Extending agency

The merit of relational approaches for Childhood Studies

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Current discussions on the concept of agency in the inter- and multidisciplinary field of Childhood Studies are a reaction to the deficits revealed in the way the New Sociology of Childhood has viewed agency: as an attempt to gain a more nuanced, differentiated understanding of agency on both an empirical and a theoretical level. My intention here is to contribute to the current reconceptualisation of agency, but not in the sense of providing a better or more nuanced understanding of individual or human agency. Quite the contrary, I argue for a different understanding of agency as social and collective, which allows for different sensitivities and methodologies in research on childhood. I will bring into play selected contributions on agency in the social theory and social anthropology of the last two decades that share a relational/relativistic approach towards the social. The core argument that I want to push forward is that a relational conception of agency can be one productive reaction towards the claim by Prout and others that we need to reflect on existing understandings of agency in the field, all the time striving for a qualitatively different approach toward agency. This perspective turns away from predominantly intentional and cognitive understandings of agency. Hence, agents are not substantialised agents, but often consist of overlapping entities or fabrics, which are complex and in motion. Consequently, agency can be seen as a realised, situated and permuted capacity, which can be accomplished through the combination of various interconnected "persons" and "things".

The presentation of children as "agentic social beings" and the idea of "children's agency" were core notions within the emerging field of the (New) Sociology of Childhood in the 1980s and 1990s. They still resonate powerfully in much of today's work. Indeed, this strong idea, in its dual aspect both as a normative assertion and as a call for an empirical and conceptual reorientation in the study of childhood (Alanen, 2010, p. 5) has inspired manifold queries. On the one hand, the powerful seed of "children's agency", most present in the so-called New Childhood Paradigm, has been nurtured by countless empirical contributions. One way or the other, many of these publications employ the term "agency" to exemplify the social construction of childhood and, in doing so, to testify to

children's contribution to it as active social agents. On the other hand, scholars have also been critical in their reviews of the idea and concept of agency in Childhood Studies, in particular within the last decade. This reflects the growth of empirical research as well as the vast expansion of Childhood Studies into an interdisciplinary space with differentiated, multiple approaches.

It is probably fair to say that the Sociology of Childhood is now at a stage at which the established, mainstream understandings of agency are scrambled. Not only has children's agency become a "troubled idea" (Oswell, 2013, p. 7), but agency has also been accused of being one of the mantras in Childhood Studies (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 255). Now, the idea has started to be investigated more profoundly. My intention here is to contribute to the current re-conceptualisation of agency, but not in the sense of providing a better or more nuanced understanding of individual or human agency. Quite the contrary: I argue for a different understanding of agency as social and collective, which allows for different sensitivities and methodologies in research on childhood, something that I will nevertheless only be able to hint at in this contribution. To open up conventional thinking, I employ a strategy of extending agency. I will bring into play selected contributions on agency in the social theory and social anthropology of the last two decades that share a relational/relativistic approach towards the social. I will very briefly recall some aspects of how agency was seen in the 1980s and 1990s in Childhood Studies, most prominently represented in the New Childhood Paradigm, when this development was very much influenced by the debate on a dualistic understanding and mediation of "(social) structure/agency" (see also Oswell, 2013, pp. 37–50). Then I will sketch out some conceptual contributions and recent reactions towards identified deficits in Childhood Studies. The intention of this is not to provide an overall review of the existing literature. Rather, the objective is to exemplify some critical aspects that, on the one hand, still remain unresolved and, on the other hand, are starting points for an extension of existing notions of agency in Childhood Studies. To move towards this extension I will then step back in history, recalling that the introduction of the concept of agency in Childhood Studies in the 1980s was closely linked to wider developments in the field of social theory. Within these discussions on agency, a number of recent contributions, which can be grouped under the label "relativistic/relational approaches", offer interesting perspectives for the future orientation of research.

The conventional understanding of agency in Childhood Studies and recent reactions

There is no doubt that within the last two to three decades, agency has become a prominent concept in countless fields of social science, amongst them Childhood Studies. This development in the social studies of childhood is most visible in the so-called "new childhood paradigm" (James & Prout, 1990). It is well known

that this perspective claims to give voice to children and, likewise, acknowledges children's agency. Hence, children are denoted as "social actors" and "children's agency" becomes a core idea (Prout, 2008, p. 29). Inseparably from this claim, the new paradigm, which still resonates in many current contributions, draws attention to the fact that structural and socio-cultural conditions of childhood in modern society block, handicap or distort this fundamental capacity (Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009, p. 4). In short, what I call the conventional understanding of agency, deeply rooted in modernist sociology (Prout, 2011, p. 6), has a twofold nature. First, it states that children "have" or "possess" agency (e.g. in James, 2009, p. 42ff.; see also Mayall, 2002, pp. 33f.; Corsaro, 2005), thus being able to bring about change or to make a difference. Second, studies following this line of thought want to prove this "new" perspective and empirically investigate how individual children can express agency in the context of constraining and enabling conditions. This conventional understanding of agency joins the line of dualisms that characterise Western, Euro-centric perceptions of the world and about the world. It rests on fundamental divisions and oppositions, such as mind and body, individual and society, micro and macro, human and non-human, and so on. Thus, many contributions in the New Sociology of Childhood and, in particular, protagonists of the New Childhood Paradigm tend to display individualistic or even naturalistic conceptualisations of agency. They share a humanist account of agency that can be called a "capacity concept of agency" (Passoth, Peuker, & Schillmeier, 2012, p. 1) and that is widespread in sociological theory.

In recent years, a number of contributions have identified some weak points of this depiction, for example, going against a simple definition of agency as "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (James & James, 2012, p. 3). Some have tried to go beyond a mere critique, offering propositions for varying degrees of modification. For example, Bühler-Niederberger and Schwittek (2014) claimed that a conventional understanding of agency only considers agency in cases where children challenge or alter existing structures, i.e. where they make a difference to the existing order of the social. They presented the results of a study that takes children's agency into account as something that can also serve to solidify existing structures. Thus, partly leaning on Anselm Strauss, they start out from the assumption that ordering the social has to be understood as an on-going process to which every participant contributes through his or her active involvement (Bühler-Niederberger & Schwittek, 2014, p. 505). Hence, this implies that things and orders are not only altered by human activity, but also have to be kept stable or durable through that activity. At first sight, one might easily agree with their claim. Nevertheless, the criticism I would like to make is that this contribution does not provide any deeper understanding of agency, i.e. with regard to its production or form of existence that goes beyond conventional understanding. Their understanding of agency remains somehow individualistic, humanist and cognitive, though taking note of current contributions inspired by relational social theory (e.g. Oswell, 2013). To take another

recent contribution, Larkins has presented an interesting paper arguing for "a fuller framework for understanding children's social and political agency in citizenship" (Larkins, 2014, p. 10). Partly leaning on Isin's ideas about Acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008), she claims that the Act comes first and that the actor is a consequence of this mobilisation. Although Isin is not primarily concerned with the concept of agency, his enactment approach does not start out from the idea that agency is something existing or residing within an actor-body or a pre-established agent (Isin, 2009, p. 383; Raithelhuber, 2015). In my reading of Isin, agency (political or otherwise) and agenthood both are a secondary product of enactment and an attribution within a complex milieu that is disturbed. Thus, they are not something that is "exercised" by children or is essentially "theirs", as Larkins suggests (2014, pp. 9, 13). Larkins does not deliver any information about the quality or constitution of this assumed agency, e.g. by asking how it can be that an agency of this kind is brought about and becomes manifest in that very situation. To turn to a third example, Konstantoni (2012) has presented a study based on Prout's critique of a much-too-strong notion of the autonomous, independent child and its agency (Prout, 2005). Nevertheless, her idea about interdependency seems to take the actor (or the individual) as a primary existing entity and a given. Only from that starting point does she examine connections, relations and their dynamics. Within this picture, the understanding of agency remains ensnared in the binarity or dualism of structure/agency, whereas structure is conceived as enabling and constraining factors. Hence, Konstantoni does not consider that agency itself might be a product of negotiation by different actors (including humans and things).

These three references are only some examples of a trait in the much broader discussion. In contrast, other recent contributions to agency in Childhood Studies already display a relational/relativistic understanding of agency. This is most visible in current empirical and conceptual contributions on embodiment and artefacts in Childhood Studies. They show that agency is slightly losing its exclusively "human" character. To take an example, Prout (2008, p. 33) refers to the work of Ogilvie-Whyte (2003), arguing that children's agency partly has to be understood as an effect of their interrelationship with artefacts. It is noteworthy that Ogilvie-Whyte (2003) employs aspects of a symmetrical sociology, which Latour has outlined (Latour, 2005). Hence, we can say that the understanding of agency in Prout's work already somehow conceptually extends beyond the conventional understanding. In this respect, the work by Woodyer (2008) on embodied practice and children's geographies is very promising. On the one hand, she discusses the significance of anti-dualist, anti-representational approaches for research on childhood. On the other hand, she takes up the relational/materialist concept of heterogeneous, hybrid geographies proposed by Whatmore (2002). This implies a de-centred understanding of agency as social agency and as a precarious achievement. Hence, Woodyer argues that the social and the material interact and gear into each other in messy ways. This allows her to start out from the connections

between different, heterogeneous elements of relational configurations, i.e. the socio-material assemblages (Woodyer, 2008, p. 358f.). Once again, the connection to ANT stands out; here, it is enriched by references to non-representational theory (Thrift, 1996, p. 24). References to the work of Gell (1998) are also striking (see below).

To sum up, current discussions on the concept of agency in the inter- and multidisciplinary field of Childhood Studies are a reaction to the deficits revealed in the view of agency in "early" New Childhood Studies, trying to gain a more nuanced, differentiated understanding of agency on both an empirical and a theoretical level. While some take up new ideas on agency from the on-going discussions in social theory, for example those leaning on a relational/relativistic approach towards the social, most contributors stick to the conventional notion of agency that is anchored in a dualist conception of structure/agency or any mediation of this binarity. Hence, generally speaking, a large part of the literature in this field still has a poor and unsatisfactory understanding of agency, though there are promising signs, and possible points for extension can be spotted. To be able to take up new ideas on agency and reorient research, I propose taking a close look at how the conventional understanding of agency in Childhood Studies connects to wider shifts in the sciences, especially in social science.

Agency in social theory, or the structure/agency dilemma

The agency assumptions of the New Sociology of Childhood since the 1980s link conceptually to two isochronic key developments in social theory. First, they are connected to a renewed emergence and strengthening of an agency perspective, thus contesting previous and predominant structural/functional and structural/deterministic concepts of action (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004, pp. 91, 113f.). Second, as a result, this agency perspective in social science has had to dissociate its understanding of agency from older notions of "free will" and "free actors", as well as from ideas about autonomous, independent, unconditioned individuals or subjects. As King (2007) has already elaborated extensively, protagonists of the New Sociology of Childhood, in particular, painted a humanist, individualist and quasi-natural picture of children's agency, while at the same time, as sociological scholars, they paid homage to the communicative codes of the sociological zeitgeist. Thus, they connected their picture of children's agency to suitable synthetising approaches, working on what was known as structure-agency integration (Bryant & Jary, 1997, p. 3). This development in New Childhood Studies runs parallel to trends in related fields. For example, in the last two decades Anglo-American Lifecourse Research and Aging Studies have shown similar characteristics (see Raithelhuber, 2011).

The concept of agency has been a hotly debated key issue in discussion on the social within the last three decades (Carle, 2005). Roughly outlined, agency in philosophy, religious studies, social sciences and human sciences implies the idea

that someone or something is endowed with a capacity or potential to do things and to make a difference. This means that he, she or it can causally impact on himself, herself or itself or on the environment in a transformative or creative manner or, alternatively, can resist such an influence from outside. Often, agency is linked to intentionality, thus representing intention or some sort of consciousness, or at least a form of practical reflexivity (Ahearn, 2010, p. 34). In many cases, agency contrasts with the concept structure. In this context, structure represents something solid and durable to explain the continuity, perpetuation, replication and distribution of relatively constant or similar human actions in time and space (Sztompka, 1994), while agency stands for the dynamic, creative moments of action. This notion is based on the idea of a continuum with two ends or poles. Thus, "free will" or "choice" is at one end, wherein agency represents the potential to bring about an uncaused cause. This notion of agency contrasts with "causation" at the other end, i.e. the notion that something or someone is caused, e.g. from outside or inside.

Since the 1970s, several theoretical approaches have been presented that have tried to describe, shed light on or criticise the interconnectedness of these antagonistic concepts. In this context, Giddens' Theory of Structuration (1984), in which agency is a core concept, has become the most prominent. This modelling of agency is reflected in many contributions in the New Childhood Studies (e.g. James & Prout, 1997, p. 5; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 202; Mayall, 1996, p. 53), as well as offering references (e.g. Mayall, 2002, p. 33ff.) to the Realisms of Roy Bashkar and Margaret Archer (see also King, 2007). It is a well-known fact that Giddens attempts to overcome dual conceptions of the social with his key concept of a duality of structure. Hence, he defines structure as a pre-condition for action, but simultaneously claims that action reproduces structure and even has the capacity to change or modify structure. This is due to agency, as the following core quotes show:

> Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their **capability of doing those things** in the first place (which is why agency implies power […]). […] Agency concerns events of which **an individual is the perpetrator**, in the sense that **the individual could**, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, **have acted differently**. (Giddens, 1984, p. 9, author's emphasis)
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> Action depends upon **the capability of the individual** to 'make a difference' to a pre – existing state of affairs or course of events. (Giddens, 1984, p. 14; author's emphasis)

The citations highlight a general trait of the conventional thinking on agency. According to Giddens, agency is a capacity or potential of an individual, that is a human being, to be the causal originator of action. Ultimately, this kind of individual agency rests upon a cognitive operation, independently of how much

a person is conscious of this process or able to speak about it. Metaphorically speaking, agency is located relatively permanently in *one* body and thus lies hidden in *one* head until it originates action. Thus, agency is a relatively stable, essential feature or primordial quality of any individual human being, which extends and varies across the life course. Hence, it is "human agency".

Many works in social science, particularly in sociology, denounce this understanding of agency as substantialist, essentialist, humanist and individualistic (Raithelhuber, 2011, pp. 112–185). In addition, such critiques are also voiced beyond our closer intellectual environment, for example in such rising disciplines as neurology (Gazzaniga, 2011) as well as in "older" branches of science such as philosophy, in particular in moral philosophy (Honoré, 2010). A number of such contributions have roots in science and technology studies or are linked to the material turn in social and human sciences. Contributions in social and cultural sciences that intend to conceptualise agency beyond the conventional notion follow a methodological and empirical route to address the ways in which agency is produced socially and situated, i.e. in the context of everyday action, as well as the manner in which it becomes socially operative and effective. To demarcate the fundamental disparity between the ways in which agency is approached, one can distinguish between two positions. On one hand, there is the conventional notion of agency as "individual agency" or "human agency". On the other hand, we talk about "social agency" or even "collective agency" (e.g. Barnes, 2001, p. 349).

Relational/relativistic approaches towards agency

To extend our conventional notion of agency, I propose to engage deeply with relational approaches. The core argument that I want to push forward here is that a relational conception of agency can be one productive reaction towards the claim by Prout and others that we need to reflect on existing understandings of agency in the field, all the time striving for a qualitatively different approach toward agency (see Prout, 2000, p. 16; 2005, p. 65; Bühler-Niederberger & Van Krieken, 2008). A relational conception of agency reacts to the theoretically and empirically unsatisfactory determination of agency that still characterises the discussion about "childhood agency" or "children's agency" in Childhood Studies (Oswell, 2013, p. 50).

Contributions that allow a sought-after more complex perspective on agency make use of different theoretical movements. For the purpose of this chapter, I lean on contributions that can be grouped under the label "relational/relativistic" and make use, in particular, of contributions in cultural sciences (see also Bollig & Kelle, Oswell and Esser in this volume). Findings in anthropological research on agency and rituals make it clear that agency does not always have to be embodied, at least not in the sense of being restricted to solely *one* human body. It can be distributed among various participants in action. To formulate this more radically,

one can say that agency can only exist in interconnectedness and be brought about in relations. According to Sax, agency should be conceived of most generally as "the ability to transform the world" (Sax, 2006, p. 474). This allows us to ask what the nature of this transformative capacity is, what it consists of and how it is made up (2013, p. 27). It seems reasonable to ask such questions in research on rituals, especially, because rituals often bring about transformations, e.g. in the context of therapies or conflict solutions (2006, p. 476). Manifestations of agency, i.e. the public instantiation and revelation of an agentic potential, play an important role in rituals. In addition, research on agency in ritual contexts also shows the significance of connectivity and collective accomplishments. Further, these accomplishments show that non-human beings, unanimated things or spiritual instances can "have" agency or be endowed with agency. To give but one example, the "agency" that a priest "possesses" when bringing together a couple is not his or her agentic potential as an individual person. Moreover, this agentic potential is distributed among various people, institutions and practices (p. 477), such as the church, the couple, the wedding contract (i.e. the sheet of paper used for it), and so on. Some of these aspects connect far back in time, for example to the authorisation that the priest received through his ordination. Only this interconnectedness of various aspects in time and space can explain the agency that becomes manifest in rituals:

> Ritual is the point at which the agency distributed among other persons, relationships, and social institutions is articulated and made manifest. (Sax, 2006, p. 478)

This is the reason why Sax concludes that ritual agency should be conceived as being distributed in networks, at best. Agency is not necessarily restricted to one single person. Indeed, this kind of limitation is actually a rare case (2013, p. 28).

Contributions such as Sax's connect with an increasing number of studies that employ a relational/relativistic perspective, most obviously when envisioning the connections between things and between human beings and things. They open up perspectives to reconceptualise and newly understand agency beyond the individualistic bias. Thus, this allows agency to be considered in the context of a fundamental sociality that embraces non-human things, both animated and unanimated (e.g. Latour, 2005). Perspectives of this kind can also be found in a number of theoretical contributions on the role of materiality in social practices (Schatzki, 2010). Others who are essentially in line with a relational approach of this kind observe how things can become mediators of agency or mediating instances. According to Gell (1998), things can become elements of a causal/relational milieu or structuring of the social in which agency is produced as well as allocated and attached to various "things". This allows us to envision the everyday practices and discourses in which humans attribute agency to other humans as well as to objects.

> "[S]ocial agency" is not defined in terms of "basic" biological attributes (such as inanimate thing vs. incarnate person) but is relational – it does not matter, in ascribing "social agent" status, what a thing (or a person) "is" in itself; what matters is **where it stands in a network of social relations**. (Gell, 1998, p. 123; author's emphasis)

This form of perspectivation allows for agency to be envisioned and investigated as an essential aspect of an overall milieu, as opposed to an understanding of agency as purely an element of the human psyche (Gell, 1998, p. 20). Realistically, this approach also allows artefacts and naturefacts, i.e. "things", to be perceived as elements of a specific social identity and social agency. Hence, agents are those human beings and things that have a specific status within a network of social relations, i.e. social positions that can originate causal events in their environment. In other words, if human beings or things inherit a status of this kind, they become instances of agency. Further, Gell shows that agents are not always located solely in *one* place and that their existence is not reduced to solely *one* particular temporal segment. Thus, sometimes agents seem to have various bodies, which can appear at different places in different moments, some of them even outlasting the life of one individual (p. 21; see also Raithelhuber, 2011, pp. 162–68).

To take a third and final example, sharing this anti-individualistic understanding of agency, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) study how human beings mediate and transform meaning. Hence, human beings bring about agency to gain control over their own behaviour, i.e. their own activities and mental processes. The authors conceive of agency as socially produced and culturally constructed activities, which are present in concrete social practices that they call "figured worlds" (p. 38). Borrowing from Vygotsky, Holland and her colleagues take on the idea of "mediating devices", i.e. gadgets or apparatuses that have a mediating, moderating and connecting quality. Human beings use these devices to control their mental processes. For example, we use a knot tied in a handkerchief to remind us that we intend to do or undo something in the future. Such devices are "external" objects that are both generalised and culturally produced. Individuals use them to entrench or embed themselves in their respective environment as well as to "bring about" change. It is essential for this approach that the assignation of meaning as well as the placement of these "things" must not be considered as an individual action, even if done fully "consciously". Moreover, such devices are part of collectively produced systems of meaning (Holland et al., 1998, p. 35). The contribution by Holland and colleagues leans heavily on the anti-essentialist work of the post-colonial Indologist Ronald Inden (1990; Holland et al., 1998, p. 42). As Inden states, agents and agencies can be conceived as being complex, changeable and in motion. They produce and reproduce each other in a dialectical process in constantly shifting situations (Inden, 1990, p. 2).

Consequences of a relational-relativistic understanding of agency

The three examples presented display a unique engagement with agency, but share a relational/relativistic perspective. Instead of asking for the quality and conditioning of "individual agency" (in the sense of capacities, features, competences, etc.), they propose investigating the socio-generative mechanisms that bring about something like "agency". Hence, if we consider "agency as an open empirical question and not as an answer given by theoretical decisions" (Passoth, Peuker, & Schillmeier, 2012, p. 5), then our attention turns towards movements and relations, i.e. towards processes, actions, situations, in which things become ligated and disconnected. Instead of asking for essences or entities, activities that can be realised come to the fore. Only then and from that position can we look at entities such as actors or subjects (Abbott, 2007, p. 9). This perspective also turns away from predominantly intentional and cognitive understandings of agency. Hence, agents are not substantialised agents, but often consist of imbricated and overlapping entities or fabrics, which are complex and in motion. Consequently, agency can be seen as a realised, situated, permuted capacity that can be accomplished through the combination of various, interconnected "persons" and "things".

What is the added value of this extended, qualitative different understanding of agency? A relational/relativistic perspective on agency suggests that, first, as researchers we do not (any longer) need to substantialise and localise agency exclusively in one individual. This is something that we human beings already accomplish well enough in our everyday practices due to our anthropocentric bias (Barnes, 2001, p. 349). Obviously, as human beings, we are inclined to take the relational characteristics of "things" within a specific context for the internal powers or the essential nature of these things in the first place (p. 349). In any case, a mere repetition of this perspective does not provide new scientific knowledge. Rather, it masks an adequate approach to agency. Second, thinking of agency merely within a dualistic perspective of agency/structure is not a viable option; however, the two concepts might be mediated. Agency is not an individual capacity that has to be asserted or analysed. To sum up, strengthening a relational/relativistic approach in Childhood Studies means staying clear of any reification of "agency", "social structures" or "individuals", as well as "networks" or "connections".

Conclusion

I started with an eclectic review of recent contributions towards agency in childhood, taking them as examples for current endeavours towards a more nuanced, differentiated understanding of agency as against tendencies that have been criticised in "early" Childhood Studies. For reasons of contrast, I differentiated between recent contributions that, on the one hand, more or less try to redesign or advance approaches to agency. My critique, which is open to question, was that they are nevertheless somehow still saturated with a binary thinking of

agency/structure. At least, they do not address deeply the question of how agency is brought about socially/collectively and how it comes to be attached to certain entities, e.g. "children" or "adults", or taken away from them. Yet, on the other hand, I also took note of contributions that deploy approaches that are anchored in what I called relational/relativistic thinking. To unfold and underpin these accounts, I drew on contributions in social and cultural anthropology that allow for a dehumanised, denaturalised, de-individualised understanding of agency. To put it positively, they allow agency to be conceived as a complex, situational and collective achievement that is partly stabilised through other "humans" and "objects", or mediated by them. This extended understanding of agency is far from being an updated version of the conventional understanding of agency. The road I outlined here is not intended to support an improved or "fixed" approach towards individual or human agency, or of its shapes and functions. A fully social or collective understanding of agency that includes "objects" leads to something different. It enhances our sensitivity towards what is regarded as important and should be examined. Second, it offers a different methodological way of how to address phenomena of "agency" in childhood studies. Hence, taking the "Relation Road" is not a lazy way to level out, avoid or sideline questions of power or representation. Quite the contrary: it is a way to frustrate convenient attempts that place all these parameters in people's heads or outsource them to some factors and forces "in the background" or "in context". I think that this sensitivity and methodology also allows for a more adequate approach towards the dynamics, quick ruptures and changes in the everyday lives of children and their "others", as well as towards the fixed, durable and persistent elements across the different situations and spaces experienced by children, as for example in new programmes and practices in early childhood education and care. The argument is that we can employ relational/relativistic thinking as a heuristic method in the study of childhood or children. Theoretically and empirically, research has to start from the dynamic processes through and in which relations are brought about in time and space, and which from time to time result in the empirical production on the level of everyday life that allocates "agency", as a differentiated capacity, to human beings, e.g. as an individual capacity to children or adults. Seen in this way, "agency" can serve as a useful concept for orienting research in Childhood Studies. If we use the wider discussion on agency within this relational/relativistic perspective, then agency completely loses the essentialist, individualist and naturalist aura that still emanates from conventional approaches toward agency in the New Childhood Studies. Somehow, the seed must die in order to bear fruit.

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