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EDITORIAL

Ambiguous agency: critical perspectives on social interventions with children and youth in Africa

African children and youth, especially those growing up in expanding urban areas throughout the African Continent, are increasingly identified in academic discourse, public policy and the media as ‘social problems’. Whether as ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’, young people of the continent have, for decades now, been a major target for social and security policies by governments, the police, juridical and penitentiary systems, the United Nations and local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This is especially the case when their behaviour is in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions of childhood and youth,¹ such as in the case of a number of categories of children deemed to be ‘at risk’, including ‘underage criminals’, ‘child-soldiers’, ‘street children’ and ‘child-headed households’.

Contributors to this special issue provide ethnographic evidence and critical analysis about the historical and cultural processes through which these, and other categories of children and youth, have been identified and managed as ‘social problems’ in six different African countries.² Authors problematise the ascribed categories and common dualisms (for example, ‘victim–perpetrator’, ‘passive-agent’) which are consistently, and often uncritically, employed, both by academics and international development agencies, in the context of social interventions. In doing so, they reveal how these categories are the outcome of the controversial interplay between competing local and international definitions and politics of childhood and youth, and of the different extents to which their agency, autonomy and responsibilities are acknowledged.

Taking a multi-disciplinary approach, contributors offer ethnographically grounded yet theoretically sophisticated accounts of the interplay between ‘out of place’ children and youth (Boyden 1990, Nieuwenhuys 1998) and social interventions,³ and consider how acknowledging the agency of ‘out of place’ children and youth might transform our thinking about them and the way we intervene in their lives.

Ambiguous agency

In her article on language and agency, Ahearn (2001) commented on the ubiquituousness of the notion of agency in the Academy and on the heterogeneous ways in which the term is employed by different authors (Ahearn 2001, see also Vanderbeck 2008, p. 396, Jeffrey 2012, p. 245). In the field of childhood and youth studies, the notion of agency has been of huge importance in redefining this research field across several disciplines, particularly since James and Prout’s (1990) introduction to the seminal Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood. Scholars and practitioners alike are now accustomed to thinking about children and youth as ‘social agents’ (for example, see Montgomery 2001, Honwana and De Boeck 2005, Christiansen et al. 2006, Kovats-Bernat 2006, Panelli et al. 2007, Notermans et al. 2011). For example, in the context of Africa, Honwana and De Boeck (2005) describe young people as ‘makers and breakers’ in their collection of ethnographies about how children and youth are transforming the Continent, whilst Christiansen et al. (2006, p. 9) provide ethnographic descriptions of ‘youthscapes’ on
the Continent highlighting how ‘many African youths have aspired to come of age in often volatile and precarious circumstances and have had to shape their lives and strategies accordingly in their attempt to generate meaningful lives for themselves’.

However, Durham asserts that the claim that children and youth have agency ‘is repeatedly offered as an argument in books and articles on youth. But – wonders the author – what kind of agency do youth have? And what does it mean for us as anthropologists to go out and seek to identify youth agency in various places around the world?’ (Durham 2008, p. 151, our emphasis). Durham has highlighted how ‘the agentive nature of youth’ can somehow be ambiguous in specific situations such as, for example, warfare (Durham 2000, p. 116). We use the term ‘ambiguous agency’ in this special issue to refer to examples of agency amongst children and youth which is in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions about childhood and moral and social ideals about the kind of behaviour young people should demonstrate, the activities they should be engaged in, and the spaces and places deemed appropriate for them to inhabit. This special issue explores, through different ethnographic cases, what the acknowledgement of children and youth’s ‘ambiguous agency’ means in the practice of social interventions. Furthermore, we look at how the political and ethical issues raised by children and youth’s moral ambiguity affects the way the notion of agency itself is defined and employed in social research.

The growth in interest in children and youth’s agency within the social sciences has produced a plethora of criticism about social interventions and child protection programmes which have tended to take a paternalistic approach. According to this critique, many programmes regarded children as ‘passive victims’, acting in the name children’s ‘best interests’ but in practice excluding them from participation and decision-making, denying them an active role and obscuring their capacity for action, resulting in a sense of powerlessness (Panter-Brick 2002, 2004, James-Wilson 2007, Van Dijk and Van Driel 2009). Social interventions have been accordingly re-designed on the basis of the principles of children and youth’s ‘agency’ and their right to ‘participation’. It is now mostly assumed that social interventions should aspire to be child-focussed and participatory in their nature, enabling children and youth to take part in decision-making processes based on an acknowledgement of their capacity for autonomy and self-reflection.

Nevertheless, less research has investigated what this means in practical terms in contexts where children and youth threaten and challenge the existing moral and social order, sometimes in overtly violent ways, or when their very independence and self-assurance mark them out as ‘deviant’ and contest established and normative notions of a ‘global childhood’. The acknowledgement of children and youth’s agency, when this unsettles iconic and moral ideals of childhood, poses challenges to the cultural politics of a ‘global childhood’. Articles in this special issue provide critical reflection on the way the notion of agency is used and on how it is defined in the field of childhood studies across several disciples of the social sciences. Starting with the conundrum that children and youth’s ‘ambiguous agencies’ pose to social interventions, and accepted morality, this special issue, consequently, tackles issues related to the notion of agency seldom addressed within the social sciences at a time when the ascription of agency to social subjects has become paradigmatic, hegemonic and often unquestionable.

The politics and moralities of agency
Exploring the reason for the rise of the notion of agency in the social sciences over the past few decades, Asad (2000, p. 30) points to the shift from a Marxist notion of history as dominated by collective forces, to a vision in which ‘(a)ll individuals (…) have the moral capacity and responsibility to act for themselves’. Asad, like others, links the rise in the notion of agency to the spread of the belief in the autonomous and responsible subject, a key feature of today’s neo-liberal capitalism and mode of governance (for example, see Rose 1989, 1996).
Within the social sciences, the spread of the notion of individual agency has followed an agenda of political claims – an epic effort by social scientists to grant a certain amount of power, resistance and political influence to those who are commonly considered to be devoid of any (Durham 2008). Studies dealing with agency across the disciplines of the social sciences have, therefore, focussed primarily on categories of actors marked by exclusion, poverty and victimisation. In these cases, ascription of agency appears to be more a political statement than a research outcome (Mahmood 2001). In childhood studies, it is mostly in categories of children considered to be ‘at risk’ (in terms of being a risk both to themselves and to wider society) that researchers have searched for and identified evidence of agency. As Jeffrey argues, ‘we are now well accustomed to reading stories of children and youth who protest against injustice, often in difficult circumstances, or who express agency simply through their own resourcefulness’ (2012, p. 245).

Acknowledging people’s capacity for resistance is a crucial political issue. However, the notion of agency has become inherently linked with consciousness and responsibility, echoing – despite authors’ intentions – neo-liberal normative notions of subjectivity and citizenship (Asad 2000). In an implicit way, Asad insightfully remarked, agency is commonly assumed to be directed towards what authors consider to be ‘positive’ moral goals, according to a triumphalist vision of history where individuals strive teleologically towards self-empowerment, responsibility and constructive action (Asad 2000, see also Laidlaw 2002, Durham 2008). On this issue, Hoggett (2001, pp. 42–43) remarked:

The desire to give emphasis to the active, resilient, resourceful aspects of the welfare subject is an understandable reaction to the pathologising and problematising of the passive and ‘dependent’ welfare subject which dominated much thinking about social policy in the past. (…) However, there is a danger that we then slip into equating agency with constructive coping, as if the two were synonymous. The point is that there is nothing necessarily constructive about agency and we should beware of smuggling normative assumptions into our thinking here, as if agency is good and absence of agency is bad.

Claims in praise of the autonomous and self-sufficient neo-liberal subject are so frequently enmeshed with notions of social agency that it is often difficult, in research and in practice, to ‘free the concept of agency from its narrower association with free will and liberalist autonomy’ (see also Bevir 1999, Durham 2008, p. 151). The issues that arise from the unclear distinction between the two notions are particularly evident when we consider the practical field of social intervention or political agendas. On the ground, as the articles in this special issue reveal, when researchers and practitioners deal with children and youth’s agency, the apparently abstract notion of social agency reveals its actual entanglement with moral and political blueprints which are seldom acknowledged.

We argue that children and youth’s ambiguous agency is one of the issues revealing the contradictions between the sociological notion of social agency, the ‘liberal subject’ and the notion of autonomous agency, and the practical field of social intervention. The limited notion of agency as resourcefulness, resistance to hegemony and domination, and as something inherently positive short-circuits when we deal, as the authors of this special issue do, with actions that go ‘against the grain’. In other words, towards goals which are not consistent with political ideals of self-liberation and freedom, the principles of ‘universal reason’ or ‘self-interest’ (Mahmood 2001) and, in the case of children and youth, with normative assumptions about the nature of childhood. For example, Heather Montgomery, writing about child prostitutes in Thailand, remarked that:

Child prostitutes are problematic because they challenge many notions about childhood itself, especially what is considered to be appropriate behaviour for children. (…) The children of Baan
Nua, like child prostitutes or homeless youths in the West, are anomalies in the discourse about children and childhood. They exist in an ambiguous category which challenges notions of childhood and which threatens Western constructions of children. They have none of the attributes that are expected of children and, as a consequence, they are threatening and disturbing. These are children who blur the categories of adult and child, knowledge and innocence, force and choice. (2001, pp. 133–134)

And later, that:

Children who are not perceived as innocent, such as children in Baan Nua, homeless youth in the West, and child prostitutes on the streets of London, become ‘problem’ children who threaten and disgust. Innocent and passive victimisation are demanded of children, and lives presented in this way do not threaten or problematise constructions of childhood. (Montgomery 2001, p. 145)

In practice, children and youth making up ‘morally ambiguous’ categories are generally only accepted as children and youth who are ‘in need’ and ‘at risk’ when ‘true victims’. By contrast, features like self-consciousness, self-reflection, capacity for resistance and for managing their lives, which constitute evidence of agency, may represent moral practical problems.

Which agency is ‘good’ agency?

This special issue moves beyond current and popular debates about whether and how children and youth’s agency is acknowledged, to a discussion about what kind of agency is deemed appropriate for children and youth. This move requires dealing with the cultural, social and historical categories employed to assess and evaluate children and youth’s behaviour in the context of social interventions, and with the measures used to deal with those whose behaviour is apparently unfit according to mainstream moral codes.

Paradoxically, while child-rights activists advocate for the acknowledgement of children and youth’s agency in theory, this same agency may be identified as an obstacle to the intervention itself. As such it has to be overcome through modes of disciplinary control or ‘child protection’ measures designed to bend children’s and youth’s conduct towards morally and socially approved goals, transforming social agency into ‘responsible agency’. Such interventions are marked by a paternalistic, directive and supervisory approach. These programmes are meant to help children and youth ‘in need’ but also demand that they meet certain behavioural and social requirements. The purpose is unambiguously that of re-educating children and youth, correcting their conduct, or returning it to what is deemed socially appropriate and disciplining them into responsible individuals. Children and youth are allowed, moreover they are praised, for being ‘agents’, but their agency must be of the ‘right’ kind (Durham 2008).

As Deborah Durham highlighted, when recognising, experiencing and disputing the concept of ‘youth’ (and, we would add, ‘childhood’), in practice, ‘people draw attention to the ways relations are situated in fields of power, knowledge, rights, notions of agency and personhood (...) people speak directly to the question in their societies of what is power, what is agency and of what kinds is it, and how rights are to be negotiated’ (Durham 2000, pp. 116–117).

Authors in this special issue reveal precisely how, in the practice of social interventions, the ambiguous agency of ‘out of place’ children and youth is often considered inappropriate by policy-makers and practitioners. It is typically seen to be not of the right kind because it is not consistent with the liberal conception of autonomous agency, which presupposes a notion of the subject as ‘responsible citizen’, nor with the moral image of a ‘global childhood’. As contributions to this special issue show, ambiguous agency is frequently subjected to processes of concealment or correction, or moulded to make it consistent with specific moral and social standards couched as being in the ‘best interests of the child’.
Indeed, dealing with children and youth involved in morally ambiguous activities, using an actor-centred perspective and trying to acknowledge their capacity for agency and self-reflection, brings about an ethical conundrum. How can we acknowledge children and youth’s agency without divesting them of their need for support and, even more importantly, without entrusting them to a legal system that considers agency and self-reflexivity as synonymous with legal responsibility (Asquith 1996, Ruddick 2006)?

As Bordonaro highlights (2012), in order to acknowledge children and youth’s agency without encountering the ethical conundrum which their morally unfit actions give rise to, ‘quantitative ideas of agency’ are commonly called for (Durham 2008, p. 152). This idea draws attention to the fact that whilst agency is a recognised capacity of human beings, it does not exist in the same ‘quantity’ in individual actors:

Interestingly, although it seems to be a universal quality, such agency is often represented quantitatively; people have more or less agency. (Durham 2008, p. 152)

Children and youth’s ambiguous agency is frequently deemed to be of a special, limited and restricted nature, for example, ‘thin agency’, ‘restricted agency’, ‘limited agency’ and ‘tactical agency’ (Honwana 2005, Klocker 2007, Punch 2007, Robson et al. 2007). The way children and youth are made agents – but not fully so – makes it possible to ‘save the children’ but side-steps important practical issues such as, for example, what is the relationship between agency, legal responsibility and the limits of individual freedom in society, and crucial questions associated with the legitimacy of social interventions (Hecht 1998, Agustín 2007).

It is precisely the failure to deal with these issues that has hampered broader reflection and re-thinking about how the notion of children and youth’s agency might be crucial in reforming their position and participation in society. This has made for a confused situation where researchers and international organisations appeal for children and youth’s agency and participation, but leave aside any real consideration about how this would transform, in complex, disturbing and profound ways, the moral politics of childhood and the position of these actors in society. This special issue suggests that it is now time to explore the consequences of children and youth’s ‘ambiguous agency’ for both theory and practice.

Contributions to the special issue
Articles in this special issue deal with the issues outlined in this editorial from an ethnographic perspective with authors reflecting on the theoretical issues surrounding the notion of ‘ambiguous agency’ starting from the grassroots situations they encountered in their own research.

In her article on young people’s experience of violence in the provinces of North and South Kivu, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Claudia Seymour, who has extensive experience of working with international child protection agencies, highlights how international child protection interventions continue to be based on assumptions about children’s inherent vulnerability and victimhood. She claims that these interventions simplify and overlook the complex historic and socio-economic dynamics of conflict, resulting in programmes that are disconnected from the realities as they are lived and perceived by children and youth themselves.

Stephen Bell and Peter Aggleton deal with the contradictions between public health policies, mainstream restrictive moral ideology regarding sexual activity and the actual sexual behaviour of young people in rural Uganda. As youth engage in secretive sexual activities, due to strong social and cultural taboos, mainstream social interventions in HIV and AIDS and sexually transmitted disease prevention are often ineffective. Bell and Aggleton, therefore, appeal for thinking about ‘counterpublic health’, a term used to explore areas of public health in which mainstream
investment in a moral ideology compromises the ability to respond effectively to public health needs (Race 2010).

Drawing on ethnographic research with child-headed households (CHH) in Zambia, Ruth Payne (2012) theoretically extends notions of agency by moving beyond an approach which considers the agency of children and young people in CHHs as inherently connected with coping, resilience and competency. Payne introduces the concept of ‘everyday agency’ to convey a picture of daily life in CHHs from the vantage points of children and young people living in them, and considers the implications of this standpoint for social interventions.

Using his ethnographic research with street children and child protection policies in Cape Verde, Lorenzo Bordonaro deals with the conundrum that ambiguous agency presents for the way social interventions are implemented in practice. Introducing the expression the ‘politics of children’s agency’, Bordonaro draws attention to the political and moral undertones of the notion of agency itself, pointing to an unresolved tension between the acknowledgement of children’s agency in social research and the challenge of children’s participation and full citizenship in society.

Through the analysis of two rights-based programmes for children implemented by international NGOs in Rwanda, Kirrily Pells explores the influence of rights-based discourses on social interventions with children and youth. Looking at how rights concepts translate from the international level to local contexts, Pells challenges the increasing prominence given to rights-based programming and questions its ability to engage effectively with everyday realities, concluding that rights need to be embedded within everyday life, drawing on the experiences of children and youth themselves.

Cecilie Lanken Verma explores how children and youth formerly abducted by rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda are confronted with a range of constructions of morality, time, and deviance upon their return from the bush and how they experience the homecoming process of rehabilitation and reintegration. Lanken Verma throws light on the contested, and often contradictory, discursive field which surrounds notions of ‘homecoming’ for ex-combatants. This includes some of the ways in which humanitarian interventions come to enter into politicised fields of narrative and categorical control, producing constructions of ‘deviance’ and ‘evil’, and contradictory stories along the way.

Finally, Francesco Vacchiano and Mercedes Jiménez analyse the independent migration of Moroccan children and youth to Southern Europe. These children demonstrate ambiguous agency as minors who are entitled to specific rights of protection but whose illegal presence simultaneously represents a challenge to the integrity of the European border system. Vacchiano and Jiménez offer ethnographic insights into the phenomenon of independent child migration itself, whilst taking a critical stance towards the categories that have been used by the European press and policy-makers to describe it, and the ways in which it has been managed as a social problem.

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Notes
1. This editorial and most articles in this special issue use the terms children, youth and young people interchangeably to refer to people under the age of 25 years (United Nations 1989).
2. The seeds for this special issue were sown some time back at a seminar hosted by the Centre for Child-Focussed Anthropological Research at Brunel University, ‘Emerging Perspectives on the Anthropology...
of Childhood’ in May 2008. This led, a year later, to a panel at the European Conference on African Studies in Leipzig, organised by Lorenzo Bordonaro, focussing on the ‘deviant’ children of Africa.

3. We use the term ‘social interventions’ to refer to all kinds of programmes and policies, usually delivered by NGOs, governments and international development agencies, aimed at children and youth, in practice, at the grassroots.

4. The notion of a ‘global childhood’ is based on an alleged natural and universal distinction between children and adults and has been formed in Western world imaginations and exported through processes of colonialism, the forces of globalisation, international development organisations and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Boyden 1990). Whilst it is, therefore, limited in its understanding and conceptualisation of childhood (Stephens 1995, Burman 1996, White 1996, 1999, Nieuwenhuys 1998, Bessell 1999, Katz 2004); it has nonetheless become an ideal against which all childhoods should be measured (Stephens 1995, Bessell 1999).

References


