

Meanings of children's agency: when and where does agency begin and end?
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Abstract

Agency may be doubted, or seen as displaced or defused away from the individual and merging into social contexts. However critical realism does the groundwork of unravelling problems in order to provide a firmer theoretical basis for social research. This chapter summarises some key concepts in critical realism, which help to validate real agency. Most of the examples are drawn from research in two primary schools in urban Tanzania.

Introduction

To analyse agency, we will draw on concepts from critical realism (CR). Bhaskar (1998, 2008) with Archer (2003), Porpora (1998), Sayer (2000) and others has developed this philosophy since the 1970s. "Critical" denotes the Marxist tradition, and "realism" refers to the central understanding of enduring, independent, already present social reality, which we can discover but do not invent or construct. One example of CR concepts is the separation of two kinds of power. CR contrasts coercive power² that oppresses agency, versus creative emancipating power¹ that extends free agency. The difference is vital because power is usually reduced to power², which is feared as inevitably oppressive, and this may be seen as the only way for adults to control children, and to stop them from having dangerous power. Instead, power¹ is promoted when adults and children fulfil their human agency by protesting against injustice, and working together for peace and freedom (Bhaskar, 2008).

CR is accused of being too abstract, too laden with jargon, and simply an unhelpful, unnecessary, alternative sociology. Replies to these and other criticisms could more than fill this chapter. We will briefly say here that CR is not a sociology. It is philosophy, which works to unravel and resolve serious problems and provide a firmer basis for understanding and analysis in social science and childhood studies (Alderson, 2013, in press). We aim to avoid jargon wherever possible, except when there is a unique term for a specific concept. We also aim to avoid abstractions unless they can explain practical problems more clearly. If you are not yet familiar with CR, we do hope you will decide to look at this chapter and that you find it useful.

CR concepts will be reviewed in the following sections: agency and structure; four planar social being; knowing and being; the pull-push power of absence; difference versus change; closed and open systems; natural necessity; and the possibility of naturalism. Most of our examples come from a PhD study of physical punishment in two primary schools in urban Tanzania. The research included observations, interviews with children, teachers and parents, group sessions, photographs, and some children kept diaries and made drawing and maps. The ethnography of the researcher (TY) living for months in the poor city areas was also very revealing (Yoshida, 2011). She had previously lived in Tanzania and spoke some Swahili.

Agency and structure

Social research tends to ignore or deny children's agency in two main ways. Quantitative surveys emphasise social structures, contexts and variables that seem to shape and often determine children's lives (for example, Hansen et al. 2010). In contrast, qualitative, interpretive methods that emphasise social contexts can "decentre" individuals' agency. Agency may then appear to be "an effect brought about by the assembly of heterogeneous materials" and diverse resources "through which children's agency is (or is not) produced" (Prout, 2000, 17). There is ambiguity here about how and by whom children and/or their agency are produced, and Prout's use of actor network theory, which places people and objects on a similar level of agency, overlooks conscious human agency. Oswell's erudite analysis of agency concludes that "the individual child" myth, which "few believe", falsely sees children as possessing capacities individually. Instead, Oswell contends, "agency circulates around children" impersonally, and exists "only by virtue of their relationship with others" as facets of each local situation. "Agency neither starts nor finishes with any individual agent." It is orchestrated within narrative structures, character is not "real" and there is no single author but always multiple authors of agency. Agency is never a property and is always relational, in-between, dispersed (Oswell, 2013, pp. 264-70). While acknowledging these complexities, CR takes each child to be a distinct, conscious, embodied individual, possessing real though limited agency,

The possibility of individual agency may be denied if it seems to merge too much into the social context. Yet this denial mistakenly assumes all or nothing: agency is either pure and separate from all context, or is lost in social contingencies.. The reality lies between the extremes, Agency and structure can only exist in relation to each other, as separate but interacting, partly overlapping entities. Without the values and resources from structures that enable us to make sense of experience,, agency would be either empty or else chaotically, meaninglessly overwhelmed. Porpora (1998, 2007) reviewed four concepts of social structures theorised in social science. First, structures are mainly created by individual agents through countless behaviours aggregated over time. However, this model is unrealistically dominated by seemingly free agents. If childhood is such a structure, it is hard to explain how or why children and adults "construct" certain types of childhood and not others, especially when the types are oppressive.

Second, structures are law-like regularities that govern, determine and explain somewhat mechanistic social behaviors. This model is favored in quantitative surveys, in structural functionalism, and in biology-led child development. Yet it takes too little account of agency and diversity. Model one assumes overly-free, voluntary agency and model two assumes overly-determining structures.

Third, structures are seen as rules and resources on which agents can draw, such as in Giddens's (1979) structuration theory. Like Goldilocks, Porpora is still not satisfied, and he believes this model is too virtual, static, random and agency-dominated.

Porpora's fourth and preferred model is social structures seen as systems of human relations among social positions. Rather than being underlying or external rules to be invoked, structures such as childhood, the family, the school, the economy, exist as powerful and enduring systems and positions in and through social relations. Over time, structures far precede and far outlast individual agents who do not construct them. Yet agents constantly reproduce and resist, modify and interact with structures, and are shaped and reshaped by them through social processes in time and space

Social structures, unlike natural ones, can only operate through human agency. However, structures cannot be reduced to agents' conceptions of them, or to agents' activities. Agents draw on a range of structures and may choose between them. For example, religion, education, culture, history, biology, economics, all present different, often conflicting, versions of childhood, which agents consciously or subconsciously adopt or reject. Margaret Archer (2003) analyzed in great detail the time sequences when (adult) agents draw on and then reflect and relate to structures through their internal conversations and later act on them. Children's knowledge, judgment, foresight, freedom of choice, control and agency are all very limited, but so too are adults' capacities. At all ages, human agency is constantly constrained by structures and by other agents, by resources and chance, as shown by the limited agency of the supposedly most powerful person in the world, the American president.

In the study of Tanzanian schools, contradictions were observed, when children's actual competent agency was denied or overlooked, and they were held to be essentially irresponsible and immature. Yet children were also often held to be entirely responsible for their own agency and easily able to behave suitably if they wished. Children who misbehaved were blamed, while all the difficulties and barriers around them were often ignored. For many, the long school day continued with paid tuition until 4.00 or 5.00 p.m. and some stayed on to do self-study. High standards were demanded. One girl reported that students ought to arrive at school at 6.30 a.m. "Then sweep for 30 minutes, and water flowers and clean toilets. Bad behaviour is to be late" (Yoshida, 2011, 176). Yet many of the teachers, and adults generally, were relaxed about being an hour or two late themselves, and teachers sometimes missed whole lessons. Research by Mizen and Oforu-Kusi (2010) in Ghana, and by Alphonse Omolo (2015) in Kenya, shows how children's self-reliant agency similarly keeps knocking against very hard contexts and discriminations against children. Honwana saw the restricted yet resourceful and courageous agency of child soldiers in spatial terms. When they seem least powerful and lacking control and resources, they resist through tactical and "interstitial" agency. Young soldiers in Mozambique, "by virtue of this borderland condition...are able to be mobile and grab opportunities the moment they arise" (Honwana, 2005, pp. 49-50).

Porpora's fourth model can be compared to a river (agency), which reshapes the land (structures) around it, but the land also shapes the course and speed of the river. The image suggests that each child cannot have just any type of childhood; the type is highly organised by nature and society before the child is born, and much has to be accepted or can only be altered with great difficulty. Yet within those natural and social structural constraints, there is scope for choice and change, as the child like the river moves forward. Rather than static, spatial concepts about fixed edges between them, structure and agency can be seen as dynamic processes interacting across porous shifting boundaries and changing over time.

Four planes of social being

CR analyses all human life on four interacting planes of social being, to help researchers to take comprehensive and also coherently organised views of children's rich, complex lives. The four planes are bodies in nature, interpersonal relations, social structures, and inner being. The Tanzanian study vividly illustrated the importance of inter-relating all four social planes in childhood research.

On plane one, bodies in material relations with nature are essential bases for personal and physical agency. Children express all their agency through the

speaking acting body, and through their bodies children may be deprived, constrained, punished, shamed, confined and excluded. The research topic of physical punishment especially opens ethnography to explore children's embodied physical-mental pain and trauma. Children were punished in the belief that fear, pain and shame would deter them from doing wrong, overriding their present agency in the hope of developing their future agency as responsible citizens

Chris, George and Shabani (all names have been changed) talked about severe physical pain when they had to kneel on the concrete floor for long periods, or they had to go around the whole school, to be jeered at by other children, in a squat position until their legs felt "dead". They would be unable to walk home, or bend over in the toilet (Yoshida, 2011, 167-8).

Attention to bodies also crucially turns to the very crowded hot classrooms with around one hundred children cramped together. The researcher (TY) still remembers discomfort and tiredness caused by sitting on *dawati* (a long desk with a bench attached to it) with students for several hours in the two schools, observing rote-learning lessons most of the time. In the classrooms with parts of the ceiling plaster coming off and no lighting, darkness during rain or heavy clouds made both students and teachers unable to read and write comfortably. Rain sometimes poured in through the windows (Yoshida, 2011, 166). Restless bodies show discomfort and boredom and inattention. Besides bodies, emotions which are partly physical-hormonal, were also punished, and amplified by memories. "The body 'remembers' pains and pleasures" (Archer, 2000, 202). The students recognized the pain they had felt more than once before with fear and shame.

Shame also relates to plane 2, interpersonal relations. When relating to other children and to adults, those who had been punished reacted with distress and contrition, or they tried to laugh and hide their shame. Adults preferred to blame irrational childhood, instead of seeing how children's reactions could be explained by the boring rote-learning, often exacerbated by hunger, lack of adequate seating, lighting and textbooks. Any complaints or resistance from students could result in negative adult-child relationships, and be regarded as proof of children's inability to understand the adults' well-meant intentions towards them. Children's protests, be it against increased bus fares, strict school rules or physical punishment, are also often taken to prove their "needs" to be nurtured, rather than their reasonable agency (Yoshida, 2011, 170). Teachers were themselves professionally and financially constrained, and some were frustrated that they could not show more care for the children. Other teachers assumed that poor students misbehave, and this could seem to justify control through physical and emotional punishment.

Children's agency is also expressed through varying interpersonal interactions, in humour, friendship, loyalty, kindness, politeness, respect, ingenuity, skill and reliability, or ridicule, anger and violence. Subtle or blatant, overt or implied, children's changing and combined behaviours show their highly attuned, expressive, social competencies and awareness of others. The socially constructed nature of childhood reproduces, and is reproduced by, practices of inequity and domination. For example, silence is a sign of children's active respect for adults, not merely of incompetent, passive childhood. Challenging adults' authority is particularly regarded as difficult by children and "bad" by adults, so that children often actively and consciously "practised" silence (Yoshida, 2011, 152).

Interpersonal relations tend to be physical. For instance, during crowded journeys on the city minibuses, young children sit on strangers' laps, showing an ease about physical contact that is not usual in many other cultures. The friendly routines, such

as hugs, handshakes, holding hands while talking together, friendly slaps, which go with the greetings “my brother”, “my sister”, bind communities and extended families warmly together. Most city dwellers and workers, including school children who live far from their schools, use the city minibuses. These are overcrowded, hot and uncomfortable during rush-hours, with women with washbasins filled with bananas, mangoes and doughnuts popular as breakfast. Most people push forward when they try to board a crowded bus although, once they are on, they can be very friendly and helpful. The researcher (TY) remembers that seated people often offered to hold her large bag of research equipment, until she found herself a seat. Unwelcome in some other cultures, the warm friendly interactions on the minibuses made her like Tanzania and its people more. Although there are thieves and serious social inequality particularly in large cities, there are also very friendly and physical interpersonal relationships amongst strangers.

The third plane of social being is social structures, often of oppression and violence that restrict children’s fulfilled, competent agency. Hard-pressed families are under great pressure to pay for termly exams, and they rely on children not to fail. Those who fail annual exams have to repeat the year, sometimes several times. There is lack of knowledge, skill and time to help with problems such as dyslexia, so children tend to be blamed for their learning difficulties. The great shortage of staff and other resources mentioned earlier is often determined by the World Bank and other international agencies and donor countries. Precious funding is lost through inefficient and corrupt administration. Besides the weak law banning physical punishment in schools, there is lack of inspection and enforcement. The harder present living conditions become, the more hope is invested in educating children, often in punitive ways.

Social structures that shape agency, such as neo-colonial legacies and neoliberal economic policies, tend to seem absent and invisible. It is therefore harder to detect and analyze them in observed ethnographies. Yet if these oppressive structures are ignored, students’ failures can be wrongly blamed on them or on their teachers’ as if they are wholly free agents. For example, some children who were punished for their inattention during lessons said they usually do not have breakfast, or even lunch, and they only have one meal a day. Others have to wake up very early to help with the housework.

While explaining about his sense of responsibilities for his ageing parents, Brandon repeatedly spoke of children who “can’t do anything for them” (the parents) now, dismissing all his present caring work (Yoshida, 2011, 158-59). Both children and adults talked about “future” responsibilities, illustrating how powerful beliefs about competent adulthood and dependent childhood structured inter-generational relationships in a disconnected sequence of linear developmental stages: the small person now cannot contribute, only the future big person can.

Punishment is used not only to correct perceived wrong doing, but is more endemic, structured into child-adult relations in every culture and country. The general school discipline exerted through children’s bodies could be punitive. Teachers often repeatedly asked groups of students to stand up and sit down on the ground until they all did this properly, “not easy especially for hot, hungry, listless, and sometimes ill children” (Yoshida, 2011, 175). Children who complied were punished again and again until everyone complied.

The fourth plane of social being addresses personal inner being and also political concern about present social problems and hopes of better futures, through agency and structures that work towards freedom and the good life in the good society.

Human rights provide detailed maps of the good society. We do not have space to review Yoshida's other main topic, human rights, in detail here. However, the schools study shows that it is crucial to see children's rights well beyond Article 12 and the right to express a view, into which children's rights are far too often reduced. In the UN (1989) Convention's main 42 Articles, rights are a living embodied reality. They are honoured when children and adults have an adequate standard of living, food and clean water, clothing and shelter, freedoms of (embodied) expression, free association and privacy, protections from neglect and abuse, and respect for each child's worth and dignity. Alternatively, rights are violated when necessities and physical and mental freedoms are withheld, and when bodies are punished, confined and humiliated. Children in the schools study have high hopes of education opening up new futures, but they know much of their future agency depends on world economies and employment.

Bhaskar (1998, 2008b) argues that real agency is influenced by resources and structures but not determined by them. The model of Tanzanian childhood relates to Tanzanian adulthood. The powers adults "can draw upon depend partly on their relations to one another, and to relevant parts of the context, such as educational institutions" (Sayer, 2000, 13). Many children in the two schools live with their extended family or their elder sibling(s) after one or both of their parents had died, or after they had moved, to live nearer to a better school. One boy (aged 11), who lived with his grandparents felt there was discrimination against orphans. He wrote in his diary for the research (in 2007):

"My mum left this world in 2006, and my dad...I don't like living without my parents...I pray every day...[but] sometimes I have to sleep with empty stomach, no food for the whole day...but there is no money to go to hospital when I am ill..." (Yoshida, 2011, 139)

Children's lives exist on all four interacting planes of social being. Hunger and lack of material care (plane one), discrimination, disrespect, loneliness and emotional strain (plane two), structures of childhood, national policies and international economics (plane three) can all have negative effects on plane four, children's inner being and agency, their education, health, bodily integrity and moral status (Ainsworth, et al., 2005; Beegle, et al., 2009). In Africa, the absolute number of people living on less than \$2 a day has doubled since 1981 (Seery and Caistor-Arendar, 2014).

Thinking and being

CR separates the reality and being (of people, objects, events) from our thinking and knowing about them (Bhaskar 1998). Intransitive reality (a school, a city) exists before we each encounter it and form our transitive perceptions about it. We discover reality and do not invent it, although we may invent our reactions and beliefs, perceptions and memories.

To collapse real things (living children) into thoughts (concepts of childhood) is termed the epistemic fallacy, when being (ontology) is reduced into thinking (epistemology). Theories of children's dependence and inadequacy can shape events, such as actual behaviours and interactions, but there is still a difference between the thought and the deed. Pain is both a real, physiological, biochemical, neural reaction, and a felt, perceived experience, when pain may be increased or reduced by thoughts and emotions. Kneeling on a concrete floor for hours can be

made worse by anxiety, stress, shame, uncertainty and helplessness, not knowing how long the punishment will last for instance. Soldiers who hardly feel the pain of wounds until the excitement of battle is over indicate that pain is powerfully altered by emotions. Yet pain is not all in the mind.

Adults may be so concerned with thoughts (models of the deficient versus the ideal child, forms of moral education, hope of forming future adults) that they overlook physical being. They regarded shame or embarrassment as an essential part of punishment in learning “how to control the body” and how to correct the childishness they perceived in the child’s mind. Yet the children concerned are highly aware about physical reality. Hassani (aged 13) described physical and emotional pain caused by the punishment of having to hop up and down repeatedly in front of younger classes for making a mistake. He experienced real physical loss of control over his own body through pain and humiliation (Yoshida, 2011, 167-8). As with structure and agency, there is no definite dividing line between intransitive being in actual bodies and behaviours, versus transitive thoughts, but there are differences. CR is concerned to avoid collapsing bodies into beliefs, and assuming that our physical lives are wholly constructed through our personal experiences and perceptions. Similarly, childhood researchers show how childhood is a set of beliefs, separate from real children and their living agency and competencies.

Many students say they do feel respected and listened to by adults, but others experience primarily non-recognition or coercion. They learn to be “well-behaved” by embodying docile compliance. Their freedom from physical and mental pain is achieved through instrumental or what may be labelled “rational”, “adult-like” decisions, by their choice to be rule-following agents in the presence of adult power over them. They weigh up one choice over another. In this way they tend not to see their compliance as entirely meaningless and it is a form of agency. Silence too can be an embodied agency (Yoshida, 2011, 152-4, 177).

Absence

Absence tends to be ignored in research, which concentrates on presence and evidence. Yet absence is central to CR. Absence is the almost infinite otherness, everything that has been lost into the past, besides all the infinite potential waiting in the future, of which only a tiny part will ever be realised. Absence is all that we might have been or known or done, but have not. It is a great causal power, a vacuum that absorbs almost all around it, and is therefore a prime mover: pushing and pulling everything forward into new times and spaces. To act is to change things by absenting or removing a present condition or constraint and forming a so-far-absent new condition (Bhaskar 2008b).

Everything is partly defined by what it is not. Childhood agency is largely defined as incomplete because of the supposed absence of adult competencies. Students often talked about non-recognition of their agency, either directly by referring to their right to be heard, or indirectly in the negating, omitting or marginalizing of their agency. Moreover, a sense of “lack”, “negation” and “absence” was sometimes felt and expressed by children in terms of their “future” responsibilities, informed by powerful traditions in child-adult relations. For example, Saida (age: 14) wrote in her diary:

“...At our home. We like doing work very hard. Usually, each of us has to do some kind of work, and when we finish with our work you feel very good about your environment. Without our parents we aren’t going to work. They [parents]

raise us, provide for us, and protect us from illness. It means that parents are expected to take some time off from work, when we [children] are around. So this is why we share work at home among children...But one day my younger sibling, who was asked to run an errand to our neighbour, refused and ran away.” (Yoshida, 2011, 141)

Saida is responsible and she seems to enjoy the work at home to help her parents. However, she notes a lack of willingness in that she and her siblings wouldn't do the work without their parents. Noting her younger sister's resistance to work, she perhaps suggests the lesser moral status of the younger one.

To recognize the void and empty space of absence is essential because a world too tightly packed for movement (physical or mental) cannot change, and has no room for alternatives, for new possibilities or transformations. The agency of childhood (and adulthood) involves becoming and begoing, leaving and absenting former spaces to enter new future ones. Absence is also central to splits and gaps, lacks and needs in present schools and childhoods, and potential new openings into future so-far-absent improvements.

Difference and change

Difference involves, for example, one child leaving a room and other entering it, so that a different child is there. However, an example of transforming change is when a child learns to read and the same child has new skills and independence and agency and a new identity and status as “a reader”. Difference does not involve this real causal change and emergence of new identities, relationships and activities that nevertheless exist within the same changing person – or school, or city. Whereas change combines with continuity, difference does not. Difference marks the child as other, who will one day be a different person, an adult. Change sees the same person lasting yet being transformed over a lifetime. Many similarities and equalities between children and adults can then be appreciated. Developmental psychology divides childhood into separate, hardly connected stages, each with a different status and problems of being in stages towards adulthood. “” Children in the study said they could contribute to their family only “when” they grew up, “later” and “after” studying very hard and becoming adults, not while a child. There are clear disconnections in the sequence of linear developmental stages, past, present and future. This model denies how children are already competent contributors (Yoshida, 2011, 156-160). Children and adults use age as one of the most important markers of their different identities, a real influence on their lives (Nieuwenhuys 2005).

Closed and open systems

School students' progress is often discussed as if it occurs within a closed system of a single overriding force: the student is taught and then memorises, understands and repeats the lesson, within the closed teaching-learning system. Yet in social life there are always many competing and conflicting forces and influence within open systems: the students' home life, health, ability, the type of school and teaching, the state of the toilets that might stop parents from allowing their daughters to attend school, all the other students, their aspirations and future employment opportunities, the education policies at local, national and international levels, and so on.

Some forces promote and celebrate children's agency. Others at the same time

constrain and underestimate students' capacities so that their agency may take resisting and subversive forms. When interviewed, the Tanzanian teachers spoke of different influences and causes of children's problems and misbehaviours. "In many cases, first of all, I ask them [reasons for children's misbehaviours]. But...Very often they [children] like to tell you lies." Poverty may be said to cause bad and "uncivilised" and unsophisticated behaviours among local children, not found in more affluent areas of the city (Yoshida, 2011, 159). Although students also associated misbehaviours with poverty, they tended to explain causes more in terms of personal relationships with their family members or teachers. "Your father is alcoholic...The father doesn't care about the child's outcomes...Everyday they [family members] come back home anytime they want...and they have nothing to talk about." "Teachers can be strict, and children can be scared of the teachers. That's why children become truants." Children's accounts covered material, social and personal influences (Yoshida, 2011, 135-6). Awareness of open systems avoids simplistic thinking, which blames individuals and proposes standard remedies. Instead, social life and change are seen to be highly complex and multi-layered.

Natural necessity

Natural necessity is the underlying causal reality that drives many of the ways in which children and adults behave. It works through physical, historical, social, political and economic structures and powers. Natural necessity also works through three levels: the empirical, the actual and the real.

The empirical level involves observers' experiences and perceptions, such as researchers' reports, graphs and conclusions. There were children's accounts and diaries during the school study, and the researcher's observations. Second, the actual level concerns events, people and objects that actually exist or occur, an episode of punishment, for example. Most research works on these two descriptive levels.

However, this is rather like observing falling objects and recording the patterns of falling to see if there are "constant conjunctions" that explain how and why the objects fall. Maybe the power of falling is in the objects themselves or, by analogy, children's achievements are entirely through their own efforts. Maybe the objects influence one another's falling – or succeeding, such as when children are set to compete against one another.

CR also searches for deeper, real, explanatory causes, which are invisible and are only seen in their effects (Bhaskar, 1998). These are like gravity, which is taken to be the true explanation for falling objects, even though gravity itself cannot be seen or proved.

With physical punishment, adults are often unwilling to use it, and they know it seldom works to deter or to reform misbehaviour. Yet many feel compelled to use punishment. Their agency, actions and beliefs could be seen as symptoms more than causes. The underlying explanations and causes for physical punishment systems include the pressures on teachers: to maintain order in very large classes of uncomfortable children; to prevent classes from becoming still more disorderly; to instil fear and obedience in the children; to prevent children from thinking they can win in the power2 battle for control over the class; to keep the respect of the parents and of teacher colleagues; to prevent complaints; to avoid being dismissed; to maintain the actual and symbolic adult status of being a firm not a weak teacher.

When physical punishment is the norm, very few teachers are strong and skilful enough to succeed without using it, and to counter these real underlying causal influences with very limited resources. Attempts to change systems usually fail because they involve only the empirical and actual levels. To succeed, they have to address real, causal, natural necessity too.

The possibility of naturalism

Scientism assumes that methods in the natural and social sciences are identical. Reductionism assumes that the subjects-objects of social and natural science research are identical, such as when children's behaviour is observed as if they are animals, but their human motives and views are ignored. However, naturalism assumes that there can be, an essential unity but not uniformity of methods between the natural and social sciences, because they are more alike than is usually believed (Bhaskar, 1998).

Interpretive researchers tend to consider that naturalism, the use of empirical, positivist, natural science methods in social science, is inappropriate and naive. Social beliefs and behaviours are so contingent and transient, existing in the changing relations and perceptions of unpredictable agents, within invisible social structures and values. Whereas natural science deals with solid things, social science is about ideas.

However, CR contends that social and natural science both deal with things and ideas, solid bodies, specific actions, and also imaginative interpretations and unproven theories, such a gravity or evolution, which are only known in their effects. Social life is not wholly irregular and unpredictable. Deeper trends show partly predictable consistencies, such as historical patterns in the use of physical punishment.

Naturalism accepts that social structures and agency really exist. For example, although social structures or systems of human rights can only operate through human agency, they have an enduring existence. There are longstanding, universal standards of justice against tyranny, theft and murder. Modern human rights can be seen as contemporary versions of how we understand and practise these ancient realities. Children's agency is fleetingly exercised, observed and interpreted, but it is also real in three main ways that are accepted in natural science: the abstract concept of agency is an unseen, causal, explanatory power like gravity; it is known in its effects that keep changing the world, such as when a child sweeps a school yard or sows some seeds, dealing with real objects and enduring ideas; and third, the effects can be observed and often measured. The possibility of naturalism can give social researchers greater confidence in the reality of their observations and analyses.

Conclusion

We have treated agency mainly in terms of children's practical, conscious responses in schools. We have not addressed other vital areas along a spectrum of children's agency stretching from babies' pre-fully-conscious physical-emotional-social agency (Alderson et al., 2005) to children's very different additionally rational agency, such as when they consciously make complex, stressful personal decisions and give informed, voluntary consent to high risk surgery (Alderson, 2007) or when they are active child soldiers (Honwana, 2005). We have said little about the unjust

constraining structures of neo-colonial global economics that enforce under-funding and under-resourcing in Tanzanian schools. Students' and teachers' agency then often appears as hope and courage when coping with problems, rather than as fulfilling academic potential.

Agency may be seen as ambivalent, intended or inadvertent, rational or foolish, cautious or risky, compliant or resistant, individual or collective, partly autonomous and partly heteronomous, chosen yet constrained, effective and ineffective, creative and destructive, competent and incompetent. An act may be viewed very differently from different perspectives. Critical realist analysis concludes that agency and the surrounding social structures take many forms, interact and overlap. Yet the conscious, embodied, individual agent also exists, partly separate from the surrounding structures and relationships that form, enable and constrain agency. Only the human agent can enact agency.

Even if the inner impulse of conscious agency, like the unconscious moving power of gravity, cannot be seen or proved, agency is "real" in at least two crucial ways. It has real effects when agents act and make changes. And second, most aspects of human social life (being a child, a student, a parent, an author) depend on assuming that we are each the same, sustained-though-changing, morally conscious individual agent throughout life (unless dementia sets in, but dementia proves how much we rely on that "normal" continuity). To deny unseen agency sets up untenable theory/practice contradictions. Authors who deny personal agency cannot claim to be named authors or protest about plagiarism. Such contradictions can only be resolved by accepting the reality of individual agency in theory and practice.

Based on our research (Alderson, 1993; Yoshida 2011) we suggest that agency involves 1) physical/verbal activity by the unique embodied agent with 2) thought and conscious decision-making, purpose and motive within 3) often very powerful and more or less enabling power¹ or constraining power² social relationships and structures. These evoke varying reactions in the agent from voluntary/willing cooperation to active resistance. There is 4) some moral awareness about need and desire, harm and benefit to self and others (though awareness does not dictate action, many still decide to cause harm but agents do so consciously). And 5) time, space, resources and opportunity enhance and restrict limited human agency. However, inadequate resources do not preclude agency, they may generate it: hungry children may be active workers and soldiers. Finally 6) agency tends to affect others and cause change.

CR has many other concepts that serve as useful tools for social research. So far, few childhood researchers have used them, and there is scope for much innovative work. Our introductory summaries are debated at great length by critical realists, who offer robust, practical ways for research to describe and understand the world, to validate knowledge and to address moral questions such as justice between generations and nations. Ruth Levitas (2010) and others contend that working towards more just societies is a central task for sociology, and childhood researchers are uniquely able to work with and for children and young people as agents towards this goal.

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