

# Feminisms and children/childhood studies: a necessary struggle?

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# Three frames for (re)thinking feminisms and childhoods

- Intersectionality
- Psychosocial studies
- Critical/Radical disability studies

# Intersectionality

- feminist theory's key and unique contribution?
- based on black feminist activisms and legal interventions (Crenshaw, Hill Collins, Nayak, 2014)
- taken up also in childhood studies

# Do current debates within feminist theory over the status of intersectionality translate to childhood studies?

- whether intersectionality recapitulates or renegotiates the pitfalls of identity politics
- attending to identities rather than only structural positioning
- structure vs. experience
- who is intersectional

# Limits and dangers of Intersectionality

- Washing away power relations into complexity
- reproducing the focus on the 'big two' or (class and 'race'/gender) 'three', rather than more deeply exploring connections and tensions
- Danger of reification of categories
- ethical dilemmas in representational practices – with claims of reproducing othering, reinscribing Identity politics

# Intersectionality applied to childhoods

- where and how the category of childhood functions
- which children appear as prototypical children (usually those from the global north) and which ones appear to deviate from these norms
- relationship between the domains of the experiential and structural: the status of 'voice' and what is involved in generating and documenting accounts of children's perspectives
- whether and how children experience themselves *as* 'children', and how that experience is structured by prevailing discourses and practices

# Psychosocial studies

- Frosh & Baraitser, Walkerdine, Stenner & Brown....
- mobilises a range of resources - from psychoanalysis to other varieties of posthuman theories
- attends to the role of fantasy, the irrational or affective, the unconscious
- addresses the body, embodiment and so complexifies prevailing binaries between inside and outside, as well as self and other
- Privileged status of psychoanalysis? Deleuze?
- In my reading: Foucault - that is, to interrogate practices of subject-formation and subjectification

# Critical disability studies

- social model of disability separated impairment from its stigmatising and dis-abling consequences
- Now connections (through the 'affective turn') with queer theory (Puer, 2012)
- Recent analyses linking childhood and disability studies:
  - Lupton (2013) on infancy, 'interembodiment' ('skinship'), leaky bodies and competing imperatives for contemporary parents,
  - Rosen (2015) on soundscapes of children's screams in institutional settings, mobilising a Bakhtinian understanding of 'answerability',
  - Amot & Ytterhus (2014) topicalise young children's use of the body in negotiations between adults and children in early education settings
  - Lesnik-Oberstein's (2015) collection heralds disability studies as a key resource for challenging essentialisms



# Overall relevance of disability studies to childhood studies

- challenging normative modes and models of development:
- in terms of critiquing its presumed directionality
- Highlighting the plurality and non teleology of growing 'sideways', rather than 'growing up' (Stockton, 2008; Bruhm and Hurley 2004),
- or of the mutating or compliant body (see also Meekoshi & Shuttleworth, 2009).

# An Example

- occurring in an interview with a parent affected by cuts in welfare benefits, generated for a small, local pilot study exploring educational impacts of the 'bedroom tax' (Bragg et al, 2015).
- Noteworthy context since, although a criterion for recruiting participants was having school-age children, we were not investigating or explicitly asking questions about (the adequacy of) parenting but rather generating accounts of the consequences of having to limit resources.
- Mother's appeal 'tell your professor we are good mothers...'
- culmination of stories she narrates of women's struggles to be supported, and not stigmatised or judged according to middle class professional criteria and without trying 'to understand where you're coming from and how your family is'.
- Unusual rather than typical response

# Our study

Jo Bragg, Erica Burman, Anat Greenstein, Terry Hanley, Afroditi Kalambouka, Ruth Lupton, Lauren McCoy, Kate Sapin, Laura Winter (2015)

*The Impacts of the 'Bedroom Tax' on Children and Their Education: A Study in the City of Manchester*, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester,

Report available on:

[www.manchester.ac.uk/bedroomtax](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/bedroomtax)

# Generating perspectives from a range of 'BT-affected' participants:

- Families (14 parents of (in total 24) school-aged children, 9 women, 5 men)
- 39 service support providers, including:
- 12 Community support and service providers (including 3 housing, 3 social support (specialising in work with CYP) and 3 faith-based), plus 2 health-related orgs, one of which provided a food bank, plus
- 20 participants working in 8 Schools (4 primary, 4 secondary)
- No research done (as yet) with CYP (!)

‘Tell your professor we are good  
mothers’

An example of regulation and  
resistance?

# Context for this statement

P. We are good mothers (.) tell your professor we are good mothers (.) we are poor we live in council houses we have life skills (.) uff because we have suffered not because we are dummy not because we don't want to study life keep us there I'm a postgraduate

I. Yes my professor knows that it's other you know it's other people the government that needs to hear that isn't it

P. Yes a postgraduate but life puts you my son's not well life puts you in that situation and you don't get a breather you're not getting an opportunity to rest your brain and decide what [you] want to do with your career you're constantly battling they will reduce this they send this they will stop this eviction letters this and that bills coming left right centre. (lines 565-573)

# And just before, she said:

- '... these council houses women they are the most loving to their families it is the external environment which is causing because they want to change the family dynamic...' (532-3)

# *“Tell your professor we are good mothers”*

- ‘council houses women’ = poor women in receipt of socially subsidised housing
- ‘council houses women’ as mothers;
- relationship with their ‘families’ characterised as ‘loving’ (with ‘loving’ later qualified or reframed in more technical (and hence debatable) terms as a ‘family dynamic’)
- ‘external environment’ which ‘wants to change the family dynamic’.
- efforts to be diplomatic? Starts to make a claim about ‘external’ pressures on women ‘causing’ the change of family dynamic but reformulates it into a more indirect ‘want’ or desire.



# *“Tell your professor we are good mothers”*

- carries no hint of uncertainty about being a good mother, or deference to the received status of the ‘professor’ (and by implication the researcher and research) to confirm her claim of being ‘good mothers’;
- this is clear by the priority accorded the claim ‘we are good mothers’, asserted before and then repeated (for emphasis) after ‘tell your professor’.
- This statement (‘we are good mothers’) stands, literally, irrespective of the ‘professor’ (note unmarked gendered position of the ‘professor’, and how or whether this sits as antithetical to or potentially overlapping with ‘mother’....).

***“Tell your professor we are good mothers”*** in relation to intersectionality

- speaks to the relational constitution of positions
- within research practices as well as wider social practices,
- and around mothering, families and the state.
- Speaker comments on the situated character of what is said, but also communicating and negotiating her understanding of what this interview is for
- Makes a claim to influence practices of knowledge generation and circulation.

# *“Tell your professor we are good mothers”* in relation to intersectionality

- Discourse of mutual configuration of woman-as-mother and child(ren) relations.
- Highlights tensions between feminisms and the politics of childhood arising from the asymmetry of their positionings.
- Dominant discourse of innocent childhood pits worthy children against, or at best in relation to, mothers who are themselves then qualified as being more or less worthy.
- Topicalises the invidious position/regulation of mothers, as a consequence of state (physical, mental - behaviour, attainment) scrutiny and evaluation of their children (see e.g. Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Edwards et al., 2015).
- Class foregrounded but also relations between class and racialized positioning
- (relevant to note that neither the interviewer nor interviewee were native English speakers and both are migrants to the UK, although the interviewer is white and the interviewee of African background.)

# *“Tell your professor we are good mothers”* in relation to psychosocial studies

- link between women-as-mothers and children could not ‘work’, or exercise its traction, without the emotional investment of women in being seen as ‘good mothers’.
- This parent is under such pressure to ‘prove’ good motherhood that she transgresses the current norms (of intensive mothering, Thornton, 2011) that mandate such expressions of doubt and uncertainty.
- In this case, the fact that her son has been diagnosed with disabilities (see later) intensifies those anxieties,
- but acknowledging this also can be read as offering an arena for performing appropriate maternal care and relationality.

***“Tell your professor we are good mothers”*** in relation to psychosocial studies

- an attention to the investment of women-as-mothers' identities in being perceived as 'good'.
- these identities are portrayed as binary – good vs. not good/bad.
- where is the ‘good enough’ mother, the description of mothering that Winnicott popularised from 1953 onwards, by reassuring women that it was possible to be ‘good enough’?

# *“Tell your professor we are good mothers”* in relation to psychosocial studies

- Fantasies of others behind the researcher - 'the professor' and beyond.
- Connects with analyses of how current policies target poor communities psychically as well as financially: the shame in disclosing poverty (Chase and Walker, 2012; Youngmie, 2012) and the complex relations between this and 'scroungerophobia' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013),
- Wider debates on intensification of (entrepreneurial) mothering with imperatives for compulsory freedom and enjoyment mandated by the childcare advice literature.
- Extra emotional labour of managing within reduced resources, as well as the physical labour and having to justify increasing limits on consumption and activities to children).

# *“Tell your professor we are good mothers”* in relation to psychosocial studies

- Cf Shildrick and MacDonald (2013): feeding children functions as a key indicator of maternal adequacy. Most recurrent theme from all our participants, spanning parents and school and community organisation staff, was food deprivation – how parents are cutting down on shopping, compromising on food quality, only eating on some days so that children can eat, such that as one parent put it ‘fresh food is out of the question’.
- tensions – not only between adults and children but also between siblings, perhaps not surprisingly when domestic space is being contracted

*“Tell your professor we are good mothers”* in relation  
to psychosocial studies

From subjectification to subjectivity?

- maternal resistance?
- talking back, of assuming a collective voice, rather than being interpellated into the reflexive, self-regulating individual confessional subject incited by the evaluation of mothering.
- active and critical as well as asserting class and gender solidarity; it accuses/critiques dominant discourses.



# *“Tell your professor we are good mothers”*

## in relation to disability studies

- mother of three children, one of whom is disabled
- “I’m not dummy” - in relation to competence and its classed as well as gendered and aged associations
- Significant overdeterminations: disability as related to poverty (in terms of reduced quality of life and life expectancy): being poor increases the chances of having a congenital or acquired impairment, and being disabled increases the chances of being poor.
- How relational commitments constrain individual projects of self-realisation. i.e. how responsibilities limit women’s capacities to become the agentic, enterprising, planning ideal-typical subjects of neoliberalism.

# Putting the analysis and frameworks together

- challenge for/by intersectionality: childhood is a temporary/unstable 'condition' (although disability studies also addresses this), albeit constituted as a generational relationship (Alanen, 2001).
- Does this exemplify (the strengths and need for) intersectionality, or undermine it?
- Does intersectionality theory presume that the positions/intersections, albeit shifting salience according to particular conditions, are otherwise stable?
- Cf the BT example: The increased salience of age and gender, and their transitional meanings according to particular aged thresholds, becomes a site for strategic planning and management; particular trajectories or traversals of the age/gender intersection have acquired sociopolitical salience. What this does is to fix and essentialise (and normalise) those positions, whilst covertly also simultaneously *underlining* their provisionality and relationality

# In relation to psychosocial studies

- the meanings of home are not only bounded by the physical walls of the building but extend across neighbourhoods and interpersonal networks.
- 'psychological homelessness' (becomes materialised in the threat of physical loss or leaving of home, even homelessness.
- But the loss of attachment at stake here seems to be that of the state's commitment to its own citizens, whose claim to home and community - and even capacities of self-definition in relation to the allocation and distribution of the 'inner space' of home - is being undermined.
- how to choose the unit of analysis? where does the emotional 'buck' stop and, indeed, start?

# Disability studies

- has connected with queer theory and both decentre norms, and 'colour in' what counts as 'ability'.

# To conclude: on feminisms/childhoods relations

- The relation does not lie within the configuration of the binary between women and children, as also between feminisms and childhoods, but outside it –
- in the sociopolitical, structurally-elaborated positions that constitute and constrain relations between women and children.
- historically sedimented, but also continuously reproduced, sociopolitical practices.
- ‘bedroom tax’: the complex relationalities and mutualities between the mothers and children’s mental and physical states
- Most significantly she refuses to be interpellated as possessing or ‘owning’ these as individual ‘problems’.
- In this sense this mother can be read as: (1) articulating a feminist identification that (2) engages in a relational politics of childhood, moreover one that (3) counters current claims of a demise of working class solidarity inculcated by and as ‘scroungerophobia’ (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013).

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