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Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials

Author(s): Allison James

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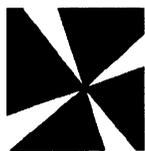
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## Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials

**ABSTRACT** In this article, I explore the lessons that the anthropological debates of the 1980s about writing culture might have for contemporary childhood research within anthropology and the social sciences more generally. I argue that the current rhetoric about "giving voice to children," commonplace both inside and outside the academy, poses a threat to the future of childhood research because it masks a number of important conceptual and epistemological problems. In particular, these relate to questions of representation, issues of authenticity, the diversity of children's experiences, and children's participation in research, all of which need to be addressed by anthropologists in their own research practices with children. Unless anthropologists do so, childhood research risks becoming marginalized once more and will fail to provide an arena within which children are seen as social actors who can provide a unique perspective on the social world about matters that concern them as children. [Keywords: children, childhood, representation, voice]

Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UNCRC] 1989), listening to the voices of children has become a powerful and pervasive mantra for activists and policy makers worldwide. Recited now by politicians as well as practitioners, the voices of children have become a symbol of the modern welfare state's commitment to the values of freedom, democracy, and care. As noted in the children's rights newsletter, "The voices of children themselves must be prominent in [the] exploration of what is going on in their lives—we must approach children as knowing subjects" (Children's Rights International 2005:27). In more popular discourse, too, children are symbolically positioned as articulate commentators on the social world. No longer are they simply silent witnesses to the ravages of war or natural disasters, depicted as starving and malnourished as they haunt the pages of the Western press (Burman 1994); now, we also hear their voices. Within the cultural scripts of Western societies, it is as if in the words that children speak lie encapsulated the innocence and authenticity of the human condition, fast being lost to the adult world, as Chris Jenks observes:

Infants are angelic, innocent and untainted by the world which they have recently entered. They have a natural goodness and a clarity of vision that we might "idolize" or even "worship" as the source of all that is best in human nature. [1996:73]

However, despite such representations of the "voices of children," children themselves may, nonetheless, con-

tinue to find their voices silenced, suppressed, or ignored in their everyday lives. Children may not be asked their views and opinions, and even if they are consulted, their ideas may be dismissed. As R. Morgan (2005) notes, for example, although numerous organizations may now consult with children, rather fewer feed back to them. Fewer still make their views count. This suggests, therefore, that any recognition of children as citizens in the social world with ideas to contribute as children remains patchy, an ironic state of affairs given the UNCRC commitment to children's participation worldwide.

However, this contrast between the image of "the child" as the symbolic voice of authenticity and innocence and the everyday experiences of children as silenced spectators is perhaps even more strange, given the emergence of the new paradigm for childhood research within anthropology and more generally within the social sciences during the 1980s to 1990s. At its core is a conception of children as articulate social actors who have much to say about the world, as people who can be encouraged to speak out through the adoption of ethnographic and participatory methods of research (James and Prout 1990). By now widely adopted, and constituting somewhat of a new research orthodoxy, the recognition of children as competent social actors is the place from which much contemporary anthropological research with children now sets out. Why is it, then, that—despite the political rhetoric surrounding the commitment to hearing "children's voices" and apparently

now also having the theoretical and methodological means to access them—little of what children as social actors say is heard outside of the academy (Roberts 2000)? This is paradox to which I speak in this article. However, my aim is not to offer practical resolutions, as that job is being tackled elsewhere, in the field, by those working within a child-rights framework. Rather, my interest here lies in identifying some of the theoretical and conceptual pitfalls about “voice” that arise when carrying out anthropological research with children that seeks to explore their perspectives as social actors.

In brief my argument is as follows: Although new approaches in the study of childhood and children’s everyday lives have opened up a theoretical and conceptual space in which children can speak as participant-observers about their experiences of the world, this is not in and of itself sufficient to ensure that children’s voices and views are heard. Thus, paralleling the intellectual history of feminism and women’s studies (Alanen 1992), childhood research must now begin to engage more directly with the core issues of social theory to unleash the political and intellectual promise of positioning children as social actors. That is to say, giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children’s perspectives can provide.

Anthropology, I suggest, is uniquely positioned to contribute to this task of critical reflection and review for two reasons, and I find it somewhat surprising that it has yet to tackle this task. First, if children’s otherness to adults makes them conceptually strange (Jenks 1982), then anthropology’s experience of researching, theorizing, and writing about “the other” offers a number of invaluable lessons for the study of children. Second, if the problem of representation is, as I suggest, central to this question of “voice,” then anthropology’s exploration of this issue during the 1980s can surely illuminate the problems now being faced by childhood studies (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986).<sup>1</sup>

## PRACTICES AND PROBLEMS

Three interlocking themes constitute problems of practice in contemporary childhood research. The first relates to matters of authenticity. If, as the new paradigm for childhood studies suggests (James and Prout 1990), children need to be given a voice in research, the implication is that children are somehow disabled or prevented from speaking out, and that, therefore, they need a helping hand. Why and how this is done becomes, then, a critical, epistemological issue that immediately foregrounds a range of other problems—specifically, those of translation, interpretation, and mediation. If children’s voices and concerns are not immediately accessible and apparent, then we need to consider the ways in which children’s interests are represented, by whom their voices are represented, and for what purposes.<sup>2</sup> What roles are the “voices of children” made

to take on in research? How are they being used to inform? What is the risk that children’s voices may be employed simply to confirm established prejudices rather than to present new insights based on children’s own perspectives as social actors?

A second and related theme highlights a hidden danger. This is that the very conceptualization of, variously, “the voices of children” or “children’s voices” risks glossing over the diversity of children’s own lives and experiences. Despite an apparent nod in the direction of multivocality, such conceptualizations uncritically clump children together as members of a category. This category is then held to speak with one undifferentiated voice, irrespective of class or culture, a practice exemplified, for example, in Article 12 of the UNCRC, which speaks of the best interests of “the child.” A singular category position is made to masquerade for all children. The risk here is that, far from giving children greater audibility and visibility as social actors inhabiting a variety of different social worlds, children are simply further disempowered, their voices rendered silent once more (James and James 2004). That children themselves experience this categorical positioning as a problem is demonstrated in a recent UK study: The young people interviewed wanted to be treated “as individuals, not an age group” (Morgan 2005:183). The key question is, then, how might childhood researchers hear, at one and the same time, children speaking both as individuals, with their unique and different experiences, and as the collective inhabitants of that social, cultural, economic, and political space that in any society is labeled as “childhood”?

A third theme involves questioning the nature of children’s participation in the research process. As childhood studies has developed, research is now quite correctly understood as being carried out with children rather than on children, with children’s participation in the research process foregrounded and acknowledged (see Christensen and James 2000; Christensen and Prout 2002; Toren this issue). Indeed, the whole question of “voice” assumes, implicitly, children’s active collaboration in the research process; it positions them as participating subjects rather than as the objects of adult research. As such, therefore, contemporary childhood research embraces many of the methodological critiques that have taken place within anthropology and the social sciences more broadly: namely, the awareness of the power differentials involved in the researcher–researched relationship that has encouraged a greater politicization of the research process.

More recently, however, there has been a movement toward regarding children as researchers themselves, as people who can carry out their own research projects into areas that are pertinent to their everyday lives. Linked to the children’s rights agenda (Alderson 2000), the participation by children as coresearchers, or even sole researchers, in the research process represents, therefore, an interesting challenge for childhood studies, raising a variety of questions about the purpose and intentions of childhood research. For example, does such research carried out by children

necessarily represent a more accurate or authentic account of children's issues that can better inform policy? Does it obviate the inherent adult-child power relations involved in the research process (Mayall 2002)? Conversely, might such research simply risk substituting one kind of exploitation with another through the assumption that "children can play a significant role in carrying out research *because they are children*" (Jones 2004:123, emphasis added). Are adults able to adopt "the native's point of view" (Geertz 1983)? Or, if it does "take one to know one," then what does the future look like for adult researchers involved in childhood studies?

In the space of one article, such a plethora of questions cannot be answered in full, but now that anthropological and sociological childhood research is an established and respectable field of enquiry, there is a need to consider critically the direction in which it is heading. Thus, my intention in this article is, while drawing on the lessons anthropology has learned about representation, to place these questions on the table so that a new critical stance might reenergize childhood research. First, we need to guard against a crude form of what Clifford Geertz has called "ethnographic ventriloquism: the claim to speak not just about another form of life but to speak from within it" (1988:145). That is to say, for adult researchers there is a fine line between presenting children's accounts of the world and the claim to be able to see the world from the child's perspective as a new kind of "truth." Second, we must also challenge the new "text positivism" and "dispersed authorship" that seem to assume, necessarily, that research done with or by children—research including "what children say"—is an authentic (and hence unproblematic) representation of children's voices (Geertz 1988:145). If left unchallenged and untheorized, all such practices, I suggest, risk being mystifications, attempts to "get round the un-get-roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions are home-made, that they are the describer's descriptions, not those of the described" (Geertz 1988:144–145). This, then, is the challenge offered to childhood studies by anthropology's own history and by what anthropological research with children has, in the future, to confront.

### **SMALL VOICES, CHILDREN'S WORLDS**

In an Oxford playground in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, Charlotte Hardman (1974) asked about the possibility of an anthropology of children and the potential significance of children's voices for our understanding of childhood. Up to that point, the study of children in the United Kingdom had been languishing as the study of socialization or was simply subsumed within research on the social institution of the family (James and Prout 1996). Arguing that children, like women, occupied a "muted" position in society, Hardman proposed that this new anthropology of children would be one where children would be their own informants about a social world. It would be an anthropology that took children as competent spokespeople and as

people to be studied in their own right, rather than just in terms of the future adults they would become. Using participant-observation, Hardman (1973, 1974) was able to present evocative accounts of the child life that unfolded within the playground and to set in motion a new way of thinking about children and childhood within the British anthropological tradition.

Within the United States, by contrast, working directly with children was nothing new. Anthropologists had been studying children for many years under the rubric of the culture and personality school: For examples, consider the early work of Margaret Mead (1928), Ruth Benedict (1935), and John Whiting (1958), with Beatrice Whiting and John Whiting's (1975) "six-culture study" and the 1994 account of child care in Africa by Robert LeVine and colleagues representing later examples of this tradition. Although largely focused on broader questions of cultural transmission, nonetheless, in studies such as these, U.S. anthropologists had already made children's everyday lives the focus of their observations and enquiries.

Given this much longer U.S. anthropological tradition of work with children, it is rather curious, therefore, that in the 1970s the loudest rallying call for exploring "children's perspectives"—perspectives that could be articulated through the "voices of children" when positioned as social actors—was from Europe. In addition, this call came from a range of disciplines, not just from anthropology. In part this can be explained by U.S. interest in psychological anthropology. In some senses, this offered a "natural" home for the study of children's everyday lives (see LeVine this issue), given the dominance of developmental psychological discourses for understanding childhood within the Western cultural tradition. Thus, interest in children as a social, rather than developmental, category became sidelined, with some notable exceptions: For examples, consider Myra Bluebond-Langner's (1978) work with dying children, William Corsaro's (1979) exploration of young children's access rituals in games, and Helen Schwartzman's (1978) extensive work on children's play worlds. However, it may also be the case that, in the European context, it was the coming together of a wide range of dissenting voices from different disciplines, including importantly from developmental psychology (see Richards 1974; Richards and Light 1986; and for a critique and overview, see Woodhead and Faulkner 2000), that provided sufficient groundswell for the development of what is now collectively known as childhood studies. With a commitment to interdisciplinarity at its core, and drawing on sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, geography, and law, what united this field of study was a concern for the socially constructed character of childhood that involves the twin research foci of childhood as a sociostructural space and children's own perspectives as social actors (James et al. 1998).

And there is, by now, a large volume of childhood research work, worldwide, that bears testimony to the significance of this shift in focus away from the individual, developing child. Exploring children's own social perspectives

has been hugely informative about children's everyday lives in different cultural settings, often presenting adults with provocative accounts that challenge many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about what children do or think. Frequently, though not exclusively, using qualitative anthropological methods—ethnographic research, participant-observation, participatory research techniques, or ethnographic interviews (see Christensen and James 2000 for an overview)—children's voices now routinely appear in research accounts, speaking about the things that matter to or concern them as children. And it is these voices that are held to constitute children's perspectives as social actors.

For example, in my own early anthropological study of childhood identities (James 1993), I wanted to understand what, from a child's perspective, might be regarded as significant differences about other children and the importance that such differences, once identified, might have for children's friendships and their everyday social relations with one another. Put simply, as I wrote in my preface, I wanted to know about the "difficulties some children encounter in being children" (1993:x). Using participant-observation in schools and involving many conversations with children, the research demonstrated that children's ideas about the body's shape and size work as powerful markers of difference, but that the stigmatizing potential anybody's body has can be ameliorated, by children, through their becoming competent social actors. To be small for one's age, for example, is to be seen as different. Thus, seven-year-old Joel told me he knew who was the smallest in the class: "I know who's the tiniest in our class—Cindy" (James 1993:112). And, tearfully, Milly told me that Toby and Mike "keep finding very small things" against which to compare her size (James 1993:117). Elsewhere, in a later article (James 1995), I discuss in detail Jerry's account in which he spoke boldly about his own difference in size from other boys. Proclaiming that he was a "titchy, little boring person," it seemed that Jerry threw down the gauntlet to other boys to ridicule him for being small. But, in so taking the initiative, he was instead able to defend himself against the possibility of verbal or physical abuse.

But, as this research also revealed, just being a child is, in itself, sometimes experienced by children as a stigmatizing difference. Camilla articulated the frustrations she felt and the difficulties that she, as an eight-year-old girl, had experienced in demonstrating her competence, her abilities, and her desire for independence in the context of her everyday life at home:

What [i.e., why] I like to be big and what I want to be older is because everyone treats me like I'm a little kid, like a baby. They say, "Camilla, will you do that?" Like I'm a little baby. And my sister gave me this little toy to play with and, guess what, my mummy picked me up and put me in the chair and she goes, "I'll feed you in a minute" and I said "No, I can feed myself." And my sister she never gets dragged round like me. Like she always drags me around and shouts at me, like, "Camilla, you

silly little girl. Why have you been in my drawers? Why are you wearing my bra?" [James 1993:114]

In such studies the voices of children are represented, revealing things that are important to them. Personalized and individualized, the children tell us about their everyday experiences of the social world and reveal, in this case, the hidden hurts and humiliations that many children experience and which adults often dismiss as unimportant or regard simply as playground rough-and-tumble.

This kind of work has been replicated in any number of studies about any number of topics by any number of social scientists. For example, the significance, to children, of their experiences of bullying, racism, and social exclusion has been brought into adult purview; these experiences were ones that, hitherto, adults had been tempted to downplay or dismiss as "childish," soon and best forgotten (for excellent recent examples, see Connolly 1998, 2004). In addition, listening to what children have to say has enabled adult researchers to document examples of the patterning of gender in children's social relationships (Thorne 1993), to analyze the meanings that friendship has for young children (Corsaro 1997), and to examine the varied roles that children take on in family life in different parts of the world (Lorimer 2003; Punch 2001). We now have considerable information about children's experiences of their everyday lives at home (Mayall 1996), in school (Field 1995; Pollard 1985), on the street (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998), and in the neighborhood (Fog Olwig and Gulløv 2003; Spilsbury and Korbin 2004). We now also know what some children think about mental health issues (Armstrong et al. 2000), what others feel about carrying out sex work (Montgomery 2001), and what working children in Mexico think about their contribution to the family economy (Bey 2003). By now, we have voices aplenty.

### THE PITFALL OF AUTHENTICITY

This large body of empirically based, often ethnographic work clearly reveals children speaking out about what it is like to be a child in particular social or cultural settings. Through establishing that there are "children's perspectives" that offer a sometimes quite different view of the social world, there is now acceptance therefore that

an account of society from the point where children stand—that is, from a children's standpoint—is in principle just as conceivable as any of the theoretical accounts of more conventional "adult sociologies." [Alanen 1992:109]

However, although this has put a welcome end to the relative absence of children's perspectives within social science research, this has not enabled the "authentic" voices of children that some might wish to claim.

Here, then, is the first lesson that childhood studies should take from anthropology: Consider the problems of authenticity that were highlighted by the "writing culture" debate of the 1980s. Although children's words quoted in research reports may be "authentic"—in that they are an

accurate record of what children have said—it remains the case that the words and phrases have been chosen by the researcher and have been inserted into the text to illustrate an argument or underline a point of view. The point of view being presented is, therefore, the view of the author, not that of the child; furthermore, the author inevitably glosses the voices of children as part of the interpretive process. As writers of texts, it is adults who retain control over which children's voices are given prominence and over which parts of what children have to say are to be presented: It is "the ethnographer who in the end assumes an executive, editorial position" (Clifford 1988:51). While within anthropology itself the problems of authoritative authorship are of course widely recognized, albeit not necessarily overcome, when it comes to the reporting of what children say, such dilemmas are, with a few exceptions (e.g., Lee 2001:133–134), still rarely acknowledged or discussed, even by anthropologists. The question, then, is why this happens and indeed whether this matters.

One explanation for the absence of much critical reflection on the use of "children's voices" in research is surely historical. The desire to portray children as social actors and the attribution of competence rather than incompetence to children has meant that it has been important for children's voices to speak loudly and boldly within the text. In this sense, then, it has been crucial to have as many voices as possible, speaking about matters that concern children. The parallel here with the development of women's studies and racial and ethnic studies is quite clear (Alanen 1992). There has been a need simply to raise the research profile of the study of children; by citing their words and views, researchers are able to get a rather different set of concerns about children and childhood onto the research agenda. In the case of childhood research, then, the presence of their multiple voices in the text has been, perhaps, less about an intent to reveal the "collaborative production of ethnographic knowledge" to displace the authority of the writer, as was the case within mainstream anthropology (Clifford 1988:50). Instead, it was more a matter of simply getting children's voices heard in the first place.

Moreover, the inclusion of children's voices did represent a radical epistemological break, not only with developmentalism but also with traditional assumptions about children's incompetence and inarticulateness. As Martin Woodhead and Dorothy Faulkner have observed, even though

much [developmental psychology] research continues to work within traditional scientific paradigms which treat the child as the subject of the research, new lines of research have opened up where much greater emphasis is given to children as social and cultural actors [with] their perspectives, views and feelings . . . accepted as genuine, valid evidence. [2000:31]

However, now that there is a polyphony of children's voices in studies of children's everyday lives, the by-now routine and sometimes uncritical "quoting" of evidence from children deserves, I suggest, more critical attention.

Not only is it the case that, as James Clifford argues, "Quotations are always staged by the quoter and tend to serve merely as examples of confirming testimonies" (1988:50); also, for childhood researchers, there is the need to attend at an epistemological level to what this practice means as a process of representing childhood. Lest childhood studies descend into the mire of a new political correctness about children that fails to address the grounds of its own practices, it is time to revisit what exactly the inclusion of the voices of children accomplishes in research.

This means closely reexamining the socially constructed character of childhood that makes the social space of childhood different for different children. Acknowledgment of such cultural relativism should not, however, simply be the taken-for-granted point of departure from which we begin our analyses; it should also be the place to which we continually return. As is the case in any anthropological research, it means acknowledging that the children's voices that appear in our texts do not necessarily speak about "children" in general or "the child" in abstraction. They may do this; equally, however, they may not. This, in itself, must remain an empirical question.

The claims that are made about and on behalf of "children" and the use of "children's voices" as evidence—and as evidence that might be acted on—need, therefore, to be tempered by careful acknowledgment of the cultural contexts of their production. The voices of children that we include in our texts must, therefore, be acknowledged in their particularity and the generalizations we draw from them must continue to be carefully crafted. Indeed, they must be recognized as crafted; their "authenticity" must be interrogated, not assumed. Authenticity implies authority, reliability, and trustworthiness: original words, thoughts, and so forth gained first hand. But it is precisely such connotations that are problematic, as they risk making "the voice of the child" somehow unimpeachable, given as noted earlier the Western mythologizing of "the child." They also imply universality, encouraging a view that "the voice of the child" can speak on behalf of the many different, other voices, which might—if allowed to speak—describe rather different children's lives in different parts of the world, or, indeed, different sections of more local communities. It is just such a universalizing view that the UNCRC fails to problematize in its assertion that there can be rights of the child, as those who are endeavoring to implement the UNCRC in different parts of the world in relation to child labor, for example, have strongly argued (Boyden 1990; Crawford 2000).

Within anthropology, this common sleight of hand—whereby, on the basis of conversations with privileged informants, typifications of whole cultures are frequently derived—was exposed by Clifford's (1988) deconstruction of the ethnographic authority deriving from participant-observation. It is a lesson about authenticity that childhood studies needs now also to be mindful of, particularly when research findings translate so easily into policy agendas, the figure of the child being such a powerful rhetorical device (King 2004).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, unless we remain mindful of such

problems and find ways to work through them in our analyses, the theoretical, methodological, and epistemological strides made in recent childhood research risk being undermined. This does not, however, mean abandoning the search for, and inclusion of, children's thoughts and words in our research. Instead, it means ensuring that we keep in mind the pitfalls inherent in doing so.

### SMALL VOICES, BIG ISSUES

Part of what Adrian James and I have elsewhere termed "the cultural politics of childhood" is the need to recognize that "the diversities that distinguish one child from another are as important and as significant as the commonalities they might share" (James and James 2004:16). Thus, although Jens Qvortrup (2005) rightly argues that childhood is a structural space in any and every society—and, in this sense, all children have much in common—the ways in which children inhabit and experience those common spaces can, nonetheless, differ sharply. And, as noted above, the wealth of studies now available that offer a child's perspective on a range of topics reveals the critical contribution toward recognition of this diversity that the inclusion of children as social actors in research has made. That said, however, and given this large body of baseline data, what in the future might be the purpose and potential of including still more children's perspectives in social science research?

A first point concerns the application and use of research findings. Research with children offers commentaries from children about their engagement with the wider adult world, which have a range of practical applications. A good example here is recent research exploring children's views on parental divorce (Smart et al. 2001). When children are asked about their experiences, they do not necessarily present a negative picture of family breakdown. Instead, as Carol Smart and colleagues show, children speak with great subtlety in terms of an ethic of care, suggesting that where there is little conflict between parents, and when a nonresident parent still continues to provide care and love, divorce and family break up is not necessarily a damaging experience. This children's perspective made an important contribution to the ongoing debate about the "effects" divorce has on children.

Child-centered research into such issues, as an increasingly important and significant feature of childhood studies, has been embraced wholeheartedly (although not always without controversy) by policymakers and by the NGO community involved in fostering children's rights. Indeed, by adopting this perspective in their own work, NGOs have been able to help communities by, for example, working with children and training them as health educators (see, e.g., Onyango-Ouma 2001). They have also actively furthered children's interests through promoting their rights in a range of different political arenas. In response, there has been some welcome feedback from such work into the academy, particularly in relation to discussions about issues such as children's rights and child labor.

This indicates that, for childhood studies at least, the important relationship between theory and practice is by now established and the divide between pure and applied work may be beginning to dissolve.

The work of Jo Boyden and colleagues (1998) on child labor, for example, engages with the insights offered by childhood studies to argue that what is needed is a situated knowledge of children's everyday lives provided by children themselves. Only then might the complex problems that working children face in many parts of the world be tackled effectively. Similarly, Martin Woodhead (1996), as a developmental psychologist, has argued for an understanding of child development that is culturally located. He rejects the one-size-fits-all model that is often used by those endeavoring to put in place childcare programs in different societies.

However, childhood research is not simply about making children's own voices heard in this very literal sense by presenting children's perspectives. It is also about exploring the nature of the "voice" with which children are attributed, how that voice both shapes and reflects the ways in which childhood is understood, and therefore the discourses within which children find themselves within any society. Thus, as Claudia Castaneda has recently argued, there is a need for us to give

sustained attention to the value of the child in the making of adult worlds, and so the way this value often works against the "best interests" of those whom the category purportedly identifies. [2002:2]

Through her use of the concept of figuration, Castaneda explores the ways in which children appear in and across different discourses about "childhood" and "the child" and identifies the material outcomes these have for children. Thus, for example, she shows how different images of the "racialized child" are currently being employed within the United States to support transnational adoption through the contemporary positing of children's race-as-color by choice, rather than birth. For her, "figuration entails simultaneously semiotic and material practices" (Castaneda 2002:3). Although this may seem a counterintuitive step, going against the presentation of children's own voices in research, it proves, as I shall now illustrate, an important additional remit for a childhood studies that can give indirect voice to children (Castaneda 2002:3).

Although the need to listen to children's voices is, as noted, often paid lip service outside the academy, all too often those voices are silenced by images of childhood that cling to the more traditional, developmental discourse of children's incompetence, rather than competence, as social actors. We need, therefore, to ask about the effects that this discourse has on children's own everyday experiences. In a recent work, two colleagues and I (James et al. 2004) took this agenda forward.<sup>4</sup> The research explored the professional practices of family court advisers in England, part of whose job it is to represent children's interests to the court in cases of parental divorce and family breakdown. The

research sought to explore the models of "the child" that, explicitly and implicitly, shape professionals' work with children. It revealed that, although these advisers are charged with giving voice to children and thereby, seemingly, working to empower them, a number of different and competing models of childhood inform their everyday practice. Thus, for example, the research showed that although Article 12 of the UNCRC provides children with the right to speak out in matters that concern them and to express their wishes and feelings according to their age and maturity, if the practitioners felt this would not be in children's best interests, then children's voices were effectively silenced, despite the practitioners' explicit commitment to child-centered practice.

This was never more so than when the practitioners had to report children's views to the court, and they had to decide just how much of what children had said to them could or should go into the court report and in what form. Children's voices became subject to practices of translation, mediation, and interpretation (cf. Lee 2001). Their authenticity, as evidence of children's wishes and feelings, was modified by adults who, nonetheless, saw themselves as working with children's best interests at heart. Thus, for example, while some practitioners did use direct quotes from children, others preferred to produce a report, which instead put a gloss on what children had said. Although in part this was done to protect children—in England parents are able to see court reports and practitioners feared that they might not like what children said about them—the net result was the translation of children's voices into a more acceptable register.

Besides mediating children's voices as a form of protection, it was also the case that what children said might be translated by practitioners in accordance with what they, as adults, felt was "normal" and "acceptable" for children. And, in making such judgments, it was to traditional models of child development that scale children's competence in relation to age that the practitioners turned. And this was despite their ready acknowledgement that such generalizations about "children" might not apply in individual cases and that they might also be subject to variation in relation to gender or to a child's individual experiences and circumstances.

This research therefore offers us an example of the problems involved in representing children's voices outside the academy, problems that interestingly parallel those of representation within it. It also highlights the distance which childhood studies still has to travel in terms of enabling its work to find application beyond those working directly in NGOs in the children's rights field, as discussed above. If social workers, those who are committed to child-centered practice, still find it difficult to present children's voices (and feel instead that these have to be re-presented), then how much more endemic must the problems be in other areas of policy in which "children" are not individualized but seen, instead, as a category to be legislated for?

Writing about an anthropology that should be appropriate and practical in terms of its application, Sandra Wallman argues that there are "two essential features of representations. . . . One is that they simplify the reality they represent; the other that any meaning imputed to them will be socially constructed" (1997:244). For Wallman, "representations are about simplification for the sake of communication" (1997:244); thus, the trick is to be aware of the import and impact of the simplifications, translations, and mediations that we make in presenting other people's views. Within childhood studies, such advice is timely, given the immense political capital that is increasingly being attributed to "listening to the voices of children" within both local and global policy arenas. Questions must be asked about whose voices are being represented and by whom? Why they are being represented? And, finally, what implications are there from the form these take?

But, in addition to the applied potential of childhood studies, it is important that the voices of children should not be confined to childish concerns. Children's voices speaking about their own child labor, in the context of the UNCRC, have furthered a critical understanding of the processes and effects of globalization (Boyden et al. 1998), while Paul Connolly's (1998, 2004) work addresses core sociological issues of class, gender, and ethnicity through his meticulous ethnographic record of children's conversations. But it is not only the direct contribution made by children's own perspectives that is of significance here. Listening to what children say about their everyday lives and experiences can allow us to both theorize and act on their understandings in relation to larger issues of social and political change. For example, as Adrian James and I have shown elsewhere (James and James 2004), understanding the role of law in the construction of childhood, how it changes, and children's own contribution to that process of change enables illustration of the necessary and ongoing relationship between structure and agency, a core theoretical issue of sociological concern. Elsewhere, Prout (2000) explores children's participation and self-realization as a window on late modernity in Britain. Thus, paraphrasing Geertz's (1975:23) observations about the significance of ethnography for theory, exploring children's small voices, when done with care, can—and I would suggest should—be made to speak to such large issues.

### CHILDREN AS RESEARCHERS?

One way out of some of the dilemmas raised by these questions about the representation of children's voices is, so it would seem, to use children as researchers and coresearchers. Interestingly, once again, this move within childhood studies mirrors some of the experiments in ethnography that took place in anthropology in the 1980s and raises comparable epistemological issues (see, e.g., Crapanzano 1980; for a discussion, see Clifford 1988). For many, such as Priscilla Alderson, using children not only as informants but also as researchers helps redress the power imbalance between adults and children during the research process

by respecting children's rights and abilities and helping "to protect them from covert, invasive, exploitative, or abusive research" (2000:243). For A. Jones, similarly, this is part of a "political struggle for recognition, representation and equality" (2004:114), so much so that, as Helen Roberts notes, "encouraging children's participation in research is in some quarters now seen as a *sine qua non* of a pro-child stance" (2000:238).

However, Roberts goes on to observe:

The reasons why a child or a young person should choose to participate in research are clearer in some studies than others . . . we cannot take it for granted that participation in research and the development of increasingly sophisticated research methods to facilitate children's participation is necessarily always in their interests. [2000:238]

Indeed, as she warns, "There may be occasions when such involvement may itself be exploitative or inappropriate, just as in other cases, not to involve children and young people represents poor practice" (Roberts 2000:225). Although access may be easier and children may be able to identify research questions that are of greater relevance to children, the quality of the research cannot be guaranteed simply by using children as researchers anymore than our understanding of disability, for example, is necessarily improved by employing disabled people as researchers.

Therefore, what is at issue here—as was at issue in the anthropological discussions of 1980s—are the politics of representation and the slippages that can occur between research and advocacy when the "researched other" is less powerful, more excluded, and more marginalized vis-à-vis the powerful and elite position of the researcher. Within childhood research, this kind of slippage has taken on a rather different hue, however, with a growing overlap between some childhood researchers and children's rights activists.

For the latter, the new paradigm of children as social actors constitutes a powerful platform from which to work with children in addressing many of the social, economic, and political inequalities that they experience on both local and global levels. Their foremost concern is with the promulgation of children's rights by enabling children to carry out research by themselves into matters that interest or concern them. And, when done well, this can produce interesting and worthwhile outcomes that may have a more powerful practical and policy impact than the more traditional kinds of research done by adults that is simply informed by what children say. In her own work for the charity Barnados, for example, Roberts chose to use as interviewers three young disabled men alongside two professional researchers to explore the views of disabled and nondisabled students on inclusive education. As she observes:

Their personal experience of separate education brought an invaluable perspective to the study. After training and discussion they not only conducted first rate interviews with both able-bodied and disabled students, but also . . . they faced questions from their interviewees. . . . Our young interviewers . . . felt that is [sic] was right to share

something of their lives with those they were researching. [Roberts 2000:232–233]

However, this does not necessarily mean that all research with children is research that has to advocate for children or foster children's rights, although this may, of course, be a by-product of the presentation of children's views about matters that concern them. Neither does it mean that applied work must necessarily take the form of advocacy. Nor does it mean that childhood studies research, in which adults rather than children represent children's views, is somehow less authentic. What it means instead, rather less dramatically, is that all research has to be acknowledged as a process of representation, whether it is carried out by adults or by children. For anthropologists the dilemmas raised by the politics of representation are by now well rehearsed; for anthropologists of childhood, however, these have yet to be fully articulated, and they remain a very present and pressing concern given the rhetorical power that "the voice of the child" wields.

#### WHAT CHILDREN SAY

It is, of course, when children are talking that we hear their voices. For Ian Hutchby (2005), it is therefore through closer attention to the process of children's talk, by using conversational analysis, that one way can be found through some of these problems of representation. Citing Marjorie Goodwin (1990), Hutchby distinguishes between, on the one hand, research carried out by conventional ethnography that produces children's accounts of the social world, which are then used as a means of obtaining information about children's social competencies or their everyday lives, and, on the other hand, research that sees interviews and conversations with children "as a medium for displaying those things in its own right" (2005:67). As Goodwin writes,

By making use of the techniques of conversation analysis and the documentation of the sequential organization of indigenous events, we can avoid the pitfalls of "interpretive anthropology," which tends to focus its attention on ethnographer/informant dialogue rather than interactions *between participants*. . . . This will enable us to move . . . towards an "anthropology of experience" concentrating on how people themselves actually perform activities. [Goodwin 1990; see also Hutchby 2005:67]

For Hutchby, and others such as Susan Danby and Carolyn Baker (1998), this approach offers perhaps greater access to some kind of authenticity because the aim is to show how social phenomena, such as gendered interactions or acts of resistance, "occur naturally in the social lives of children among other children" (Hutchby 2005:69) and are apparent in the flow of their everyday conversations and activities. Children are not being asked to give an account or to reflect on such matters. However, although in this sense these are "natural" instances of talk, the fact that they are audiotape-recorded, transcribed in fine detail, closely interrogated, interpreted, and analyzed means that the voices of children are still subjected to the mediating effects that all forms of social analysis entail.

Therefore, because there is no way of escaping the predicaments of representation (even in this body of work), as has occurred in respect to feminism, childhood studies has to find way instructively to engage with such parameters. This means that "children's perspectives," "the child's point of view," "hearing children's voices," and "listening to children" have to be regarded as standpoints, places from which any analysis sets out, rather than definitive descriptions of empirical phenomena embodied in the words that children speak. Put this way, the question becomes what types of research dialogues can we have with children, rather than a question of examining the authenticity (or not) of their voices or their perspectives on the world. More simply, it becomes a matter of trying to understand where they are coming from and why the positions from which children speak may be subject to change and variation in and through time. This is no different from social science research with adults.

Berry Mayall (2002) and Leena Alanen (1992) both provide an account of standpoint theory, which gives us the theoretical basis for such an approach, but Mayall (2000) develops this to argue that the generational divide between children and adults, an unequal power relationship, need not be an obstacle to the research process. By acknowledging, rather than ignoring or trying to mask, the different standpoints of the adult researcher and child informant, good conversations with children can be had, and where children are actively engaged in the process of data production, a similar participatory dialogue can develop.

However, although Roger Hart's (1992) ladder of participation is often used as a kind of moral yardstick against which research with children can be judged, because it sets out a range of different levels of children's participation in research from tokenism through to full participation, it should not determine the kinds of research methods to be adopted. As in any research, the methods chosen must match the task at hand. A recent anthropological study of children's understanding of the social organization of time illustrates this point through its use of selected participatory research techniques,<sup>5</sup> which drew on children's different skills and competencies at different points in the research process.

As discussed in detail elsewhere, the research used a set of paper charts that encouraged children to depict the ways in which their time is divided up within one week (Christensen and James 2000). One chart was a pie chart, which was familiar to children as a chart used in math lessons at school; it was a representational device they felt competent in using. Time could, like a pie, be divided up to depict different slices of children's time. Later analysis of these charts showed that, collectively, most children thought that the week could be divided broadly into "time in school" and "time outside school." Time away from school was however, detailed by the children into discrete blocks of time spent doing different activities, reflecting not only their different experiences and interests but also gendered differences in the kinds of activities they enjoyed, as well as differences

in the form and pattern of family life. Boys played football and on the computer; girls played in the park and went shopping; some girls cooked at home and helped with the housework while other girls did not. Although all the children were ten years old, what the charts revealed were the diversities, as well the commonalities, between them. However, in respect of children's representation of school time, there were few differences. In all but one example, school was represented as a blank space. It was as if nothing much was going on in school, or, at any rate, nothing that was worth noting. Only one girl decided to differentiate between different kinds of "school time," and she did so in a most revealing way. The times she identified were those times during the school day when children see themselves as having some control over what they do with their time: going home from school, lunch time, and break time.

Later, in the same research, children interviewed one another about their hopes and fears about going to secondary school. To construct an interview schedule, each child was first asked to list ten things that they wanted to know about going to secondary school. This task revealed high levels of agreement among the children about what was worrying them about school transition. Top of that list was the fear of getting lost in a building that was much larger than their primary school. A close second was whether they would have friends at the new school. Using this composite list, children then went on to explore with each other some of the shared grounds for these collective anxieties that derive, on the one hand, from the structural arrangements for secondary education in the United Kingdom, and, on the other hand, from children's awareness of the potential frailty, over time, of their intersubjective relationships with one another.

Although this work goes some way to providing a "children's perspective" by revealing what some children say about how they understand and experience time's passage, the twin issues of how to interpret and represent this child stand-point remain. And because they do, this problem has to be further reflected on. It is to this that I now turn by way of conclusion.

### CONCLUSION: CONTEXTUALIZING CHILDREN'S VOICES

Now that the field of childhood studies has come of age, and children's voices are making a respectable and even respected contribution to the research agenda of the social science community, it is time to consider its further potential. Just as feminism has matured from its radical roots into a sophisticated and multifaceted area of scholarship and study, having won the struggle in the 1960s to have women's voices and views represented, so childhood studies is, I suggest, poised for further development. As Qvortrup (2005) recently suggested, one way forward toward sustainable childhood research would be to set the by-now commonplace qualitative studies of children's own perspectives, voices, and agency alongside other work that explores the structural conditions that shape childhood as a generational

space. Such an integration would help ensure that we do not lose sight of the differential impacts that societal forces such as the market, neoliberalism, the state, urbanization, and so on have on childhood as a generational unit.

One way in which this agenda might be progressed is by revisiting a key theoretical tension within the field of childhood studies, noted at the outset: the relationship between "childhood" as a social space, "children" as a generational category, and "the child" as an individual representative of that category and inhabitant of that space. In whatever cultural context, and in relation to any child, this relationship both defines who they are, how we as adult researchers understand them, and how they understand their own experiences. As argued elsewhere, this is the cultural politics of childhood that shapes children's everyday lives and experiences (James 2002; James and James 2004). Childhood is a social space that is structurally determined by a range of social institutions, but, precisely because of this, children as subjects are also structurally and culturally determined as social actors with specific social roles to play, as children. Indeed, this is what constitutes their standpoint. And yet children also "shape those roles, both as individuals and as a collectivity, and they can create new ones that alter the social space of childhood" itself (James and James 2004:214).

To explore the intricacies and tensions of this relationship through empirical documentation of how it is played out in and through children's everyday lives would therefore be one significant way to give voice to the voices of children as social actors. It would avoid some of the pitfalls and problems of representation discussed in this article, not by hiding them away but by making them, instead, an explicit focus for practice. In this way, by reflecting the complexities of the issues that frame what children say, rather than offering the simple message that recording and reporting their voices is sufficient, it may be that children's voices will be more willingly listened to and their perspectives more readily understood.

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**ALLISON JAMES** Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TU, United Kingdom

## NOTES

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1. The term *childhood studies* is used here to refer to the interdisciplinary approach to research with children that emerged during the 1980s to 1990s. Anthropologists have had—and continue to have—a critical role to play in this development. Ironically, the lessons from anthropology's own history seem, as yet, not to have been applied systematically to this new field of inquiry.

2. For a discussion of the difficulties of representing children's voices outside the academy, see Lee 2001:96–101.

3. One of the criticisms King (2004) makes of the new sociology of childhood is that it is simply a legitimating vehicle for those interested in promoting children's rights, thereby constructing their view of what children need.

4. This was an ESRC-funded project entitled "Constructing Children's Welfare: A Comparative Study of Professional Practice," which operated from 2001 to 2003.

5. This project, "Changing Times: Children's Perception and Understanding of the Social Organization of Time," was undertaken between 1997–2004, was carried out by Pia Christensen, Allison James, and Chris Jenks, and was funded by the ESRC.

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