

● **child studies** ○

N. 6, 2024

**CENTRING CHILDREN IN RESEARCH: A
COLLABORATIVE EXPLORATION INTO CHILD-
CENTREDNESS AS METHOD AND THEORY**

**CENTRAR AS CRIANÇAS NA INVESTIGAÇÃO: UMA
EXPLORAÇÃO COLABORATIVA DA CENTRALIZAÇÃO DA
CRIANÇA COMO MÉTODO E TEORIA**

Alex Ormalm

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Johanna Sjöberg

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Anna Sparman

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Rebecka Tiefenbacher

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Joel Löw

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Johanna Annerbäck

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Johanna Sköld

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Emilia Holmbom Strid

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Sanna Hedrén

Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning (IBL)
Linköping University, Sweden

Lina Lago

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Olga Anatoli

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Yelyzaveta Hrechaniuk

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden

Alan Prout

Professor Emeritus, University of Leeds, UK

Marek Tesar

Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of
Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

This collaborative article explores child-centredness as a theoretical and methodological concept by asking what it means to centre children in research. The collaborative format offers a heterogeneity of voices on the concept as the contributing authors write, critically and creatively, from a range of different interdisciplinary research perspectives. Writing from the departure point of the key role of child-centred approaches within the field, including recent discussions concerning the need to decentre children/childhood, the goal is to spur and contribute to discussions on the possibilities and challenges of the concept, as well as new ways of approaching it.

Keywords: child-centredness, decentring, child research, child and childhood studies, collaborative writing

Resumo

Este artigo colaborativo explora a centralidade da criança como um conceito teórico e metodológico, perguntando o que significa centralizar as crianças na investigação. O formato colaborativo oferece uma heterogeneidade de vozes sobre o conceito, uma vez que os autores que contribuem escrevem, de forma crítica e criativa, a partir de uma série de diferentes perspectivas interdisciplinares de investigação. Escrevendo a partir do ponto de partida do papel fundamental das abordagens centradas na criança dentro do campo, incluindo discussões recentes

sobre a necessidade de descentralizar as crianças/infância, o objetivo é estimular e contribuir para discussões sobre as possibilidades e desafios do conceito, bem como novas formas de o abordar.

Palavras-chave centralidade na criança, descentração, investigação sobre a criança, estudos sobre a criança e a infância, escrita colaborativa

Introduction

Centring children in research has been a common feature of research within child and childhood studies since the 1980s as an endeavour to recognize children in their own right, not primarily as, for example, part of the family unit (cf. James & Prout, 1990; Qvortrup, 1985). This has often involved participatory methods and methods oriented around children's perspectives; for example, under the name of child-focused research (James & James, 2012). However, it can also entail centring children as the primary research concern with the help of concepts such as a child perspective (cf. Halldén, 2003) or childism (Wall, 2023). However, child-centredness is more often discussed as a feature in relation to other well-theorized concepts such as those mentioned above, rather than as a concept in itself. Recently, discussions have emerged within the field arguing for a need to move beyond child-centredness by decentring children and childhoods (Spyrou, 2017), or thinking with concepts such as after/post childhood (Kraftl, 2020) and post-child (Aitken, 2018). These discussions highlight questions about what it means to 'move beyond', and how child-centredness is understood and practised within the field.

By exploring child-centredness as both a methodological and a theoretical concept, this paper challenges the taken-for-granted status of child-centredness by engaging with a diversity of approaches to it. The goal is not to pinpoint or define what child-centredness is. Rather, it is to concretize, without aiming to unify, what it means from a diversity of research perspectives situated in an interdisciplinary research environment that has been dedicated to child-centred research for several decades.

For this article eleven authors, researchers and doctoral students, at Tema Barn, Linköping University, Sweden was invited to write a 500-word piece on the topic child-centredness. The format is inspired by the method of collaborative writing and the idea that knowledge production becomes more complex and multifaceted by thinking together (Peters et al., 2022, Tesar et al., 2021). This format, inviting many authors to shortly make their stand on a certain topic without any requirement for coherence, opens up for disparate thinking and expanded reflection. Borders and conflict surfaces between different theoretical standpoints are allowed to be visible, and differences and heterogeneities are rather encouraged (Sparrman et al.). Therefor the eleven authors approach the topic of this article from

their own theoretical or empirical angle, and without any attempt to make them more coherent or making easy transitions between different pieces. The article hopes to spur the readers curiosity and thinking of the concept child-centredness.

The introduction has been written by Alex Ormalm and Johanna Sjöberg. It serves as a starting point for the individual contributions with the aim of incite curiosity towards twisting and turning what child-centredness can mean in child research. The contributions have gone through internal collegial reviews as well as being reviewed by external reviewers; Professor Emeritus Alan Prout and two blind reviewers whose contributions are integrated last in the article. This collaborative process, including both authors and reviewers, welcomes similarities and connections as well as differences and dissonances. This turns into a conversation that demonstrates the collaborative knowledge-making. We invite you to read the article, not as one coherent piece or with the expectation of finding a streamlined argument or one cohesive method, but rather as a collection of heterogeneity that poses critical questions ahead. With this in mind, we seek to spur a discussion about the possibilities, challenges, and future of child-centredness in child and childhood research.

Centring Children's Absences: Thinking with Abandoned Playgrounds and Ghostly Participation

Alex Ormalm

Imagine for a moment an abandoned playground, decaying after years of neglect in the absence of children. The architecture is overgrown, rusty, and broken. If it were a movie, where the playground is used to convey a sense of eeriness, the swings might be creaking in the wind and the animal-shaped spring swings might have degraded into something that looks as though it belonged in a horror movie. With this image in mind, I want to push the question of 'what' can be centred in child-centred research by delving into how child-centredness can be (re)thought through the concept of 'absence'.

Children's absences can be about limiting access to what is deemed unsafe or inappropriate for children, or it can be about forgetfulness, lack of attention, the unsayable, or about what was never even considered. Absence is often slippery because it is denoted by what is not there. While the children figure somewhere, their absence figures somewhere else, telling us a story of its own. We cannot pinpoint its boundaries or a single location. While thus posing a challenge to analysis, children's absences hold the potential to push back our attempts to categorize or hold still the category of the child in our knowledge production. Instead, centring children's absences asks us to think with a shattered category in movement (cf. Hetherington, 2004).

The eeriness of an abandoned playground is created through absencing childness, not just children – their movements and sounds, traces of their activities, the maintenance of a place created for them, their presence in public spaces and, not least, the signs of (happy) childhoods. Their absence draws attention to how their absence from this place, just as their presence somewhere else, has effects (cf. Scott, 2018). Their absence haunts the space that once was for children, affecting us enough for abandoned playgrounds to become tropes for conveying what is dystopian or lost.

Centring children’s absences contributes to what child-centredness can mean by challenging approaches to child-centredness that rely on children’s verbal and physical participation or perspective. It enables an approach to child-centredness that sets ‘centring’ in movement as it does not bound the category of ‘the child’, but rather loosens it up. This expands the reach of where and when it matters to acknowledge the effects of children, because it does not require children to ‘be there’ in order for them to matter (cf. Ormalm et al., 2022). In an abandoned playground, it draws attention to how we can think of children’s ghostly participation in shaping space, as well as what kind of world becomes present in children’s absences.

“Decentring” the Child

Anna Sparrman

The call for a decentring of the child is done to show how children exist through relational enactments between human (children) and non-human entities (eg. Spyrou 2019). It is a critical act of pointing out and unpacking what the child comprises. But what do we leave unexamined when doing this? Let us consider Jill Greenberg’s photograph of a lone crying child.



Figure 1. Four more years (2006), Jill Greenberg © <https://clampart.com/2012/04/end-times/#13>

According to Greenberg, this child became hysterically upset during the photo session. Greenberg related the child's misery, anguish and hopelessness to the political despair she was feeling at the time. George W. Bush had just been re-elected as the president of the US and she anguished over the future and the suffering to which children would be exposed. Hence her title *Four more years* (Yoo 2010).

This, and the rest of the photographs in the collection, *End time* (2006), were created by mothers handing their children a lollipop (or something else they liked) and then asking for it back. The children cried in response. This created a heated debate, even hatred towards Greenberg, some accusing her of exploiting children's misery. Greenberg, however, replied that children's crying is a natural way of communicating. Creating these photographs, she argued, is neither more nor less provocative or unnatural than shooting photographs of smiling children advertising jeans (Teicher, 2013).

In different ways Greenberg and the 'haters' shared a mission. Both sides wanted to protect children; The 'haters' from the abuse of the photographer, (and the mothers?); Greenberg from the rising political fundamentalism she identified in the US. Both debaters, it could be argued, centred the children but in different ways.

Drawing on Mol's notion of "baroque heterogeneity" (2016, p. 258), we see that the photograph is enacted through multiple and at times incompatible heterogeneities: a child, photographic technologies, a mother, a photographer, tears, visual editing tools, politics, a title, emotions, hate letters, and so on. Curiously, however, this decentring takes for granted what counts as a child in the first place. Why do we even think this is a child, and what is the 'it' which is being decentred? Decentring is at risk of ignoring our unexamined reliance on what Sjöberg (2013) calls "childity", the significant details we use to indicate "child": body proportions, the large head, the chubbiness and maybe the crying. Perhaps we need to be much more careful about what we take for granted when we "decentre"?

Centring the Decentred Child

Rebecka Tiefenbacher

I understand child-centredness as the striving to situate children's experiences, voices, and perspectives at the forefront of theoretical, methodological, and/or empirical inquiry. In this way, it connects to wider efforts in childhood studies to recognize and understand children's life conditions and

situations across temporal and geographical contexts (cf. Canosa & Graham, 2020). Not all children have been at the ‘center’, however. For example, Underwood et al. (2015) state that children with disabilities are underrepresented in studies seeking to understand children’s own experiences. Children with communicative differences and difficulties are particularly excluded from research (Rabiee, Sloper, & Beresford, 2005). The consequence is that, on the whole, we lack knowledge about the everyday experiences of children with disabilities (Stafford, 2017).

In more recent years, there have been calls to decentre children and childhood. One argument for doing so has been that contemporary societal concerns cannot be captured through ‘the narrow confines of a “child-centred” field of study’ (Spyrou, 2017, p. 433). I agree with such calls on the basis that not all research enquiry can start with a childhood ‘lens’ (cf. Kraftl, 2020). In the case of children with disabilities, however, we cannot talk about ‘decentering’, because they have yet to be at the centre of childhood studies. By centring the children and childhoods that have been outside the main focus – using methods that recognize children’s many conditions for participating and ways of communicating (Tiefenbacher, 2023) – it becomes possible to challenge assumptions and ideas in the field; for example, as it concerns concepts and notions such as participation and children’s voices (cf. Tisdall, 2012). Therefore, I suggest that child-centredness still has an important role to play in childhood studies, and may even help to advance the field.

The Centring of the Child – a History of Becoming Beings

Joel Löw

The so-called new paradigm of Childhood Studies that evolved around 1990 followed several decades of studies that had centred the child, often in tandem with democratization processes. The ‘new’ was thus characterized by an effort to distance from development-oriented child psychology, with an emphasis on the socially constructed childhood and a common foundation to study children as social actors, as ‘beings’ instead of children as adults in the making, i.e. ‘becomings’ (e.g. James & Prout, 1990; Qvortrup, 1994). It is not an exaggeration to claim that the centring of the child has been linked to this position in both research and society ever since.

Nevertheless, there has been continuity along with change. The emphasis on children as social actors with rights, voices, and competences – which broadly characterizes the present – is still closely connected to socialization processes of becoming carriers of democratic values and norms. And if we focus on ‘becoming’ in this sense, the history of childhood offers much to learn and reflect upon.

At the turn of the 20th century, Ellen Key envisioned what could become The Century of the Child, with the belief that the world would only be changed for the

better if a new type of humankind arose. She saw children as drilled and tamed in a militaristic manner which led to the reproduction of yearning for power, nationalism, and wars. A new type of humankind could only be achieved through a new approach to children, thus laying the foundation for a new society. After WWI, voices were again raised against authoritarian upbringing, but now in contrast to democracy. With support from the new science of child psychology, it was argued that child-rearing needed to change in order to create the democratic child, emphasizing concepts such as freedom, individuality, and fellowship. By extension, this reflected a value struggle between authoritarian and democratic states (Löw, 2020). Even the Cold War meant a power struggle between fundamental ideologies, norms, and values. It wasn't until the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) that the democratic liberal system gained world hegemony. It cannot be ignored that both the UNCRC (1989) and the 'new paradigm' in Childhood Studies coincided with this shift.

Nowadays, authoritarian voices are heard loudly, both nationally and globally. Russia, like China, is striving for a new world order, with a common critique of the Western world's value base. Against this backdrop, it is simply impossible to ignore that we are fellows in a world bound by ideologies, discourses, and notions about what society can bring. The historical perspective can shed light on the interconnection between the societal development, notions of human 'becomings', and the field of Childhood Studies, but only the future holds what the centring of the child will mean.

Moving In and Out of the Centre – Child-centredness as a Relational Practice

Johanna Annerbäck

This text discusses child-centredness as a relational practice in which both human and non-human actors are involved. It begins with fieldnotes collected for a study focusing on the outdoor activities of toddlers (aged 1–3y/o) at preschools in Sweden.

It's a rainy day and the girl is dressed in outdoor clothing, gallon mittens and a high visibility vest reaching further than her knees [...] She seems interested in some small sticks and sits down to get closer to them. She tries to grab them but it seems impossible. The vest gets in the way as she stretches her arm and the mittens are too clumsy to grasp the small sticks [...] after a long struggle, the researcher can no longer resist but brings the girl a stick as she stretches out her hand [...] Holding the stick in her gallon mitten hand, she is observing the stick for a long, long time. (Fieldnotes from the girl with the sticks)

The idea was to centre the children by following them in the playgrounds, moving with them and learning through these movements (cf. Ingold, 2020). By adopting a cautious, and what we thought of as a respectful, physical distance from the toddler, this also meant decentring the researcher. By keeping a distance, to enable the toddlers to move around with as little influence from the researcher as possible, the researcher was positioned out of the centre.

As the fieldnotes indicate, this approach of centring the child created a distance from the girl that was uncomfortable for the researcher. Seeing her struggle against the vest and gallon mittens that clothed her little hands and prevented her from grasping a stick, it was difficult not to intervene and move into the centre.

As an outcome of this situation, this child-centred approach should be understood as a practice of correspondence (Ingold, 2020) situated in relations between the toddler, the researcher, and the environment, rather than as a fixed methodological approach. By moving in and out of the centre, as researchers, we attuned to the ways in which the girl, researcher, rain, place, sticks, and clothes mutually shaped each other.

When employing this approach, the question of what it means to centre children becomes entangled with the position and movements of the researcher in correspondence with a world in motion (Ingold, 2020). As a relational practice, the question of whether we centre or decentre children becomes too fixed (cf. Spyrou, 2017). Instead, questions must be asked about how to think of child-centring as an entanglement of different relations of centring, decentring, and recentring.

Centring Children in Time

Johanna Sköld

In a polemical article, historian Sarah Maza (2020) criticized the history of childhood for being descriptive and a-theoretical in its focus on children's lives and experiences. She argued that the field needs to move beyond the history of children to history through children if it is to make a substantial contribution to mainstream historical knowledge. While, arguably, many childhood historians already do this, it is worthwhile reflecting upon how a focus on children can contribute to a better understanding of societal transformations over time. For me, asking whether children influence, or are influenced by, any aspect of the world is a way of exploring the distribution of power and resources that shape societies. Child-centredness illuminates how relations between generations, genders, social classes, ethnicities, sexualities, geographical belongings, and ages intersect and change. Child-centredness can therefore function as a theoretical and methodological lens to

explain and explore issues relating to present or past societies that do not necessarily seem to allude to children.

The history of provision for the elderly, for instance, is a subject that at first glance seems to have no connection to either children or childhood. However, by centring children, it becomes obvious that their value as labourers and future security for their parents is relevant to this question. As long as children were perceived in terms of such an economic value in the rural economies of the USA and Europe, people who lacked offspring to provide for them in old age sometimes turned to orphanages and boarding-out agencies to acquire children. In a sample of 521 applications for a foster child filed at the Stockholm poor relief boarding-out bureau during the early 20th century, 20% of the applications came from people aged 60 or over (Sköld, 2006). Some were probably interested in the fee paid to foster parents, others explicitly asked for a child (girl) to take care of them in their declining years. As children's social value changed, from being economically useful assets for adults to emotionally valued beings who should be cared for with their own best interests in mind (Zelizer, 1994), such demands from elderly people were met with suspicion. The boarding-out bureau was reluctant to place children with elderly foster parents out of fear that they would pass away before the child was old enough to take care of him/herself. But the bureau deviated from its own rules if the foster care arrangement benefited the child, such as bequeathing an inheritance (Sköld, 2006).

By centring children onto the subject of provision for the elderly, we can ask how the changing social value of children has affected childless and/or elderly people's opportunities to plan for their future. Child-centredness is thus a tool for analysing societal transformations beyond the immediate concerns of children.

Centring Large Child Groups – Towards a Deeper Understanding of Young Children's Interactions

Emilia Holmbom Strid

In this piece, I ask what centring large child groups can contribute to our understanding of preschool children's interactions. After all, it is in everyday interaction that – among other things – cultures, opinions, worldviews, moral perspectives, and emotional life are formed and developed. Preschool is one place where young children interact and where peer cultures are created. Peer cultures provide an opportunity to test and develop different cognitive, emotional, and social skills. Social contexts are challenging because children constantly encounter and must learn to deal with new social situations entailing both self-selected and imposed interactions.

Even though the group situation is a common element in children's everyday lives, there seem to be few studies on children's own interactions within large groups in preschool (but see Corsaro, 1979). The idea that interactions rarely occur between an adult and child in isolation (Pursi, 2022) draws attention to the importance of considering multiparty interactions, as they require considerable interactional work from all participants. Research often focuses on teacher interventions and how adults create opportunities and involvement for children's participation (Bateman, 2022) or on the challenges faced by preschool teachers when surrounded by large groups and the teachers' lack of resources (Samuelsson, William, & Sheridan, 2015). The focus on teachers' interactions or engagement with children risks relegating the interactions between children to the background. By centring child-child interactions, one can gain knowledge about preschool children's interactions in broader and more complex contexts.

Shifting the gaze from adult interventions to children's perspectives through the study of child-child interactions draw attention to moments that are rarely addressed. For example, moments when the teachers (and other adults) are not called upon, interactions that tend to float by unnoticed because they are perceived as mundane (and perhaps uninteresting) from an adult perspective. However, to capture the complexities of everyday life in preschool, there is a need for a child-centred perspective, where children in large groups are also positioned in the foreground. This can reveal what is presented as relevant to them in their participation and how they orient themselves to the group and in group situations. This raises questions relating to how large groups of children can be centred in child research. How do we need to think, or rethink, child-centredness in this approach? How can it be achieved methodologically?

The Child at the Centre of Professional Attention

Sanna Hedrén and Lina Lago

Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) is an institution at the intersection between education and leisure. SAEC builds on ideals of a child-centred education and the curriculum emphasizes that teaching should be characterized by informal learning and be related to children's interests (SNAE, 2022). Traditional SAEC pedagogy (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020) highlights aspects such as meaningfulness and voluntariness. It is, however, important to reflect upon this child-centred ideal. How do children become professionally centred in such practices, and what child is centred? We argue that this is a matter of when, how, and for what reason the child is centred. In some situations, the child at the centre is an actual child, the child before me, with specific wishes and needs. On other occasions it is the imagined child who is centred, based upon professionals' assumptions about children and their wishes and needs. Such assumptions build on experiences of encountering

actual children, but are also impregnated with ideals and norms of children and childhood.

In a study of SAEC staff's discursive formations of the child during collegial conversations, we found that the child was often talked about as an anonymous participant in the group (Hedrén & Lago, 2023). In this case, the child at the centre is invisible and remains within the rules and norms of the group. At the same time, children who deviate from the group, children who are 'noisy', 'questioning', or 'refusing' attract attention from professionals. These children were centred because they posed a 'problem' and were in need of special treatment. Hence, in SAEC, children are centred in two different ways: compliant children are centred as a group, and the deviant child is centred as an individual.

It is important in professional practice striving to centre the child – whether in education or research – to make visible, discuss, and reflect upon which child/children one centres, and with what consequences. Is it her/his wants and wishes that are centred? Or perhaps her/his needs or rights? Centring the child needs to be accomplished differently in different situations, but one needs to be aware of the possibilities and limitations in each of these positionings. When talking about a child-centred professional practice, it is not about one child; rather, child-centring is a scattered professional practice, and centring the child is a way to acknowledge the multitude of children, actual and imaginary, who are present in everyday educational practice.

It is necessary to maintain an awareness of the tension between centring the actual child and the imagined child, and this tension must constantly be challenged in educational practice, to be able to keep the normative child in constant flux.

Centring Children in Child Language Research

Olga Anatoli

In this text, I ask what a child-centred approach can contribute to an approach to children as social actors within linguistic research. Human language is a subject that is addressed in diverse academic disciplines, and while all speakers of a language have been or still are children, child-centredness is not a mainstream concern in research on this uniquely human capacity. Language has been mainly theorized as a system of communication with a structure that functions separately from its speakers; it has only been a recent development in linguistic research to question this separation, specifically in response to the political challenges facing multilingual children and young people in monolingual educational institutions (cf. the translanguaging argument in Otheguy et al., 2015). In relation to different paradigms about child language, it has been argued that the experiences of

language during one's early years are central to the personal sense of self (cf. Avineri, 2020). Language in a child's life is discussed as central for building social relations, achieving enskilment and knowledge transfer, and constructing identity.

At the same time, a child's language is often used by adults, particularly in institutional contexts, as an objectified tool for categorizing that child in relation to aspects such as ethnicity, neurophysiological development, or schooling. Consider institutional interactions involving three parties, such as the doctor–child–parent during medical visits or teacher–child–parent in educational settings. In these encounters, the child's ability to perform on standardized tests is used as a measure of development. The use of an objectified concept of language enables a focus on the child as becoming, and turns language development into a public health concern (e.g. Rescorla & Dale, 2013). Employing a child-centred approach, it becomes possible to recognize a holistic view on child language, demonstrating not only structural, societal constraints on the children's ability to act, but also highlighting children's linguistic and interactional skills, which may not have been validated otherwise. Methodologically, the focus on talk as a form of social action appears to be a productive approach to accessing a children's perspective on interaction, even if the child's speech is limited (e.g. Prado & Bucholtz, 2021). A child-centred approach that recognizes children as social actors (e.g. James, 1990), therefore, may offer a new perspective on child language and change the focus from an objectified, normative conceptualization of language to a situated, evolving capacity to act.

Centring Verbs

Yelyzaveta Hrechaniuk

Decentring the child in Child and Childhood Studies may appear counterintuitive, or even sacrilege of sorts. But I would like to use this short text as an opportunity for a thought experiment and to consider the terminology of child-centredness, and Child/Childhood Studies and the outcomes of focusing on nouns in these three concepts.

The idea stems partially from a common piece of advice on writing, and particularly academic writing, which encourages suspicion towards nouns in general. They tend to fall flat, remain vague and imprecise, and obscure action. In addition, action in its various shapes and forms – doings, practices, processes, and transformations – seems to be what the social sciences strive to explore. The names of several interdisciplinary fields reflect this focus on studying action and contain verbs or verb-derived nouns. For example, the emerging field of Valuation Studies takes an interest in valuation, that is social practices through which values are achieved. Drawing theoretically upon Science and Technology Studies (STS),

Valuation Studies examines a wide range of practices to determine how actors produce, contest, and dismiss what is desirable, important, meaningful, or worthy (Doganova et al., 2014). While strictly speaking a noun, 'valuation' is clearly derived from a verb and denotes a practice. Compared to the ambiguous 'child' or 'childhood' in Child/Childhood Studies, which could be an umbrella for various subjects, objects, or actions, 'valuation' appears more precise yet not too limiting of the practices in focus. This choice of an action-driven concept seems to me to give the field a push and provide momentum.

Another example of the productivity of verbs is Annemarie Mol's (2021) playful renaming of Food Studies into Eating Studies. In Mol's (2021, p. 5) empirical approach to theory, eating is not in itself the main interest, but exploring eating practices can advance our understanding of ways of being, knowing, doing, and relating. Detailed descriptions of eating practices provide food for thought and lessons for theory (ibid.).

While the names of many research fields are assembled around nouns, it is productive to reflect upon what could be gained by imagining studies of 'doing childhood' or 'childing' (cf. Woolgar, 2012). A confusion, an ontological debate, or a productive conversation about the direction of the field? In STS, 'gerundizing', or adding an -ing – as in 'childing' – is used to draw attention to the active work and practices that constitute and uphold scientific concepts and mundane notions alike (Woolgar, 2012). Such a gerundized alternative to 'the child' could perhaps be instrumental in centring children, their actions, doings, and lived experiences, as well as the work and practices that make up childhood.

Child-centredness in the 1980s: The Foundation of Interdisciplinary Child Studies

Johanna Sjöberg

There is a tendency within the field of child studies to highlight the book *Constructing and reconstructing childhood* edited by James and Prout (1990) as the starting point for child-centred research. And although this book was central in pushing research on children and childhood forward, we must remember that, even prior to it, there was child-centred research. Opie and Opie (1959), Aries (1960), and Speier (1976) are early examples of individual researchers who, without a psychological or pedagogical point of view, focused on children's own doings and living conditions. It is less well-known that entire research institutions were dedicated to child-centred research. One of the earliest was the still-existing department of Child Studies (Tema Barn) at Linköping University, Sweden.

By 1981, the Child Studies research department had already started to form. It was part of a reorganization of research within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences into broad interdisciplinary themes. Dedicating one out of five thematic departments to children, childhood, and youth meant that children were recognized as having high social and academic relevance, with permanent topicality. It was stressed that disciplinary research fail to generate knowledge about important questions concerning children and their relation to society. The new research milieu was therefore aimed at stimulating interdisciplinary research and asking novel questions about children's perspectives and voices. It should contribute new knowledge about children's relation to society and culture and develop insights into social development from children's own perspectives. This means that, even during the planning of the Child Studies department, listening to children themselves was considered crucial.

Many academics and professionals provided input, and in 1984 an edited volume was published, mapping out the academic path forward (Aronsson et. al., 1984). This publication highlights children's mundane everyday lives, and its foundation is that childhood is socially and culturally constructed, and that ethnographic/anthropological and historical methods are well suited to understanding children and childhood in different cultures and times. Research should provide critical knowledge about the taken for granted, and thus conventions on children/childhood should be problematized. In addition, children's premises and their own perspectives are emphasized as important. These are familiar ideas within the field today. Back then, they were novel, standing in contrast to a dominant focus on children's vulnerability, deviance, and problems.

The government gave Linköping University the 'go-ahead' to establish the Department of Child Studies in 1987, and the following year the first professors and doctoral students arrived. Since then, the researchers at the department have engaged in child-centred research highlighting children as worthy of study in their own right, continuously pushing the interdisciplinary study of children and their relations to and with society further.

Conclusion

Alan Prout

In their introduction to this paper Ormalm and Sjöberg set out the promises of collaborative writing to create more complex, multifaceted and heterogeneous outcomes than conventional writing practices, all the better to stimulate the curiosity of the reader. Speaking personally, after reading the paper I felt like I had just attended a very interesting symposium. The contributions are rich and invigorating. They both overlap and polarise. By turns they manage to confirm each

other but still clash in some ways. The effect is precisely the hoped for excitement of continuing thought. Just as the ethnographer continues to observe their fieldwork site long after they have physically left it, so the reader of this paper is left with numerous lines of flight to pursue or not depending, perhaps, on their stamina.

'Centring' (the verb - see Hrechaniuk above) emphasises activity in motion. But what does this entail? As a minimum we might think that in 'centring' we actively draw something (in our case children - or maybe the child or even childhood?) together. We fix it by sharpening its edges and separating it from its context, the better to make it stand out and be recognised as a legitimate noun. This means we also make decisions about what is core to it, what is peripheral and what is excluded. It both assumes a heterogeneous ontology and simultaneously effaces it. To me this kind of centring activity was the main work of the first phase of contemporary childhood studies, the stage when us participants in those early days of contemporary childhood studies were attempting to define and validate a field of study. If we achieved anything we did so, in large part, by 'centring'.

Echoes of such centring work are to be heard throughout this paper: when Tiefenbacher points to the need to recuperate occluded categories like disability as well as childhood; when Ormalm valorizes bringing the absent presence, whether disability or childhood, into view; when Sköld highlights the implications for children in changing provision for the elderly; when Strid underlines how child-centredness shifts attention from adult-child interactions to child-child ones (and calls for methodological innovation to centre children in large groups); or when Hedrén and Lago distinguish between how 'the child before me' and 'the imagined child' is centred with different consequences.

In giving these examples, I do not mean to imply that these authors neglect the importance of the decentring, which was, I think, the next main phase in the evolution of childhood studies (Prout, 2005). So, for example, when Anatoli suggests that child-centredness might create a more holistic and contextualised view for language studies, a shift of perspective is implied. It suggests that the lines of causality may be complex and run in more than one direction. Similarly, Löw points to the historical context in which child-centred childhood studies was created, particularly the mid-twentieth century revulsion against authoritarian child-rearing, reminding us just how complex, tangled and heterogeneous were the networks through which that shift came about (see also Sköld and Ormalm above). What these underlines most of all is the strategic move identified by Annerbäck: the analytical flexibility exercised by strategically moving between centring, decentring and re-centring; Re/De/Centring, if I might be allowed a neologism. Sparrman's contribution is an eloquent commentary on this, a call for caution in such a move, for it is easy as she correctly insists, to fall back into old essentialism about childhood, inadvertently re-inscribing taken-for-granted notions of the child.

As a parting shot though, I want to highlight a crucial point made by Sjöberg: an institutional home for Childhood Studies (whether of the Re/De/centring variant or not) makes a tremendous difference. Tema Barn is a testament to this. It is itself a centring practice because it brings together the material, social, financial, and intellectual resources needed for research in childhood to become more visible. However, childhood scholars have not been as successful as we might have been in creating such places. More centres and more centring of this kind is needed.

References

- Aitken, S.C. (2018). *Young people, rights and place: Erasure, neoliberal politics and postchild ethics*. London: Routledge.
- Ariès, P. (1960). *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*. Paris.
- Aronsson, K., Cederblad, M., Dahl, G., Olsson, L., & Sandin, B. (Eds.) (1984). *Barn i tid och rum*. Malmö: Liber Förlag.
- Avineri, N. (2020). Child language. In J. Stanlaw (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of linguistic anthropology* (pp. 1–5). London: Wiley.
- Bateman, A. (2022). Participation. In A. Church & A. Bateman (Eds.), *Talking with children: A handbook of interaction in early childhood education* (pp. 55–77). Cambridge University Press.
- Canosa, A., & Graham, A. (2020). Tracing the contribution of Childhood Studies: Maintaining momentum while navigating tensions. *Childhood*, 27(1): 25–47.
- Corsaro, W. A. (1979). 'We're friends, right?': Children's use of access rituals in a nursery school. *Language in Society*, 8(2–3): 315–336.
- Doganova, L., Giraudeau, M., Helgesson, C.F., Kjellberg, H., Lee, F., Mallard, A., Mennicken, A., Muniesa, F., Sjögren, E., & Zuiderent-Jerak, T. (2014). Valuation studies and the critique of valuation. *Valuation Studies*, 2(2): 87–96.
- Gustafsson Nyckel, J. (2020). Vägen mot det undervisande fritidshemmet. In B. Haglund, J. Gustafsson Nyckel, & K. Lager (Eds.), *Fritidshemmets pedagogik i en ny tid* (pp. 59–80). Gleerups.
- Halldén, G. (2003). Barnperspektiv som ideologiskt eller metodologiskt begrepp. *Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige*, 8 (1-2): 12-23.
- Hedré, S., & Lago, L. (2023). Is there an 'I' in 'we'? Staff's discursive formations of the child in Swedish school-age educare. *Nordisk tidsskrift for pedagogikk og kritikk*, 9.
- Hetherington, K. (2004). Secondhandedness: Consumption, disposal, and absent presence. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22(1): 157–173.
- Ingold, T. (2020). *Correspondences*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

- James, A., & Prout, A. (eds.) (1990). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. London: Routledge.
- James, A.L., & James, A., (2012). *Key concepts in childhood studies*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.
- Kraftl, P. (2020). *After childhood: Re-thinking environment, materiality and media in children's lives*. Routledge Spaces of Childhood and Youth Series. London: Routledge.
- Löw, J. (2020). *Världen, Sverige och barnen: internationell påverkan på svensk barnpolitik under välfärdsstatens framväxt i mellankrigstidens tidevarv*. (Diss.) Linköping University Electronic Press.
- Maza, S. (2020). The kids aren't all right: Historians and the problem of childhood. *American Historical Review*, 125(4): 1261–1285.
- Mol, A. (2016). Clafoutis as a composite: A hanging together felicitously. In J. Law and E. Ruppert Eds., *Modes of knowing: Resources from the Baroque*, pp. 242-265. Manchester: Mattering Press.
- Mol, A. (2021). *Eating in theory*. Duke University Press.
- Opie, I., & Opie, P. (1959). *The lore and language of schoolchildren*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ormalm, A., Annerbäck, J., & Sparman, A. (2022). Listening by 'staying with' the absent child. *Barn-forskning om barn og barndom i Norden*, 40(3).
- Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 6(3): 281–307.
- Peters, M.A., Tesar, M., Jackson, L., Besley, T., Jandrić, P., Arndt, S. and Sturm, S., (2022). Exploring the philosophy and practice of collective writing. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(7): 871–878.
- Prado, E., & Bucholtz, M. (2021). Getting dressed as a social activity: The interactional competence of an Autistic teenager who doesn't use speech. *Research on Children & Social Interaction*, 5(2): 239–270.
- Prout, A. (2005). *The Future of Childhood: towards the interdisciplinary study of children*, London: Routledge.
- Pursi, A. (2022). Play. In A. Church & A. Bateman (Eds.), *Talking with children: A handbook of interaction in early childhood education* (pp. 309–330). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Qvortrup, J. (1985). Placing Children in the Division of Labour. In: Paul Close & Rosemary Collins (Eds.), *Family and Economy in Modern Society*. Hampshire & London: MacMillan, pp. 129–145.

- Qvortrup, J. (ed.) (1994). *Childhood matters: Social theory, practice and politics*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Rabiee, P., Sloper, P., & Beresford, B. (2005). Doing research with children and young people who do not use speech for communication. *Children & Society* 19(5): 385–396.
- Rescorla, L. A., & Dale, P. S. (Eds.). (2013). *Late talkers: Language development, interventions, and outcomes*. Baltimore: Paul H Brookes.
- Scott, S. (2018). A sociology of nothing: Understanding the unmarked. *Sociology*, 52(1): 3–19.
- Sköld, J. (2006). *Fosterbarnsindustri eller människokärlek: barn, familjer och utackorderingsbyrå i Stockholm 1890–1925*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wicksell International.
- SNAE, Swedish National Agency of Education. (2022). *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet 2022*. Skolverket.
- Sparman, A., Sjöberg, J. Hrechaniuk, Y. Köpsell, L., Isaksson, K., Eriksson, M., Ormalm, A., Venäläinen, P., Ågren, Y., Coulter, N., Kjellman, U., Aarsand, P., Tesar, M., Sanchez-Eppler, K., & Wells, E. (2023). Archives and children's cultural heritage. *Archives and Records*, 45(2), 81–100.
- Speier, M. (1976). The adult ideological viewpoint in studies of childhood. In A. Skolnick (Ed.), *Rethinking childhood: Perspectives on development and society* (pp. 168–186). Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Spyrou, S. (2017). Time to decenter childhood? *Childhood*, 24(4): 433–437.
- Spyrou, S. (2019). An ontological turn for childhood studies? *Children & Society*, 33(4): 316-323
- Stafford, L. (2017). 'What about my voice': Emancipating the voices of children with disabilities through participant-centred methods. *Children's Geographies* 15(5): 600–613.
- Sjöberg, J. (2013). *I marknadens öga: barn och visuell konsumtion* (Diss.) Linköping University Electronic Press.
- Teicher, Jordan G. (2013). *Stunning Portraits of Crying Children That Brought the Photographer Hate Mail*. Slate. <https://slate.com/culture/2013/08/jill-greenberg-end-times-crying-children-photos-became-a-headache-for-the-photographer-photos.html> Downloaded 21 August, 2023.
- Tesar, M., Duhn, I., Nordstrom, S.N., Koro, M., Sparman, A., Ormalm, A., Boycott-Garnett, R., MacRae, C., Hackett, A., Kuntz, A.M., Trafí-Prats, L., Boldt, G., Rautio, P., Ulmer, J. B., Taguchi, H. L., Murriss, K., Kohan, W. O., Gibbons, A., Arndt, S. & Malone, K., (2021). *Infantmethodologies*. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, pp.1-18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.2009340>

- Tiefenbacher, R. (2023). Finding methods for the inclusion of all children: Advancing participatory research with children with disabilities. *Children & Society*, 37(3): 771–785. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12628>
- Tisdall, E. K. M. (2012). The Challenge and Challenging of Childhood Studies? Learning from Disability Studies and Research with Disabled Children, *Children & Society* 26 (3): 181–191. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2012.00431.x>
- Underwood, K., Chan, C., Koller, D., & Valeo, A. (2015). Understanding young children's capabilities: Approaches to interviews with young children experiencing disability. *Child Care in Practice*, 21(3): 220–237.
- Wall, J. (2023). From childhood studies to childism: Reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations. *Society and Social Changes through the Prism of Childhood*. Routledge, 2023. 5-18.
- Woolgar, S. (2012). Ontological child consumption. In A. Sparrman, B. Sandin, & J. Sjöberg (Eds.), *Situating child consumption: Rethinking values and notions of children, childhood and consumption* (pp. 33–53). Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- Zelizer, V. (1994). *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Yoo, Alice (2010). Baby, don't cry – Jill Greenberg (15 pics). <https://mymodernmet.com/baby-dont-cry-jill-greenberg/> Downloaded 21 August, 2023.

Bionotes

Alex Ormalm
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
alex.ormalm@liu.se

Johanna Sjöberg
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
johanna.sjoberg@liu.se

Anna Sparrman
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
anna.sparrman@liu.se

Rebecka Tiefenbacher
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
rebecka.tiefenbacher@liu.se

Joel Löw
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
joel.low@liu.se

Johanna Annerbäck
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
johanna.annerback@liu.se

Johanna Sköld
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
johanna.skold@liu.se

Emilia Holmbom Strid
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
emilia.strid@liu.se

Sanna Hedrén
Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning (IBL)
Linköping University, Sweden
sanna.hedren@liu.se

Lina Lago
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
lina.lago@liu.se

Olga Anatoli
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
olga.anatoli.smith@liu.se

Yelyzaveta Hrechaniuk
Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies

Ormalm et al. (2024). Centring children in research: a collaborative exploration into child-centredness as method and theory. *Child Studies*, (6), 11-32, <https://doi.org/10.21814/childstudies.5745>

Linköping University, Sweden
yelyzaveta.hrechaniuk@liu.se

Alan Prout
University of Leeds, UK

Marek Tesar
Faculty of Education and Social Work
The University of Auckland
m.tesar@auckland.ac.nz

Received: September 2024

Published: December 2024

