

Book reviews

Global Studies of Childhood

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Florian Essed, Meike S Baader, Tanja Betz, et al. (eds), *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New perspectives in Childhood Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2016; 297 pp. ISBN 9781138854192

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This book is targeted to students and scholars in the fields of childhood studies, early childhood education, sociology, social work and education. Its aim is to provide a robust and comprehensive overview of agency, one of the key concepts in childhood studies. This aim is approached by critical theoretical and empirical perspectives. Agency has become a widely used, ‘trendy’ concept, and one can easily identify numerous studies in various fields, such as educational psychology, family studies, child protection and early childhood education. However, as the editors argue, there is a lack of critical scrutinising of the concept (p. 1). Thus, this book contributes to this gap in the literature by discussing agency from various viewpoints: theoretical perspectives, children’s research participation, historical perspectives, global aspects and institutions as an arena for agency in childhood.

The book consists of five sections divided into 18 chapters. It is authored by scholars from Europe, India and Tanzania and provides an interesting and thought-provoking entity. In addition, the editors have given a good overview of the book by providing short statements on each section and a conclusion. However, the conclusion is short and does not fully resonate with the book’s wide ranging content. The chapters have provided substance for a much more thorough summary of the reconceptualisation of agency and childhood, for example, by using social differentiation, power relations and social structure as a conceptual framework. As the editors state (p. 290), the book ‘has brought to light the wide-ranging theoretical and analytical potential that a critical and relational concept of agency still offers today’; however, more detail around this in the conclusion is absent. The concept of *generational order*, the generational power structure and children’s position in society (pp. 4–5), is identified as a key component to understanding agency at childhood, which is one of the key messages of the chapters. While this stimulates fresh perspectives on children’s agency both theoretically and empirically, as a reader I would have welcome more varied conclusions.

The first section ‘*Theoretical perspectives*’, includes six chapters that offer an illuminating discussion between structuralist, post-structuralist and post-humanist epistemologies. Theorists such as Deleuze, Schatzki, Latour, Tronto and Bhaskar are noted and are used to propose a relativist understanding of agency ‘which is brought about socially/collectively’ (Raithelhuber, p. 99) but simultaneously deeply embedded in material and mental structures of practices (Bollig and Kelle, pp. 36–37). These chapters challenge the reader and trigger a re-thinking of prevailing understanding and practices related to children. They offer useful tools to conceptualise agency in childhood and promote innovative frameworks in research. As such, the first section provides a strong foundation on which the other, more empirical, sections are built.

The second section, '*Children as actors in research*', consists of two chapters. It provides examples of problematising the existing methodological certainties such as children's voice in research and socially constructed positions of children and adults. Both chapters, authored by Spyrou (pp. 105–118) and Warming (pp. 119–132), showcase how changing the conceptual framework opens up completely new ways to approach data, for example, by re-positioning adults and children in research. They are good examples of how re-thinking children's agency might provoke fresh and more nuanced interpretations and conceptualisations of doing research with children.

The third section, '*Agency in historical perspective*', includes three chapters, all coming from a German context and exploring childhood agency before the advent of the 'New Sociology of Childhood'. Together, the chapters cover a timeframe from Romanticism in the 1800s to the 1970s with *Kinderläden*, a form of 'free-range' parenting. They reveal the historical pathway towards present conceptualisations of childhood agency, showcase the milestones on this pathway and make a strong case for generational order and generational ordering by analysing the historical nodal points of childhood agency. However, the examples come mainly from German experience, and as the roots of sociology of childhood are in Scandinavian research, it would have been interesting to also have an example from there.

The fourth section, '*Transnational and majority world perspectives on agency*', consists of three chapters discussing children's agency in a variety of contexts across the globe. The geographic spread is wide: Asia, Latin America, Europe (Punch, pp. 183–196) and India (Sen, pp. 197–210; Kayser, pp. 211–223). The chapters are thought-provoking and urge re-consideration of different contexts of childhood. Moreover, the critical discussion of concepts such as rights, power and justice and how they relate to agency offers a fresh way to understand childhood contexts. The concepts of *majority and minority worlds* should have been explicitly introduced at the beginning of the section and added into the index to avoid confusion.

The last section, '*Agency in institutions of childhood*', includes four chapters introducing children's involvement in various institutional practices: early childhood education (Dreke, pp. 227–242), child protection (Ackermann and Robin, pp. 243–255) and elementary school (Eckermann and Heinzl, pp. 256–270; de Moll and Betz, pp. 271–289). Again, the chapters provide a critical view on children's agency in institutions; they argue that agency is a relational phenomenon and discuss how children participate in producing the institutional practices. They re-frame the stage of childhood and bring adults' doings into the spotlight by asking whether claimed childhood agency is actually a desirable agency, whether children are really able to speak for themselves and how institutional practices are reproduced by children. The last chapter in this section represents a quantitative study, rare in the field of childhood studies, and presents an interesting discussion on how social class has an impact on children's educational and out-of-school opportunities.

The book is well worth reading. It contains fascinating discussions about agency and childhood and challenges the reader's understanding of these concepts, which, in the book, appear as multi-faceted and multi-layered phenomena. In this regard, the first section has most to offer, but at the same time requires the reader to apply his or her mind in order to understand. This might be a slow process, especially for those who have not previously been in touch with post-structuralist epistemologies. For scholars new to the field of childhood studies, starting first with Sections II, III and IV and then coming back to Section I might be a good way to proceed.

Margaret Somerville and Monica Green, *Children, Place and Sustainability*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, 200 pp. ISBN 9781137408495

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