

## Viewpoint 2 for Children's Geographies

### Time, temporality and woman-child relations

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**Abstract:** This is the second in a series of Viewpoints about a symposium on the intersections and antagonisms between various forms of feminism and the politics of childhood. This article traces the various ways in which time and temporality were mobilised in symposium papers and discussions and considers the implications for efforts to conceptualise woman-child relations. In conclusion, the potentials and risks of focusing on temporality when theorising relations between those positioned as women and those positioned as children are considered.

**Keywords:** time; temporality; women-child relations; feminism; childhood; futurity

Time – as a concept, process, and representation – is no stranger to Childhood Studies, but time is predominantly marked by its rejection. Critiques abound of the elision of childhood, developmental time, and futurity (Qvortrup 2011; Jenks 1996), as well as of progress narratives figuring children alongside women and (post)colonial subjects as vestiges of time past in terms of both 'tradition' and immaturity (e.g. Balagopalan 2014; Gagen 2007; Yuval-Davis 1997). A focus on the 'nowness' of children's lives has become somewhat of a mantra within Childhood Studies (Uprichard 2008; Ansell et al. 2014), a notable contrast to the focus on 'transition' in its disciplinary book ends of Early Childhood and Youth Studies. This presentism takes form in the important but by now well-worn countering of representations of children as little more than 'human becomings' with an insistence on children as 'human beings'. Perhaps then, the prevalence of temporality as a cross-cutting theme at a symposium which brought childhood scholarship into conversation with feminism was both to be anticipated and rather unexpected in its ubiquity and diverse conceptualisation.

I begin this Viewpoint by briefly introducing the symposium and then move on to consider the various, and sometimes contradictory, ways in which time and temporality made appearances in session papers and discussions. I conclude the article by offering some initial reflections about the potentials and risks of focusing on temporality when theorising relations between those positioned as women and those positioned as children.

## The symposium

*Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?* was convened by myself, along with Berry Mayall, Katherine Twamley, and Ann Varley (University College London, UK) in November 2015. The symposium brought participants together to unpack perceived commonalities and conflicts between ‘children’s interests’ and ‘women’s interests’ (which themselves are heterogeneous) and, more broadly, to theorise relations between gender and generation.<sup>1</sup> A more comprehensive evaluation of the overall symposium was provided in a previous Viewpoint (add ref).

In a final session, participants considered the overarching themes which emerged during the event, as well as the omissions and questions which remained. It was here, as well as in Ann Varley’s summary of, and response to, the first day of the symposium<sup>2</sup>, that the issue of ‘temporality’, and its various mobilisations throughout the discussions, was identified most clearly as a cross-cutting theme.

## Variations in time

Time is deceptively straightforward: in common sense usage it implies little more than a quantitative measurement of duration and pace. Yet, time is multidimensional, takes different forms, and can be represented and imbued with meaning in diverse ways (Bear 2014; Sarre and Moran-Ellis 2014). These diverse instantiations have considerable import. From school bells to time sheets, time can serve as a political tool, used to regulate, control, and differentiate. Time can be experienced differently depending on our subjective and contextual experience, as well as social positions. Educators may feel rushed to finish a lesson in time or relieved that it is over.

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<sup>1</sup> All paper abstracts and further details about the project are available at <https://feminismandchildhood.wordpress.com/2015/06/27/workshop-materials/#top>

<sup>2</sup> See Ann Varley’s blog at <https://feminismandchildhood.wordpress.com/2015/12/08/reflections-on-day-1-of-the-workshop/>

Students may feel trapped for a period of time in spaces not of their own choosing or frustrated that there was 'not enough time' to complete their work. I use 'temporality' here to pay heed to this social character of time, specifically the ways in which people mobilise and experience different – and often contradictory – dimensions of time.

In exploring the theme of 'temporality' which emerged during the symposium, I begin by considering the various ways that time, temporality, and their effects, were invoked in the papers and discussion and their implications for approaches to the central questions of the symposium. I map out some of the distinctive representations of: institutional time, abstract capitalist time, historical time, future time, and theoretical time. As with any attempt at mapping, the difficulty is that exemplars inevitably exceed such categorisation, and the papers I reference in the following discussion are no different. I draw attention to them here primarily as case studies of the types of time under discussion, making the limited claim that a particular dimension of time is premised in each paper, albeit not always explicitly, and arguing that the concrete and contradictory rhythms of time became more apparent during the ensuing discussions.

**Institutional time**, and an emphasis on its disciplinary effects (following Foucault), figured most strongly in Ohad Zehavi's paper. He points to the institutional time of compulsory schooling, a key site where 'the child' is constituted, regulated and surveilled. Time, in this disciplinary view, both entraps those to whom the figure of the child is applied and is productive of generational distinctions between adults and children, as well as of docile, self-governing bodies. Such 'man-made' [sic] divisions, Zehavi contends, serve as the basis of 'oppressive social regimes' between adults and children, in the same way as the myth of femininity grounds the domination of those constituted as men over women. This analysis leads Zehavi to an anti-categorical position, arguing there is a need to jettison both femininity and childhood as well as their dualisms: masculinity and adulthood. He seeks to accomplish this move via Deleuze and Guattari's minoritarian politics of emergence, where *becoming otherwise* allows for binary classifications and power relations to be transcended.

In my joint paper with Jan Newberry on stratified social reproduction, we engage with **capitalist time** and the abstract quantification of labour in the process of surplus

value appropriation. We suggest that ‘women’ and ‘children’ are both linked and differentiated through their participation in life’s work, pointing to the tensions that emerge as communities negotiate to meet their “outlawed needs” (Kelsh, 2013).<sup>3</sup> We argue that the temporal lag between such necessary labour and its availability for capital are key to understanding the processes whereby different women, different children, and the relations between them are constituted, as well as gender and generational subordination. Whether ‘labour’ was a sufficient way to conceptualise relationships between women and children, especially within more intimate spaces of care, was the subject of debate amongst participants. This raised questions about the extent to which labour relations can involve care, love, reciprocity, creativity, and be the basis for emancipatory solidarity or, conversely, whether labour relations are exhausted by abstract capitalist time.

**Historical time** was present most clearly in Berry’s Mayall’s paper which tells the story of women activists in early twentieth century England, and the national political-economic context and contemporaneous theoretical debates (from maternalism to socialism) in which these movements emerged. In so doing, Mayall – like Zehavi – points to the institution of compulsory schooling, but here to highlight that its growth led to an increasing public visibility of children and ‘child poverty’. She argues this visibility informed women’s struggles to work for the interests of *both* women and children. As a result, unlike Zehavi’s move to reject classifications of gender and generation, Mayall allows such categories to hold and implies instead a need to again orient feminist activism towards children and the institution of childhood.

Historical time also surfaced in papers from Ann Phoenix and Ina Gankam Tambo, but here attention was paid to the way that historical practices and experiences are intertwined with the present. In exploring adults’ memories of their childhood experiences of reuniting with their mothers after a period of transnational separation in processes of serial migration, Phoenix points to the ways in which both past and present are remade through retrospective narratives. Gankam Tambo’s paper draws

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of “outlawed needs” draws attention to the fact that although people require food, shelter, relationships, intimacy, learning, and leisure, it is a political question how a line is drawn between those needs which are viewed as deserving compensation and those which aren’t included in a wage calculus or provided by the state. In late capitalism, many of those needs which are “outlawed” or excluded from legitimation are those associated with the tasks of social reproduction or which contrast with hegemonic familial forms (eg. same-sex relationships).

on year-long field work with child domestic workers in urban Nigeria, pointing out that Indigenous forms of child fostering within extended family networks persist, but they have been rewritten with the integration of Nigeria into a global capitalist economy. Children continue to be fostered, but they now take up the majority of domestic work in such households, argues Gankam Tambo, in order to enable women to enter the paid labour force. Her paper suggests that this marks a shift from a gendered to generational division of domestic work, creating antagonisms between women and children in these households. If, and to what extent, such a shift has occurred was the object of serious debate amongst symposium participants, who pointed out that it was primarily the 'girl child' who ended up shouldering such domestic labour. As participants pointed out, there is a disturbing timelessness to the gendered constitution of domestic duties. Indeed, the emphasis on historical time draws attention to the importance of attending to the ways in which historical time is implicated in present-day relations of domination, not only because the actions of the 'long dead', to use Archer's (1998) phrase, shape the social relations which we experience today but the ways in which historical time is remade in the process of both individual and collective narratives and social research.

Whilst participants largely rejected the linear, universal, and developmental time to which 'the child' has often been consigned, '**future time**' still loomed large in the discussions. Priscilla Alderson's paper, for example, is preoccupied with the kinds of ecological and political futures which children, women, and men might inhabit, raising questions about the kinds of worlds that are being left for younger generations in a neoliberal climate of debt and financialisation. Rosen and Newberry's paper points to both existential vulnerability and the openness of the future as a way of understanding and orientating struggles over the recognition, inscription, and meeting of needs, over and against those which are 'outlawed'. In their paper, Rachel Thomson and Lisa Baraitser – as with Zehavi – take up emergence and becoming, disentangled from a particular social position so as to avoid re-inscribing childhood as futurity. They argue that the birth of a child can shift temporal orientations, opening up questions about the kinds of futures and personhoods that children, mothers, and others (including fathers and grandparents) want to have and to be. These new temporal orientations shape present-day practices of provisioning, learning, and being in the process.

Taken together, these papers add weight to the argument that past, present, and future, are better understood as having a co-presence, rather than being distinct moments in time (Bear 2014). Such a temporal orientation draws attention to the ways in which theorisations of woman-child relations are always populated by our own experiences and imaginaries of childhood (Steedman 1992; Thorne 1987) as well as by our anxieties, hopes, and goals for the future.

There is here a sense of **'theoretical time'** at play, or the ways that conceptualisations of childhood, womanhood, and social relations emerge and re-emerge at particular times. Theoretical time was evident, as discussed above, in Mayall's exploration of the emergence of particular sets of ideas which English women mobilised to explain and extend their early 20<sup>th</sup> century activism. It was also apparent in the overall project itself. *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?* was framed by many participants as a topic which had its hey-day during the heady days of 'second wave' feminism and in the early days of Childhood Studies, but with relatively little attention in the following years. Certainly a number of papers at the symposium traced, in varying ways, the rises and falls of the questions posed by the project and the idea of 'feminism and childhood' having a 'time' which has again arisen.

Discussions highlighted the flows, disruptions, cycles, and potential purchase of theoretical tools used to make sense of relations between women and children. For instance, some participants commented on the 'return' to political economic theories to help make sense of questions of inequity and injustice for women and children in times of intensifying austerity and global economic retrenchment. Others, although cognisant that Feminist and Childhood Studies have not engaged with these conceptual resources as much of late, disputed this narrative of disappearance. They described the movements of the political economic in theoretical time in a grammar of 'dwelling with' or 'deepening', rather than 'revisiting'. This variation in the precise description of the flows of theoretical time highlights both the more subjective experience of the rhythms of time shaped in part by political and paradigmatic positions as well as the ways in which theoretical questions are informed by political and economic events of the moment. The rising use of the *trope* of the child in a way that effectively blames women for the conditions of children's lives in the context of crisis and austerity, and the continued subsumption of children's lived experiences

by their future promise, in social research and policy making can certainly help to explain the current purchase and urgency of the questions raised in the symposium.

Implied already in the above discussion is that varying conceptions of time were operating in the symposium discussions; however, these distinctions were not always made explicit or disentangled in the discussion. Perhaps more importantly, though, these variations are suggestive that different forms of time are often co-present. From a phenomenological point of view, this can create contradictory rhythms of **experiential time**. For example, as the discussion provoked by Rosen and Newberry's paper suggests, abstract capitalist time in labour relations can come into conflict with the lived experiences of caring, feeding, cleaning, growing, learning, and teaching. In the context of mother-child relations, Baraitser and Thomson refer to this aspect of experiential time as a time of 'waiting, endurance and persistence', and, elsewhere, Judith Suissa (2006) has referred to parent-child relations as a form of 'being with' that exceeds questions of rights, needs, and instrumentalisation. Federici (2012), perhaps, provides some help here in navigating these seemingly incompatible timescapes, noting the dual character of social reproductive labour. It is both central to accumulation in that it reproduces workers for capital but equally it is about making lives, and lives worth living, and can be a site in which opposition to practices of subordination and injustice may be fomented.

Discussions at the symposium suggested that contradictory rhythms of experiential time were also related to the ways that social positioning intersects with time. In her paper, Phoenix points to the way that incongruous timescapes can create antagonisms between women and children. Mothers in her research, who had migrated from the Caribbean to the UK, understood such practices in extended timescales, narrating their hopes for better futures for their children. Children understood their lives in the present tense. Having to join their mothers in the serial migration process caused both surprise and even consternation. Unlike the mother's extended timescapes, which framed the migration process as part of developing children as educational projects for the future, children felt that relationships with their mothers in particular were failed emotional projects due to the distance and disruption of migration.

Such distinctions might be referred to as '**positioned time**' and this notion, I suggest, could be productively employed to consider the questions posed by Ann Varley in relation to generational relations. Responding to Leena Alanen's paper, which outlined a relational view of childhood and adulthood in contradistinction to demographic approaches to aging and generation, Varley pointed out that generational relations themselves change over the life course. She questioned if presentist accounts of generation could account for these changes, and if and how life course approaches – with their extended and dynamic timescapes – could enhance efforts to theorise woman-child relations. Indeed, it is precisely the everyday and conceptual efforts of mediating between different forms of time that Bear (2014, 19) points to when she argues: 'It is not enough to trace diverse institutional representations and practices of time. We have to track how these produce social rhythms and follow the relationships of these rhythms to each other.'

## Conclusions

In drawing this short article to a close, I make three brief concluding remarks. First, the ways we think about temporality has bearing on the ways in which we frame research problems and on the types of analysis we produce. In this case I have attempted to demonstrate that a focus on one type of time can be generative of particular proposals for ways to attend to relations between those positioned as women and children. I would go as far to suggest that variations in conceptualisations of time underpinned some of the debates which emerged in response to the symposium questions. For example, attending to institutional time was a factor in Zehavi's anti-categorical approach whilst a focus on abstract capitalist time informed Rosen and Newberry's emphasis on the ways that contradictions in capital produce antagonisms between women and children. Overall, discussions of both papers stayed largely within these implicit forms of time, limiting consideration of the ways different timescapes might be concurrent and the implications of their co-presence in negotiations of the messy and subjective elements of experiential time. Here then I follow Bear and colleagues (2014) in their call to social scientists to make explicit the forms of time that we are mobilising in our work and the ways that this informs our analysis.



Second, I have made a case for the importance of considering time and temporality, including marking its centrality to the project of theorising woman-child relations. In part this is a response to the insistence on presentism, and the blanket critique of futurity within Childhood Studies, that I outlined at the beginning of this article. Even more, it is a call to attend to the temporal aspects of experience, including generational relations. It begs the question: Of whom do we speak when we theorise woman-child relations? As Ann Varley asked: Where are the older woman? (See also Burman 2008, on class, 'race', and national distinctions which inform which women and which children are often the focus of these inquiries.). A focus on time urges consideration of the pasts – colonial and otherwise – which inhabit the ways in which woman-child relations are understood, structured and negotiated and prompts consideration of the future. Indeed, our project began with a desire for things to be different, to address the invisibility, subordination, and marginalisation of those positioned as women and children, as individuals, social groups, and in their relations to each other. As Levitas (2010) argues so eloquently, we need to be able to imagine possible futures both as a way to evaluate our present conditions and if we want to 'reconstitute society' for the better. In this way, confining children's lives to the present can serve very neoconservative purposes.

Finally, I argue that at the same time, there is a need to be wary about bringing time into our analyses by asking: Why has there been a recent turn to temporality and what is lost or displaced because of it? Bear (2014) suggests that the focus on time is a response to the limitations of spatial understandings of neoliberalism, pointing to the rise of metaphors such as 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1990). Equally, we could consider the metaphor of 'time-space expansion' which globalisation has wrought on the lives of marginalised children and young people (Katz 2004). The emphasis on temporality, and futures in particular, may also relate to the radical uncertainty provoked by economic crisis and retrenchment where previous ways of living and being no longer seem possible (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). There is also the less complementary view that academics are subject to fads or fashions not only methodological, but also theoretical and thematic.

More importantly, I suggest that the rising focus on time demands careful consideration for its political implications. In explicitly articulating and mobilising time in our analyses, it is important to ask: Do we risk 'seeing' time everywhere,

amplifying the importance of time through our analyses to the loss of other aspects of life? Do we end up re-inscribing a new form of past and futurity on 'the child', displacing the important political gains made in the name of focusing on children's present? How do activists work with time and what can academics learn from such approaches in theorising and researching relations between women and children? Does this focus on time valorise becomings, change, and futures without considering the ways in which they might further sediment, or create new, inequities? In other words, emergence, in itself, is not necessarily positive. I am arguing here for the importance of continuing to challenge ourselves to consider whether a focus on attending to the 'what could be' may turn our attention away from the difficult and complex ways in which we might work, in the present, to improve the lives of women and children, and the communities we live, love, and labour in.

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