

Chapter 10

Looking Ahead: Contested Childhoods and Migrancy

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At the beginning of this volume, we explained how our interest in globalization's changing ideas and practices of childhood led us to propose 'contested childhoods' and 'growing up in migrancy' as twin conceptual tools. The purpose was to understand the migration, governance, and identity processes currently involving children and ideas of childhood. In this final chapter, we return to this conceptual pair and reflect on some of the theoretical and policy implications of the concepts as emergent throughout the book. *Whose children are we talking about?* This question, raised in our first chapter, pinpoints the link between 'contested childhoods' and 'growing up in migrancy'. Whose children are trafficked, seeking refuge, taken into custody, active in youth organisations, struggling and juggling in identity work? Which societies can claim them as their own, and build individual and societal futures accordingly? These are questions with far-reaching implications of a theoretical as well as a practical and policy-oriented nature. In this final chapter, we draw out and discuss some of these implications.

Theoretical Implications

Marie Louise: All these children and young people are growing up in migrancy, which is the main reason why their childhoods are contested. The very notion of migrancy appears to give non-migrants the right, or the feeling that they have the right, to decide who these children are, and define what is best for them now and in

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the future. The space of migrancy allows majority populations to question the capabilities and qualifications of migrants: Are these children, as minors, capable of exerting agency? Are their families qualified to make life choices on their behalf? Or should they be protected against their own and their families' attempts at exerting (misguided) agency, for their own and society's good? Elzbieta's chapter on trafficking is the only one that explicitly poses these questions, but they are also applicable to the other chapters. Running through the whole book is a conflict between paternalism on the part of powerful, non-migrant societies in the countries of residence, and resistance against such paternalism from the children and young people themselves and, to some extent, from their families. Without notions of migrancy that open up the space for ostensibly legitimate paternalism and subsequent contestation, such struggles would have been much more limited. Other forms of paternalism—class or gender based, for instance—also form similar processes. It is clearly a matter of “power”; it is concomitantly a matter of what is usually referred to as “structure” and “agency”. Our combining “migrancy” with “contested childhoods” exposes how power travels in all directions, in all these very different settings.

Let me try to set out some of the theoretical implications of this insight. I've always been a bit of a theory geek, so let me reach for some of the kinds of thinking that have fascinated me in the past and try to explain how I think they may help us understand the lives and contexts of children growing up in migrancy. First out was Gregory Bateson and his cybernetic systems theory. As a young student, I read and re-read his *Mind and Nature* (Bateson 1979) several summer holidays in a row, as well as his essays on the double bind, schismogenesis, and many other topics (Bateson 1972/2000). Running through Bateson's work is what he calls “the pattern which connects,” and he sums up his central thesis as follows: “The *pattern which connects is a metapattern*. It is a pattern of patterns. It is that metapattern which defines the vast generalization that, indeed, *it is patterns which connect*” (Bateson 1979, 11). This means, I believe, that rather than studying social objects separately, we should be looking for their interconnections and relationships. Moreover, we should be looking for systematic patterns in relationships and for what seemingly different forms of relationships and interconnections have in common. For example, rather than trying to understand what “childhood” or “migrancy” mean in a particular setting, we would learn much more about reality by studying how ideas and practices of childhood and of migrancy are interconnected with each other and with other parts of the context in which migrant children and children of immigrants live. However, Bateson continued, “We have been trained to think of patterns, with the exception of those of music, as fixed affairs... In truth, the right way to begin to think about the pattern which connects is to think of it *primarily* (whatever that means) as a dance of interacting parts and only secondarily pegged down by various sorts of physical limits” (Bateson 1979, 13). Primarily, then, our concern should be on how patterns of relationships move, evolve, and change in similar ways and in on-going dynamics with their environments. This means that not only should we try to understand how our objects of study are interconnected: our attention should mainly be directed toward, or tuned into, the dynamics and processes that form the

moving patterns of connection. Ideas and practices of childhood and ideas and practices of migrancy are not fixed but moving relatively to each other and to other parts of their environments, and this dynamic movement creates and changes the patterns that connect.

Although I still do not understand everything Bateson writes, he has certainly contributed strongly to shaping the way I think. His writings have also guided me through some of the more recent, related theories such as critical realism and complexity theory, both of which provide an alternative to conventional social theoretical perspectives (e.g. Morin 2008; Potter and López 2001; Walby 2007). These theorists regard social phenomena as interconnected systems rather than as structures versus agency—what’s more, they argue that social systems are always open, which means that parts of one system will always be interacting with parts of other systems (Danermark et al. 2002; Sayer 2010; Smith 1998). I also find relevant their emphasis on the historical embeddedness and “path dependency” of agency, so evident in the variety of ideas and practices of childhood worldwide as well as within national and local communities. So many practices and choices are simply not conceivable in other contexts. For instance, look at Ada’s chapter on “protecting” Roma children in Norway—although the Roma do experience and respond to control and oppression in many other national settings, these play out in other, particular ways for particular historical reasons. Adaptation strategies that have worked well in the past may no longer give the intended results, because the present is always different and always changing.

Critical realism as well as complexity and dynamic systems theories provide ways of thinking about society that dissolve the structure-agency dichotomy, replacing it with an approach foregrounding the dynamics of practice and process, as immanent in individuals as well as in larger social entities. The issue of whether social phenomena and events should be understood primarily in terms of structure, or primarily in terms of individual agency constitutes an ongoing challenge to the social sciences. While existing literature has tended to favour structural explanations at the expense of agency, or the other way around, I am much more interested in exploring how structure and agency interplay with each other and with power processes. “Pure” structure and “pure” agency are theoretical constructs that have little resonance with empirical research. If you focus on processes and systems, questions about where structure ends and agency begins just seem like a dead end—at least to me, they do. Is it not more interesting to explore identity processes *as processes*, rather than trying to pinpoint whether a young person is part of one or the other static social structure through individual choices? If we regard Czech, or Danish, or Norwegian, or any national society as open and dynamic systems, and the individuals as smaller open systems adapting to and thereby also changing the larger systems, to me that comes much closer to understanding what identity processes are all about. It also shows how influence and power are multi-directional. Even when relationships are clearly power asymmetrical, such as in all the chapters in this book, people don’t just sit there and let things happen. That’s not how people are and that’s not how power works.

So how may these approaches enable a new take on the links between power and the structure/agency problem? Well, that depends. Conventionally, power is understood either predominantly in terms of competing individual agency, or predominantly in terms of agency as determined by structures. Which one of the two it will be depends not only on the taste of the beholder, but also on the nature of the evidence. Looking at my own chapter about child refugees in this light, the structural perspective may seem to dominate. After all, to what extent do refugees in general and child refugees in particular influence their own situation? A great deal, I'd say: Enough to create action in the systems around them. In spite of their plight, and in spite of our habit of thinking of refugees (and of children!) as powerless, the very existence of children who are refugees means that national states are forced to respond, even to the extent that a lack of response—ignoring them—is also a form of response that may in turn lead to action, for instance from civilians who feel that they are filling a void left open by the state's failure to act. In most cases, how refugee children attempt to cross national boundaries prompts reactions from agents of the state. Border fences have been raised, refugee boats turned away, schools opened and closed, politicians confronted, laws changed, civilians arrested. Some of these actions lead to changes in the state systems, others reinforce existing characteristics, but the systems do not remain untouched. What connects these two systems, the child to the state, is what always connects systems: agency. If the heavy structure of the state does not make itself felt through the practices of its agents, the child will not feel it. If the child does not attempt to cross national boundaries, the state will have no such attempts to respond to. And in whichever way the state responds through its agents, this will create a new response from the child. I talk now as if there were only the state and the child, but this process involves other systems too. Families, the media, and party politics—it's really an important empirical question: Which are the systems involved here? It's the problem of context all over again: How does the scholar separate the relevant from the irrelevant? Where are the boundaries of the object of study? I think systems thinking helps here, too: follow human agency as it manifests itself in action and creates events. Who does what, and which systems does this action involve? Small systems and large systems all include both their own immanent structures and their own immanent agency, and this insight makes away with the dichotomous logic of structure vs. agency.

Agency is often understood as equal to the individual potential to act, or to the realization of that potential. However, what constitutes an individual is not self-evident either, and groups may be said to possess agency. To Bateson, acts and agency are inextricable parts of the systems in which they take place (Bateson 2000 [1972], p. 338). Maybe some inspiration from his theory of the double bind situation could serve as another way to bring together our conceptual twins. A double bind situation, loosely described, is a sort of damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't scenario—say, the dilemma of trying to live up to the ostensibly conflicting demands of transnationalism and integrationalism at the same time. Therefore, if you are growing up in migrancy because you or your family originated “somewhere else”, your childhood will be a contested space. However,

taking into account the larger system of which both the diaspora and the country of residence are part may contribute to resolving this kind of locked situation,¹ much as Bateson indicated that communicating about a double bind—not *within* it but *about* it, on a higher logical level of communication, would help resolve the situation. That really brings into light the importance of theory to policy and practice.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

Elzbieta: Having lived in Washington, DC for over 30 years, having been a policy-maker in the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, and having worked as a practicing anthropologist for decades, I bring to our debate a very pragmatic and policy-oriented perspective. While I appreciate theory as much as Marie Louise does, I am always anxious to find practical applications for theoretical concepts. Since migration studies are data driven, at least on this side of the Atlantic, I am also interested how empirical data—both quantitative and qualitative—can inform policy decisions and program design. Being a migrant and a first generation U.S. citizen, I am also very concerned with facilitating migrants’ participation in decision-making processes. Finally, I am also fascinated—and sometimes annoyed—with the language we use to describe children who are growing up in migrancy. The language deployed to discuss young migrants is not a matter of pure semantics but an important element of the discourse on identity and rights.

I come from a country where identity is viewed through a primordial lens. One is Polish only if one’s social existence is characterized by immediate contiguity and kin connections with other Poles, by being born into a homogenous Polish ethnic community, Roman Catholic congregation, by speaking Polish as a mother tongue, and by following Polish social practices (whatever those are!) (Kempny 2010). In contrast, I live in a country where anybody can become American and where identity is not some static “given” (Geertz 1973), but a dynamic process of “becoming” (see Jenkins 1996). In this volume, several contributors show how children contest or oscillate between these two approaches to identity construction, and how laws and policies on citizenship sometimes deprive them of the choice to assert their own identity and place them squarely in the “migrancy” framework even when the children have never migrated.

As the case studies in this volume attest, in many European countries both policy makers and the general public do not commonly distinguish between immigrant children and children of immigrants; both are referred to as “children from immigrant background”. The label of “migrancy” does not go away even when we are talking about children born in Norway or Denmark to immigrant parents. Ironically, as Helene and Rashmi show, the identity of children born in Denmark to a native Danish and an immigrant parent is commonly linked to the foreign-born parent not

¹In fact, Erdal and Oeppen (2013) argue convincingly in favour of this view.

to the white Danish parent. In the United States where the Constitution guarantees birthright citizenship to all children born in the country's territory, regardless of parentage, we take great care to distinguish these two cohorts of children. In the U.S. we have also replaced the label "native language" with "heritage language" when talking about the young people growing up in migrancy and the children's facility in the native language of their parents. Reading Marianne and Guro's chapter I wondered whether and when the youth, born in Norway or having grown up in the country from an early age, engaged in building ethnic community-based organization, will start contesting the status quo of the public funding streams that force the youth to pay more attention to their cultural heritage than to civic and political participation in the mainstream society. Call me naïve but despite the rise of xenophobia I am hopeful that as more and more countries become *de facto* countries of immigration both the rhetoric and the laws will change to reflect the fact that children of immigrants belong as much to their family as to the society into which they were born. This belonging ought to translate into inclusive language and full complement of rights bestowed on the children when they are born not at some later point in their lives when the government decides that they are worthy of being treated as full-fledged citizens.

Meaningful participation of migrant, refugee, and trafficked children is essential in research, policy-making, and practice. Following the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), "listening to children's voices has become a powerful and pervasive mantra for activists and policy makers worldwide. However, despite such representations of the 'voices of children,' children themselves may nonetheless, continue to find their voices silenced, suppressed, or ignored in their everyday lives" (James 2007, p. 261). In my studies of trafficked children I have seen time and time again how the "best interest of the child" principle deployed to guide service provision to trafficked adolescents contradicted their right to participate in determining what was best for them (Goździak 2016). Indeed, there is consensus in literature that Western policy makers and caretakers tend to prioritize the children's perceived best interests over the children's right to express their wishes and feelings (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007). Service providers often justify their predisposition to decide the child's best interest rather than advocating for her wishes and respecting her feelings by invoking the age of the youngsters they assist. They habitually treat all minors under the age of 18 as children and do not make distinctions between very young children and older adolescents. This conceptualization of young people under 18 years of age as passive and unknowing dependants without the ability to make independent decisions (see Christensen and James 2000; Jenks 1996), especially decisions regarding labour migration, contradicts the "evolving capacity" principle enshrined in the CRC.

Don't get me wrong, there are tremendous examples of immigrant youth asserting their agency and bringing about important political and social change, often against all odds. In the United States, the DREAMers, a movement of

undocumented high school students aspiring to attend college, transformed the national immigration debate and resulted in two important national immigration policies: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA). DACA is an American immigration policy that allows certain undocumented immigrants who entered the country before their 16th birthday and before June 2007 to receive a renewable two-year work permit and exemption from deportation. DAPA is an immigration policy that grants deferred action status to certain undocumented immigrants who have lived in the United States since 2010 and have children who are U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents. At the state level, the DREAMers advocated for legislation allowing unauthorized students access to in-state tuition. Several states, including Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin, have passed such laws or DREAM Acts. These achievements are not insignificant; all came about because undocumented students staged occupations, hunger strikes, and demonstrations to get their voices heard. The adults, including policy-makers at the federal and state level as well as advocates in cities, towns, and neighbourhoods, recognized the youngsters' ability to fight for their own rights and started taking their demands seriously. The DREAMers' achievements ought to be seen as building blocks towards societal understanding that young people know best what is in their "best interest".

Unfortunately, in many instances decisions regarding migrant children are made without consultations with the young people or in an empirical vacuum. Both Ada and I write about our struggles to get access to the children we wanted to study. Ada ended up consulting secondary sources to carry out her analysis of the protective regimes deployed to care for Roma children in Norway. I persevered and managed to talk to quite a number of children and youth trafficked to the United States. We remain optimistic that policy makers and service providers will ultimately realize the benefits stemming from research with and about migrant and minority children. I am particularly hopeful that funders will support innovative participatory action research with migrant children.

Implications for Further Research, Practices, and Policies

Accounts about children and adolescents on the move are often rooted in humanitarian narratives (Boyden and de Berry 2004). These narratives have focused mainly on *protection* of child migrants from harm and *provision* of needed resources, and less on *participation* (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007). These narratives are often based on a single universal definition of childhood enshrined in international humanitarian and human rights law and ignore the fact that there is no

universal experience or understanding of childhood. They conceptualize “child migrants,” “child labourers,” “trafficked children”, and “child soldiers” as products of adult agency and presuppose that children are dependent, exploited, and powerless (Rosen 2007, p. 297). These common assumptions of child migration as an inevitably exploitative phenomenon reflect views of children as incapable of independent economic or political agency. Such views were prevalent in European and North American scholarship until the 1990s and are still historically embedded in these societies. However, first in academia and—slowly and erratically—in other parts of society they have gradually been replaced by the new paradigm in childhood studies, where the agency and subjectivity of children takes front stage. We are concerned, however, that this development is uneven so that policy makers and practitioners are not necessarily appreciative of this paradigm shift—and, ironically, that the conditions for foregrounding children’s subjectivity may be laid down by adults. We are also apprehensive of any foregrounding of the agency of children at the cost of social structures that have real impact on children’s experiences, opportunities, and spaces for navigation and agency.

Our aim is that research on migrant children, such as the case studies included in this volume, will continue to enhance our understanding of their multifaceted experiences. Enhanced partnership between and among researchers and practitioners will help develop models of good practice. Several contributors to this volume have already shown examples of good practice in research with children and youth by employing innovative data collection methodologies focused on eliciting narratives from the point of view of the youth, not just by talking to their teachers, social workers, and parents. Without a doubt, more is needed both in research and in praxis. We are optimistic that empirical research presented in this and similar volumes will result in culturally appropriate and effective policies for migrant children and children who are growing up in migrancy. We are already seeing positive effects of Elzbieta’s research with trafficked adolescents, and more recently newly arrived Central American youth, on how services to young migrants expanded to include not just basic education, but also vocational training and employment placement. These efforts are directly related to the recognition that young migrants—especially those living in non-welfare states—need to find suitable livelihoods. The social workers who were co-researchers on the study of trafficked children took the results of the research and implemented training programs to explore the nexus of resiliency.

Acknowledging that migrant children do not speak with one single voice, this volume bears testimony to the enormous diversity and complexity of child migration and of children who are growing up in migrancy. This complexity offers a remarkable potential for scholarly advancement, but also poses difficulties to practitioners and policymakers seeking standardized responses. Indeed, building fruitful bridges between research-based evidence and action on behalf of children is one of the most pressing challenges facing those working to improve the lives of

migrant children worldwide. Protection, provision and participation, the three interlocking principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are indispensable in addressing contested childhoods—in scholarship, policy-making, and practice. The key feature of contested childhoods is that children growing up in migrancy have agency, yet are also vulnerable in important ways.

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