
Anthropology, Feminism and Childhood Studies

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Childhood, as a socially and culturally shaped category, has become increasingly contested in the current era of restructuring in a rapidly globalized world. Transformations have taken place in everyday life generating a great deal of scholarly attention focused on understanding the ways children face these changes in the context of local, national and globalized political economies. This increased attention has given rise to a rapidly growing interdisciplinary "childhood studies" (see James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Jenkins, 1998; and Jenks 1996) and more specifically, a reinvigorated anthropology of childhood (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Stephens, 1995). This special issue arose from our interest in extending the work of previous feminist scholars in attempting to bring together feminist and anthropological lenses through which to view children and childhood.

Relatively recently, feminist scholars including Barrie Thorne (1987), Ann Oakley (1994) and Leena Alanen (1994) have signalled the need for a broader engagement between feminism and childhood studies by arguing that the feminist rethinking of the "private/public" dichotomy has cast women and children into various public spheres. In emphasizing the need to focus on how "age relations, like gender relations are built into varied institutions and social circumstances" (Thorne 1987: 99), these authors thereby extend prevailing and persuasive feminist critiques to address the nature and effects of the "adulthood" that is systematically embedded in social relations, culture and scholarship itself. These critiques have great relevance because they point both to the ways in which adult/child hierarchies articulate with other forms of oppression (such as those based on gender, class and race) and to the need for greater reflexivity among researchers in understanding their own positionings vis-à-vis different and unequally located children and childhoods. But despite this relevance, few studies have

taken up these issues. The paucity of works that embrace, and build upon, these foundational analyses reveal, we believe, the tenacity of an historically and culturally-bound model of children as pre-social, passive, dependent and part of a private "natural" domestic sphere beyond the realm of social or cultural analysis.

Anthropologists Sharon Stephens (1995), Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Carolyn Sargent (1998), however, have renewed and broadened the anthropology of childhood, citing feminism as an inspiration for this project. As editors they each have (1) drawn attention to parallels between the experiences of women and children, (2) emphasized how feminist theorizing can provide an analytical model for similar work in child research, and (3) included gender as a crucial variable in the creation of diverse and unequal childhoods. Clearly these editors acknowledge the centrality of feminist work in their theoretical thinking about children and childhood. Scheper-Hughes and Sargent (1998: 15) go so far as to argue that, "a child-centred anthropology contains all the elements for a radical paradigm shift, similar to the salutary effects resulting from the feminist critique of the discipline." It is therefore timely to consider ways to link feminist theoretical models and perspectives with childhood studies as we turn the corner of the 21st century.

In this historical moment when undifferentiated and homogenized "children" are simultaneously valorized and a site of moral panic, when far-reaching government pronouncements are increasingly targeting children and the symbol of childhood, anthropological work informed by feminism offers rich documentation of the specific processes (across time and place) that produce varied "childhoods." Importantly, feminist anthropological perspectives acknowledge that, like women, children must be viewed as active creators and reproducers of social relations and culture. Such an approach can provide a much needed and politically important challenge to the often essentialized and universalized "childhood" constructed through dominant discourse and practice.

In bringing together the set of papers for this special issue, it was our intention to contribute to an informed anthropological understanding of childhoods and children's diverse social experiences in a rapidly changing world by building on the debt to feminist scholarship. By attending to the ways in which various childhoods are constructed and experienced within vertical and presumed veridical structures of social inequality at the local level as well as within the broader fields of national and global processes, we have attempted to meet some of the challenges for childhood scholarship set out by Allison James (2000). In particular, we have sought to answer

her call to bring together analyses that represent children as active social agents, who contribute meaningfully to local and globalizing cultural production and circulation, with analyses of how children and adults craft the structural contours of childhood itself. Through our research projects, we have each engaged with this structure/agency dynamic in order to elucidate the cultural logics that inform the relationship between the two. We have focused on the production and significance of differentially constructed categories of childhood and we have taken up the diverse experiences of variously positioned children whose lives are infused with institutionally-based and culturally diffuse power.

Tom O'Neill and Jane Helleiner both expose how very different discourses of nationalism create emergent understandings of childhood and representations of children, girl children in particular. Helleiner uses textual analysis of political debate in post-war Canada to explore how gender, class, race and childhood were often mutually constitutive, while O'Neill combines textual analysis with ethnographic fieldwork to lay bare the processes by which "childhood" is metaphorically extended beyond the lives of children to demarcate national boundaries that were and are being redrawn. In each case constructions of childhood are shown both to obscure and articulate with other subordinated identities of gender, race/ethnicity, and/or region.

O'Neill's focus on the positioning of girls within the international movement of migrant labour that characterizes current waves of globalization, links well with Downe's research with girls involved in transnational networks of prostitution. Both papers point out the limitations of outsiders' accounts that, while problematizing the involvement of girls in such networks, may also cut off investigation of both the social circumstances that propel such movement as well as the girls' own understandings of their work and lives. That the agency of children is often written out of nationalist (and other) constructions of childhood, raises important questions regarding the lived realities of the children themselves. Downe and Caputo make these realities the central focus of their respective papers, examining how violence and voice emerge in the research bound narratives offered by children in different regions of Canada as well as Barbados. Downe's paper in particular follows through on themes of nationalism and globalization established so strongly by Helleiner and O'Neill, while Caputo examines the processes through which children create for themselves spaces within the highly contested terrain of childhood.

The papers by Caputo and Downe elucidate some of the strategies employed by children as they "play" with,

accommodate, contest, and refashion competing identities that include childhood itself. These ethnographic accounts reveal not only the importance of examining the fields of power in which this play takes place but also how the socially produced and categorical identities of "child" remain fragile and embedded within gendered, classed, racialized and national identities. Responding to the aforementioned need for greater reflexivity among researchers, Caputo and Downe offer insight into the generationed politics of anthropological fieldwork. In so doing, nuanced reflections on the process of writing about gendered childhoods emerge throughout both analyses and intersect once again with the rich analyses of political and media-generated discourses set out by Helleiner and O'Neill.

Taken together, the four papers elucidate the complexity of children's lives and the intricacies in conceptualizing and addressing childhoods at different discursive levels, including the macro level of elite political and media discourses as well as the intimate and specific interactions of fieldwork with children. By making relations of power and difference as well as agency and structure central and problematic, we believe that these papers make a strong contribution to the emergent and feminist anthropology of children and childhood.

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