How can we understand the thoughts and experiences of young people in the past? This question lies at the heart of my scholarship and my teaching. It is also one that can be difficult to answer using conventional historical methods and archival research. The challenges involved in doing children’s history have led me to embrace the methodologies and insights offered by a number of other fields, including feminist theory, sociology, and geography (see Alexander, “Can”; Alexander, “Picturing”). Thinking across disciplines, I have learned, forces us to consider carefully and to articulate our methods and interpretative frameworks. It also highlights the limits and the possibilities of concepts and keywords that have influence across disciplinary borders.

It is as a historian of childhood with interdisciplinary leanings, then, that I want to use this essay to argue that “agency,” a term embraced by child and youth scholars from a range of fields, needs to be rethought and used far more critically than it is most often. I also want to make a case for the intellectual potential offered by the concept of “emotion work.”

Agency
The Oxford English Dictionary defines “agency” as “action, [or the] capacity to act.” Often associated with freedom, individual selfhood, intentionality, and choice, the term is ubiquitous in approaches to the study of young people within the humanities and the social sciences. A keyword search for “agency” in the journal Children’s Geographies, for example, brings up 340 articles published between 2003 and 2015, on subjects including “the role of agency in the support networks of child-headed households in Zambia” (Payne), “young people’s agency in the active negotiation of risk and safety in public space” (van der Bergt), and Moroccan children “between agency and repression” (Vacchiano and Jiminez).

The popularity of the term “agency” in Children’s Geographies and other scholarly publications about
young people owes much to the cross-disciplinary influence of the “new social studies of childhood.” Established in the 1990s by British sociologists Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, this approach to the study of children and youth rejected developmental frameworks by emphasizing the socially constructed nature of childhood, insisting that children’s cultures and relationships are worth studying in their own right, and claiming that young people must themselves be understood as agents and social actors. This emphasis on valuing children’s voices, recognizing their agency, and seeing them as “beings” rather than “becomings” also had particular salience in the years following the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 (see Tilleczek).

Like the understanding of agency that continues to spur the production of dissertations, articles, and books in child and youth studies, the notion of rights that underpins the UNCRC has its roots in European Enlightenment thinking about the individual. Along with freedom and progress, “agency” (the individual choice and capacity to act) underlay the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal and utilitarian thinking of men like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill.

The concept of agency influenced twentieth-century thinking as well, perhaps most obviously in the efforts of social historians to uncover and to understand the lives of women, workers, and colonized people. The archetypal example of this type of scholarship, of course, is E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, a monograph through which Thompson aimed to “rescue” Luddites, handloom weavers, and stockingers from “the enormous condescension of posterity” by focusing on working-class cultures and agency (12). In this and many other respects, Thompson owed a clear debt to Karl Marx, most particularly to Marx’s insistence, in his 1852 essay “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” that “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past” (89).

The idea that all humans exercise agency but are constrained in doing so by a variety of forces has inspired a range of scholars to analyze and to recentre the lives and the narratives of people who had been excluded from positions of power and from mainstream historical scholarship. It was central, for example, to the development of both women’s history and “history from below,” an academic approach that, as the British historian Tim Hitchcock notes in a blog post dated July 2015, prioritizes marginalized voices and “demand[s] that the reader empathise with individual men and women caught in a whirl of larger historical changes.” While the practitioners of history from below and of the new social studies of childhood have had little, if anything, to say to one another, both fields share an
emphasis on agency and on a desire to pay respectful attention to individuals who were understood previously as silent, passive, or powerless.

This impulse has shaped my own work on the history of girls and girlhood. Inspired by these fields and by feminist and postcolonial theory, my research analyzes the place of race, gender, class, and age in the Girl Guide movement during the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, however, I have sought to uncover how girls in Canada, India, and England understood and responded to the Guide movement's character-training program. The actions and choices of individual Guides, like those of Thompson's stockingers and Luddites, were shaped and constrained by a range of factors beyond their control. These girls’ responses to the adult-led dictates of Guiding (which focused on conservative visions of motherhood and citizenship during a time of rapid social and cultural change) included laughing and choosing to take part in some activities and not others. More often than not, however, girls participated without argument or complaint—a far cry from the oppositional behaviour and street-level clashes that fill the pages of books and articles about juvenile justice, moral regulation, and the early history of the Boy Scouts (see Myers and Sangster; Davies).

The types of resistance discussed in these other bodies of literature simply fail to capture the actions and choices of most of the 1.5 million young members of the interwar Guide movement. In part, this is a reflection of the ways in which the voices and actions of all girls were especially hard to find in the mostly adult-produced textual sources held in various Guide archives. Privileging public forms of agency and equating the term with resistance, as many historians have, limits our ability to understand...
girls’ choices and actions. Is being obedient, for example, a form of agency? Is it a lesser form of agency? Mary Jo Maynes highlights this particular problem with her insistence that trying to think “about girls as historical agents goes right to the heart of the contradictions in modern conceptualizations of individual agency as epitomized by rational choice models” (116).

Regardless of these difficulties, many historians of childhood continue to understand the “uncovering” of young people’s agency as one of the central goals of the field. In their agenda-setting article published in the first issue of *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, for example, Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner seek to remind scholars of their professional duty to “resist any historiographical trend” that “denies [children] historical agency” (46). Do historians (and the trends that shape their scholarship) really have the power to “grant” or “deny” agency to the subjects of their work? What nuances and specificities are lost when studies of young people in vastly different times and places all base their analyses on the uniform claim that their subjects had some kind of agency?

**Emotion Work**

Looking for “agency,” as child and youth scholars from across the humanities and social sciences continue to do in large numbers, is a flawed intellectual project. It can flatten out differences across time and place, miss or minimize girls’ actions and choices, and obscure the social relations and power imbalances that shape young people’s lives. One potential way out of this problem is through a more sustained engagement with the concept of “emotion work.” Coined by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, emotion work is a type of labour that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (7). While Hochschild’s book (an early, foundational text in affect studies) focuses on the paid emotional labour expected of female flight attendants, children and adolescents also are called upon frequently to perform exactly this kind of affective labour. Asking about the emotion work expected of young people has the potential to enrich and to alter our understanding of children’s lives and cultures in the present and in the past. Of particular relevance to scholars of girlhood, it also provides a tool with which to name and to critique unequal power relations while complicating the conventional understanding of “agency” as the exercise of individual choice.

Whereas the word “agency” appears in over three hundred articles published in *Children’s Geographies* during the past twelve years, a keyword search for the term “emotion work” in the same journal yields only three results, none of which cites Hochschild or
engages with her use of the term. Carolyn Gaskell’s article focuses on the emotions of adult scholars, Sophie Hadfield-Hill and John Horton’s examines the emotions produced in adults and young people during the research encounter, and Jeni Harden’s discusses children’s negotiation of physical and emotional regulation in schools. In this last piece, Harden also discusses her search for “agency” in a sentence that echoes Marx remarkably closely: “While there was some evidence of children flouting the restrictions placed on them, the extent to, and the ways in which, children can act, is limited by their location in the social structure” (91).

These analyses of children’s experiences with schooling and academic research, while valuable in their own right, do not address one particularly important setting where age- and gender-based power relations combine often to create expectations about emotion work: the family. The affective familial model in which emotion work is expected of dependent children is tied to the emergence of what Viviana A. Zelizer famously has called the ideal of “the economically useless but emotionally priceless child” (1). Instead of contributing wages to the family economy, this modern “priceless” child was to be put to work in other ways: in return for the financial support supplied by their parents, young people were “expected to provide love, smiles, and emotional satisfaction” (1).

Zelizer, an economic sociologist writing in the mid-1980s, was interested primarily in the ways in which legal, commercial, and social welfare institutions reflected shifting American ideas about the economic and social value of children between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Her comment that modern children were expected to give their parents love and “emotional satisfaction” was almost an aside, and its implications only now are being taken up more fully by historians of children and youth (see Vallgårda, Alexander, and Olsen). There are echoes of Zelizer and Hochschild’s work in current children’s geographies scholarship as well; Karen Wells, for example, has argued recently that international adoptees often are called upon to do the emotional work of completing white, middle-class families.

The family-based emotion work expected of modern young people, which often includes demonstrating love and producing happiness in others, consistently places more pressure on girls than on boys. This point is illustrated especially clearly in Sara Ahmed’s work on happiness, which traces how the expectation that some people should make others happy has been “used historically as an argument for sustaining a gendered division of labour” (53). The gendered nature of the emotion work expected of young people, Ahmed shows, has its roots in the eighteenth century—in texts by the same European men whose ideas shaped our current conception of agency.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*, a book that had a profound influence on Western thinking about childhood and education, also introduced the idea that the goal of girls’ education should be to learn how to make men happy. A feminine education, Rousseau insisted, should encourage a “quiet, modest bearing.” More importantly, though, its ultimate aim was to ensure the satisfaction and well-being of man by tending and consoling him in order to “make his life pleasant and happy”: “The further we depart from this principle, the further we shall be from our goal, and all our precepts will fail to secure her happiness or our own” (393).

Making others happy by acting in “selfless” ways and managing one’s own emotions continued to be part of girls’ formal and informal education throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Dyhouse). During the early twentieth century, the global Girl Guide movement emphasized the importance of girls’ emotion work along with camping and domestic skills. Throughout the interwar years, Guide magazines published numerous articles extolling the social benefits of acting cheerful and making others happy. One article on “Citizenship” in the October 1922 issue of *The Girl Guides’ Gazette*, for example, lauded the unequal distribution of affective and domestic work along age, gender, and class lines: “In private life, we can make those round us easy or uneasy, happy or unhappy, by our conduct, our manner, our fashion of speech, our attitude towards our daily duties. A scowling, ungracious daughter, a scolding wife, an impatient mother, a forgetful and careless help, an unwilling worker, brings discredit on all those offices” (Boyle 189).

Prescriptive texts like *Emile* and Girl Guide periodicals tell us much about the hopes and fears of educators and social commentators. Yet they furnish few clues about how young people understood the ideas they contained. More recent sociological research, however, provides clear evidence of how emotion work has shaped some young women’s lives. In their study of the well-being, social development, and family functioning of adolescents in Canadian military families during the war in Afghanistan, Deborah Harrison and Patrizia Albanese found that it is daughters far more than sons who take on additional emotional and domestic work when a parent is deployed. This work includes masking feelings, acting cheerful, and monitoring and trying to improve the emotional states of other family members.

The emotion work expected of daughters is depicted as well in the 2015 Pixar animated film *Inside Out*, which follows the memories and the anthropomorphized emotions of an eleven-year-old girl named Riley as she moves with her parents from Minnesota to San Francisco. A cross-country move, like the military deployment of a parent, is a stressful life change, and the movie tracks how Joy, once the
dominant emotion in Riley’s brain, is challenged by Anger, Disgust, Fear, and Sadness. In one dinnertime scene, Riley’s mother praises her for remaining “our happy girl” throughout the turmoil of their move and asks her to remain “happy” for the sake of her father. When Riley expresses sadness and anger at the dinner table, her father chastises her for being “disrespectful.” The take on emotion work in this film attracted some comment in the media, with one New York Times reviewer writing that it “turns a critical eye on the way the duty to be cheerful is imposed on children, by well-intentioned adults and by the psychological mechanisms those grown-up authorities help to install” (Scott). This critique of emotion work is blunted, however, by a conventionally happy ending in which Joy and Sadness co-operate, Riley acquires “great new friends [and a] great new house,” and she has an awkward but heterosexually promising encounter with a boy at one of her hockey games.

The long-term consistency of cultural scripts telling girls that they have a duty to make others (often men) happy is striking. It highlights the fact that childhood in the present, as in the past, continues to be defined by age- and gender-based expectations and hierarchies. These imbalances of power, of course, are what made “agency” such an attractive concept in the first place. Instead of abandoning it altogether, then, we need to think carefully about its origins and limits by also employing new keywords like “emotion work.”

Works Cited

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