

## **Re-Exploring Childhood Studies**

**Anandini Dar**

[anandini@camden.rutgers.edu](mailto:anandini@camden.rutgers.edu)

**Patrick Cox**

[ptcox@camden.rutgers.edu](mailto:ptcox@camden.rutgers.edu)

### **Introduction**

As graduate students in Childhood Studies, ongoing changes in the field are as much a part of our study as our own research. In the Department of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University, we have explored and observed various trends that have defined this field. A starting point might be Allison James and Alan Prout's (1997) emphatic explication of the field as an 'emergent paradigm' in the 1980s. More recently the field has increasingly been re-evaluated as inter, multi, trans, and cross-disciplinary, as in the 2010 special issue of *Children's Geographies*, 'Viewpoints'. The past 30 years of scholarship and departmental developments have contributed toward creating a definition of the still nascent field, but have also opened pathways for constructive engagement, questioning of past paradigms, and continued work on the definition of the field by emerging scholars who constitute it through our own research and writing.

This special issue is part of the editors' and authors' reflexive work as graduate students to work both in, and on, the field of Childhood Studies. Rather than focusing exclusively on our individual research and allowing the field to develop around us, we choose to deliberately engage with the field and actively take on the work of its development. The papers collected here were first presented at the Exploring Childhood Studies conference, a graduate student conference held in 2010 which was chaired by the editors on behalf of the Graduate Student Organization of the Department of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University-Camden, New Jersey, USA (<http://clam.rutgers.edu/~childgso/conference/index.html>).

The conference was an effort, in the words of our call for papers, to ‘define Childhood Studies by doing childhood studies’. This “doing” included the research and writing of the 36 conference papers as well as the work of the conference organisers. We went to great lengths to ensure that papers from multiple and varied disciplines would be presented at the conference, as we believe a multi-disciplinary approach is a hallmark of our field, but we sought a very specific kind of multi-disciplinarity. While we were interested in papers that reflected multiple disciplines, our aim was to bring together new scholars who studied children and childhoods within single disciplines and unite their papers from across disciplinary boundaries into themed panels. Childhood Studies as a field of research is clearly not limited to departments of Childhood Studies; research around children and childhoods takes place in virtually every department in the academy. For us, truly doing childhood studies meant reaching beyond departmental and disciplinary boundaries.

The theme of the conference was in resonance with the dilemmas, debates, and struggles that emerging scholars in this field face: what is childhood studies? Is there a set research question or method of inquiry? How does one address it within, across, and beyond disciplines? What makes a researcher and research multi-disciplinary? We see it as an asset that this field is far from unified in its methodology, or holding aloft a limited set of research questions, or adhering to a single definition of how knowledge is constituted, though it has been close to this in the past.

James and Prout’s declaration of an ‘emergent paradigm’ advanced the field greatly in bringing about an increased awareness of children’s issues internationally and in the academy. It also led to a proliferation of studies designed to specifically locate children’s ‘agency’ with a heavy emphasis on ethnography as the preferred methodology, even while claiming to promote an inter-disciplinary approach. What was accomplished was a shift in the dominance of childhood studies from a developmental perspective to a sociological one. Methodologically and theoretically, we find both perspectives when adopted by themselves equally constraining. Further, the approach to agency within this paradigm indicates an emphasis on the child as actively working upon structures. James and Prout write that, ‘there

must be theoretical space for both the construction of childhood as an institution and the activity of children within, and upon, the constraints and possibilities that the institutional level creates' (1997, 27). This has done invaluable service in terms of defining the emerging field of childhood studies, and offered new ways of informing rights and policy decisions influencing children. It has also, however, resulted on the insistence of the study of agency of children as always informing or acting upon institutional and structural constraints, at all times. One conference attendee expressed just this insistence in our post-conference survey:

ONE OF THE CARDINAL ISSUES IN CHILDHOOD STUDIES IS THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND RECOGNITION OF CHILDREN AS ACTIVE AGENTS CAPABLE OF INFLUENCING DECISIONS THAT CONCERN THEIR LIVES. I DID NOT SEE THIS ELEMENT EMPHASIZED OR ADVANCED IN SOME OF THE PAPERS. AS AN EMERGING DISCIPLINE ONE WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT A CONFERENCE OF THIS NATURE SHOULD HAVE BEEN USED AS A PLATFORM TO RE-ECHO THIS ELEMENT (emphasis theirs).

This attendee confirms the emphasis on agency is alive and well. That the papers at the conference and in this issue do not place a primacy on child agents as social reformers is deliberate on our part.

As Childhood Studies slowly becomes a discipline rather than a multi-disciplinary area of study, it develops the usual trappings of other disciplines: its own jargon, definitions of knowledge, theoretical and epistemological presumptions, canonical texts, and foundational concepts, all of which are inevitably constraining. An over-emphasis on child's active agency is one such development that limits research possibilities. Several of the writers in this issue intentionally situate their work in opposition to this directive, choosing instead to move the field beyond this rigid emphasis on children as active social agents. Rather, the papers herein move to the fore an agency that exists in context of structure; even the most agentic child lives in an agency/structure relationship. The papers that follow study children and childhoods in their social, economic, cultural and political structural settings. Child-centric research need not, and should not, be synonymous with agency-centric, though an emphasis on it no doubt fulfilled a valuable function some twenty years ago. Instead, in research on children, the

interplay of structure and agency is of greater use than one that focuses on and theorizes agency as social change.

The struggle to define the field methodologically as inter, multi, trans, and cross-disciplinary is still contested as well. The conference and this special issue are ways in which we envision the field of Childhood Studies to cross disciplinary boundaries, both practically and theoretically. Our effort has been to draw together divergent disciplines, perspectives, and methods into multi-disciplinary collections. Each panel at the Exploring Childhood Studies conference brought together researchers whose works were united around common subjects. They each came with different disciplinary backgrounds, philosophies of knowledge and knowledge production, disciplinary argot, and divergent truth values. Yet together, they made for unique collaborations; the multi-faceted approach constructed by the juxtaposition of scholars from diverse disciplines shed more light on their subjects than any single mixed method study might have done. We see great potential in this collaborative communication that places disciplinary works in conversation with one another across disciplinary divides as a way forward for future conferences and for the field of Childhood Studies.

### **Breakdown of Chapters**

What appears in this issue of *Childhoods Today* are the papers from two of the 12 collaborative panels. The first, 'Children at Play', was chaired by Patrick Cox and the second, 'Children and Poverty', by Marianne Modica.

All the papers in the collection on 'Children at Play' examine not only play, but children's identity construction through play. At times this play is self-directed by children, at others its form is imposed by adults, while other play is a mix of the two. Though the papers describe play in different historical periods, places, and media, the authors find children actively working out identities and social roles in concert with, and at times in opposition to, adult ideas of what those roles should be.

The first paper, “‘Little Children are Constructed of Malleable Materials’: Conceptions of Children and Childhood in Anna Chapin Ray’s Playground Books” by Deborah Valentine takes up adult constructions of play space most explicitly, and through it adult intentions on child identity. Valentine offers insight to the role of ‘child-savers’ in the US in the late nineteenth century, gleaning unique findings from unique source materials that call into question our understanding of Progressive Era approaches to child development. She examines two novels by a nineteenth century playground proponent and unearths early and surprising thoughts on early childhood. She also demonstrates an unsung but profound role of women in the playground movement.

Suzanne Eyerman brings an educator’s perspective to children’s play in her paper, ‘Who’s the Boss? Children Learning to Negotiate Unwritten Social Rules Through Play’. Eyerman observes children working through temporary breakdowns in communication while playing in school and camp settings. Through these moments and a shared understanding of group goals, Eyerman contends, children teach themselves about relating to one another outside of adult direction.

Finally, Chana Etengoff expands the definition of playgrounds to virtual spaces in ‘Playing with Pixels: Youth, Identity, and Virtual Play Spaces’, contrasting and comparing virtual play spaces with traditional physical play spaces. For Etengoff, Teen Second Life is both an adult construction reflecting adult’s intentions and a space which teenage users actively construct along with adults. Through both adult planning and youth activity within the adult-created virtual space, Etengoff sees identity work taking place—sometimes at the hands of adults, sometimes in response to adults, and sometimes in youth directed ways unimagined by the creators of Teen Second Life.

The papers from the Poverty panel explore diverse social, historical and geographical contexts and conditions affecting poor children globally. The two papers selected for this publication examine the everyday lives of poor children in contemporary times, as well as the institutional mechanisms of assistance these children are situated within. While the papers

adopt and offer divergent theories for their critique of the institutional efforts at improving poor children's lives, both authors describe how children's behaviors as well as their interactions and relationships with the adults influence, affect, and can inform the structural interventions.

In her paper 'Designed to control, destined to fail? Disciplinary practices at an inner-city elementary school in the United States', Anne Scheer offers valuable instances of poor children's daily challenges and difficulties with rules and punishment at their school. Through detailed accounts from her ethnography at an inner-city school in America, supplemented by a Foucauldian analysis of discipline, Scheer argues that rules and punishment at schools create inconsistencies and tensions between children and teachers, and result in the failure of schools to create a safe space to support poor children's education.

In the final paper of this issue, Aviva Sinervo tackles the subject of aid and assistance for "poor children" in her paper, 'Connection and Disillusion: The Moral Economy of Volunteer Tourism in Cusco, Peru'. Within the children's assistance and volunteer tourism industry, Sinervo contends that children's economic and emotional forms of care overlap in complex ways, mediated by varied notions of childhood. She explains the delicate and complex balance of affectivity and economics through a renewed theoretical conceptualization of 'moral economies'. Lastly, Sinervo offers anecdotes from conversations with adult volunteers and programme managers, parents and children, to demonstrate the diverse perspectives shaping childhood, as well as the children's aid industry in Peru.

These papers reflect the breadth of research within two specific topics and also map differing ways of doing Childhood Studies. The papers evidence their authors' formal affiliations to departments of Sociology, Anthropology, Developmental Psychology, Education and Childhood Studies with their own methods and writing styles. Each informs what constitutes research and ways of doing research, yet, by having submitted to the conference each writer identifies herself as "doing" childhood studies despite departmental definitions. Collectively, they speak to disciplinary border crossing within the field of Childhood Studies.

## **Conclusion**

It remains a point of pride for us and the members of our Graduate Student Organization that 147 people responded to our Call for Papers with proposals to Exploring Childhood Studies, and 100 people from six different countries attended what was, after all, a graduate student conference. Our Organization President, Lara Saguisag, opened the day from the podium with a quote from a chapter titled 'Attending Conferences' in the Graduate Study for the 21st Century: How to build an academic career in the Humanities:

Unless you are doing it solely to build confidence and have no plan whatsoever to record it on your CV, do not waste your time attending a graduate student conference. Know that you are more than capable of succeeding at a "real" conference and seek out the superior benefits of attending one (Semenza, 2005: 186).

She went on to add 'We are honoured and pleased that so many people chose to waste their time with us, recognised the superior benefits in attending, and helped construct pathways for the future of Childhood Studies'.

A part of that future has already been made manifest. The conference developed a community across disciplinary boundaries among those who would engage in childhood studies in a multi-disciplinary way. In response to feedback in praise of the multi-disciplinary format and some lamenting of inadequate time for discussion following the panels, Exploring Childhood Studies quickly developed its own list serve to extend the discussion. Communication across disciplinary borders requires both time and space to hash out differences in definitions and varying rationales behind research. In an attempt to work out a sustained liminal space for our field to engage in this communication and to encourage further cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration over isolating disciplinarity, we made our list serve public. In just over a year, more than 1,300 researchers and practitioners crossing disciplinary, institutional, and national borders have joined this endeavour. The list serve can be found here: [https://email.rutgers.edu/mailman/listinfo/exploring\\_childhood\\_studies](https://email.rutgers.edu/mailman/listinfo/exploring_childhood_studies).

Our work and communication does not end here. As conference chairs, we recently spoke about the ongoing project of building a multi-disciplinary field from within at the

Enhancing Communication in Cross-Disciplinary Research conference, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the University of Idaho. While there, we were confronted by an enormous body of literature on interdisciplinary theory and practice, but a literature that is confined to researchers in the so-called 'hard sciences' that is rarely, if ever, cited in the literature on cross-disciplinarity in the humanities and social sciences. Conversely, our comments on multi-disciplinary theory and practice in American Studies, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Area Studies and of course Childhood Studies were met with unfamiliarity by our new found scientist colleagues. In other words, even the literature on cross-disciplinary research struggles to find its way across disciplinary borders. That biology, chemistry, nutrition studies, ecology, computer science and even pediatrics, among other 'hard sciences', have been conspicuously absent from Childhood Studies, even while they have been actively engaged in other interdisciplinary research, indicates just how much work remains to be done in protecting our field from encroaching disciplinary rigidity. We still adhere to, and practice in these ways, the underlying theme of Exploring Childhood Studies, and will continue to define it by doing it, consistently being reflexive about our part in defining a field that is still emerging. The exploring is ongoing.

## References

James, A. and Prout, A. (eds.) (1997) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Oxon: Routledge.

Semenza, G. (2005) *Graduate Study for the 21st Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.