Questions of agency: capacity, subjectivity, spatiality and temporality

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Abstract

Geographies of Children, Youth and Families is flourishing, but its founding conceptions require critical reflection. This paper considers one key conceptual orthodoxy: the notion that children are competent social actors. In a field founded upon liberal notions of agency, we identify a conceptual elision between the benefits of studying agency and the beneficial nature of agency. Embracing post-structuralist feminist challenges, we propose a politically-progressive conceptual framework centred on embodied human agency which emerges within power. We contend this can be achieved though intensive/extensive analyses of space, and a focus on 'biosocial beings and becomings' within dynamic notions of individual/intergenerational time.

I Introduction: The emergence of conceptual orthodoxies

An explicit discussion of specifically human social agency might seem surprising and somewhat old-fashioned. Surely we have moved beyond human social agency towards considering subjectivities, post-subjectivities, assemblages, rhizomes, networks. Yet synchronous with the turn towards post-structuralism, postmodernism or even post-humanism in human geography, we have also witnessed a rapid growth of research into Geographies of Children, Youth and Families (GCYF). This subdisciplinary field was founded on the notion that children and youth are competent social actors, a conceptual framing motivated by the political imperative to make visible a group who were relatively absent from academic accounts, and

whose views were often overlooked in politics and society. Much of GCYF, including substantial elements of our own work, continues to hold fast to a notion of human agency in the face of broader societal tendencies to deny the agency of young people. In this paper, we evaluate the focus on agency and explore what recent moves in some parts of GCYF to engage in post-structural critique of 'the agent' might mean for the sub-discipline. Rather than move beyond agency (Kraftl, 2013), we argue that we require a sustained and critical (re)thinking of agency in light of post-structuralist critiques, as the

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concept has enduring political and theoretical value in GCYF and critical human geography.

GCYF, the field of work which is our central concern, flourished from humble beginnings in the later decades of the 20th century (Robson et al., 2013). Its origins are multi-stranded, incorporating: psychologically-inspired research on children's spatial cognition; social research on children's lives in different times and places; and feminist research on parenting and family life (Holloway, 2014). The second of these three strands – which concentrates on understanding children's experiences as social actors in a diversity of times and places – blossomed in the early 21st century. In this period of growth, geographical interest in the study of children's lives was interconnected with New Social Studies of Childhood (NSSC) (James et al., 1998). NSSC emerged originally from anthropology and sociology but developed into an interdisciplinary project (James, 2010), of which GCYF comprises one component. NSSC sought to counter linear, biological models of child development in psychology and adult-centred approaches to socialization in sociology (James et al., 1998). In contrast, this new paradigm was based upon:

> agreement, first, that children could – and should – be regarded as social actors, second, that childhood, as a biological moment in the life course, should nonetheless be understood as a social construction; and finally, there was methodological agreement about the need to access children's views first hand. (James, 2010: 216)

The impact of this vision is evident in the rise to dominance in GCYF of research which takes children's agency seriously, and uses child-centred research to explore the construction and implication of different understandings of childhood across the globe (Jeffrey, 2012). There is increasing concern, however, that the three key founding conceptions of NSSC – that children are competent social actors; that childhood is a social construction; and that children's views

should be heard – have become something of a 'mantra', repeated without due examination (Prout, 2005; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Kraftl, 2013).

This paper examines the first of these conceptual orthodoxies – the notion that children are competent social actors – through a reading of the literature on GCYF in the Global North and South. The paper is divided into four key sections designed to probe different, although related, questions about agency. The first, *capacity,* examines existing debates in the field about the qualities of children's agency, and highlights the unintended conflation of the *benefits of studying* children's agency with the *beneficial nature* of children's agency. The second, *subjectivity*, considers the implications of broader theoretical moves to de-centre the rational agent for GCYF, and foregrounds the importance of theorizing an embodied subject/ agent which emerges in power. The third, *spatiality*, scrutinizes both continuity in multi-scalar conceptions of place and innovation in attention to the material spaces of encounter, and what this means for the concept of agency in GCYF. The fourth, *temporality*, reflects on radical shifts in the conceptualization of time associated with changing understandings of agency. In conclusion, we set out our conceptual framework for research in the next phase of GCYF, and reflect on the ongoing tension between theory and politics in sub-disciplinary practice.

II Capacity: Questioning the qualities of children's agency

The founding conception that children are competent social actors whose agency is important in the 'construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of societies in which they live' (Prout and James, 1990: 8) marked an ontological break with previous research and established a new normative mode of enquiry in GCYF (Holloway, 2014). In retrospect, it is striking that this

agency was commonly attributed rather than theorized (Ruddick, 2007a, 2007b; Vanderbeck, 2008; Oswell, 2013): Holloway and Valentine (2000a: 6), for example, introduce the idea that NSSC 'insist' that children have agency, but do not probe the theoretical basis of this claim. Oswell's (2013: 38) explanation for NSSC's ascription rather than thoroughgoing theorization of agency is that:

> The original interest in children's agency was less an exercise in theory than politics. Its purpose was, in many ways, to rebalance the perceived inequalities of power or to find ways of researching children that did not reproduce the prejudices of power.

This critique that a paradigm shift was based more on political intent than theoretical premise can also be levelled at GCYF. Here the shift to focus on children's capacity as social actors was significantly shaped by the politics of children's rights, not least the context of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Matthews and Limb, 1999).

Although the assertion that children have agency was not thoroughly theorized, concern with agency's relation to structure has been important in NSSC. Following Giddens (1984), James et al. (1998: 202, 207) argue that 'social action continuously and reflexively creates and is produced by both agency and structure at one and the same time', and emphasize 'creativity' in connections between research centred on structure or agency. Oswell (2013: 38) argues that although this remains 'part of the common sense of the field', studies have in practice largely favoured structure or agency, rather than exploring the dialectical relation Giddens envisaged between the two (see also Holt, 2006). This debate was not directly replicated in GCYF, however; here the strength of feminism militated against dichotomous thinking (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b). We can see this in Katz's (1991, 2004) analysis of the impact a Sudanese state-sponsored agricultural

development project has on children's environmental knowledges, work and play, and more broadly on rupture, resistance or reformulation in the relations of production and social reproduction. Katz draws on feminist and Marxist thinking to reject analyses which favour structure or agency, and instead combines structural interest in the remaking of the systems of re/production with an agency-centred analysis, recognizing that these are 'constructed by the material social practices of living historical subjects' (Katz, 1991: 505). Such an emphasis on explorations of children's agency in the context of multiple, intersecting structures of dominance has become characteristic of much research in GCYF (Jeffrey, 2012).

As the field developed, this longstanding interest in children as social actors in places undergoing socio-technical, politic-economic and environmental change prompted mounting debate about the depth and type of children's agency (Durham, 2008). Klocker (2007: 85), in her work with Tanzanian child domestic workers, proposes a distinction between 'thick agency' ('having the latitude to act within a broad range of options') and 'thin agency' ('decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts'). This notion of 'thin agency' is taken up by Payne (2012) and Evans (2012) in their studies of child and youth-headed households (CYHH) to describe the agency exercised by these young people living in highly restrictive contexts in Zambia, Tanzania and Uganda, with Payne noting that while their lives fall outside of normative understandings of childhood they experience 'everyday agency' in coping with difficult situations as an unremarkable, ordinary facet of life.

Similarly, Langevang and Gough's (2009) investigation into a broader group of young people's efforts to earn a living in Ghana points to limits on young people's agency, and they suggest that young people's agency:

take[s] the form of 'tactic' or 'bounded' agency, as their actions are more a matter of continuously adjusting to a changing situation than having complete control over their lives. (Langevang and Gough, 2009: 752)

Their reference to 'tactic' agency draws on De Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategic actors who wield institutional power, and those who can only employ tactical agency to accept or resist the dominant order. In our view, the use of De Certeau, which is also seen in research on the Global North (Kallio, 2008; Ottosson et al., 2017), is particularly noteworthy: it subtly shifts the emphasis from 'depth of agency' to 'type of agency'; in the process it also characterizes young people as political subjects who are unlikely to be strategic actors as they lack control over broader power structures (Kallio, 2008).

This may be a useful way to think about agency in these instances, but extreme caution is required to ensure this is not simply normalized as *the* way of conceiving of *young* people's agency. On the one hand, it is pertinent to question whether this is specific to children, since adults can be similarly constrained and unable to display strategic agency. On the other hand, it is evident that young people can enact 'strategic power'; this is apparent in their involvement in acts which alter broader societal structures. Those involved in the Arab Spring (Jeffrey, 2013), for example, changed (to varying degrees) the prevailing economic/social/political order. Some young people, in some circumstances, undoubtedly have only tactical agency; but others, in different situations, find themselves actively able to reshape dominant structures of power and forge alternative futures.

Children's tactical and strategic abilities to assert their agency – whether in showing resilience in the face of, or successful challenge to, oppressive social relations – has been enthusiastically uncovered, validated and even celebrated by GCYF (Hoang et al., 2015). Those focusing

on societal transformation acclaim young people's role as the true 'alchemists of the revolution' (Jeffrey, 2013: 147). Young people's positive influence on their worlds is thus revealed, and the lessons for state, civil society and (adult) community engagement with young people articulated (Cele and Van der Burgt, 2015). Politically, this research agenda is progressive, and its orientation reflects the commitment to children's rights in the formation of the sub-discipline. Conceptually, the iteration of a research practice centred on the search for and commendation of children's agency fuses the notion that it is beneficial to study children's agency with the idea that children's agency is a positive force in the world. Two facets of this inadvertent, unmarked conceptual elision strike us as particularly interesting.

First, this amalgamation depends on particular notions of the child and agency. Durham (2008: 152) contends that these liberatory understandings of youth in Childhood Studies emanate both from Enlightenment liberalism that 'privileges individual capabilities, especially the capacity of individuals to resist inequality and unreasonable cultural expectations', and from Romantic constructions of the hallmarks of youth as rebelliousness, resistance and cultural creativity. We concur with this view, and heed Ruddick's (2007b) concern that there is a dangerous paradox in seeking to claim children's agency via liberal notions of the autonomous subject when children are excluded from this formulation. Furthermore, we contend that the unmarked importance of ideas about the virtuosity of young people informs understandings of young people's agency as inherently positive, as they are cast as innocents in the operation of broader power relations.

The unacknowledged strength of these liberal and Romantic ideas means that accounts which celebrate children's agency, and their resistance to wider social structures, have dominated. Although alternative narratives exploring young people's exclusionary actions

undoubtedly exist (Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2004), less attention has been paid to the ways in which children's agency can (re)produce privilege and oppression (Sparks, 2016). Going forward, researchers in GCYF need enhanced reflexive awareness of the unintended conceptual consequences of their politically-progressive promotion of children's rights, and to consider not only what type of agency young people might have, but also their role in the reproduction of, as well as resistance to, socio-spatial inequalities.

Second, the presumption that children's agency is positive has consequences for those young people whose childhoods fail to reflect culturally valued notions of childhood innocence, for example because they live as child soldiers, street children, young sex workers or in CYHH. Bordonara and Payne (2012: 366) demonstrate that their 'ambiguous agency' is subject to a tacit moral assessment by the state and NGOs who often consider it excessive, an obstacle that needs to be overcome in order to rescue young people and return them to morally-valued childhoods. Bordonara (2012) goes further and argues that the liberal ideal of individual autonomy, in which individual actors make both reasoned and reasonable choices, also permeates Childhood Studies. The consequence, he argues, is that those whose behaviours reflect normative models of childhood are deemed to have unconstrained agency, whereas those whose lives rupture notions of children's innocence are presumed to have constrained agency. Crucially, he argues that this evaluation hinges not only on an academic assessment of the preconditions for agency, but also on a moral appraisal of their actions.

We depart from his analysis in this final respect, as our reading of the literature identifies explanations for young people's constrained agency that centre on socio-economic circumstances which limit, but do not entirely foreclose, their opportunities to act. van Blerk (2011: 229), for example, examines how young

sex workers in Ethiopia seek to manage multiple identities across the spaces of work and home. Her recognition of limits on their agency is not based on a value judgement about their role as sex workers, but on the assessment that 'their performance of femininity is inherently encased within wider structures of rural poverty inhibiting their ability to transcend the relatively powerless position of women inherent in traditional gender dynamics'. Evidently, attention to agency and structure, rather than censuring moralities, is an enduring characteristic of some strands of GCYF, and an assessment of constrained agency need not imply moral judgement. In the next section, however, we go on to examine how these debates about children's capacity as social actors are challenged by post-structuralist examinations of subjectivity.

III Subjectivity: Questioning the subject of agency

Paradoxically, the paradigm shift that NSSC wrought on the basis that children should be regarded as competent social actors emerged just as self-transparent, liberal notions of the self were coming under attack from feminist and post-structuralist work which emphasizes the powerful, contingent, relational and performative nature of the subject (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). These understandings of the subject not as pre-existing, agentful beings, but as contingent constructions that emerge through social practice within time/space-specific regimes of power, are now challenging the liberal conception of agency upon which the field was founded.

Foucault's work has been important to de-centring understandings of the subject in NSSC and GCYF (Lee and Motzkau, 2011; Philo, 2011; Oswell, 2013; Pykett and Disney, 2016). Crucially, instead of presupposing the existence of independent, self-knowing subjects in an Enlightenment tradition, Foucault argued that individual subjects are discursively produced

though power relations. His early work paid scant attention to agency in the sense of individual free will (Philo, 2012); nonetheless, Heller (1996: 94) argues that a reading of his works and interviews as a whole demonstrates that subjectification does not simply equal subjection (as subjects are not simply created and controlled by discourses). Although power for Foucault is everywhere, as a mechanism it is never absolute, never entirely in the control of an individual or group; it is always incomplete and subject to destabilization and shift. While the individual is constituted via subjectification – and is therefore never liberal or sovereign – the 'subject' is also constituted 'in a more autonomous way through practices of liberation, or liberty, as in Antiquity, on the basis of course of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment' (Foucault, 1988: 50; McNay, 2004; Philo, 2012). Judith Butler's influential work takes Foucault's ideas of power and subjectification of power forward, via critical engagement with (among others) Althusser, Benjamin, Deleuze, Freud, Klein (e.g. Butler, 1997, 2004). Although more often discussing a notion of 'resistance', Butler directly addresses the question of agency, when she claims that it is possible to conceive of 'an agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence' (Butler, 1997: 130).

Some GCYF researchers have found inspiration in the challenge such de-centred understandings of subjectivity provide to the Cartesian subject (a move also reflected in Childhood Studies; Oswell, 2013; Esser et al., 2016). Given the importance of feminism in the emergence and development of the sub-discipline (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011), it is perhaps unsurprising that this de-centring of the subject has often been explored though post-structuralist feminist theory (Thomas, 2005). In these accounts, we see decentred, though still specifically human, subjects whose embodied, fleshy corporeality is marked and framed in relations of power. They are not bounded, rational subjects, but ones forged through intersubjective relationships of emotional recognition and practical, foundational, interdependence (Holt, 2013), in part acting in ways which are beyond conscious (Blazek, 2015; Bosco and Joassart-Marcelli, 2015; Kustatscher, 2017).

This theoretical emphasis on the interdependent nature of subjectivities has interesting parallels with grounded research. For instance, studies in Africa have emphasized the social underpinnings of agency. Durham (2008: 175) rejects liberal conceptions of youth, and argues that: 'People in Botswana feel their agency – their ability to act effectively and to grow in their own power – primarily as it becomes manifest in ties of interdependence with other people.' Rather than autonomous selfhood, relationality is the key to agency here as elsewhere in the Global South (Punch, 2002; Boyden and Howard, 2013; Crivello, 2015). This empirical work demonstrates that young people are not simply independent social actors; their ability to exercise agency emerges in the context of inter and intra-generational dependencies which, depending on the context, can open or foreclose possibilities for meeting their current and future needs. Indeed, these approaches are beginning to have resonance in the Global North (Bartos, 2012; Vanderbeck and Worth, 2015; Jayne and Valentine, 2016).

GCYF's engagement with poststructuralist feminisms, which explore the becoming of the subject in the context of power, has been augmented in the past decade or so by poststructuralist work that developed under the banner of non-representational theory or '"more-than-representational" geography' (Lorimer, 2005: 84). Initially, this body of work, which critiques a perceived overemphasis on representation in cultural geography – arguing instead for an emphasis on the relational, habitual production of meaning in action – was represented as 'very British and very male' with 'limited appeal . . . to feminist scholars' (Cresswell,

2012: 96; see also Thien, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). One reason NRT has been slow to have an impact in feminist-dominated strands of GCYF is the challenge it poses to the founding conceptions of a specifically human agency which emerges in contexts shaped by power. There is a clear fault line here between post-structuralist feminist work in which agency – conscious or otherwise – is situated within the context of wider social forces, and the refusal in some early NRT work 'to search for . . . an out-of-field "power"' and their decision to focus instead 'on the efficacy and opportunism (or otherwise) of practices and performances' (Anderson and Harrison, 2010: 8). Mitchell and Elwood (2012: 791–2) sum up this disjuncture succinctly, arguing that in post-structural feminist theory:

> Personal agency is thus conceptualized as always constrained within a larger field of social forces and power relations, even when (or perhaps especially when) that agency is unconscious, manifested in mundane bodily practices. Through its emphasis on the present moment, however, NRT evacuates these larger sociohistorical processes of their political force and meaning.

Notwithstanding these differences, a discernible strand of GCYF that engages with NRT, affect and enchantment has emerged, which makes important contributions to understanding how children's agencies/subjectivities emerge through connections with a host of human and non-human actants. For instance, in her work on deconstructing child/nature dualisms, Taylor (2011: 431) emphasises that: 'hybrid politics traces agency as an effect of the imbroglio of human/non-human relations'. This scholarship has explored the hybrid agency of children emerging through connections with a host of non-human others, from toys (Woodyer, 2008), to popular culture artefacts (Horton, 2010), media stories (Curti et al., 2016), animals (Malone, 2016; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017), snow (Rautio and Jokenin, 2016), stones

(Rautio, 2013) and nature matter more generally (Änggård, 2016). These enchanted and enchanting stories do have insight into new political potentials to be otherwise (Curti et al., 2016), but it is interesting, and perhaps telling, that geographers, and GCYF in particular, have been quick to consider enchantments, vitalism and hopefulness (Marshall, 2013), but have had less to say about frailty, vulnerability, fragility and finitude (Edelman, 2004; Harrison, 2015; although see Horton and Kraftl, 2017). We might debate whether this focus reflects a continued optimistic attachment to the futurity of childhood (Edelman, 2004), or reduced interest in overtly political-economic issues – say the impact of poverty on young people's experiences of life in the Global South (and North) – compared with previous research traditions in the sub-discipline. However, this paucity of (uppercase) politics might be one reason why the impact of this theoretically enticing approach has been less than one might expect, and consequently why the practical doing of GCYF often still focuses (strategically, or otherwise) upon a central, knowing and rational young subject.

Differences between post-structuralist feminist and NRT approaches matter, but there are also considerable commonalities in their potential influence on the future conduct of GCYF. Notably, both approaches propound a performative approach to subjectivity; both embrace the importance of materiality, including the importance of things as well as people in the everyday practices through which these subjectivities emerge; and both are deeply concerned with issues of embodiment. These commonalities facilitate growing interconnections, and we argue that critical engagement with nexus, hybridity and assemblage, which retains a keen awareness of broader operations of power, has much potential to advance debate on agency in GCYF (Aitken, 2007; Ruddick, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). Kraftl's (2015) research on alter-childhoods is illustrative in this respect, as he considers hybrid bodies

and materialities in practices of de/schooling within an analysis of the wider politics of education. Similarly, when Malone (2016) reflects on dog–child relationships in La Paz, there is a strong sense of the precarity of both the dogs and the children.

This potential to study practices, performances and hauntings in ways which recognize the diffuse and diversified reproduction of power underpins our playful but also pointed call for 'more than nonrepresentational geographies' (Holloway, 2014: 382). We suggest that non-representational theory has value, but can be best deployed when tied to a critical analysis of power inequalities, which is crucial to this sub-discipline's wider intellectual project, and in shaping children and young people's lives. Post-structural feminist theory and NRT approaches informed by a two-way flow of ideas have much to offer future theorizations of the emergence of agency in power, and consequently our understanding of social reproduction and change (see Wolfe, 2017). To ensure that this focus on the event, hybridity, connections and non-human agency does not side-line broader consideration of regimes of power, we argue that GCYF must pay close attention to the spatiality and temporality of childhood.

IV Spatiality: Questioning the space/place of agency

NSSC was a key influence on the development of GCYF, but from the outset geographers contributed to the field by questioning the dichotomous and bounded space of agency articulated by this sociologically and anthropologically-inspired tradition (James et al., 1998; Holloway and Valentine, 2000b). In its place, geographers articulated three, inter-related ways of thinking about spatiality. These comprised: (i) 'working with a progressive sense of place, in which global and local are understood to be embedded within one another rather than as dichotomous categories'; (ii) conceiving of the sites of

everyday life 'not as bounded spaces, but as porous ones produced through their webs of connections with wider societies which inform socio-spatial practices within those spaces' where adult control, strategic alliances between adults and children and children's agency may be important; and (iii) attending to the ways 'ideas about childhood inform our understanding of particular spaces' as '[t]hese spatial discourses are important as they inform socio-spatial practices in these sites, socio-spatial practices which then reinforce, or occasionally challenge, our understandings of childhood' (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b: 779). Following Massey's insistence that 'the social relations which constitute space are not organised into scales so much as into *constellations of temporary coherences*' (Massey, 1998: 124–5), these three takes on spatiality were conceived of as inevitably interconnected (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b).

This conceptualization of the spaces of agency as '*constellations of temporary coherences*' enjoys considerable longevity in GCYF. Katz's (2004) global/local approach to counter-topographies, for example, has been echoed in Jeffrey's (2010a) approach to vital conjunctures which explores the importance of translocal processes for children and youth, and people's influence on these (see also Radcliffe and Wenn, 2016). Research on children's political agency is more recent, but we can see in Habashi and Worley's (2014) investigation into the political preferences of Palestinian children in the West Bank the importance of local, regional and global discourses in shaping children's attitudes, as well as young people's redefinition of these powerful ideas. One crucial development, however, is that the importance of mobility to young people's agency, both in terms of their ability to act in the present and their scope to achieve imagined futures, now receives greater attention (Holt and Costello, 2011; Collins et al., 2013; Ansell et al., 2014; Esson, 2015). This emphasizes not only the power geometries

shaping individual spaces (Massey, 2013), but crucially the importance of mobility between these temporary coherences for young people's agency.

Poststructuralist critiques of liberal conceptions of agency, however, have stimulated new ways of thinking about space. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 512), for example, argue that attention to emergent subjectivities underlines the importance of 'process over product', a stance which leads them to emphasize 'the transformative potential of events'. Pursuing this approach, Wilson (2013) argues that a focus on micro-spaces usefully pinpoints the political possibilities of apparently mundane sites as a key context for social transformation (cf. Ansell, 2009). Her research considers parental encounters in a multi-cultural British primary school, which sometimes reinforce but also rupture white parents' perceptions of their British Asian counterparts, making these places of (positive) incremental change in British multicultural life (Wilson, 2013). In so doing, she employs an open understanding of space (e.g. linking the materiality of the playground to wider educational landscapes, its location in a super diverse, post-colonial city and domestic spaces) and time (e.g. showing the past and hopes for the future matter). Pursuing a subtly different approach, Valentine et al. (2015) explore how encounters with a particular difference (e.g. disabled, minority-ethnic or LGBT identities) in family life can sometimes produce more positive attitudes to that specific social group in public life. Their research sets these family interactions in the context of wider space/times, tracing for example the importance of globalization, migration and the detraditionalization/individualization associated with the shift to modernity. Mills (2016) demonstrates that this attention to specific encounters in broader social context need not be limited to the contemporary period. Her historical research uncovers the importance of emotional and embodied romantic and sexual encounters between teenagers, in mixed-sex, inter-faith spaces of youth work, to a post-war generation that shaped social change.

We argue that the notion of encounter has the potential to bridge the divide in GCYF between scholarship which retains a keen interest in the idea of a human agency, and the post-structuralist/NRT inspired studies of materialities, assemblage, and so on. Firstly, encounter as a conceptual lens allows a politicized focus on the making of difference. A key characteristic of encounter is the political potential to challenge differences between 'them' and 'us' (Wilson, 2017), whether in the context of GCYF that is between diverse young people or between generations (Kallio, 2017). The politically progressive bent of this work matters given the historical origins of GCYF (see Section II), and provides a point of common ground for the analysis of human (and, for some, non-human) agency. Secondly, encounter allows for an examination of relations which extend beyond the specific site of encounter. Wilson (2013), Valentine et al. (2015) and Mills (2016), for example, all provide an interpretation of encounters that situate them in geographies that extend beyond the event, and which consider the power shaping them as well as their political potential. The result is that they do not simply account for the way '[e]ncounters *make* difference'; they also consider the ways spatially and temporally extended encounters make *a* difference in political terms (Wilson, 2017: 455).

This notion of encounter sits well alongside older approaches to spatiality within GCYF (Massey, 1998). Aitken (2014: 8), for example, brings Massey's formulation together with an emphasis on the materiality of space, in conceptualizing space 'as events . . . as an assemblage of previously unrelated processes', thereby illuminating the political potential of 'becoming other through dislocation and surprise', for example by emphasizing the interconnectedness of people and things (Taylor,

2011; Rautio, 2013) and potential 'lines of flight' towards other ways of being (Aitken, 2014; Curti et al., 2016). We agree with this analysis, but argue it is vital to exercise caution, as well as optimism, as encounters do not necessarily bring about positive change in socio-spatial practices. Children's encounters in play, for example, have long been heralded as potentially transformative, opening up possibilities, for 'liberatory notions of justice and difference may develop' (Aitken and Herman, 1997; Woodyer, 2012, Pyyry and Tani, 2017). However, its potential for progressive social change is not always realized, as in practice it produces 'more of a tendency toward stability than toward its undoing', for example reproducing gendered, disablist and classed differences (Katz, 2004: 101; Harker, 2005; Holt et al., 2017; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2018).

Captured as we are by genuine enthusiasm for encounter, we are also clear about the limits of this approach. Specifically, we embrace work on encounter which considers the situated (re)production of difference through encounters which are shaped by their relation to other time/spaces (Wilson, 2017), but argue that for a more rounded view this must also sit alongside broader-scale research. Play, once again, provides a useful example. Encounter undoubtedly offers a vehicle through which we might study the emergence of young people's subjectivities, for example through a focus on street games in a neighbourhood, or an organized activity in a youth club (see Mills, 2016). However, if we are to understand societal-level shifts in the nature of play, we also need research which incorporates multiple spaces in order to investigate which children get to play where. Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2018), for example, take a cross-cutting approach in demonstrating that children's differential ability to access extra-curricular, care-based and free play environments is shaped by, and reproduces, classed power. It is noteworthy that data collection for extensive research requires a strategically

essentialist methodology (as categories are temporarily fixed in the collection of information on the experiences of 'children' of different 'ages', 'classes', 'genders', 'ethnicities', etc.). This represents a marked difference with work on encounter; nevertheless, we see potential for productive exchange between the two, as both approaches consider the operation and reproduction of power through contingent social relations, and embrace a relational approach to the subject. Going forward, plural research agendas which incorporate both a focus on how encounter shapes and makes a difference, and analyses which link these spaces together to trace the shifting nature of childhood at a broader scale, are vital if we are to develop rounded understandings of GCYF.

V Temporality: Questioning the time of agency

A defining achievement of NSSC was to replace psychological and sociological notions of the child as 'becoming' with an understanding of the 'being' child, a competent social actor whose life-world is worthy of adult attention and investigation (James et al., 1998). This temporal focus on children's current childhoods, rather than simply their progress towards future adulthoods, has been key to the development of GCYF and counters the wider societal view that the central importance of children is their futurity. This approach has been challenged, however, in the past decade. Uprichard (2008) argues that in shifting attention from 'becoming' to 'being' NSSC were merely inverting a dualism, not fundamentally challenging it, and she makes a compelling case for interrogation of the links between the two in a 'being and becoming' approach to children and childhood. This integration matters, Uprichard (2008: 309) argues, as:

> the interplay between the different notions of time within each discourse ... is key to understanding

the notion of the 'child'. Hence, while the discourse of the 'being' child accentuates the present, and that of the 'becoming' child stresses the future, both the present and the future interact together in the course of everyday life.

This dual emphasis on the 'being and becoming' child is evident in an upsurge of work on youth transitions which explores young people's 'Boundary Crossings' between childhood and adulthood (e.g. Valentine, 2003: 37; Camfield and Tafere, 2011). Worth's (2009) research on visually-impaired youths' transitions in the UK, for example, ties Allport's theoretically eclectic understanding of becoming (which considers past and present stimuli as well as futurity) to Grosz's post-structural feminist theorizations of becomings. Grosz's vision of time departs from the neutral, linear and chronological, and instead emphasizes its active role in events and openness to futurity. This notion that time (like space) is not a linear, passive or neutral container for agency (Worth, 2009) has had important implications for studies of youthful becomings. We can begin to see this in Jeffrey's (2010a: 502) suggestion that geographers shift to the study of vital conjunctures, a move which in part reflects his concern that 'becoming' is not a temporally even process. Radcliffe and Webb (2016) take the argument that time is *not* evenly laid out, with each element equally important for the 'becoming' child, further in their study of Mapuche youth transitions in Chile. They argue that vital conjunctures are not simply singular, critical, contemporary moments, but conjunctures which emerge from and connect with longer-term histories such as colonialism or postcolonial political practices. This stretched notion of time is extended in the opposite direction by Ansell et al. (2014) who recognize the importance of the past in creating the present, but place greater emphasis on the ways 'being and becoming' in young people's livelihood strategies in Malawi and Lesotho are shaped by their current needs

and future ambitions, with their actions shaping their own, as well as wider society's, futures (see also Crivello, 2015). That young people are aware of this iteration between the present and futurity is evident in Cheng's (2014: 401) exploration of Southeast Asian students as 'time protagonists', but for many young people in the globalizing world, this awareness is not sufficient to prevent them from being stuck in time, waiting indefinitely for a future that might never materialize (Jeffrey, 2010b).

The relationship between these conceptualizations of the time and the subject of agency bear closer examination. On the one hand, adopting a 'being and becoming' approach is eminently positive as it allows us to reinforce our gains by cementing interest in children in the here and now, whilst also extending conceptual insights into their 'beings and becomings' by examining how the now links to past and future, in the process reshaping the present and futurity. To date, this dynamic approach to time has been taken up most clearly within work on youth transitions and education, and the challenge is to extend it through other parts of GCYF. This is politically and intellectually important as a 'being and becoming' approach explicates young people's agency in the (re)production of broader power relations and inequalities which can endure throughout the lifecourse. On the other hand, in taking this agenda forward, we need to recognize the conceptual import of work on the subject of agency, most notably that the 'being and becoming' of subjectivities, applies to all subjects, not just children (Madge and O'Connor, 2006). Some threads of research in GCYF have long considered children, youth *and* adults who shape, and are shaped by, young people's lives, but this is not universally true. The challenge is therefore not simply that we adopt a 'being and becoming' approach to childhood and youth, but a 'being and becoming' perspective on all subjects, including the grand/parents, teachers, volunteers, religious leaders, legislators and so

on in our research who influence, and are influenced by, young people's emergent agency (Holloway, 2014; see also Aitken, 2014).

This move to emphasize the 'being and becoming' of child and adult subjects suggests there is much to be gained from bringing together a conceptual emphasis on the active importance of time with performative understandings of the subject. The relationship between the two is not, however, always smooth. There is a potential mismatch between this dynamic take on time and the notion that subjects are made through the moment or event. Jones (2013: 876) has been important in introducing the idea that children are non-representational subjects, but identifies potential problems with this approach's emphasis on 'the present moment of practice', arguing that 'its relative neglect of the trajectories of the past-into-present which are always in place through various interconnecting ecological, corporeal, material, cultural, economic and memorial flows' leads to 'presentism'. This neglect of moments outside of the present is not inevitable, however. Poststructuralist feminist research demonstrates that a non-linear understanding of time can be combined with a recognition that agency emerges through everyday practices. This move is achieved by siting these moments or events within broader social relations which stretch backwards into history and forwards into futurity, even as they are open to repetition or rupture in the present (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012).

Moreover, bringing together the inevitably embodied subject of poststructuralist feminism (Butler, 1993), whose messy corporeality is forged in power, with this stretched notion of time, productively disrupts the undifferentiated assertion that (young) people have agency (see Section II). Specifically, the combined analytical focus on embodiment and time means we can no longer ignore the dynamic mutability of the bodily subjects in GCYF, who grow, hopefully develop, and eventually decline, over

time. Attention to this changing corporeality unsettles NSSC's paradigm shift which (wrestling childhood from biological understandings of development and socialization by inverting the bio/social dualism) placed the 'being' child firmly in the social realm (James et al., 1998). Instead, our focus is directed at embodied subject/agents who are simultaneously biological and social, shaped as '*biosocial beings and becomings*' through the inevitable entanglement of what were previously regarded as conceptually separate processes. This not only means these agents can no more escape their biological needs (water, food, shelter) and transformations (growth, aging) than they can the emergence of their subjectivities in power. It also implies that their 'biology' is neither simply natural nor pre-existing; rather it is constructed, forged and dissected by power (Butler, 1993). Attention to embodiment has produced entirely warranted calls to take children's bodies seriously (Aitken, 2001; Colls and Hörschelmann, 2009), but in seeking to think about the biosocial without veering form one pole to the other (Kraftl, 2013), our purpose here is to explore the implications that thinking about our sub-disciplinary subjects as 'biosocial beings and becomings' has for understandings of agency in GCYF (see Prout, 2005, and Ryan, 2012, on biosocial debates in Childhood Studies).

At the individual level, conceiving of children, youth and adults as 'biosocial beings and becomings' directs our attention to the importance their embodiment at different points in time might have in shaping their modes of agency. Compare, for example, a baby who cries for help in an intersubjective relationship with their carer (Holt, 2013); a young person who negotiates inter and intra-generational dependencies as they seek to become someone (Boyden and Howard, 2013); and a state actor who localizes child policy through its implementation in their organization (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). Each has agency,

but their time-specific embodiment as a 'biosocial being and becoming' has, at least potential, implications for the form their agency takes (and the response it receives). In this sense, their agency is inevitably biosocial, as both their strategic and purposeful actions, and their emotions, habits, dispositions and extra-rational elements of conduct, are entwined with the potentialities of their corporeality as they emerge in wider contexts of power. Future research in GCYF needs to explore the biosocial expression of this agency within and across different lifecourses as we depart company with a purely social approach to childhood.

At the societal level, there is even greater potential to stretch our notion of time yet further, so that we might consider biosocial agency across generations into the past and future. In this regard, our argument is not simply that we should focus on the been, being and becoming child (Hanson, 2017), but that we consider intergenerational biosocial relations. Mayall's (2015) use of Bourdieu's conception of hysteresis – which refers to the '"structural lag" in the opportunities on offer in a field and the dispositions people bring to a field' (Bourdieu, 1997: 16, cited in Mayall, 2015) – adds a stretched notion of time to social agency, showing how dispositions which shape subjects' propensity to act can endure across intergenerational time frames, even though social circumstances have changed. However, marrying this theoretical stance with insights from the developing field of epigenetics allows us to produce a more thoroughly biosocial understanding of agency across generations. Epigenetics suggests that environmental circumstances (e.g. exposure to different diets, pollutants, etc., that are societally-shaped by classed, racialized and gendered power and so on) can influence gene expression, having bodily impacts not only on individuals across their life course, but also on that of future generations (Guthman and Mansfield, 2013). The 'biosocial beings and becomings' of our research, and their agency in

particular time/spaces, is thus tied to the past, and extends into the future, through intergenerational biosocial relations which we can only capture by radically stretching the time horizon adopted by GCYF.

VI Conclusion: Future directions for agency in GCYF

Geographical study of children, youth and families has expanded exponentially over the last two decades, and its central concepts are beginning to influence diverse fields of scholarship (Yuan Woon, 2017). The enduring importance of GCYF as an intellectual project, however, does not simply mean that this endeavour should continue in its current form. This paper draws on our individual research and collective reading of the wider literature across the globalizing world to ask timely and provocative questions about one of the field's founding conceptions, namely the notion that children are competent social actors. Our purpose in a four-fold scrutiny of understandings of *capacity*, *subjectivity*, *spatiality* and *temporality* in conceptions of agency is to elucidate the assumptions that framed the development of our field, to explore contemporary challenges to them, and to set out our vision for the next phase of GCYF.

We began with an analysis of *capacity*, arguing that one of the founding conceptions of the field, the notion that children have agency, underpinned a politically-progressive, but nevertheless under-theorized, paradigm shift. This ascription of agency to children has prompted considered debate about its depth and type, but we identify a conceptual elision between the *benefit of studying agency* with the *beneficial nature of agency*. This leads to our call that GCYF move away from celebrations of young people's agency, which are implicitly underpinned by both liberal conceptions of the subject and romantic ideas about the virtuosity of youth. This not only requires research which explores how children's agency (re)produces as well as

challenges inequalities, it also demands that we pay explicit attention to the implicit assumptions about the child agent that underlie much existing debate.

Our focus on *subjectivity* was designed to follow this agenda, and we explored how post-structuralist feminist and non-representational approaches now challenge the liberal and romantic conceptions of agency upon which the field was founded. We identify points of productive commonality between these feminist and more-than-representational approaches, as well as tensions over engagement with questions of power and politics. Moving forward, we contend that GCYF should embrace the challenge posed by post-structuralist and feminist work to advance identification of an embodied subject/agent which emerges in contexts of power. To ensure that this research pays due attention to enduring regimes of power, balancing research on the political potential to be otherwise with concern for ongoing vulnerability, we argue that it is vital for GCYF to pay close attention to conceptualization of space and time.

In terms of *spatiality*, we identified considerable longevity in conceptions of the spaces of agency as '*constellations of temporary coherences*', but also champion the conceptual potential of 'encounter' as a framework which can connect GCYF research which has a strong interest in young people's agency with post-structuralist/NRT studies' interest in materialities and assemblages. Specifically, we argue that the politicized focus on the making of difference, and the insistence that the site of encounter is linked to spaces and regimes of power beyond the event, provides a conceptual space where we can explore the contingent, embodied, connected and specifically human agency of subjects whose actions may in part be purposeful and rational, and driven by affect and beyond-conscious motivations. Nevertheless, we also insist that future research in GCYF must extend beyond this admittedly captivating

approach, combining its insights with broader approaches which incorporate multiple spaces in individual studies, as these produce a different type of knowledge about social stability and change. The challenge for GCYF is to navigate a course which allows us to integrate broad-scale analyses of social (re)production (which are politically vital if we want to be able to identify the relative positions of, say, different groups of young people) with detailed examinations of the emergence of these subjects through encounters (which are crucial in showing how difference is (re)made as people and things come together in contingent time/spaces).

Our analysis of *temporality* leads to our call for GCYF to combine this integrated approach to space with a radically stretched notion of time. Our review shows that 'being and becoming' approaches to childhood have gained much strength in research on education and youth transitions, and we argue that there is potential to extend this more broadly throughout the sub-discipline, and in relation to the children, youth *and* adults who influence, and are affected by, young people's lives. More fundamentally, combined scrutiny of the embodied subject of agency and stretched notions of time moves us to emphasize that children are '*biosocial beings and becomings*'. For us, this sets new agendas for research focusing at the individual level on the expression of biosocial agency across (different) lifecourses, and at the societal level on how biosocial agency stretches across generations from the past and into the future.

Our agenda for research thus embraces post-structuralist feminist challenges to the liberal conception of agency on which the field was founded, and argues for a biosocial approach to the beings and becomings of GCYF, involving both intensive and extensive analyses of space and dynamic notions of time that are stretched in both the individual and intergenerational frames. This will allow us to explore how biosocial subjects are being and becoming in

space and time, as porous bodies are forged in particular ways in specific but connected spaces which are always implicated in power, and this embodied subjectivity and capacity to act is carried forward, in growth and change, through the lifecourse and, on occasions, across generations. Such an agenda enables GCYF to retain the focus on children's agency that was a political imperative in the formation of the field, but does so in a way that challenges, probes and theorizes it in new ways. Thus while we debunk the notion of a holistic subject, we also reframe subjectivities as interconnected, porous, unbounded, and tied to a host of interdependences to people and things. This strategy matters, as in a world where children's agency is still routinely denied it would be politically and ethically unthinkable for us to deconstruct liberal notions of the subject without reconfiguring new understanding of agency. Moreover, we contend that this position has wider resonance, and argue that in critical human geography, where we are concerned with assemblages of people and things, it is vital that we continue to consider the emergent, embodied, enduring and mutable nature of specifically *human* agency.

It would be conceptually neat to end here, but the reality is that GCYF has been as much shaped by politics as theory, and this continues to matter. Notwithstanding vast strides in post-structural thinking which link the emergence of agency to wider regimes of power in extended time/spaces, the politics of adopting this theoretical approach can be vexing. Quite simply, there are numerous time/spaces where young people are denied agency, rights and/or participation, and while post-struturalist analysis might be theoretically appropriate in these contexts, it is often more politically expedient to invoke notions of children as bearers of rights (notwithstanding the fact that this rests on liberal conceptions of the subject) to promote the interests of young people and their families. The challenge going forward in GCYF, and one which we ourselves regularly encounter, is that we positively manage the articulation between these strategically valuable conceptions which help foreground the opportunities and difficulties faced by children, youth and families, and the more rigorously theorized approaches to agency which can help us understand their geographies. In an ideal world, rigorous theory might align neatly with good politics, but in today's global community researchers in GCYF must continue to negotiate the productive symbioses and the tensions between the two.

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