall, then, adultism has come to be understood as a lens for understanding children's experiences of systemic suppression.

Toward a new concept of adultism

The above advances in understanding adultism are significant and important. But they suffer from one major flaw that that the remainder of this essay seeks to overcome. This flaw, in a nutshell, is that adultism is still understood chiefly in terms of other forms of marginalization. It is still primarily modeled on theoretical insights from feminism, racism, colonialism, and the like. The problem here is that, unlike in these other perspectives, adultism has yet to be theorized as a distinct critical perspective in its own right. That is, while it may share a great deal with experiences of sexism, racism, colonialism, ablism, and the like, it is likely at the same time to function somewhat differently. Indeed, any intersectional analysis of oppression depends on different angles of critique introducing their own specific language and ideas. Sexism does not operate on exactly the same logic as racism, nor racism in the same way as colonialism, nor colonialism exactly like ableism, and so on. What, though, is distinct about adultism? What are the dynamics

of its own particular experience? What, in other words, makes adultism particular to children?

To unpack what is distinct about adultism, the remainder of this paper formulates a child-specific conception of children's marginalization across three key dimensions: an ontology of human being, an epistemology of knowledge, and a politics of power. These dimensions together suggest that adultism exposes marginalization as an experience, not just for children but also in part for any marginalized group, of normative disempowerment. It shows that social domination relies on an interdependent dynamics in which the empowerment of some relies on the disempowerment of others. While such a logic could in principle pertain to any systemically suppressed group, it is in its particular expression in adultism that it makes its sharpest and clearest expression.

Adultism and the construction of being

First, in terms of ontology, or ideas about human being, adultism can be understood to construct childhood as that which lacks human being, not just socially or culturally, but by nature. Adultism involves the assumption that children are not only historically lesser beings but lesser in their very essence. Indeed, adultism establishes a child-adult binary that constructs "childhood" as a state of being that is somehow in important respects still a part of nature and therefore non-human. To the extent that a person or group is a "child," they embody a supposedly biological, neurological, pre-linguistic, or even spiritual realm of non-human human being. They do not yet possess what makes humanity distinct from all other forms of being. Put differently, adultism constructs childhood as a mode of existence that negates itself. It relegates childhood to a state of being that, paradoxically, must overcome its own childlikeness to achieve whatever is thought to separate humanity from nature.

It is this ontological construction that distinguishes adultism from other modes of social marginalization. Sexism may construct women as naturally lesser than men, but it does not associate women with non-humanity as such. Racism does not oppress minorities on the basis of their not yet having overcome their biological non-Whiteness. While colonialism is more similar to adultism in this regard, it nevertheless assumes that colonized peoples, if supposedly closer to nature, are not themselves representative of nature itself. In contrast, adultism proclaims that childhood lacks fully adult humanity by its very ontological being. It imagines childhood as still at least somewhat existing in a state of nature and so having as its purpose to negate and surpass itself in an eventual humanity. Not only is childhood defined in relation to adulthood – just as womanhood is defined in relation to manhood and Blackness in relation to Whiteness – but childhood *is* adulthood, just not yet. Childhood can only exist as a state of adulthood-to-be. The result is that adultism constructs childhood, not just as a lesser state of human being, but as a peculiarly, indeed paradoxically, *non*-human state of human being.

This association of childhood with nature creates a false binary opposition between childhood and adulthood. As the childhood studies philosopher Karin Murris suggests, "[a]geist prejudices are directly related to the Nature/Culture binary, which … positions child as an ontological, colonized 'other'" (2018: 16). Childhood functions under

adultism or ageism as a symbolic representation of humanity's domination over the natural world. Childlikeness comes to represent whatever is non-rational, uncivilized, or pre-cultural – that is, whatever humanity as such surpasses. In other words, as Rachel Rosen puts it, "childhood continues to be one of the last acceptable bastions of essentialism" (2018: 423). Other marginalized groups, however dehumanized, remain with the sphere of human possibility. But children stand for the absence of human possibility. An adultist logic demands that children can gain a measure of humanity only insofar as they cease being fully children. The state of childhood marks that within human being that is non- or pre-human.

Similarly, adultism is able to associate childhood with the sub-human, that is, forms of non-humanity that appear in the guise of humanity as threats to properly human order. Here, childhood comes to stand for an amorphous fear, something that must be divided off in order to preserve what is good, right, and civilized about human existence. The political theorist Toby Rollo describes a kind of "misopedy" or hatred of children that is animated by a "historical binary opposition between the fully human adult and the sub-human child" (Rollo, 2018: 309). The sub-human child occupies a noumenal space of apparent humanity masking all that threatens humanity with a return to animality. In one way, the sub-human child can come to stand for what dominant groups fear about women, the colonized, and racial minorities, insofar as they are constructed as also childlike. But more broadly, children themselves are positioned as needing to overcome their sub-humanity by ceasing to be children.

This adultist logic of children's non- and sub-humanity can even be found, unfortunately, in critical theory. Nikolas Mattheis (2022) argues, for example, that ecofeminism sometimes makes a damaging association of childhood with non-human nature, as in Donna Harroway's slogan to "Make Kin, Not Babies." Harroway's argument is that the climate crisis demands a reduced population, which she opposes to the demands of neoliberal natalism. However, such an argument reduces babies and children themselves to "appear only as kin *being made* – whether designed and birthed or nurtured and protected," thus "assigning child, once again, to an abstracted 'Nature'" (Mattheis, 2022: pp. 518-19). Harroway's solution is for adults to deny children's being, both literally and figuratively. Mattheis argues that instead it is important to avoid "the (adultist) violence involved in the relegation of children to a separate (nature) sphere" (p. 521) by "'changing the story' of kinship in the 'Anthropocene'" in ways that humanize babies and children. Instead of "Make Kin, Not Babies," a feminist-childist alliance might assert the need to "Make Kin With Babies" or "Let Children Make (You) Kin" (p. 522). Critiques of sexism and neo-liberalism are undermined if they rest on the backs of the marginalization of children.

In fact, the reduction of children to non-human beings has a long and troubling history. Domination over children is part of a deep historical system of patriarchy, the centering of the adult male "pater" or father as the human standard. Patriarchy is usually associated with issues of gender, but is also, and equally, a marginalization of age. Unlike for women, it has often constructed children as not only lesser but non-human beings: as "blank pages" yet to have humanity written upon them; as "natural animals" lacking human reason; as "pure innocents" removed from human struggle (Wall, 2010: pp. 13-33). These

assumptions remain powerful today. They imagine childhood as in one way or another taking place outside the sphere of human reason, language, and society.

The peculiar ontological problem of adultism is then that childhood is normatively constructed as not only a lesser form of human being but a form of essentially non-human human being. The problem is normative because, while on the surface children are of course understood to be just as human as adults, underlying assumptions about being human suggest precisely the opposite: that childhood stands for the absence of what makes human being distinctively human. Childhood stands for that part of humanity that is sub-human: its nature, biology, irrationality, animality, blankness, or innocence. Adultism constructs childhood as that within humanity that exists to overcome itself. It perpetuates a peculiar and paradoxical binary opposition between human human being and non-human human being.

Adultism and the capacity for knowledge

A second dimension of a fully normative theory of adultism can be found in the area of epistemology, or conceptions of knowledge. The problem here is again associated with assumptions specifically about childhood. In essence, adultism renders children's knowledge not just unknown but unknowable. It makes the very possibility of children providing their own understanding and perspective impossible. It is again a question of marginalization: pushing children's knowledge beyond the written boundaries of the page onto the unwritten edges. Unlike for other groups, however, the issue for children is not just that their capacity for knowledge is discounted. It is that knowledge itself is associated with adulthood. Adultism constructs a binary opposition of adult knowing and child not-knowing, an opposition that renders children's specific knowledges not just secondary but illegible.

The specific situation for children can been seen by taking a careful look at the feminist theorist Miranda Fricker's influential concept of "epistemic injustice" (Fricker, 2007). According to Fricker, marginalized groups like women, racial minorities, and the poor face the epistemological problem of being denied, not only a voice in their societies, but more fundamentally societies' recognition of their "capacity as a knower" (Fricker, 2007: 20). Earlier feminist formulations describe this problem as a "double bind": Women are not only not heard but also not considered capable of having anything worth hearing in the first place (Heywood, 1997; Irigaray, 1993). On Fricker's formulation, epistemic injustice is structural: it renders the misjudgment of women's and other groups' credibility normative. It expresses a generalized social "prejudice" that operates "beneath the radar of our ordinary doxastic self-scrutiny" (Fricker, 2007: 40). Marginalized groups must struggle, not only to express their own specific knowledges, but, unlike dominant groups, to be considered capable of expressing their own specific knowledges to begin with.

While Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice has been usefully taken up in childhood studies (Burroughs and Tollefsen, 2016; Carel and Györffy, 2014; Hanna, 2022), the question remains whether it fully accounts for the problem of knowledge faced by children in particular. After all, Fricker herself refers only to issues of gender, race, and class, and nowhere specifically to issues of age or childhood. This omission is itself

somewhat adultist, since it odd to ignore what is arguably the group most likely across virtually all societies to be considered lacking in capacities as knowers. Phrases like "don't act like a child" and "don't be childish" are frequently used to denigrate both adults and children for an incapacity for understanding. If there is a prejudice against any group's capacity as knowers, this group would seem most obviously to be children.

But Fricker's blind spot is no accident. The epistemological problem for childhood is peculiarly complex. The concept of adultism suggests that epistemic injustice is rooted, not just in prejudices about capacity, but also in prejudices about knowledge itself. For children, it is not just the *capacity* for knowledge that is assumed to be lacking, but the very *possibility* for knowledge. Adultism associates knowledge with the accumulation of experiences, perspectives, and ideas that gradually form into understandings of the world over time. Knowledge itself, on this view, is inherently temporal, that is, tied up with the amount of time an individual has existed in the world. And so it is inherently non-childlike.

This adultist construction of knowledge can be found throughout history. A particularly influential instance can be found in two related arguments made by the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke. First, ontologically, he claims that human beings are born as "white pages" upon which knowledge and understanding must be written over time (Locke, 1964). And second, epistemologically, he argues that knowledge is "empirical," meaning that it begins in concrete sensory "experiences" that only develop over time into organized "ideas" and still later into "knowledge" defined as "associations among ideas" (Locke, 1960). These two arguments combine in Locke's notion (taken from earlier historical figures like Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas) that the "capacity" for knowledge arises in 7-year increments, only reaching fully human fruition at age 21. The result is that children lack "knowledge" in Locke's sense because they inherently lack time in the world. The possibility to know is a function of age. A child gains the possibility for knowledge, on this adultist logic, only insofar as they cease being a child. And since Lockean empiricism is the foundation of modernity, from science to democracy, the notion that knowledge is necessarily the realm of adults is baked into contemporary life.

This is not the place to enter into the many ways that postmodern philosophy has overcome these kinds of Lockean epistemological oversimplifications. Suffice it to say that both knowledge and the capacity to know have in the past century been shown to involve in a variety of more complex linguistic, symbolic, cultural, relational, structural, power, and other foundations. These newer approaches broadly frame knowledge as based, not simply on empirical development, but on the interaction of differences, diversities, and particularities of "lived experience" (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1982; Ricoeur, 1981). It is even possible to say that knowledge fundamentally arises from the absence of knowledge, or non-knowledge: that is, from lived experiences of "difference" that deconstruct normative assumptions (Kearney, 2003). However, even these postmodern epistemologies are rarely developed with children in mind.

Scholars in childhood studies have started to recognize the need for a distinctive critique of epistemological adultism. As the childhood studies sociologist Hanne Warming argues, the "lens" or "prism" through which sociological knowledge is gained remains fundamentally adult (Warming, 2024). Accessing children's knowledge is about

more than just observing their agency and listening to their voices. It requires a counter-normative critique of knowledge that she calls "Childhood Prism Research (ChildPRe)," an approach to scholarship that recognizes that "the study of children's lives offers a privileged lens when it comes to certain issues" (Warming, 2024: 194). In a similar way, the childhood studies theorist Erica Burman argues that adult epistemological privilege needs to be challenged from the perspective of what she calls "child as method": the analysis of how "childhood can contribute to and enrich wider geopolitical concerns" (Burman, 2024: 2). Childhood is not just another realm of knowledge, but another method for the very production of knowledge. In these and other ways, childhood studies scholars are showing that knowledge itself, whether that of children or that of adults, remains adult-centric without adultist critique.

A telling example can be found in emerging discussions around children's rights to vote. One of the main (though far from the only) arguments against ageless suffrage is that, while children may have valuable experiences to bring to politics, they lack sufficient knowledge or understanding of their own experiences to vote responsibly; thus, they must rely on adults' knowledge of children's lives to be represented politically (Cowley and Denver, 2004). On an adultist view, children are thought not to know what they think about politics, not just because of social prejudice about their capacities, but because political knowledge is itself a natural impossibility. The knowledge required for voting is believed to arise only with time: the time of empirical experience in the world and the time of education into political life. In opposition to this assumption, others argue that the marginalization of children's knowledge undermines the very foundations of democracy (López-Guerra, 2014). A core tenet of democracy is that those governed by policies and laws should be able to influence their formation, and clearly infants, children, and youth are impacted by democratic choices just as much as adults (Wall, 2021). The last third of humanity to continue to lack basic democratic rights are disempowered in part by the epistemological assumption that they lack political knowledge by nature.

Adultism ultimately complicates and deepens what is meant by epistemological injustice. The problem from the perspective of childhood is not just that children's otherwise obvious capacities as knowers are obscured by historical prejudice. The problem, rather – or, in addition – is that children's capacities as knowers are discounted by understandings of knowledge itself. A deeper adultistic analysis is needed of epistemology as such. As briefly suggested here, the capacity to know needs to be reframed in non-temporal terms, not as the organization of experiences into increasing understanding, but as the expression of lived experiences of difference. The basic unit of knowledge is not the normative but the non-normative, that which escapes historically linguistic, cultural, and societal formulation. In whatever way epistemology is rethought, its adultist critique would benefit not only children but also adults. Since children too are full human beings, any insight into children's ways of knowing is also insight into human ways of knowing. As long as "knowing" and "non-knowing" are defined in terms of "adulthood" and "childhood," the effort to know as such is distorted and impoverished.

Adultism and political disempowerment

A third dimension of normative adultism can be found, finally, in the area of politics, broadly understood as any exercise of power. If childhood is associated with non-human being and non-knowledge, then it is hardly surprising that it is also associated with the lack of rights to exercise power. Adultism in this political sense is not just the assumption that only adults deserve the right to power. In a more profoundly normative sense, adultism establishes a binary opposition of adult empowerment and child disempowerment. Adults have the right to power precisely because children do not. Adults themselves can be disempowered by being constructed as child-like: as has been the case for colonized peoples, women, racial and ethnic minorities, the disabled, and many other groups throughout history. And sometimes children can be empowered by being considered adult-like: as in the case of climate protesters, gun opponents, Black juvenile offenders, and child labor activists. But the logic remains the same: Adultism empowers any group constructed as adults through the specific disempowerment of any group constructed as children.

This binary logic of power has long been noted in relation to other marginalized groups. Marx (2000) long ago pointed out that economic power is structured, not just by accumulations of wealth, but by a class dynamic that robs the proletariat of the ownership of its own production. The philosopher Foucault (1977) argues that social, political, and sexual power is not just an exterior force but an internalized structure by which individuals and social groups are historically differentiated. The sociologist Bourdieu (1984) shows that class power is enforced by distinctions of aesthetic taste. Feminist legal scholar MacKinnon (1989) demonstrates that political and legal power are structured around not just the historical power of men but a gendered binary opposition between male domination and female subordination. Other feminist and queer scholars like Butler (1993) claim that political power is bifurcated by ritualized gender performances. In these and other ways, it has been well established that power is exercised over marginalized groups by instituting a wide range of intersecting binary norms.

While such analyses are directly applicable to power relations *between* children – say, between privileged and underprivileged children, boys and girls, and Black and White children – it is not necessarily the case that they entirely capture the power dynamics that take place between children and adults. Adultism may present its own distinct kind of problem, just as sexism, racism, and coloniality operate somewhat differently from each other as well. If so, then the analysis of power remains incomplete without an intersectional analysis of adultism.

What adultism adds to this conversation is a critique of how power operates interdependently. Adultism constructs a false binary opposition between an independent and therefore empowered adulthood and a dependent and therefore justifiably disempowered childhood (Wall, 2019b). Adults have the right to power because children need power exercised upon them. Adulthood is coded as socially, politically, economically, culturally, and in general "independent" while childhood is coded as contrastingly in all these ways "dependent" on the actions of others. When a group or individual is constructed as independent, they gain the right and responsibility to exercise power over others. When a

group or individual is understood instead as dependent, it is not only the right but also the responsibility of independent groups to exercise power over them for their own good. Any childlike association for any group – whether children, women, minorities, the disabled, the elderly, or the colonized – suggests a lack of independence and therefore a lack of right to power. The construction of independent adulthood versus dependent childhood justifies the empowerment of some at the expense of the disempowerment of others.

Consider the example of international law around discrimination. The legal scholar Aoife Daly shows that international discrimination law rarely identifies children (as opposed to racial minorities, women, the disabled, and various other groups) as belonging to a discriminatory class (Daly et al., 2022). This omission is maintained despite the fact that international law defines discrimination very broadly as "differential treatment in comparable situations without an objective and reasonable justification" (Vandenhole, 2005: 83). It ought to be the case, legally speaking, that any differential treatment of children must be explicitly and deliberately justified on "objective and reasonable" grounds. In fact, however, any such need for justification is largely assumed to be unnecessary. Indeed, there is no international treaty against children's discrimination. The landmark discrimination treaties concern race and gender: the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Even the Convention on the Rights of the Child only prohibits, in Article 2, discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sex, language religion, disability, and other factors, but not – unless included under "other status" – on the grounds of being a child.

The reason that children are marginalized from international discrimination law is that such law contains hidden adultist biases. If discrimination means, as above, "differential treatment in comparable situations," it remains possible to interpret children's situations as non-comparable and hence not protected. Children's economic and other types of dependence on adults can suggest that their particular "differential treatment" is naturally justified. These languages of legal discrimination place children in a double bind. They must first prove their equal power to act on their own behalf before they can claim that this right is being discriminated against.

For discrimination law to account for adultism, it would need to conceptualize power differently. Discrimination would need to be understood as the denial of not an independent but an inter-dependent access to power. It would need to be reframed as a denial of empowerment as an interdependent part of society. Discrimination law would then attack the problem of any kind of bias: whether undermining persons' independent capacities to act or failing to respond to persons' dependence on others for inclusion. The adult-child binary currently distorting discrimination law would be overcome by recognizing that discrimination occurs across the full spectrum of human relations regardless of relative dependency on others. The problem, in other words, is not *differential* treatment but *disempowering* treatment. Everyone's situation is different, but no one deserves to hold less power over their society than anyone else.

A different example of adultist disempowerment can be found in the arena of academic scholarship. Just as researchers can unwittingly import larger social norms that are sexist, racist, or colonialist, so also can they import into their work a hidden and distorting

adultism. Education philosopher Tanu Biswas and colleagues have developed for this purpose what they call "The Adultcentrism Scale": "a research tool in the form a questionnaire developed to measure and analyze adultcentric bias" (Biswas et al., 2024: 6). Both researchers and their subjects make use of unconscious or normative biases that may favor adult over child power. These biases range on a scale from children being viewed as "empty boxes" merely to be filled by adults, to being "without agency" and so requiring adults to act on their behalf, to not being "competent" and so needing adult socialization and guidance (p. 6). Such a scale makes it possible to differentiate degrees to which researchers and their subjects harbor normative biases about the justifiability of disempowering children simply because they are children.

Finally, one could point to the adultism involved in political logics of developmentalism. If children are constructed as "developing" beings and adults as "developed," then the former can rightly be ruled over by the latter. As the political philosopher Toby Rollo points out, "politics remain[s] so hostile to the substantive inclusion of children … [because of] the developmentalist conception of politics itself," the notion that politics is always in a state of development toward a fully rational and responsible ideal (2024: 31). On an adultist logic, adults can rightly disempower children because children are only future, not present, political beings. Children themselves must be subordinated to adult power so that democracy can continue to advance. Sana Nakata and Daniel Bray locate this politics of adultism in colonial modernity: "we can understand the infantilization of Indigenous peoples as a logic that arises in the very formation of modernity itself" (Nakata and Bray 2023: 308). In this case, one could argue, colonialism rests on adultism more than the other way around. The colonized group needs to be associated with childhood in order to be disempowered for its own supposed good.

All people and groups deserve equal social empowerment. They deserve that their own particular lived experiences of difference have the same impact as those of others on their shared social environments. The critique of adultism shows that this problem of power tends to be understood in oversimplistic terms as a problem of the denial of agency, freedom, or independence. The more complex reality, for children and adults both, is that political marginalization rests on empowering some by disempowering others. Adultism constructs supposedly independent and rational groups as rightfully exercising power on their own terms. And it correspondingly constructs supposedly dependent and irrational groups as needing power exercised upon them. Adultism proclaims the false logic that empowerment justifies disempowerment. Adulthood needs to be powerful because childhood needs to be ruled over. The deeper reality, however, is that empowerment is interdependent and rightly shared by all.

Conclusion

The concept of adultism still remains outside the mainstream of scholarly and societal discourse. But it should be just as important a critical lens as sexism, racism, colonialism, and other much more widely understood concepts. As in these other cases, adultism is not just about one group or occasional situations of domination or mistreatment. Rather, it describes deep-seated structural norms that distort all aspects of life. Understood

normatively, adultism is a pervasive and historically rooted sets of assumptions that impact everything from self-perceptions to social relations, cultural assumptions to political systems, and educational aims to academic research. It is necessarily intersectional with other normative biases. And like any critical perspective, it can be understood and theorized in different and even conflicting ways. But the important point that fails to be appreciated in both the academy and societies is that adultism is a needed critical lens not just on children but on the whole range of human relations.

As I have defined it here, adultism is the normative empowerment of adulthood through its binary opposition to childhood. It rests on the assumption that adulthood defines what it means to be human, to have knowledge, and to exercise power. Because of this, adultism cuts across other normative biases such as sexism, colonialism, and disablism to justify any group's disempowerment by its supposed childlikeness. Adultism is radical and profound because it constructs childhood as not only a lesser form of human being but a form of essentially and paradoxically non-human human being; it associates childhood with not only the incapacity but the impossibility for knowing; and it structures power as the rule of a supposedly independent adulthood over a supposedly dependent childhood. Adultism thereby functions as a complex and largely unseen normative system demanding the disempowerment of children as children.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

John Wall https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5297-0357

References

Alanen L (2001) Explorations in generational analysis. In: Alanen L and Mayall B (eds) *Conceptualizing Child–Adult Relations*. London: Routledge/Falmer Press, 11–22.

Balagopalan S (2019) Why historicize rights subjectivities? *Childhood* 26(3): 304–320.

Bell J (1995) Understanding adultism: a major obstacle to developing positive youth-adult relationships. YouthBuild USA. Accessed at https://www.scribd.com/document/810223093/Understanding-Adultism

Biswas T (2023) Becoming good ancestors: a decolonial, childist approach to global intergenerational sustainability. *Children & Society* 37: 1005–1020.

Biswas T, Florio E, Caso L, et al. (2024) The adultcentrism scale: a potential contributor to advancing children's participation rights in Nordic contexts. *Social Sciences* 13: 238.

Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Richard Nice: Harvard University Press.
Burman E (2024) *Child as Method: Othering, Interiority and Materialism*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
Burroughs MD and Tollefsen D (2016) Learning to listen: epistemic injustice and the child. *Episteme* 13(3): 359–377.
Butler J (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.
Carel H and Györffy G (2014) Seen but not heard: children and epistemic injustice. *The Lancet* 384(9950): 1256–1257.
Checkoway B (1996) Adults as allies. *Partnerships/Community* 38. Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcepartnerships/38.
Courbon P (1933) Mental adultism and precocious growth of the personality. *Annales Medico-Psychologiques* 87: 355–362.
Cowley P and Denver D (2004) Votes at 16? The case against. *Representation* 41(1): 57–62.
Cox AM (2015) *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Daly A, Stern RT and Leviner P (2022) UN convention on the rights of the child, article 2 and discrimination on the basis of childhood: the CRC paradox? *Nord J Int Law* 91: 419–452.
DuBois P (1903) *Fireside Child-Study: the Art of Being Fair and Kind*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.
Dyer H (2020) *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood: Asymmetries of Innocence and the Cultural Politics of Child Development*. Newark: Rutgers University Press.
Flasher J (1978) Adultism. *Adolescence* 13: 517–523.
Fletcher A (2015) *Facing Adultism*. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
Foucault M (1977) *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Fricker M (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Goodley D, Runswick-Cole K and Liddiard K (eds) (2020) *Interventions in Disabled Childhood Studies*. Sheffield: iHuman Press.
Gregoire J and Jungers C (2007) *The Counsellor's Companion: What Every Beginning Counselor Needs to Know*. New York: Routledge.
Halliday AS (2017) Envisioning Black girl futures: Nicki Minaj's anaconda feminism and new understandings of Black girl sexuality in popular culture. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 6(3): 65–77.
Hanna A (2022) Silent epistemologies: theorising children's participation rights. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 31(1): 40–60.
Heidegger M (1962) (German original 1927). In: Macquarrie J and Robinson E (eds) *Being and Time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Hernandez D and Rehman B (2002) *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*. New York: Seal Press.
Heywood L (1997) *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Hodgins BD (ed) (2019) *Feminist Research for 21st-Century Childhoods: Common Worlds Methods*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Husserl E (1982) *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy—First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. (German original 1913) Trans. F. Kersten. The Hague: Nijhoff.

Irigaray L (1993) *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kearney R (2003) *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.

Locke J (1960). In: Woozley AD (ed) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding [original 1690]*. London: Collins.

Locke J (1964) *John Locke on Education [original 1693], Edited with Introduction and Notes by Peter Gay*. New York: Columbia University.

Lombardo L and Polonko KA (2010) Interdisciplinary contributions to the prevention of child maltreatment. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences: Annual Review* 4(12): 89–112.

López-Guerra C (2014) *Democracy and Disenfranchisement: The Morality of Electoral Exclusions*. New York: Oxford University Press.

MacKinnon CA (1989) *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Marx K (2000). In: McLellan D (ed) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mattheis N (2022) Making kin, not babies? Towards childist kinship in the "Anthropocene". *Childhood* 29(4): 512–528. doi: 10.1177/09075682221098155.

Moosa-Mitha M (2005) A difference-centred alternative to theorization of children's citizenship rights. *Citizenship Studies* 9(4): 369–388.

Murris K (2018) Posthuman child and the diffractive teacher: decolonizing the nature/culture binary. In: Cutter-Mackenzie A (ed) *Research Handbook on Childhoodnature*. Salmon Tower Building: Springer.

Nakata S and Bray D (2023) Political representation of aboriginal and torres strait islander youth in Australia. In: Sandin B, Josefsson J, Hanson K, et al. (eds) *The Politics of Children's Rights and Representation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Phoenix A (2023) Theorizing racialization, epistemic violence and children's intersectional positioning. In: Balagopalan S, Wall J and Wells K (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies*. London: Bloomsbury, 266–279.

Pierce CM and Allen, GB (1975) Childism. *Psychiatric Annals* 5: 266–270.

Ricoeur P (1981). In: Thompson JB (ed) *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rollo T (2018) The color of childhood: the role of the child/human binary in the production of anti-black racism. *Journal of Black Studies* 49(4): 307–329.

Rollo T (2024) Democracy and developmentalism: the logics of child exclusion. In: Balagopalan S, Wall J and Wells K (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies*. London: Bloomsbury.

Rosen R (2023) Childhood in and through social reproduction theory. In: Balagopalan S, Wall J and Wells K (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies*. London: Bloomsbury.

Runswick-Cole K, Goodley D and Liddiard K (2023) Inviting disability: disabled children and studies of childhood. In: Balagopalan S, Wall J and Wells K (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies*. London: Bloomsbury.

Tetteh PM (2013) Me sumsum ni ha'-the dislocation and non-belonging of child domestic workers in Accra. *Ghana Social Science Journal* 8(1-2): 106–127.

Twum-Danso Imoh AO (2024) Challenging North-south binaries and the implications for studies of childhood globally. In: *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*. 2 ed. New York City: Springer International Publishing, 725–739.

Vandenhole W (2005) *Non-Discrimination and Equality in the View of the UN Human Rights Treaties Bodies*. Belgium: Intersentia.

Wall J (2010) *Ethics in Light of Childhood*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Wall J (2019a) From childhood studies to childism: reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations. *Children's Geographies* 20(6): 257–270.

Wall J (2019b) Theorizing children's global citizenship: reconstructionism and the politics of deep interdependence. *Global Studies of Childhood* 9(1): 5–17.

Wall J (2021) *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Wall J (2023) Childism: transforming critical theory in response to children. In: Balagopalan S, Wall J and Wells K (eds) *Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies*. New York: Bloomsbury, 208–222.

Warming H (2024) Childhood prism research. In: Balagopalan S, Wall J and Wells K (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies*. London: Bloomsbury, 194–207.

Watson N (2012) Theorising the lives of disabled children; how can disability theory help? *Children & Society* 26: 192–202.