Smoke and mirrors? Challenging categories in global childhood and youth research

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'Smoke and mirrors'

- = *a metaphor for a deceptive, fraudulent or insubstantial explanation or description* (Wikipedia)

'Smoke'

- Age

- Adolescence and transitions

- Family structure

- Children's work and learning

- Children's agency/voice

'Mirrors'

• How assumptions underpinning theories and concepts are reflected and refracted back to Global North

• Complications that arise

• Should we rethink childhood and youth 'from the South'?

• Do we need 'hybrid theorising'? 'Mosiac epistemology? (Connell 2014)

Young Lives

- **Multi-disciplinary study that aims to:**
  - improve understanding of childhood poverty
  - provide evidence to improve policies & practice

- **Following nearly 12,000 children in 4 countries:** Ethiopia; India (Andhra Pradesh & Telangana); Peru and Vietnam, over 15 years - MDGs

- **Now covers 11 year period:** first data collected in 2002, with 5 survey rounds and 4 waves of qualitative research with nested sample 50 children plus school survey of children in school

- **Two age cohorts in each country:**
  - 2,000 children born in 2000-01
  - 1,000 children born in 1994-95

- **Pro-poor sample:** 20 sites in each country, reflecting country diversity (rural-urban, diverse livelihoods, ethnicity)

- **Collaboration:**
  - partners in each study country
  - core funded by DFID, DGIS, IrishAid, etc

VISUALISING THIS

Qualitative nested sample

Linked school surveys

1 2 3 4

OLDER COHORT

AGES: 8 12 15 19 22

Following 1,000 children

Same age children at different time points

YOUNGER COHORT

AGES: 1 5 8 12 15

Following 2,000 children

Round 1
2002

Round 2
2006

Round 3
2009

Round 4
2013

Round 5
2016

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- Focus on the daily lives and wellbeing of children and young people in a selection of YL communities – rapid social change and modernity/globalization

- Capture important changes during childhood and children's trajectories - a life course approach

- Understand how policies and services are experienced by children (and caregivers) - inequalities - and who is 'left behind'

Partnerships

- Country Directors in each country

- PI is responsible for Cohort Maintenance

- Lead Qualitative Researchers and qualitative research teams

- Coordinated by team in Oxford

- Differing academic backgrounds and training:

- Social anthropologists, nutritionists, social workers, child protection specialists, educationists, economists, policy specialists

- Assumptions about children...

Mirrors?

- Power relations working within and across teams

- Status hierarchies within countries – and relationship to Oxford

- Normative assumptions about childhood and youth - what children 'should be' doing, what they can 'know'

- Eg Teachers' views of 'poor' children/parents (Arathi Sriprakash)

- Reflections back - and managing this.

1. Age:

- Eurocentric view – Chronological

- Functional

- Relational

- Date of birth

- ILO Minimum Age Convention 138

- Fixation on numerical age obliterates notions of seniority, importance of intergenerational relationships, and gendered chains of care

2. 'Adolescence' and 'transitions'

- 'Discovery' of adolescence globally – exacerbated by MDGs?

- All cultures have ways of marking the end of childhood and onset of social adulthood (Montgomery 2009)

- In global North = pathological state to be feared & needing treatment

- Implies becoming, deficiency, 'too young'

- Uncritically exported to Global South – eg Child marriage & early marriage become 'Teenage motherhood'

3. Family:

- Assumptions about ideal family form: now accepted in eg UK that families differ (this was a battle)

- BUT being exported to global South – imagery of nuclear, two-child (Heron, 2015)

- 'Broken homes' rhetoric - uncritical imitation of criminology claims in western nations by colonized nations (Ibrahim, 2015).

- Relational, generational approach?

Child work is common. Exploitative or dangerous work causes harm but some work can be a positive way in which children develop skills and take part in their community. Find out more at Our policy work.

5. Children's agency/ 'voice'

- Critique of 'Voices of the Poor' - well-established critique now in childhood studies

- First unpack assumptions about children

- Build credibility

- Ambiguous, constrained agency, 'agency as vulnerability' (Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi 2013)

Limitations of theories

- Dominance of economics in policy-setting – lack of theory and conceptualisation - 'othering' of development studies/international development

- Getting beyond 'just another example' (Balagopalan 2011)

- 'Universalisms become ethically problematic (or indeed ethically violent) when they fail to take into consideration the contexts upon which they are imposed' (Hopkins and Sriprakash 2015)

- Relational sociology – Alanen, Bourdieu, Connell + Critical realism
- Get over the 'it's very complicated' problem. It is.
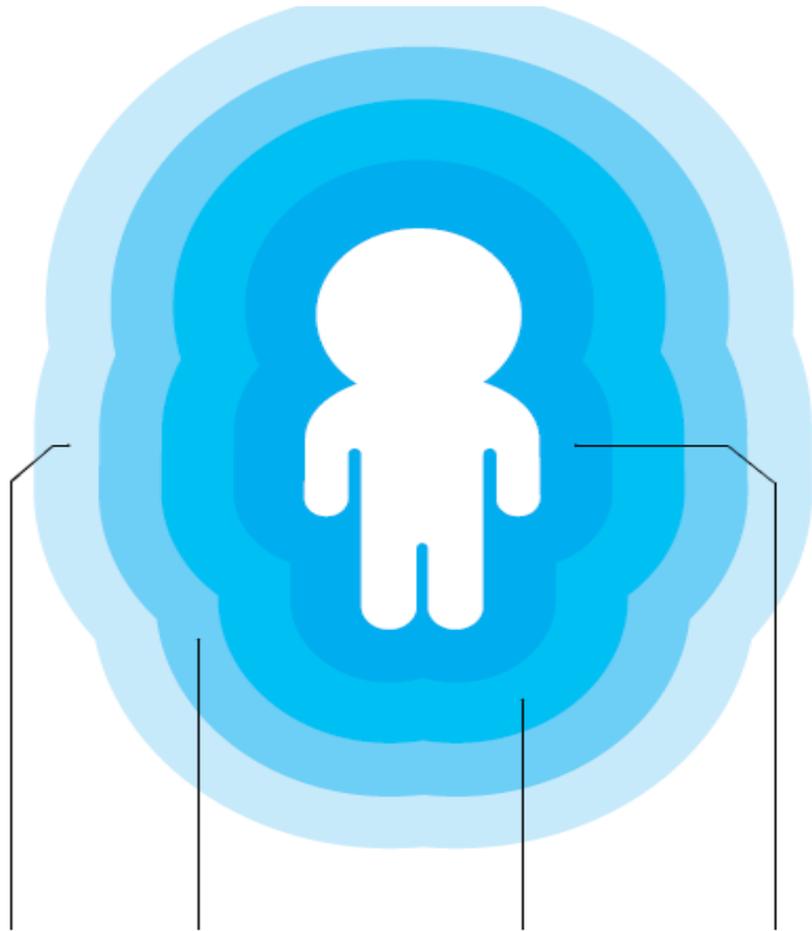
Providing children with an environment that facilitates and nurtures resilience for when violence does occur to help them cope and recover.

Redefining power relationships in age, gender, race, socio-economic status and sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression.

Listening to children to understand their concerns and circumstances.

Providing all persons who care for children with knowledge and skills so that their care is protective.

Reasons to be pessimistic?

- Difficulty of dissipating 'smoke' – reliance on models
- *'theoretical frameworks developed in the metropole become embedded in the intellectual work of the periphery, not by the exercise of direct control, but by the way the whole economy of knowledge is organised'* (Connell 2014 p524).
- Publishing conventions

- Children 'mirror' - 'AIDS orphans' 'I've got low self-esteem'

- Research agenda set by donors/NGOs – interventions

- Neo-liberalism – derangement – 'responsibilisation'

Reasons to be optimistic?

- Get beyond boundaries while respecting difference
- Patiently critique assumptions (smoke)
- Be aware of mirrors – try to see 'through the looking glass' (Reynolds 1990)
- To bring about change, first we need to *understand*
- Communicate effectively about theories, models and ideas for solutions
- Mainstream childhood/youth into fields of enquiry including economics, development studies (law? education?)
- Create intellectual spaces within NGOs/international aid machinery for theory-building (Connell 2014)
- Do no harm.

New Global Goals/SDGs

- UN GA 2014:

  "Many children find themselves living with multiple risks and multiple hazards ... action must be on the basis of mappings of vulnerability that reflects these complexities"

- **Sustainable Development Goals** –Goal 1: aims to eradicate extreme poverty and halve the proportion of men, women and children living in poverty

- Data will be disaggregated by age

- Children/youth will no longer be invisible in statistics

- Universal – across locations and boundaries – open up a space to get beyond binaries.

www.younglives.org.uk

- methods and research papers
- datasets (UK Data Archive)
- publications
- child profiles and photos
- e-newsletter
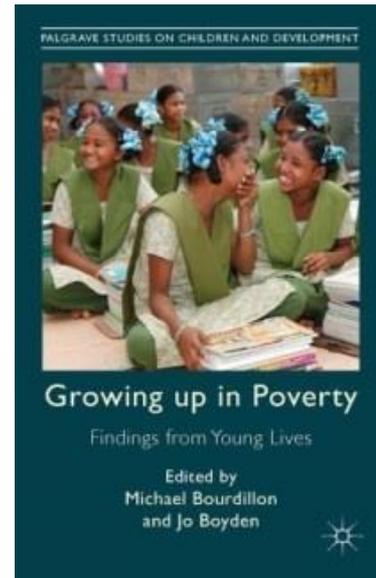
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