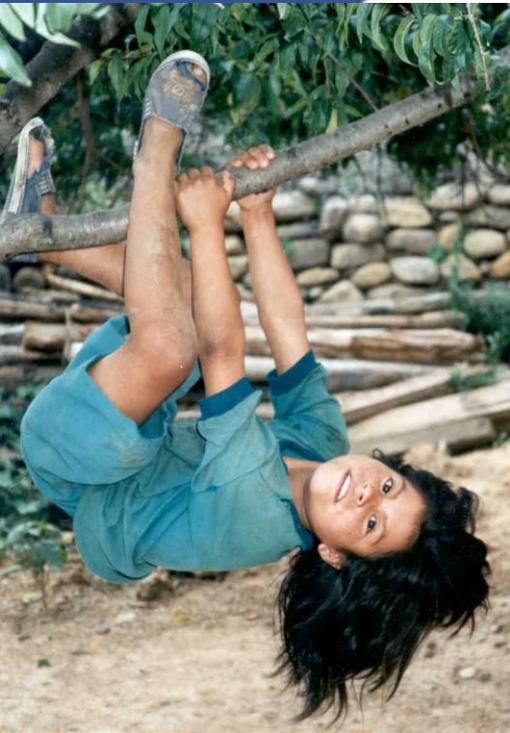# Limitations and Opportunities of Cross-disciplinary and Cross-world Dialogue in Childhood Studies

Prof. Samantha Punch

- limited inter-disciplinary communication

- gap between academia and policy / practice

- lack of dialogue and cross-cultural learning between childhoods in Majority and Minority Worlds

Learning Across Majority & Minority Worlds

- Drawing on literature from both contexts
  - *Children and Young People's Relationships* (Punch & Tisdall 2013)
  - *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood & Youth (*Panelli et al.2007)

- Katz's work in the US and Sudan
  - revealing the "unexpected connections among disparate places" (2004, p. xiv)
  - rare comparison of changing childhoods

- Cross-learning opportunities still relatively rare
  - Jeffrey and Dyson (2008): *Telling Young Lives*
  - Chawla (2002) *Growing Up in an Urbanising World*

  More inter-disciplinary, cross-world dialogue bridging the divide between academia and practice (Punch 2016)

The Generational Order

- Alanen and Mayall (2001)
  - 'generationing' as a structural feature of child-adult interactions
  - 'childing' and 'adulting' practices

- Less developed theoretically than the gender order?
  - Gender mainstreamed into development but age is still marginalised
  - Multi-disciplinarity of childhood studies (Alanen 2012)

Pervasiveness of agency

- To counteract models of child development and socialization; not passive/victims

- "*A much used but largely unexamined concept*" (Mizen and Ofusu-Kusi 2013: 363)

- Vague and lack of clarity:

  - "*ability to act creatively and to make things happen*" (James 2009: 42)

- *What is less clear is the degree of agency, the impact of that agency, let alone the nature of that agency* (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007: 242)

Questioning agency

…should certainly be a contested and scrutinised concept rather than one which is taken-for-granted, unproblematised or assumed inherently to be positive and desired by all children and young people. (Tisdall & Punch 2012: 256)

Adult power: not always negative (Benwell 2013)

– Polarised: adults only see vulnerability (Payne 2012; Pells 2012) or inappropriate agency?

– Vulnerability as driving agency rather than as denying children's capacity to act (Mizen & Ofusu-Kusi 2013)

– Ambiguous agency? (Bordonaro & Payne 2012)

Problematising Agency

- Not polarised as active or passive

  – "*a simple binary, having or not having agency, capacity and power*" (Oswell 2013: 269)

- Continuum of agency (Robson et al. 2007)

  – varies depending on opportunistic and constrained contexts, created and expected identities, positions of power/lessness, lifecourse stage, and state of emotions and wellbeing

Majority World contexts

- Thicker / thinner (Klocker 2007: 85)

    – *"'thin' agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives. 'Thick' agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options."*

- Tactical agency (Honwana 2005:49)

    – *"… cope with the concrete and immediate conditions of their lives … Their actions, however, come from a position of weakness."*

Relationality

- More relational

  – White and Choudhury (2010): children's agency not autonomous, supported by adults

  – Collective agency rather than individualised

- Focus on relationships
(Hopkins and Pain 2007; Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2013; Jamieson and Milne 2012)

- Negotiated interdependencies
(Punch 2001a, 2015b)

Gap between academic discourse and policy/practice

- Discourses of vulnerability & victimhood vs agency & participation
  - Eg. Pells (2012) children in Rwanda

- Adults imposing moral judgements
  - Payne (2012) child-headed households in Zambia: who is at risk and from whose point of view?

    - Agency treated tokenistically in practice

Explaining the Gap

- Children's agency needs to be understood from adults' and children's perspectives

- Language of academic discourse of childhood studies is not accessible enough?

- Or not appropriate/relevant to apply to everyday practice? ('impact')

- Indicates problem of over-emphasising agency and not locating it within the generational order

Way forward?

[Not] … "*to see children's agency everywhere or to see it as a universal, unitary phenomon. It is the task of a sociology of children to document that capacity when observed, but also to recognise incapacity, abuse, power relationality, torture and exploitation. But the task also relies on a recognition of children's dependency*."
(Oswell 2013: 280)

Children's agency needs qualifying in relation to the Generational Order

Negotiated and constrained interdependencies exist both **within and across the generations**

- Explicitly bringing in the generational order
  - Part of the structural context (Punch 2015a)

- Intergenerationality
  - Patterns of intergenerational change (Vanderbeck 2007)

- Intragenerationality
  - Roles of siblings and birth order (Evans 2014)
  - Peers, friends, partners (Punch 2015b)

Cross-cultural learning: applicability to Minority World?

- Generational Order: includes intra-generational relations - neglected? (Evans 2014)

- Age, birth order & sibling composition: intra-generational factors shaping the generational order
  - household divisions of labour (Punch 2001)
  - the generationing of power: eg. parental vs sibling power (Punch 2005)

- Birth order still over-looked as a social variable (cf. gender, class, ethnicity)

Negotiated and constrained interdependencies within and across generations

- Indicates the dynamic and contingent nature of children's agency
  - situated in a social and cultural context

- Enabling and constraining processes
  - positive and negative aspects of agency and interdependencies from generational perspectives

- Within the generational order
  - focus on relational processes
  - intergenerational and intragenerational relations
    - Illustrates potential for dialogue across Majority & Minority Worlds (Punch & Tisdall 2012)

Global Childhood Studies

- Despite the wealth of empirical material which has emerged across the sub-disciplines of childhood studies over the past two decades, why is there a **lack of inter-disciplinary dialogue** in the field?

- Despite many positive moves forward, why does there continue to be a **gap between the academic discourse of childhood studies and arenas of policy and practice**?

- Despite there being many empirical studies of childhoods in the Minority World and separate studies exploring Majority World childhoods**, why have the two literatures separately emerged** rather than benefiting from learning across cultural contexts?

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