



## **Questioning, Debating, and Problematizing Agency in Childhood Studies Research**

—Kaitlynn Weaver

Esser, Florian, Meike S. Baader, Tanja Betz, and Beatrice Hungerland, editors. *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*, Routledge, 2016. 297 pp. \$160.00 hc. ISBN 9781138854192.

Since the implementation of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), childhood studies scholars have defined children's agency as the ability to participate in—rather than be protected from—the social world. However, the editors of *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood* claim that, in most childhood studies research, this definition of “agency” is conceptualized as an inherently positive, individualized trait of modernity, a quality that naturally exists within children and simply needs to be “uncovered” by researchers (7). This anthology, which includes chapters by experts in the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies, is the first book to systematically propose a deconstructed and post-structural concept of children's agency that explores how actions are promoted or restricted throughout social relationships and environments. By problematizing agency, the

editors also call into question past research that has overemphasized “classic dualisms of personality and society, child and adult, action and structure, and so on” (48). Instead, this book argues that childhood and agency are fluid, performative, socially constructed, and relational. Thus, this anthology begins an ongoing and rich discussion among childhood studies theorists in which new theoretical, historical, and transnational perspectives about agency and childhood are explored.

*Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood* is organized in five sections. It begins with a comprehensive introduction by editors Florian Esser (sociology and education), Meike S. Baader (education), Tanja Betz (childhood studies and education), and Beatrice Hungerland (childhood studies) that critiques the continued exclusion of young people from childhood studies research. The introduction identifies

a “new” era in the field of childhood studies, one that followed the implementation of the UNCRC and ran from the late 1980s into the early 2000s (although the writers acknowledge that many of these research paradigms existed years earlier). This period was characterized by a normative use of the term “agency.” However, the editors argue that recent work in childhood studies has constructed “[a] substantialist concept of the actor and the child [that] is based on a de-historicized, de-socialised, individual-centred idea of action” (6). Therefore, this book makes the case for a “reconceptualised agency” that comprises “social relations and interdependency instead of independence and autonomy” (9).

The essays in Section I, “Theoretical Perspectives,” propose a range of theories that complicate agency by treating it as produced socially rather than individually, through relationships among children, adults, and their environments. Childhood sociologist David Oswell opens this discussion while also exploring how disciplines such as developmental psychology can be renegotiated as “sites for the *invention* of methods and as *resources* for making children and childhood observable” (29). He argues that the methods are not the problem, but rather that the researcher’s ontologies essentialize children and their actions (30). In chapter 2, childhood studies scholars Sabine Bollig and Helga Kelle argue that practice theory—which implies that children do not *produce* practices or their subject positions but “*become* actors as the practices are being performed” (39, emphasis added)—

can be effectively applied to research with and about children. In this way, both agency (the child’s actions) and the actor’s subject positions (the “child”) combine to (re)produce children as children through a multitude of heterogeneous and unpredictable social practices. Bollig and Kelle also argue that children can challenge or sustain these performances over time, both of which are demonstrations of agency (45).

In chapter 3, editor Florian Esser argues—by incorporating relational social theories—that agency can be reconceptualised as a social relationship that includes both humans and non-humans. Relational social theories explore how children’s potential or ability to act is enabled or constrained by their intersections of identity and thus how children interact with their social worlds. In this way, childhood, agency, and their social worlds are theorized interdependently. In chapter 4, sociologist Anne Wihstutz agrees with Esser that relational social theories can further nuance agency as a social relationship in childhood studies research. Thus, Wihstutz argues for a “feminist ethics of care” perspective, since both children and adults require care and support as a result of experiences of adversity. Wihstutz acknowledges, however, that needs are heterogeneous and are therefore expressed differently depending on social context (64).

In chapter 5, childhood studies scholar Priscilla Alderson and educational scholar Tamaki Yoshida use a theoretical framework of critical realism to demonstrate how Tanzanian children’s abilities to act are constrained



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because of neo-liberal, neo-colonial, and generational hierarchies between children and adults. However, they argue that children also possess agency in their everyday lives, since “real agency is influenced by resources and structures but not determined by them” (81). Unlike other scholars, Alderson and Yoshida argue that “[o]nly the human agent can enact agency,” and that, although agency can be conceptualized in many different ways, agency is real when humans interact with their social worlds (86).

Finally, in chapter 6, educational scholar Eberhard Raitelhuber argues that agency must be not only nuanced—as other scholars have suggested—but completely redefined, so that the term loses its “essentialist, individualist, and naturalist aura” (99). Interestingly, however, his perspective approaches those of the other scholars when he claims that agency must be redefined through “relational/relativistic approaches to the social” (89).

Section II, “Children as Actors in Research,” addresses some of the theoretical and methodological challenges—including the “tendency to equate agency with authenticity” (9)—that arise when adults study children’s experiences. In chapter 7, sociologist Spyros Spyrou explores how the academic search for children’s “authentic voice,” like the pursuit of “agency,” has fallen short. Spyrou argues that researchers should instead begin to “trouble” essentialized notions of identity, voice, and agency by theorizing each category as performative, contradictory, and ambiguous (109). In chapter 8, sociologist Hanne Warming argues that socially constructed identities of “adult” and “child” are flexible and can be performed inversely to demonstrate children’s agency to influence the research process (119). This, Warming argues, “breaks with what is regarded as a ‘natural’ role in the field” of researcher and

participant and child and adult (121), without assuming that power relations between children and adults can be completely suspended.

Section III, “Agency in Historical Perspective,” argues that normative assumptions about agency and childhood consistently shift based on historical context. Editor Meike S. Baader begins this section by arguing that the transformation from the “vulnerable” to the “strong” child did not begin in the late 1980s with the development of the “new” childhood studies. Instead, these representations had begun shifting with changes in educational paradigms since the nineteenth century. For example, Baader states that in the early 1900s, Germany experienced a movement toward progressive education that defined children as “strong and autonomous” (141), while the Kinderlâden movement in West Germany encouraged children to resist adult authority. Baader argues that these movements—like the “new” childhood studies paradigm—essentialized children’s agency and thus the children themselves (146).

In chapter 10, Günter Mey demonstrates that a study conducted by psychologist Martha Muchow in Hamburg, Germany, in the 1920s and 1930s can inform methodological frameworks for research being done with or about children today. Muchow used a form of methodological triangulation by analyzing previous theories of urban perception and connecting those to observations of and interviews with working-class children to explore how young people both influence

and are influenced by their environments (153). This chapter demonstrates that research with young people cannot access “the child’s perspective” (158), and therefore requires researchers to be self-reflexive in order to “keep the difference between adults and children perpetually in view” (160).

Finally, in chapter 11, editor Beatrice Hungerland explores how representations of children have changed in parenting books published since the 1950s because of the shifts in educational paradigms discussed in chapter 9. This section of the book argues that while childhood and agency have been addressed in the past, they have manifested themselves differently based on historical context. This section also contributes to recent criticism of the UNCRC by demonstrating that children were recognized as having opinions and desires decades before its implementation.

The authors in Section IV, “Transnational and Majority World Perspectives of Agency,” propose a (post)colonial and transnational outlook on childhood and agency to disrupt the universalizing construct of “the Western child.” In chapter 12, sociologist Samantha Punch argues that “by engaging in a cross-cultural dialogue between the majority and minority worlds [as well as academic and policy discourse], our understanding of children’s agency could be enhanced” (183). Further, she contends that agency must be recognized when children are both vulnerable to and resistant of adults. Next, childhood sociologist Hia Sen explores how notions of liberal

agency have translated into a South Asian context, creating a “representational conundrum” for childhood and subaltern scholars searching for a homogeneous, subaltern, and powerless speaker (206). Instead, Sen argues that studying the lives of protected, middle-class Bengali children could be used to “go against the grain” (207) of current scholarship that looks for a specific kind of agency: “the act of defiance or protest” (203).

In chapter 14, educational scholar Laura B. Kayser explores how citizenship and agency are intertwined in the lived experiences of non-working South Indian children who participate in rights movements to oppose child labour. Kayser argues that researchers must consider multiple contextual factors that affect children’s actions to participate in citizenship practices, such as children’s positions in the generational order and children’s rights initiatives in everyday contexts (e.g., schools), as compared to institutional contexts (e.g., protests). Like Sen, Kayser claims that both child workers and children protesting against child labour have agency (222).

The chapters in the final section, “Agency in Institutions of Childhood,” argue that past childhood studies research has disproportionately focused on children’s unsupervised actions. However, since agency is co-produced, children’s actions must also be explored in supervised contexts. Childhood sociologist Claudia Dreke begins the section by analyzing photographs of children taken by German preschool teachers, arguing that these photos can demonstrate generational and

social hierarchies (230). This chapter reconceptualises agency by demonstrating how institutions put children’s positive and “desirable forms of agency” (227) on display, thereby reinforcing generational authority. In chapter 16, social pedagogy scholar Timo Ackermann and social scientist Pierrine Robin explore how children’s actions and experiences are essentialized by German child-protection case files written by social workers and lawyers. This chapter demonstrates that agency “is tied to adults’ representations and understandings of children, and to children’s vulnerabilities and capacities” (252). In chapter 17, educational scholars Torsten Eckermann and Friederike Heinzl argue that institutional identities—such as the “student” and the “teacher”—are (re-)cited by children (256). For example, one student reproduced the role of “educator” by teaching her classmates how to correctly fold a piece of paper (263). This chapter disrupts the notion that agency cannot be seen when children “mimic” institutional identities, stating that the “copy” can never “conform with the ‘original’” (266-67). Finally, educational scholar Frederick de Moll and editor Tanja Betz use a quantitative approach—the only one in the book—to explore how children’s agency can be seen when children challenge or reproduce structural inequalities in schools.

This book provides an important first step to “explicitly and systematically” problematizing agency (1). This is done through insightful conversations and, more importantly, debates between and among authors. According to the

editors, the authors' disagreements are "not regarded as a deficit or disadvantage" (12); they benefit the reader, as they allow for a transnational, theoretical, and historical exploration of agency and childhood in one location. An example of such a debate is Esser's critique of agency as neither "thick" nor "thin," along with the claim that this dichotomous framework becomes obsolete when relational theories are used (48). However, Warming emphasizes children's "thicker" and more empowered agency when the performance of "child" to "adult" is inverted (119). Although disagreeing in some respects, both theorists contribute to the broader argument that agency should be conceptualized as relational and interdependent.

Judging by the theories, discourse, and methodologies used throughout, this book assumes a reader who is well versed in sociological theory and praxis—perhaps a graduate student or faculty member working in the field of childhood studies. However, the collection could greatly benefit any scholar exploring the limitations and possibilities of agency in previous and current childhood studies scholarship. These theoretical conversations provide a nuanced and problematized analysis of agency across contemporary, historical, and transnational contexts that allow this book to do exactly what the title suggests: to provide new perspectives in childhood studies.

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