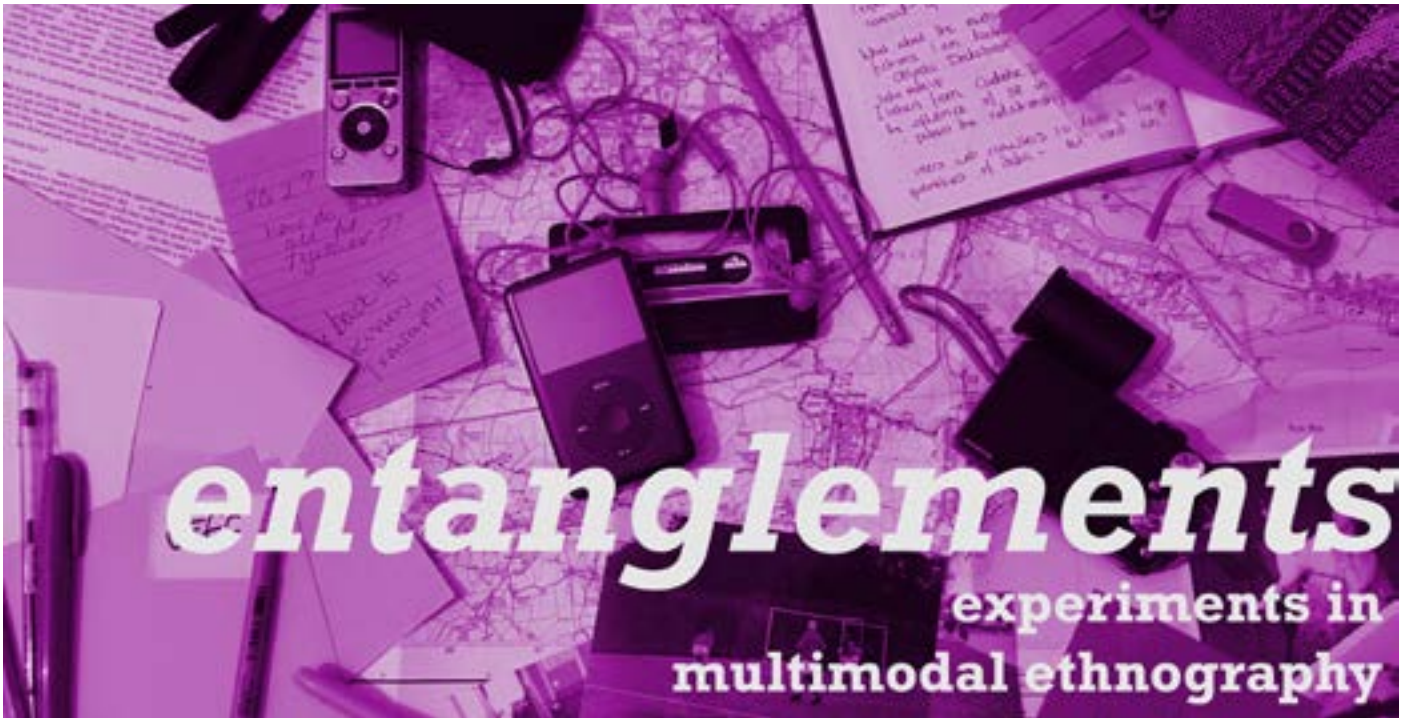
ISSN 2516-5860



Volume 1, Issue 2 (Autumn, 2018)

'Connective memories': reflections on relations between childhood, memory and temporality

Kirrily Pells

Recommended Citation:
Pells, K. (2018). "Connective memories': reflections on relations between childhood, memory and temporality', *entanglements*, 1(2): 97-101

‘Connective memories’: reflections on relations between childhood, memory and temporality

Kirrily Pells

Last autumn I had the privilege of attending the *in common* London exhibition held by the inspiring Connectors Study. I found it an immensely enriching experience to engage with the multimodal data generated with young participants in Athens, Hyderabad and London. One aspect of the exhibition to which I was drawn involved the application of innovative publics creating methodologies to engage the wider public in the research project by asking for people’s earliest political memories (EPM). The result was a series of postcards hung from a line in the centre of the exhibition space. Some were printed with the words of research participants, others had been submitted online from around the world and yet more contributed by the visiting public. What sparked my curiosity was not only the temporal and geographical span of the memories shared, or the diverse imaginings of ‘the political’ from the intimate politics of everyday family life, to participation in large scale public political activism, but in particular, questions on the relations between childhood, memory and temporality, some of which I am currently exploring in my own work.

Much has been written on the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of adults’ memories of childhood, especially in relation to themes of nostalgia and loss, as a time distinct to adulthood and reflecting a sense of what childhood *should* be. Indeed, many of the memories shared in the exhibition were from adults reflecting on childhood experiences. However, a relatively underexplored area theoretically and empirically is the qualities, dynamics and flows of memories *in*, as opposed to, or more importantly perhaps alongside, memories *of* childhood. I refer to

memory in childhood to denote not only children’s individual and collective or social memories, but also the ways in which children engage with the individual memories of others, such as those of parents and family members, or with collective remembrances, such as of conflict, disaster and colonialism. Below I offer some reasons for why this might be the case and offer some thoughts on avenues for exploration

The first concerns the ontology of the child. Within the field of sociology of childhood important conceptual advances were made in conceiving of the child as “beings” in the present and seeing children as social agents contributing to their own lives and the world around them, rather than developmental “becomings” on the path to adulthood (James and Prout, 1997). This has led to a focus on children’s interests, experiences, perspectives and actions in the here and now, with far less consideration of children’s future lives and in particular, children’s past lives. Increasingly, however, the becoming-being dualism has been subject to critique as neglecting the more complex and relational ways in which time can operate in children’s lives (Uprichard, 2008; Rosen, 2017). Hanson (2017:282) argues for the need to bring in the “been child” as: “[t]o understand what children are, we do need to understand not only their past, present and future but also the mutable relations and shifting sequences between these temporal orders.” I suggest therefore, that investigating “threads of memory” (Moss, 2010: 537) might enable a productive reimagining of the ontology of the child and through an examination of the particularities of children’s own memories move away from the abstract figure of the child to the more subjective relationship between children and the unfolding of multiple, coexisting temporalities.

In pursuing such an exploration, one encounters the second thematic area which has perhaps precluded a fuller examination of memory in childhood. Where memory in childhood has been approached as a field of study or professional practice it has been largely through the psy disciplines, with an emphasis on traumatic memory, such as of child sexual abuse and other ‘adverse childhood experiences’, conflict and migration and so on. While imperative to acknowledge the pernicious nature of these experiences, when viewed solely through a narrowly biomedical construction of trauma, the focus becomes very individualised rather than encompassing a broader consideration of the conditions which give rise to, and sustain such violences, as well as the attendant effects. Moreover, this lens can inscribe traumatic personhood upon the young, by obscuring the other interpretations and recollections children may hold and make of their experiences, such as the bonds of relationships with family and friends, the sense of solidarity and political struggle and the desire for meaning-making, strategies for survival and flourishing. It also reduces the qualities and expression of memory to traumatic symptomology and can overemphasize children’s passivity, rather than exploring the complex ways in which children navigate their lives (albeit often in highly constrained circumstances) and make meaning (Habashi, 2013).

Relatedly, within the field of memory studies children often feature as objects or subjects of the transmission of parental trauma and memory, most notably in research on/with the second generation (usually as adults) of Holocaust

survivors. Again, this implies temporal and relational linearity as traumatic memories are passed down, from the older to the younger generation. There has been far less consideration of the active role of children as active translators of individual and social or collective memory (for an important exception see Habashi, 2013).

Despite some of these limitations, I suggest that there are alternative accounts of the workings of memory, offered by feminist scholars in particular, which offer a rich theoretical lens for understanding memory in childhood. In her work on postmemory Marianne Hirsh (2012: 21) makes the call for a "multidirectional" or "connective" approach to the study of memory. She cites Gabriele Schwarb who observed:

> *"It is not so much that our memories go in or come from many directions but rather that they are always already composites of dynamically interrelated and conflicted histories"*

Adopting a "connective approach" (see also Hoskins, 2016) therefore, problematises the notion of passivity and linearity in the models of memory outlined above and instead attends to the "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (ibid., 5) that goes into the generation, mediation, reception and ruptures of memory and memory work. For example, Madeleine Leonard (2014:66) explores the "inter-generational sharing of memories" in research with Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot young people in Cyprus. She details how the young people accept, negotiate and challenge meanings, often shifting the narratives of family members and teachers in the process. She argues that: "[t]hrough adult memories, the past and the present become interconnected and projected into the future with the child located as the core conduit linking the past to the present and future" (ibid. 75). Memories are thus generated as a result of a shared encounter (Moss, 2010:53) generationally and temporally. As one of the contributors to the EPM activity described how at the age of two she participated in a political rally in Greece alongside her parents, but commented: "through countless re-tellings of the story, I'm not sure whether it's my own memory or an implanted one."

Furthermore, Hirsch (2012: 98-9) applies a "feminist mode of knowing" to the study of the position of the other within memory work in order to theorize the ways in which knowledge is "embodied, material, located". Similarly, within childhood studies, how children understand and experience their lives is typically understood as relational and intersectional, situated in wider material and social inequalities. Bringing these strands together would enable an investigation of how children understand and experience the making, holding, mediating and translating of memories from their marginal social and political position and in relation to, and through, others.

Moreover, Hirsch argues adopting this "mode of knowing" becomes an "ethical and political act of solidarity" asking questions over "[h]ow memory is constructed, of what stories are told or withheld – to whom and by whom" (ibid:98-99). Similarly, with children this is political. It means both listening to what children have to say, as well as exposing the social and institutional structures that shape the possibilities for expression of some memories while silencing others, especially from those children rendered 'other' along lines of race, class, gender, disability and other intersecting oppressions. Habashi's (2013) research with Palestinian children living in the West Bank is a pertinent example of how a highly marginal and often silenced group contextualize current political and economic oppression in the light of past familial and collective memory to make sense of current experiences and to express an individual and collective sense of the future.

***

In conclusion, the multimodal ethnographic data generated as part of the Connectors Study offers helpful insight into some of the questions provoked in this piece. Memories are often fragmentary, not captured by one expression or sense alone, but rather comprise a "flow of remembered actions, images, sounds, smells, sensations and impressions" (Hoskins, 2016: 348). While expressed through the medium of text (handwritten and digital), drawing and image, the EPM series open up analytical possibilities of exploring the affective, embodied and sensual textures of memory – the consumption of food, the sound of cries, the smell of tear-gas, the chaotic action of an uncertain moment - and how these memories of the past might be entangled with present preoccupations and future imaginings.

Moreover, the multimodal data move us towards viewing memory as a situated, emergent encounter between generations, between humans and objects or interfaces, and between publics (Hoskins, 2016). It also involves thinking about how as researchers, our own memories may inform and become engaged within our research practice. Above all, I would suggest it underscores that the time is ripe for an exploration of memory in childhood and adopting a "connective approach" attending to the dynamics of temporality, relationality and power, will enrich our understandings of childhood and the workings of memory.

References

Habashi, J. (2013). 'Palestinian children: authors of collective memory', *Children & Society,* 27(6):421–433. DOI: 10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00417.x

Hanson, K. (2017). 'Embracing the past: 'been', 'being' and 'becoming' children', *Childhood,* 24(3):281-285. DOI: 10.1177/0907568217715347

Hirsch, M. (2012). *The generation of postmemory: writing and visual culture after the Holocaust.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hoskins, A. (2016). 'Memory ecologies', *Memory Studies,* 9(3):348-357. DOI: 10.1177/1750698016645274

James, A. and A. Prout (eds) (1997). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. London: Falmer Press.

Leonard, M. (2014). 'Echoes from the past: intergenerational memories in Cyprus', *Children & Society,* 28(1):66-76. DOI: 10.1111/j.1099-0860.2012.00445.x

Moss, D. (2010). 'Memory, space and time: researching children's lives', *Childhood,* 17(4):530-544. DOI: 10.1177/0907568209345611

Rosen, R. (2017). 'Time, temporality, and woman-child relations', *Children's Geographies*, 15(3):374-380. DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2016.1232938

Uprichard, E. (2008). 'Children as 'being and becomings': children, childhood and temporality', *Children & Society,* 22(4):303–313. DOI: 10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00110.x

Kirrily Pells is Lecturer in Childhood at UCL Institute of Education. Her research interests are global childhoods and children's rights especially in relation to poverty, intersecting inequalities and violence. She has a particular focus on children's lives post-conflict and her current work is investigating memories in childhood and intergenerational relations in Rwanda. She is also a Research Associate with the Young Lives study, University of Oxford, where her research focuses on the intersections and dynamics between structural and symbolic violence with interpersonal violence in the lives of children and youth in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.