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Editorial introduction: The Future of Childhood Studies and *Children & Society*

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As editors of *Children & Society*, we are delighted to introduce a themed section comprised of three papers by leading figures in childhood studies -- Alan Prout, Spyros Spyrou, and Nigel Patrick Thomas. Their papers have been developed from keynote presentations at the Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth's 6th International Conference titled, "The Social, the Biological and the Material Child", which took place at the University of Sheffield in July, 2016. As these authors reflect on the future of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field, they have prompted us to consider how these ideas inform and inspire the future of *Children & Society*. Writing in 2010, in celebration of the journal's 25th anniversary, the editors at that time - Allison James, Nigel Patrick Thomas and Martin Woodhead - highlighted 'the wide range of academic disciplines and methodological approaches' that are essential to the ethos of a journal which was founded, and continues to be published in collaboration with, the National Children's Bureau, and which remains 'committed to understanding the multiple relationships between children and young people and the changing societies they inhabit' (James and others, 2010, p. 5). As the current editors, we embody that diversity, through research that spans disciplines and methodologies, as well as varied social and geographical contexts. To reflect - rather than homogenise - that mix, the editors work together here to reflect on our hopes for the future of childhood studies to embrace and advance in at least four important areas – the

relational, the historical, the political, and the inclusive - while considering what that means for *Children & Society* as a unique interdisciplinary journal.

On Materiality and Interdisciplinarity

A first central question that these three articles ask us to think about is, “What is the potential value of an increased attention to *materiality* -- or, the interactions between natural and cultural factors and human and non-human forces -- within Childhood Studies?” *Children & Society* readers across many fields will find it interesting that Alan Prout specifically examines how materiality serves as a rejuvenating theoretical and analytical orientation within universities for a field that spans the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities in its exploration of child interactions with the world. Spyros Spyrou, on the other hand, explores the potential of a focus on materiality to determine how one might “come to constitute ‘children’ and ‘childhood’” (px, this volume), while Patrick Thomas asks what societies might actually be capable of if we try to more seriously understand how children and young people relate with and constitute our material worlds.

Prout is concerned by the disproportionate impact of social and political crises on children and young people, as well as an anti-expansionary mood in academia that leads to an increasing compartmentalization of the field of Childhood Studies in universities. He calls for a more interdisciplinary study of childhood, one that includes a broad-ranging understanding of human interaction that does not artificially separate different aspects of human life. He notes that a focus on materiality can be crucial to any justification for interdisciplinary projects, but also, and just as important, it can newly frame debates about issues typically categorized as part and parcel only of “children’s worlds” (i.e., learning or schooling). At the same time, Prout asks how engaging with materiality can enrich

understanding of phenomena co-produced by all humans across the lifespan, such as citizenship; justice; poverty; institutional interventions and limitations; and war. This redirection encourages us to think not so much about what much “more established” disciplines continually have to say to Childhood Studies scholars, but rather what childhood studies could theoretically, methodologically, and analytically contribute to other, more general schools of inquiry (see Stryker 2016), and this is an exciting direction for future publishing in *Children & Society*.

Whereas Prout’s contribution to the volume highlights the value of a focus on materiality for thinking on the history and future of the discipline of Childhood Studies, Spyrou more clearly considers whether scholars have as yet adequately mined one important intellectual event within Childhood Studies: the ontological, or relational, turn. As Spyrou explains: “Placing children within this larger relational field of both human and non-human forces we begin to explore their becomings as necessarily and inevitably interdependent “on other bodies and matter” (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi 2010, p. 525) and their subjectivities as being uniquely produced out of this intra-activity each time anew but without resorting to romantic claims about authenticity” (this volume, px). This focus on “intra-activity”, co-production, and generative *relationships* between children and others, rather than a rigid stance that children *either* act on *or* are acted upon in the world, should hold much promise for scholars of childhood. We already see this call for scholarly engagements that use the child body as a theoretical and analytical framework for these types of studies (see Prout 2005, for example), but there still remain myriad opportunities to more seriously engage with children as recognizant co-producers of worlds. Borrowing from the work of Sara Ahmed’s (2004) ontological exploration of emotions, it is worth asking the question: What would Childhood Studies look like if we focused less on what

childhood *is*, and instead thought more about what childhood *does*? What kind of relationships, communities, and worlds does it encourage, mobilize, and maintain, and why?

Finally, Patrick Thomas's call for what is essentially a "longue durée" approach to centering childhood highlights a third way that a focus on materiality can advance (and preserve) not just Childhood Studies, but global lives. Overcoming a more "eventual" history of childhood and young people links eras and relationships rather than enshrines synchronic moments and *zeitgeists* in ways that make visible certain aspects of childhood and lives of young people, bringing us beyond binary notions of will, awareness, and power to consider a more complex, yet expansive way to think on child agency, participation and cultural production. What, for example, does studying childhood teach us about adulthood? What does studying children and young people teach us about humans? And what does an insistence that we include children as part of more unifying theories of the social and political do for the future of humanity? These foundational relational questions require a recommitment to a systemic understanding within social structures, and Thomas's clear links between children's experiences of the world, and the clarification and preservation of all worlds is a point well-taken for thinking on ways forward for the journal.

On the Changing 'Voice of the Child' and Interdisciplinarity

The concept of childhood emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries; yet the 20th and 21st centuries are said to be 'centuries of the child' – but, are they really? And what does this mean in relation to practice and the academic study of childhood and related theorising? A second area for more consideration in *Children & Society* is scholars' inclusion of a comparative *historical* consciousness in their submissions. In his article, Prout argues that 'In the timescale of historical change childhood often emerges as a crucial component

of key social issues' (px, this volume). At the same time, he warns that there are signs of a turn in the tide of support towards 'human rights for all' (px, this volume). *Children & Society* readers, and especially those interested in childhood studies and psychology, may recognize the value of this perspective for thinking on current and past conceptualisations of childhood and related practices. An example might be linking the legacy of the punitive 'deserving/undeserving' paradigm (which can be traced back to the New Poor Law of 1834 in England and Wales) to current uneven practices in mental health support and safeguarding, in which certain children and families consistently miss out in the United Kingdom (Sims-Schouten, forthcoming). Within our 'child-centred' societies, the needs of the child supposedly take central place in policy and practices of welfare, medical and educational institutions. Yet cuts to funding, high caseloads in child welfare, and poor integration of welfare, mental health services and social care mean that thresholds for care and support are constantly adjusted and children get harmed in the process, due to ever increasing waiting times and slipping through the system. Prout proposes a defence of interdisciplinary (and multidisciplinary) childhood studies as an intellectual and an academic project. Yet to sustain this focus, he urges childhood researchers to hone in on key questions around 'childhood' more tightly and vividly. This includes drawing attention to wellbeing and inclusive practices in childhood, and centralising the voice of the child. Because, as Prout argues, when it comes to the crunch, childhood studies as a discipline is perceived as less valuable than 'learning the more traditional skills of teaching' (px, this volume).

Spyrou takes this argument further when he proposes a more relational, ontological understanding and orientation towards childhood studies and central notions, such as 'child-centeredness', 'children's voices' and 'children's perspectives'. This is crucial when it

comes to providing insight into childhood as something that is authentic and unique to children, because, as Spyrou argues, 'If children's ontologies are not pre-given but unfold out of their intra-actions with other human and nonhuman entities, then nothing is by definition children's (or anyone's) own' (px, this volume). In essence, according to Spyrou, this may mean focusing on the nature of ontological work which constitutes 'childhood' and 'children' first, before taking decisions about the ontological status of children. Thus, Spyrou invites us to participate in a more critical engagement with the 'messiness' and 'complexity' of children's lives and childhood as a phenomenon – which may mean pursuing other ways of knowing, and moving beyond a turn to ontology. Here he proposes that ontology might provide an opening for a critical engagement with the field of 'childhood studies', and 'reinvigorate theoretical thinking rather than re-orient the field as a whole' (px, this volume). As such, Spyrou stimulates us to engage in further reflection around child-centeredness and children's voices.

Thomas also engages with some of the key issues around the 'future of childhood' by raising three questions – Why focus on the social?; Why focus on childhood?; Why focus on those things now, at this point in history? Here he draws attention to the fact that not only are 'particular childhoods' socially constructed, but that 'childhood itself is a social construct'. Moreover, Thomas's reference to the several large elephants in the room, such as poverty, injustice, refuge and displacement returns the argument to consider the legacy of the 'deserving/undeserving' paradigm discussed earlier. In other words, when we 'talk childhood', we also seem to also 'talk difference', 'worthiness' and 'unworthiness' (for example, in relation to help and support, or of being a child). Think for example about the controversies around unaccompanied minors, portrayed in the UK media as 'unchildlike children', suggesting that some children are less deserving of help and support, as they may

have lied about their age (i.e., see Stevens and Glanfield, 2016). Thus, whilst there is evidence that pictures of vulnerable and dying child refugees evoke feelings of compassion, there is also a sense of hostility towards those who may not be 'genuine', either due to their perceived age (too old to be a child) or behaviour (Ala, 2018). What is needed is a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of individual children.

Ultimately, as Thomas argues, examining childhood critically and centralising the 'voice' of the child 'can contribute to expanding the conditions of freedom for those occupying the temporary social position designated as childhood, and promoting their fuller participation in public decision-making and social action'. Thomas's call to action speaks to the underpinning ethos of *Children & Society*, with its emphasis on the importance of critical understandings of childhood for informing all those who work with and for children, young people and their families, whether in research, policy or practice.

On the Political and Interdisciplinarity

The question posed above - 'What is a child?' - leads to another, highlighted by the authors in this themed section, and particularly Patrick Thomas. In thinking to the future of childhood studies, we must also ask: 'Why do we confine our focus of study to this artificially constructed, and temporary, category?' The three examples that Thomas highlights in his paper – of poverty, climate change and displacement – all highlight generational injustice in an increasingly unequal world, reminding us why the study of childhood matters so much. Childhood is inescapably political, not least given the disproportionate impact of structural inequalities on children and young people. But, as discussed earlier in this introduction, childhood is also personal, fluid and relational, and a crucial task for contemporary childhood studies is to resist reductive accounts that fail to

recognise the inherent interdependence of children's worlds, and instead present the child as the *object* of adult intervention (such as in education or parenting, see Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011), or as an autonomous individual subject.

Alan Prout writes that 'the job of Childhood Studies is to open-mindedly unpick, as best we can, the complex entanglements of nature and culture through which childhood is constituted' (px, this volume). This sense of 'open-minded unpicking' is, for us as editors, also central to the ethos of the journal, as a monodisciplinary lens is often insufficient to unpick the questions that concern scholars of childhood. Our aim for *Children & Society* is to provide a space where it is possible to imagine children, and childhood, differently – with an open mind.

Foucault (1984, p. 343), writing about the ethical construction of knowledge, argued that 'everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. [...] I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger'. When we research with children, and when we as editors publish research *about* children and childhood in our journal, we have to think about the dangers we create, and the ethico-political choices that we make. For example, Michelle Fine (2016) has written about the ways in which neoliberal political ideology has shaped approaches to education and educational research, and hence the importance of critical research in challenging dominant societal narratives:

I want to invite readers to think aloud about how, why, and with whom we design research that can enter and investigate the claims of dominant narratives, lift up counter stories, and dive into the knotty relation between the two as well as generate images of radical possibilities. (p. 51)

Fine's invitation links to Prout's comments about the importance of an open mind and the potential of research to generate radical possibilities. The three papers in this

themed section show the importance of extending this open-minded (and interdisciplinary) understanding to the question, 'What is a child?'. To take one example, as editors, we see the implications of a narrow definition of childhood in the inequities inherent in support for young adults who were in care as children. In policy and practice across countries, 'after care' support has sharply bounded endpoints and definitional entitlements; political answers to the question of 'what is a child' define the period after which the role of the state as 'corporate parent' (as it is termed in English policy) will cease (Boddy, Bakketeig, and Østergaard 2019). Yet, we live in a historical moment when 'the boundaries of childhood, youth and adulthood are blurred, indistinct, porous and changing' (Furlong and others, 2011, p. 361), and intergenerational responsibilities increasingly extend into adulthood. What happens when we fail to recognise this blurring of childhood – and the concomitant necessity for intergenerational support into adulthood – for children who are placed in care? Spyrou's (px, this volume) arguments about recognising relational assemblages are highly relevant to this question, illuminating the need to understand how children's ontologies 'unfold out of their intra-actions with other human and nonhuman entities'.

If scholars of childhood are to build the interdisciplinary understandings necessary to meet critical societal challenges such as those that Thomas highlights, we must attend to the dynamic forces and assemblages that shape children's lives and perspectives. An interdisciplinary lens - and a correspondingly open-minded, fluid and relational understanding - can help researchers, policy makers *and* practitioners to challenge the ways in which children and childhood may become 'fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency' in Judith Butler's terms (2016, p. 24), whilst resisting an 'othering' of childhood, by recognising the essential, embodied interdependence of all our lives.

Conclusion: On Inclusivity and the Future of *Children & Society*

The three articles in this themed section capture many aspects of current debates in Childhood Studies, illuminating why these debates matter and helping us as editors to reflect on future directions for the journal. Taken together, Prout, Spyrou and Thomas's articles provide stimulating and generous accounts of new scholarship in Childhood Studies that share a foundation in feminist, post-human and new materialist theories and methodologies that promise to reshape, and trouble in productive ways, how we see the world. They inspire us to reflect that such inclusivity in theoretical contributions and accessible exposition should be an important goal of a journal like *Children & Society*, which attempts to reach across diverse audiences. For example, these articles are being published at a time when both the Children's Strikes and Extinction Rebellion's climate change protests are in the news – two of the young movements that Thomas rightly asks us not to overlook. The former in particular is a striking example of what Nolas (2015) has so usefully conceptualised as "childhood publics", which she defines as spaces in which young people are skilfully mining (rather than serving as the objects of) the tropes of childhood and futurity to fashion a generational reproach. Spyrou's questions about "what kind of children (and others) emerge out of children's entanglement with the material and discursive worlds in which their lives are embedded ... which material-semiotic arrangements ... make certain perspectives, voices, or standpoints possible" (px, this volume), are highly pertinent to understanding the Children's Strike. Since description -- as our contributors remind us -- is ontological politics, the vocabularies of enactment, intra-action, assemblage, entanglement, emergence, and multiplicity that these perspectives offer not only to shed new light on how

to read young people's activism (see also Renold, 2018) but may also allow us to act differently in the world.

Another notable example of inclusivity in the themed issue is Spyrou and Prout's call for attention to the school and schooling practices as one important site of childhood, and the need for schools and educators to learn about children's lives outside school. Prout argues that 'no serious study of schools and the schooling process can take place without taking into account the widely defined and experienced life of children' (px, this volume), and this will resonate with many *Children & Society* readers, particularly those who study and work in Education. Foregrounding children's affective experiences of school may be one way to contribute to conversations that insist that education must remain 'contested' (Aldridge et al., 2018). The intensification of the schooling day, as others have also observed (Kirby, 2018), offers insight into the felt costs of dominant rhetorics of 'what works', 'big data' and envisioning of education as a technicist or scientific enterprise (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). Equally, Spyrou's attention to ontologies offers new ways to conceive the role of non-human actants – objects like scooters and locks, in his examples, also documented in other research in this journal (Alasuutari and Kelle, 2015) - and to bring theories of social practice into research on schooling.

All three authors in the themed section speak of 'the child' in ungendered terms, and here is where attention to young people's lives out of school might highlight how they are themselves 'unpicking' (to use Prout's word) gender and sexual cultures and binary notions of what it means to be a boy or a girl, drawing on the resources of digital cultures and perhaps often leaving schools behind. Over nearly 35 years since the journal was founded, *Children & Society* has already contributed much to disentangling the child from normative notions of development, and we hope that it continues to support exploration of queer and

feminist potentialities of posthumanism and new materialism as part of its open-minded, interdisciplinary unpicking of 'childhood studies childhood' (see also Ringrose and others, 2019).

As editors, we particularly appreciate the distinctive contribution of *Children & Society* as a journal that can hold a diversity of approaches across geographical, disciplinary, methodological and theoretical locations. We build on a wonderful editorial tradition of being ahead of the curve in this regard – and recognise that this is no small achievement on the part of the journal's contributors, when it can be difficult to write about children's lives in ways that are not already out of date by the time they are published. Our commissioned Policy Reviews form a crucial part of this tradition, with recent topics ranging from children's work, to gangs, to 'troubled' families, reflecting the journal's longstanding commitment to recognising how politics and policy shape generational in/justice and children's lives. At the same time, the journal has been, and will continue to be, a place where theory has been thought *through* the diverse practices of childhood, speaking to the ordinary aspects of children's everyday lives and not only to the more spectacular objects of public debate. As part of the editors' commitment to these goals, with the support of Wiley and the National Children's Bureau, we have recently increased the word limit per submission to the journal from 6,000 to 8,000 to highlight that it is a welcome place for diverse research approaches. We are also particularly pleased that international contributions have grown over recent years, allowing *Children & Society* to provide space for building cross-world understandings of children and young people's lives in diverse contemporary societies (Punch, 2016). These shifts are also intended as an invitation to scholars from new theoretical and methodological perspectives, including those discussed by Prout, Spyrou and Thomas in this issue, as well as a welcome to all research that pushes

boundaries to develop arguments and hold ambivalence and ambiguities in tension, while maintaining reflexivity and complexity. Sara Ahmed (2017) has emphasised the ethical and political dimensions of how we relate to the academy, describing citation practices as (feminist) 'bricks', or, the materials through and from which we create our dwellings (p16). We hope that as editors of *Children & Society*, we will continue to be no less aware of and open to the responsibilities of editing and publication in creating more habitable (Balagopalan, 2014) worlds and childhoods. We look forward to working towards this future with our many authors, readers, and supporters of the journal.

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