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Beyond 'voice', beyond 'agency', beyond 'politics'? Hybrid childhoods and some critical reflections on children's emotional geographies

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that a significant proportion of research on children's emotional geographies has been deployed to reinforce the importance of children's 'voices', their (independent) 'agency', and the various ways in which voice/agency maybe deemed 'political'. Without wishing to dismiss or dispense with such approaches, I explore potential ways to go 'beyond' concerns with voice/agency/politics. Initially, I review studies of children's participation (and participatory methods), activism and everyday lives that mobilise emotion and affect in productive ways. I contrast such studies with important questions raised by a reinvigoration of interest in the need for children to be able to represent themselves. I then explore the possibilities raised by so-called 'hybrid' conceptions of childhood – which go beyond biosocial dualisms – to enable further strides beyond voice/agency. Drawing on examples from alternative education and contemporary attachment theories, I explore some potential implications for children's emotional geographies and relational geographies of age of what I term 'more-than-social' emotional relations. Yet I do not offer an unequivocal endorsement of these hybrid emotions. Thus, I end the paper by issuing some words of caution – both in terms of the critical questions raised by more-than-social emotional relations, specifically, and in terms of engendering broader debate about how and *why* scholars do (children's) emotional geographies.

1. Introduction

Reflecting a broader 'turn' to emotions and affect, children's geographers have sought to understand how emotions work in children's everyday lives. Children's and emotional geographies may be entangled in multiple ways: from children's own expressions of anxiety (Nayak, 2003) or hope (Pain et al., 2010), to the powerful feelings that undergird contemporary constructions of childhood (Valentine, 1996) or adult memories thereof (Philo, 2003). Undoubtedly, children's emotional geographies have represented a rich vein of research. However, whilst there may be broad agreement that researching children's emotional geographies is a positive, worthwhile endeavour, there remain important, critical disjunctures in terms of how emotions and affects might be understood to *matter*, both within and beyond the academy (e.g. Vanderbeck, 2008). Most notably, some recent critical debates have centred around the possible ways in which children's experiences maybe framed as 'political' (Kallio and Häkli, 2010; Skelton and Valentine, 2003).

Whilst this paper does seek to intervene in these debates, it does so in a particular way. It seeks to set out some additional (perhaps alternative, perhaps complementary) frames through which children's emotional geographies might proceed. It is not intended as an agenda for how children's geographers could 'do emotion' differently. Rather more modestly, it aims to initiate consideration of a series of additional approaches and critiques that might offer different starting points for deliberations about how children's emotional geographies matter. As I point out in the paper's conclusion, these approaches and critiques may have important ramifications for all scholars – not just 'children's geographers' – in terms of thinking how and, especially, *why* they study (children's) emotions. To do so, I begin in Section 2 by revisiting two (virtually) foundational principles in contemporary research on children's geographies and, indeed, broader social studies of childhood: notions of 'voice' and (independent) 'agency'. Several contemporary critics have attacked both principles. I draw upon their critiques to observe a *general tendency* in work on children's emotional geographies that has engaged somehow with questions of politics. That is, a tendency to deploy children's emotions somewhat instrumentally *in support* of voice and/or agency. In the second half of Section 2, and in order to frame what follows, I explore two of several possible responses to these critiques: first, I note some important exceptions to this instrumentalist tendency, focussing on studies of emotion, affect and children's politics that have moved

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'beyond' voice and/or agency; second, I note calls to consolidate notions of voice and/or agency in the face of emotional and, especially, nonrepresentational children's geographies (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012).

I want to clarify that I am not assuming that going 'beyond' means *dispensing* with questions of voice/agency, nor that children's emotional geographies *should* (now) seek to move 'beyond' those notions, nor that the two possible responses cited above are incommensurate. Rather, the remaining sections of the paper offer some additional ways of thinking and doing children's emotional geographies that may, in some contexts, be viewed as alternative, in others complementary, and, in others, as unnecessary or undesirable. Indeed, Section 4 offers one set of broader reflections on why thinking and doing children's emotional geographies *at all* may require further critical reflection. I focus in Section 3 upon one set of ways to 'go beyond' voice/agency, inspired by a recent impulse outside geographical scholarship to exceed biosocial dualisms that have characterised much childhood research (Ryan, 2012). I frame my discussion in what Ryan (2012: 2) terms a "new wave" of childhood studies that aim to understand entanglements of biology and society – so-called 'hybrid childhoods' (Prout, 2005). I then provide two extended examples, taken from my own research into alternative education spaces, and from recent cross-disciplinary studies of attachment theory. I cite these two examples with the principal aim of stretching how children's geographers might conceive of the relationality of children with adults and, indeed, the relationality of children's emotions. I am not necessarily advocating that children's geographers (or others interested in emotion) should focus primarily upon alternative learning spaces, or work with or adopt approaches from attachment theory. Rather, building on my critique of Mitchell and Elwood (2012) in Section 2, I attend to the potential implications (both substantive and conceptual) of attending to hybrid childhoods, in what I understand to be significant ways that both map onto but go beyond concerns with voice, agency and/or politics.

In Section 4 – an extended discussion and conclusion – I question what might be the role of children's geographers – and children's *emotional* geographies – in interrogating hybrid childhoods. Specifically, and despite my enthusiasm for children's emotional geographies of all kinds, I offer some words of caution. I sketch out a series of critical questions with which children's emotional geographers may wish to engage: initially, if theorisations of hybrid childhoods are to supplement other approaches to children's emotional geographies; and, more broadly, if children's geographers are to critically engage with the multiple, potential uses to which emotions may be put in relation to children's lives.

2. Going beyond 'voice' and/or (independent) 'agency'?

The so-called 'new social studies of childhood' represented a profound shift in scholarly research with children, evincing a series of core principles through which 'biological' concerns with children's development were virtually replaced with the 'social' constructions and processes through which childhoods were constituted. Two foundational principles – which were rapidly adopted by geographers – were that children be afforded greater 'voice' (in academic research and elsewhere) and that they be viewed as capable, ostensibly independent agents. Few researchers working with children accepted that children's 'voice' or 'agency' came without (adult-)imposed limits – far from it. However, these two principles did become somewhat of a mantra: without directly naming names, it would not be too difficult to find scores of articles that end by pressing for greater 'participation' by children on this or that issue, or that, actually, children are far more capable and independent than adults usually admit. If nothing else, I will readily accept that I have made this argument more than once (most often in research with policy-makers); I will also, therefore, be quite clear that for this reason I am not arguing that, in going 'beyond' voice or agency, childhood scholars should dismiss such principles outright. To do so would be to lose some of the hard-won gains achieved by childhood researchers and advocates over the last twenty years, and to efface the enormous variety of ways in which those two terms have been deployed.

However, I want to suggest a more measured, more modest process of 'going beyond' voice and agency, on two fronts. On the first front, recent work by geographers and others has raised critical questions about not only the desirability but the possibility of voice and/or agency. Space precludes a full review, but I want to highlight just two examples. First, Philo (2011: 125) examines occasions where it might be *inappropriate* to listen to a child's voice – for instance (borrowing from Foucault) if a child should wish "for sexual relations with a given adult". Indeed, Philo notes an obvious contradiction within children's geographies research where children's voices (and feelings) about play, work or school attract significant attention, but where (for whatever reasons), children's articulations of their sexuality attract far less (also Vanderbeck, 2008). Philo's position is clear: in some contexts, it may neither be possible nor desirable to listen to children's voices.

> I am convinced that there is a major dilemma to be faced here […] my feeling is that it indeed signals the limits to how far we should go with child-centric children's geographies, suggesting instead that there are moments when it is imperative to [not be] 'seduced' by children's own voices but instead retaining a (thoroughly and reflexively critical) sense of the adult discourses […] which cannot but 'see further and deeper' than is ever possible for the children themselves

A range of other scholars has sought to question the limits of children's voice and participation (e.g. Hemrica and Heyting, 2004; King, 2007), whilst others view some examples of children's 'voice' and participation as an abrogation of adult responsibility (Conroy, 2010). I pick up on this point later in this section, with particular reference to children's emotions.

Second, important advances in relational geographies of age have, on the one hand, questioned the privileging of certain age groups in geographical research (principally 5–12 year-olds) and, on the other, critiqued a widespread practice amongst children's geographers, in particular, to consider children *on their own* (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). To paraphrase, a curious effect of viewing children as independent 'agents' has commonly been to efface the intergenerational relationships that not only constitute childhoods, but construct experiences of age-itself. Several studies have therefore sought to address this lacuna (e.g. Tucker, 2003; Wyn et al., 2012). At the same time, several studies have sought to nibble away at presumptions of children's independence that seem to preoccupy not only some academics, but popular commentators on childhood. An example that particularly detains geographers is children's so-called 'independent mobility', which has apparently been in decline in contexts like the UK for decades (e.g. O'Brien et al., 2000). Writing against the grain, Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) argue that children's mobility is, in fact, rarely independent – their travels maybe undertaken with parents, friends, pets and various others – and that, therefore, their relative 'independence' is not necessarily an indicator of the quality or worth of their movements. Developing relational geographies of age, I return to the relationality of *emotions*, specifically, at several points in this paper.

On the second front, and bearing in mind the above critiques, I want to observe a *tendency* for children's geographies to place emotions directly in the service of some particular, often quite *instrumental* notions of voice and/or agency. Children's geographers

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