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The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies

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Childism

Transforming critical theory in response to children

John Wall

Childhood studies borrows a great deal more from critical theory than it contributes to it. From gender studies, it takes feminist concepts such as relationality, narrativity and embodiment. From critical race theory, it adopts understandings of systemic privilege, internalization and institutional oppression. From queer scholarship, it uses frameworks of performativity, non-binary thinking and heteronormativity. From decolonialism, it incorporates theories such as of the subaltern, imperial globalization and epistemological justice. And it takes new thinking as well from disabilities studies, posthumanism and many other realms of scholarship. But what does childhood studies contribute to theorizing on its own terms? What similar kinds of conceptual framework does it offer to broader critical theory that is grounded in the distinctive lived experiences of children?

I argue here that childhood studies can make its own contributions to critical theory through the perspective of childism. In analogy to feminism, antiracism, posthumanism, decolonialism and the like, childism is a critical lens for deconstructing systemic adultism and reconstructing norms and structures that empower the lived experiences of children as children (Biswas 2017 and 2020; Childism Institute 2019; Parker 2017; Sundhall 2017; Wall 2006 and 2010). The concept of childism suggests that children's lives cannot come fully into focus using theories developed primarily with adults in mind. New critical lenses are needed that are ground specifically in childhoods. Childism pushes, furthermore, for other forms of critical theory such as feminism and decolonialism to recognize children's lived experiences as important subjectivities that call for readjustments of their own theorizations.

Not only are children a third of the world's population (depending on how childhoods are defined), but their lives shed a vital and distinctive light on all social phenomena, a light often invisibilized in academia and society, whether children are involved in them or not. New theoretical concepts are needed of equal innovativeness to those arising out of other critical

approaches. Of course, childhood studies must also be understood intersectionally, as childhoods vary by gender, race, ethnicity, class, culture, region, sexuality and much else. But it is also the case that childhood, for better or worse, is its own social construction. Childhood studies needs to not only *use* existing theoretical frameworks but also *do* its own critical theory and develop new theoretical concepts. Childism provides one perspective from which to do this by challenging children's systemic marginalization and empowering children's lived experiences to transform larger scholarly and societal norms.

Theorizing childhood studies

The field of childhood studies has incorporated a wide range of theoretical perspectives over its more than three decades of existence. These theories, however, frequently originated with primarily adults in mind. Insofar as adulthood remains the assumed subjectivity behind such theories, childhood studies has had to fit variously adultist – that is, adult-grounded and adult-centred – frameworks around the not always identical experiences of children. In other words, critical theory on the whole renders childhood invisible from the start. While diverse theories enjoy a great deal of intersectional overlap, it is also the case that diverse groups in societies are not always reducible to one another. A brief examination of some of the more influential theories in childhood studies shows that what is particular to childhoods often remains uncritically marginalized and therefore under-theorized. The conceptual lenses are not always on quite the right settings to bring the lives of infants, children and youth into equally clear focus.

The original theoretical basis for the new field of childhood studies that emerged in the late 1980s was a late form of structuralism. Based in the work of Karl Marx, Ferdinand de Saussure, Emile Durkheim, Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan, traditional structuralism views human experience as socially constructed. Social life is an expression of diverse structures of language, history, economics and culture. Childhood studies originated under a theoretical paradigm that views childhoods not as the universally natural phenomenon often suggested by developmental psychology but as shaped and conditioned by particular social contexts (James and Prout 1990).

By the late 1980s, when childhood studies emerged, structuralists like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu had started to argue that human experience is not only socially constructed but also individually agential. In the wake of various theoretical challenges, such as critiques from political movements like feminism, liberationism and civil rights antiracism, structuralists came to argue that social life is not only historically constructed but also open to challenge and transformation through political agency. Societies shape individuals while individuals in turn shape societies. Giddens (1984) describes this dynamic as a process of 'structuration', one in which normative systems and reflexive agents mutually constitute each other. Bourdieu explains that social structures are internalized into an agent's 'habitus' or habitual dispositions, while individual actions are in turn externalized into their 'field' of social relationships (1977). Childhood studies thus adopted its initial well-known twin foci on childhoods as social constructions and children as social actors (James and Prout 1990: 27).

Notably, however, no major theory of structuralism itself paid much attention to children. From Marx onwards, structuralism's central concerns have been the struggles of the working classes, minorities and women, which, while not necessarily excluding children, do not thematize their lives specifically. In retrospect one can see why. A structuralist could easily assume (falsely)

that the historical, cultural and political structures of a society are most fully visible in adulthood because they are still only in formation in childhood. Likewise, a structuralist could write off children's potentials for social agency as still in development in the private realm. Of course, childhood studies challenges both assumptions. But it is still saddled with a structuralist dualism in which the power of societies stands in tension with the powers of individuals to change them, a dualism grounded in the assumption of a supposedly adult subject able to impact its surrounding structures independently of them.

From the late 1990s onwards, childhood studies started adopting (in addition) a range of poststructuralist theoretical perspectives that eschew this kind of dualism. Based on ideas from Jacques Derrida (1967), Gilles Deleuze (1968), Michel Foucault (1969), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), Judith Butler (1997) and others, childhood studies scholars began to explore children's lives, not as structural patterns acted upon by individuals but as lived experiences of structural difference. The term 'difference' in poststructuralism does not just mean diversity (as for structuralists) but rather divergences, distances or deferrals from systemic norms. Poststructuralism understands societies as political systems in which systems of language, history and power condition possibilities for societal meaning and thereby marginalize and disempower normatively other or different lived experiences.

In borrowing a variety of feminist, queer, neo-Marxist and postcolonialist poststructuralist theories, however, childhood studies is still burdened with a chiefly adult gaze. None of the aforementioned poststructuralist theorists wrote much about children and none from a childhood studies point of view. Take the use of the poststructuralist queer feminist theorist Judith Butler. Butler argues that 'the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies' (1990: 33). Gender is a forcibly constructed before it is experienced subjectively. Butler also argues, in later work, that such hegemonies can be contested, as well as reinforced, by the 'performativity' of differences such as of gender. Performances such as protests, assemblies and occupations of public spaces show that 'acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the politics' (2015: 9). While language and power always already preconstruct the conditions of subjectivity, they can also be used by marginalized subjectivities to deconstruct those very conditions.

In childhood studies, Butler has been used, among other things, to help understand children's experiences as performative reifications and resistances in relation to hegemonic constructions of power. Butler's ideas make it possible to see, for example, how 'femininity is "not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm"', even from the first declaration, 'It's a girl!' (Zehavi 2018: 248, citing Butler 1993: 23). Butler also shows that 'children's sexuality, like all sexuality, should be seen as a part and parcel of the body and dominant discourse – as something that is shaped by the social and open to refutation and resistance' (Egan and Hawkes 2009: 395). Her work has been used to argue that Palestinian children's lives are framed by an ethnic 'exceptionalism' that 'conditions a liveable life – namely . . . who will count as a life and who will not' (Joronen 2016: 96). And she may help explain why, for any child, 'a stable, full, undivided and cognitively organised subjectivity . . . is never achievable' (Lesnik-Oberstein 2016: 22).

However, it may not be a coincidence that Butler herself hardly ever discusses specific differences of children or age. Her theories of deconstructive performativity and precarity are

almost entirely based on the experiences of women and other adult groups. I would argue that Butler's silence on age is no accident. Her work makes the largely invisibilized assumption that the performance of anti-hegemonic deconstruction must primarily enacted by those experiencing marginalization themselves. Difference can only be deconstructed from the point of view of difference. There is little sense that those unmasking and resisting structural injustice might depend in part on others as well, and that they might rely on a measure of support from more normatively powerful groups to deconstruct their experiences' forcible reification and co-perform new possibilities for social inclusion. The suggestion I am making here is not that children are somehow uniquely dependent on others for their social demarginalization. It is, rather, that neither children nor adults deconstruct norms or perform difference entirely on their own behalf. Neither children nor adults are self-empowered without also being empowered by others. Deconstruction needs to be understood in a more thoroughly interdependent way.

A similar point can be made about the neo-Marxist poststructuralism of the political philosopher Jacques Rancière, who has occasionally been used in childhood studies to understand how marginalized groups struggle against prevailing social norms through acts of what he calls 'dissensus'. As Rancière puts it, 'The essence of politics is *dissensus*. Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself . . . [that] makes visible that which had no reason to be seen' (2010: 38). This notion has been applied in childhood studies in a few ways. A child can thus be viewed, some suggest, as 'one who refuses a predetermined citizenship identity . . . enact[ing] this subjectivity through the "life-form" of play' (Bath and Karlsson 2016: 563). Or childhood itself can be understood as a global neoliberal project of 'development' that, in an effort to silence dissensus, 'symbolically condenses political projects, notions of subjects, conceptions of society and the future' (Vergara del Solar 2015: 443). Children can apparently engage in a politics of dissensus as much as anyone else.

But Rancière is again chiefly focused on the political lives of adults, in his case primarily working class labourers. (It is true that he wrote an early book on education, but it is more about the educator, 'the ignorant schoolmaster', than the actual lived experiences of the children being educated (1991).) Like Butler, Rancière tends to view political deconstruction as a kind of protest or performance enacted only by the marginalized group in question. Anti-hegemonic transformation is a fight *against* those with power. How, then, is this act of political dissensus to be performed by children (as a group) when the powerful in their case is largely adults? Is there room for working out the empowerment of children's differences as children, not just independently of adults, but also interdependently with them? Can critical theory more complexly understand anti-hegemonic protest as not just placing the powerless and powerful in dissensual conflict but also enabling an interdependent struggle for a radical new relation? It may be that children's efforts at political dissensus help to reveal what political struggle really consists in.

As one last example, consider the influence of postcolonialism and decolonialism. As Edward Said argues, a pervasive 'Orientalism' functions 'as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (1979: 3). Or as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, postcolonialism deconstructs histories and norms that do not 'let the subaltern speak' (1988). While decolonialism is somewhat different, it makes the related claim that scholars need to develop 'epistemological diversity' so as to 'recover repressed and latent knowledges while at the same time generating new ways of seeing and being in the world' (Zavala 2017).

In childhood studies, postcolonial theory has been taken up in a variety of ways. Sarada Balagopalan, for example, uses it ‘to critique the global circulation of a modern Western childhood as the hegemonic ideal’ and to ‘historicize’ childhoods in relation to colonial modernity (2002: 33). Olga Nieuwenhuys argues that ‘postcolonialism enjoins academics to abandon the high ground position from where they have usually sought to understand the world and to look up from a multiplicity of different, marginal positions’ (2013: 6). Similarly, Afua Twum-Danso Imoh employs decolonialism ‘to explore the pluralities that exist within childhood constructions and experiences in sub-Saharan Africa . . . as a result of the historical and global processes that have impacted many societies in the region’ (2016: 456). Lucia Rabello de Castro argues for a decolonial point of departure that enables ‘a critical evaluation of the present claim for “a global child in a global world” which stipulates a univocal trajectory for children and nations’ (2020: 49). In these and other ways, post- and de-colonial theories provide ways to critique colonialized perspectives on childhood in society and academia and liberate suppressed childhood experiences across the world.

Again, however, post- and de-colonialism cannot be said to have originated as theoretical approaches with childhoods primarily in mind. Said, Spivak and other foundational theorists are primarily concerned with differences of power, race, ethnicity, gender and culture, and not with those of age. In speaking of the subaltern, Spivak claims, ‘The question of “woman” seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways’ (1988: 90). And if a child? On the whole, such theories are more comfortable with childhood as a symbolic construction of global southern societies than with children themselves as a marginalized class.

Consider along these lines Spivak’s famous question, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ For Spivak, the subaltern is prevented from speaking by colonial, patriarchal and other normative social constructions. Borrowing from Derrida’s notion that language relies on its difference from what is *not* spoken, Spivak argues for an analysis of ‘the *mechanics* of the constitution of the Other’ (1988: 90). Such a mechanics makes it possible ‘to question the unquestioned muting of the subaltern woman’ (Spivak 1988: 91). The subaltern is silenced by the very possibilities imposed by colonialized history and language. Yet, as Spivak also suggests, the silenced other could in principle also be heard: ‘[A] fully just world is impossible, forever deferred and different from our projections, the undecidable in the face of which we must risk the decision that we can hear the other’ (1999: 199).

Powerful though Spivak’s approach has proven, her question about whether the subaltern can speak can itself be questioned in light of the subalternity of children as children. From this perspective, Spivak’s question can be heard as referring not only to a non-speaking subaltern but also to two other perspectives on which the subaltern relies, perspectives that are precisely non-subaltern in that they can in fact speak. First, there is whoever is asking the question in the first place – that is, Spivak or any other postcolonial thinker – who by asking the question assumes the position of both silent subaltern and non-silent questioner *about* the subaltern, that is, in the latter case, the position of having normative grounds actually to speak. Second, there is the group to whom the question is presumably addressed, that is, whoever is being asked, against all historical possibility, to question their own social conditions in order that the subaltern can be heard. In both cases, the process of no longer silencing subaltern perspectives depends in part on non-subalterns speaking about and responding to them. It is not that the subaltern entirely

depends in order to be heard on others with normative power. Rather, the point is that the relation between being silencing and speaking, between powerlessness and power, is more complex and interdependent than one might assume. Childhood is more than a trope for the reduction of the subaltern to silence. Rather, it could function also as a perspective in its own right to clarify what subalternity really means. In this case, it clarifies that the subaltern is liberated to speak, not just by deconstructing normative possibilities for language but also by an interdependent process or mechanics of not speaking and speaking, of opening to silences by questioning and responding.

In a moment I explain what I think such an approach could look like. My point for now is that it needs to trouble childhood studies scholars that the theories available to them are grounded predominantly and unquestioningly in the experiences of adulthood. This does not mean they do not provide rich critical resources for childhood studies work. But it does mean that the structuralist and poststructuralist theories that dominate the field – and indeed all academic study – will tend to reify a normative adult position. When a major social group is largely ignored or forgotten, this is not an accident. It has consequences when it comes to possibilities for critical reflection. Sometimes the given theoretical frameworks will fit children's experiences well, but sometimes they will fail to account for children's particular differences and lived experiences as children. This is a problem for childhood studies and critical theory alike: the former because children's lives may not come into sufficiently sharp focus, the latter because social life itself may be understood in distorted and limited ways.

From childhood studies to childism

The aforementioned considerations suggest that it is important for childhood studies theory not only to borrow from the available theoretical resources but also in turn to challenge and contribute to them from its own distinctly child-responsive perspective. Critical theory needs input not just from gender, queer, racial, postcolonial, class and other points of view but also from the perspective of children's age. Childhood studies has increasingly moved in this direction, even if it still lacks the broad infrastructure and conceptualization of theories in feminism, antiracism and postcolonialism. The concept of childism has been developed as way to grind this theoretical lens. I would like here first to describe similar efforts in what is sometimes called critical childhood studies, then lay out how childism takes those another step further into child-responsive critical theory.

Critical childhood studies shares with childism a desire to empower children's experiences to provide broader critiques of societies. It can be traced back to Berry's Mayall's work in the early 2000s to formulate a theory of 'generation' or 'generational order'. Mayall argues that 'generation is emerging as a key to understanding relations between childhood and adulthood' that makes it possible 'to think from [children's] lives towards sociological understanding' (2002: 1). In analogy to gender, generation provides an analogous perspective to feminism: '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' (Mayall 2002: 2). Children's experiences in particular challenge adult-dominated assumptions about the structures that govern adult-child relations.

Similarly, Leena Alanen (2011) describes critical childhood studies as taking a "normative turn" towards developing larger systemic critiques of social relations. Childhood studies ought to become 'critical not only of our own research practices but the very practices and social

arrangements that we study in the “real” world of children and childhood’ (150). Children’s voices can be used in ‘taking voiceless politics into account in policy-making and administrative practice’ (Kallio and Häkli 2011: 73). The idea here is that childhood studies is not just about documenting children’s lives but also about transforming larger political systems. It can formulate models of ‘children-sized citizenship’ (Jans 2004: 40), overcome the ‘adulthoodification of public space’ (Rodó-de-Zárate 2015: 413) and transform ‘the concept of rights from a child-centered perspective’ (Woodhouse 2008: 11).

Finally, from a more methodological angle, critical childhood studies calls for revisioning scholarship itself. For example, Hanne Warming’s innovative concept of ‘childhood prism research’ broadens childhood studies into a ‘relational ontology’ in which ‘childhood can constitute an extreme or paradigmatic case and can therefore potentially offer a diffractive sociological microscope on certain issues’ (2020: 1). A child prism diffracts understanding of social phenomena in new and previously unseen ways. Likewise, Erica Burman’s theory of ‘child as Method’ uses childhood studies to formulate ‘counterhegemonic and transformative models of subjectivity’ (2016: 266). It investigates children’s experiences of suffering and oppression as ways of ‘exploring and evoking the conditions for their transcendence’ (279). The perspectives of childhood shed new light on subjectivities and societies broadly.

Childism as a concept develops along similar lines. That is, it approaches children’s experiences as lenses for reconstructing scholarship and critiquing and transforming social norms. The difference with childism is that, in analogy to feminism, postcolonialism and the like, it strives to reconceptualize critical theory as such. It aims to better understand not only children’s lives but also, as in Warming and Burman, the grounds for the possibility of understanding social life in general. For this reason, childism seeks broad application, not only across childhood studies but also across the academy and society. It seeks theoretical resources not just to break down child-adult binaries but also to revision adulthood and broader social structures and relations. Its purpose is to empower children and children’s experiences to transform thinking and action across social systems.

My own work developing early definitions of childism was based on prior research in political theory. My first book (Wall 2005) was engaged in debates about poststructuralist philosophy and specifically the sustainability of the concept of political difference. My conclusion, developing upon the work of theorists like Paul Ricoeur (1992), Pamela Anderson (1998), Nestor Garcia Canclini (1999/2014) and Richard Kearney (2002), was that the then prevailing concept of ‘différance’ from Emmanuel Lévinas (1969) and Jacques Derrida (1967) was too simple. Politics needed theorizing on the grounds of a more complex relation between difference and responsiveness. I termed this relation ‘moral creativity’, by which I meant the obligation in social relations to respond to lived experiences of difference by (much like an artist or scientist) innovating previously unimagined new worlds of meaning.

It is on this basis that, after becoming involved in childhood studies, I first formulated the concept of ‘childism’ (Wall 2006). From my perspective, the idea of studying children’s ‘agency’ amidst social ‘constructions’ misses, as I explain earlier, the deeper normative tensions. But also, the then emerging use of poststructuralist theories in childhood studies also lacks, in my view, the ‘responsive’ element my first book had argued for. ‘Childism’, then, was a term I developed to describe the possibility for a normatively creative response to the lived experiences of children. This kind of possibility was already at the time being developed in relation to gender in what

was then called third-wave feminism, among theorists such as Rebecca Walker (1995), Pamela Anderson (1998) and Sara Marzagora (2016). These third-wave feminists argued, in part, that the aim of feminism is not just to deconstruct patriarchy but also to imagine creatively inclusive new social relations that rethink gender itself in more inclusive ways, including both intersectionally and in response to diverse but suppressed female experiences. Similarly, I saw a need to develop a new kind of childist theory that could approach children's experiences as demands for not only deconstructed but also revisioned social normative horizons.

I therefore define childism as 'the effort to respond to ingrained historical adultism by reconstructing systemic scholarly and social norms' (Wall 2019: 11–12). So understood, childism seeks to understand children's differences of experience by developing transformed normative imaginations that respond more fully to children's lives. Childism means that 'children's experiences must be allowed to disrupt and constantly open up even the interpretive assumptions adults bring to them' (Wall 2006: 537). It responds to young people's lives, not just by listening to them, but also by putting into question and revising the adultistic assumptions brought to them in the first place. Childism, in short, is a critical theory for applying children's experiences of marginalization to the more inclusive reconstruction of social norms in general. As with third-wave feminism, this means that childism is intersectional. Children's lived experiences cannot change social perceptions unless they are understood in relation to the full diversity of forms of social marginalization. But the aim of childism itself is to insist on the critique of children's marginalization specifically as children, so as to open up new theoretical vistas that do not presume an adult normative horizon but instead embrace a more complex social reality that equally responds to children as children.

As a political theorist, I have used this concept of childism to rethink a range of conceptual foundations including of human rights, global citizenship, political power and democracy. Human rights, I argue, need to be re-theorized as more than modern European expressions of independent autonomy, and more even than deconstructive critiques of systemic power, but instead, from a childist point of view, as interdependent social responsibilities to the empowerment of difference (Wall 2008 and 2010). I claim elsewhere that democratic representation needs to be rethought as 'the political whole's responsiveness to lived experiences of difference' (Wall 2012: 98). Global citizenship needs to be theorized as a state of affairs 'in which all persons, child and adult, are empowered in their deep rather than superficial interdependence' (Wall 2019: 2). Most recently, I have used childism to argue for children's ageless rights to vote. Just as the very concept and practice of voting has changed over democratic history with the inclusion of groups like landowners, the poor, minorities and women, so also does the last disenfranchised group, people under 18, demand the creative restructuring of voting (for both children and adults) to be equally included (Wall 2021). In 2019, I founded the Childism Institute (2019), housed at Rutgers University and advised by a dozen scholars from around the world, to organize colloquia, publications, blogs and media aimed at 'empowering children by critiquing norms and structures'. I also co-founded with activist Robin Chen the Children's Voting Colloquium (2020), which, applying childism to social practice, gathers scholars and activists from around the world to advance ageless voting rights.

This concept of childism differs from two other meanings that non-childhood studies scholars have sometimes attached to the word 'childism'. In the 1990s, literary theorist Peter Hunt used the term 'childist' to refer to 'inviting adults to read as children' (1991: 191). This adults can do by 'taking into account personal, sub-cultural, experiential, and psychological differences between children and adults' (198). The problem with this concept, however, as other literary theorists pointed out, is

that it assumes a ‘generalizable childlike response’ to literature, instead of an actual vast diversity just as with adults (Nodelman 2008: 85). The other use of the word ‘childism’, developed later than mine, is by psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, who uses it to mean ‘prejudice against children’ (2012). Like sexism, homophobia, antisemitism and racism, childism names for her ‘the huge range of antichild social policies and individual behaviors directed against all children daily’ (2012: 4). While this sense of the term ‘childism’ continues to be used in scholarship today, it too represents an unfortunately adult-centric and child-disempowering perspective. It is adult-centric because it is about the views of adults towards children, not those of children themselves. And it is child-disempowering because it adopts a deficit model of children’s lives as society’s passive victims.

Childism in the childhood studies-based sense that I use has been taken up by scholars in a number of different ways. Some, like me, have used it to illuminate what could be meant by children’s empowerment in politics. Childism helps to illuminate, for example, how children and youth in the Gothenburg Youth Council were able to ‘change the political landscape’ by transforming adult politicians’ normative priorities for government spending (Sundhall 2017). It sheds a light on how digital society involves a process of ‘creative moral response’ in which children and adults seek to ‘grow through narrative expansion when we encounter otherness’ (Ott 2019: 10–11). It shows how the right to challenge authority must involve not just a supposedly adult-like political participation but a ‘Fourth-P’ right to power in the sense of mutual empowerment (Demiral 2021). It complicates theories of ‘privilege’ as developed in critical race theory by recognizing that children’s systemic advantages are not actually ‘unearned’, so that ‘instead of thinking of privilege as something “unearned”, it proves more useful to think of it as something “automatic”’ (Barajas 2021: 2).

Childism has also been used to help retheorize education, along with other critical pedagogies, in less adultist ways. In light of children’s political activism around climate change, Tanu Biswas has argued that childist educational theory calls for ‘a conscious commitment to *letting* children and youth teach adult educators too’ (2021). Education needs to be restructured around the human community’s ‘deep interdependence (also with the natural system we are a part of)’, slowing down rather than neoliberal overheating, and a ‘pluralist’ rather than unilinear understanding of educational ‘space, mode, and time’ (Biswas 2021: 9). Childism was used to formulate a new model of playwork practice that does not simply provide and facilitate play but rather renegotiates the presence of adults in children’s times and spaces (Newstead 2016). It helps social scientists examine preschool children’s sustainability education as based, not on adult transmission of values, but on ‘a critical and constructive exchange of arguments, aims and visions’ that starts with children’s own environmental subjectivities (Franck 2017: 15). It reconstructs the adult gaze in teaching philosophy to children, by developing a ‘polylogue’ approach to philosophy for children and adults as creative and radically open-ended play (Saal 2020). And it envisions education, beyond what is argued is the adult-centric capitalism and racism of ‘Western schooling’, as a bottom-up incorporation of multiple modes of knowing in a project of ‘community formation’ (Abebe and Biswas 2021).

An example from the humanities is children’s role in revisioning biblical studies, a field of scholarship that draws on feminist, deconstructionist, Marxist and other critical theories, but only lately has developed critiques of ancient biblical history and texts from the point of view of children. Some have sought to develop in the field ‘a productive tension between childism and feminism’ in which analyses of gender in biblical texts and history are supplemented with analyses of ‘neglected

children's experiences' (Elkins 2013). A childist approach is applied to the Hebrew Bible based on the idea that 'just as we often do not acknowledge children's influence in families and societies, we have largely ignored their roles in the [biblical] text' (Parker 2017: 17). A collection of essays on biblical scholarship uses childism as a way 'to reassess the roles and impact of characters in the text and bygone persons from antiquity whose contributions and records have long been unnoticed or underappreciated' (Betsworth and Parker 2019: 3). And a recent collection of essays formulates a new interdisciplinary approach to ancient history and texts that is termed 'Childist Criticism' that seeks to transform the field from the perspective of the young (Garroway and Martens 2020).

A final example can be found in broader analyses of the relation between childism and feminism. Girlhood studies needs to move beyond traditional feminist approaches to incorporate also childist approaches that can understand how 'girls and young women bring unique voices to creative and cultural expression and also interact with social spaces in particular ways' (Mandrona 2016: 9). For sociologists, 'the cause of feminism and the cause of childism should be foundational tenets of all critical intellectual endeavours and political movements, regardless of the constitution of their membership or the causes that they pursue' (Rosen and Twamley 2018: 18). Regarding climate activism, 'by disentangling children from women in our approach to ecological feminism, we make space for the advancement of the interests of both by seeing feminism and childism . . . as allied –isms that can respond to environmental concerns' (Stirling 2020: 222).

In these and a diversity of other ways, the critical lens of childism is helping a range of childhood studies and other scholars and activists to transform understandings of social norms and practices in response to the lived experiences of children. Childism thus takes childhood studies beyond its historical focus on children's agency, which is all too easily interpreted in adultistic ways. And it does not just borrow its theoretical architecture from perspectives like feminism that continue even to this day to assume the priority of adults. Rather, it seeks to do critical theorization on its own terms. It formulates critical theory itself in new ways that places children's lives at the centre rather than the periphery of social understanding and relations.

Childist theory

If childism is to take its place among critical theories, it must develop its own broad theoretical concepts. It needs to formulate specific substantive ideas such as feminism's relationality, critical race theory's systemic privilege, queer theory's performativity and decolonialism's epistemological justice. The developments discussed earlier, in combination with larger work in childhood studies and contemporary philosophy, suggest possibilities for the beginnings of a broadly useable childist theoretical framework. Childism could be grounded, I argue, in three theoretical concepts: a hermeneutics of reconstruction, an ontology of deep interdependence and a politics of empowered inclusion. These are not meant to be exclusively childist concepts. Nor is my suggestion that they have not already been developed in part in existing childhood studies theories. On the contrary, they grow out of the rich soil of childhood studies research. The point is that new concepts such as these, and others, are needed in order to grind theoretical lenses that can transform norms and structures across scholarship and societies broadly.

The first principle is what I am calling a hermeneutics of reconstruction (Wall 2010). Interpreting societies is more complex than understanding how they are constructed (and how individuals are agents in their construction), since the bases of social construction tend

themselves to be adultist or grounded in dominant adult subjectivities. It is also more complex than deconstructing systems of power that obscure marginalized voices, since the process of deconstruction tends also to prioritize adultist power structures. Reconstruction, in contrast, asserts that interpretation is a process of shared responsiveness to difference. Understanding societies involves at one and the same time undoing normative hegemonies and recreating more expansively social imaginations. Such a hermeneutics better accounts for the experiences of children. With children in mind, social understanding emerges when marginalized experiences are not only understood as different but also ‘make a difference’ to newly conceptualized shared possibilities. A better interpretation of society is one that reconstructs differences into more expansive social imaginations.

A shift from construction and deconstruction to reconstruction is empowering for all, but especially for children. It better describes both how children contribute to social meaning and how social meaning includes childhoods. On the first point, from the moment they are born, children are engaged in a critical process of recreating the already created social worlds to which they belong. They expand meaning for themselves and for others. Likewise, children call upon adults and other children (whether explicitly or not) to reconstruct their normative assumptions in more child-inclusive ways. From birth to death, in societies and the academy, every human being engages in a continual reconstruction of already constructed meaning. Humans play with meaning, not in the deconstructive sense of unravelling its normative underpinnings, but in the more complex sense of at once undoing and reimagining it. Truly critical understanding means responding to one another with expansively recreated worlds.

A second childist principle can be called an ontology of deep interdependence (Wall 2010). Ontological being-in-the-world has been theorized in many ways over time. Today it is dominated by a constructivist view in which being lies primarily in social structures. This view is often opposed by a deconstructionist approach in which being is most authentically expressed in lived experiences of difference. But childism suggests that being-in-the-world is more fully understood as an expression of *deep* interdependence. Human (and non-human) beings are not just shallowly interdependent, that is, related, interconnected or constituting mutually shared social webs. These ontologies are horizontal, flat, two-dimensional. Rather, being is *deeply* interdependent in that persons (and things) make up three-dimensional web of mutual reliance. People are both horizontally relational and vertically other-dependent. Social beings are neither individuals nor expressions of collectives but simultaneously self- and other-empowered.

The concept of deep interdependence overcomes a traditional binary opposition between independent adults and dependent children. It describes all persons and groups as equally sharing a deeply interdependent social world. It opposes the adultist view that vertical dependence equates with a lack of being. From the Enlightenment up through postmodernity, children have been subtly assumed to somehow lack fully human status because they supposedly do not act fully on their own behalf. However, in reality, neither adults nor children have being apart from others. All are in part deeply dependent on social relations, power systems, cultural histories and natural evolution as part of their very makeup. Denying one’s own deep reliance on one’s surrounding world is an adultist rejection of the more profound reality of human existence.

At the same time, deep interdependence calls for a changed understanding of people’s independence. Independence from a childist point of view is neither individuality nor the irreducibility of normative difference. Rather, independence is better understood as empowerment.

To be independent in the world means to be empowered both in oneself and by others. Neither children nor adults are simply agents on their own behalf. Rather, in every instance, people are independent in the sense that their differences of experience are self- and socially empowered to make a difference in the world around them. Adultist frameworks tend to suggest that the anti-hegemonic struggle should arise only from below, whether by particular marginalized groups or by such groups in common with each other. But, if children too are a marginalized group, this idea of grassroots demarginalization may need supplementation with a sense of anti-hegemonic struggle that brings the powerless and powerful into relation with one another. Differences are parts of vast and unfathomable networks of social life. Overcoming marginalization depends on shared languages, historical ideas, functioning politics and much else. Human beings are not dependent or independent but deeply interdependent in the simultaneously horizontal and vertical sense of being self- and other-reliant.

A third and final childist principle can be described as a politics of empowered inclusion (Josefsson and Wall 2020). If children are equally parts of societies as adults, and if all humans (and their environments) are deeply interdependent, new understandings are needed of how we should critique social structures and seek justice. The concept of empowered inclusion suggests that social justice consists in actively expanding societies to respond to differences of experience. The concept of empowered inclusion adds to existing feminist and postcolonialist conceptions of politics the idea that inclusion is achieved, not only by deconstructing historical power imbalances but also, and at the very same time, by social systems actively empowering differences. It adds up to a deeply interdependent conception of social power.

Political empowerment is achieved, therefore, not just by the inclusion of suppressed voices but by a more complex process of actively empowered inclusion. Marginalized differences need both to empower themselves and be empowered by others. They are included by means of both self-expression and other-response. Empowerment is deeply interdependent. It is both self-empowering and other-empowered. Just as no group can simply rely on those in power to include it, so also no group can become empowered all by itself. Power is an interdependent process of difference making a difference in the world. It is a performance but one seeking to move an audience. Because human beings are at once different and interdependent, they reach justice by reconstructing more expansive social worlds with and for each other.

Conclusion

It is time for childhood studies to develop critical theories of its own. Like the academy and society at large, critical theory has largely assumed an unquestioned adult perspective. Childhood studies scholars cannot expect the tools of the past to bring children's lives equally into focus. Critical theories developed without children in mind necessarily contain flaws and lacunae. In other words, childhood studies needs to take up centrally the task of not only borrowing theory but also creating it. Just like feminists, decolonialists, critical race theorists and others, childhood studies scholars stand in a position to develop, and owe to larger society, critical theory that is specifically responsive to children. As in relation to any other group, critical theory must be intersectional. But, since children's own particular lived experiences are still widely suppressed in both scholarship and societies, critical theory remains limited and so uncritical insofar as it lacks lenses ground in the experiences of children as children.

Childism offers such a critical theoretical perspective. It does so by empowering children's experiences to challenge and transform deeply ingrained adultist norms and structures. From this perspective, it insists that critical theory include a hermeneutics of reconstruction, an ontology of deep interdependence, and a politics of empowered inclusion. Without concepts like these that are explicitly inclusive of childhoods, theoretical work cannot grasp the full complexity of human and social conditions. As with other isms, childism does not arise in a vacuum and needs continual critique and contestation. It ought to change and evolve over time. But, in the end, critical theory needs childism as much as childhood studies needs critical theory. Otherwise, theory itself remains impoverished by its long history of invisible adultist bias.

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