

Desubjugating Childhoods by Listening to the Child's Voice and Childhoods at Play

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Abstract

The article discusses the childhood discourse that is based on the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) and particularly on the principle of hearing the child's voice which is firmly embedded in it. Two major issues are addressed. First, it is shown how children's counter-knowledges that do not endorse, follow or conform to the 'UNCRC childhood' are typically disqualified as the child's voice. Second, it is argued that participatory processes that are often introduced as a means for hearing children's voices effectively may also mask, bury or silence some children's understandings and experiences. On these grounds, insights are discussed with the aim of developing a less participatory approach to bring children's voices to the fore. Foucault's conception of desubjugated knowledges is introduced as a starting point for recognising and qualifying situated knowledges in childhood.

Introduction

The bygone 20th century has come to be recognised as 'the century of the child', as farsightedly predicted by Ellen Key (1900) a hundred years earlier. Starting from the League of Nations' *Geneva Declaration* (1924), and the United Nations' *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959), to the latest *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN 1989) ratified by almost all countries, children and

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their lives have held a prominent place on the human rights agenda. Children's special position as citizens and community members was first officially recognised by intergovernmental bodies. Yet a specific concern for childhood and children has since developed in national and local contexts, too. It has been well established that children are not just little adults with inadequate capabilities and restricted citizenship, but that they are distinctive members of their communities and societies.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a global agreement to provide children with universal, subjective rights. Like human rights in general, children's rights concern all individuals, irrespective of family, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (Article 2). They are often divided into the rights to provision, protection and participation that should be followed in all actions concerning children. This set of rights has become so established by researchers, administrators and policy practitioners that it is generally referred to as the '3Ps principle' (e.g. Alderson, 2008). Together with the fourth central principle backing up the Convention, that of 'the best interests of the child'², it captures the basic ethos of the UNCRC (CRC, 2009).

While the UNCRC can undoubtedly be viewed as a victory in the global struggle for human rights, there are some problematic issues and contradictions pertaining to it. For instance, by granting children rights to protection/provision *and* participation, the UNCRC produces ambiguity which complicates the implementation of the Convention through regulations and legislation. According to Evans and Spicer (2008), this ambiguity, which has gained the attention of a number of scholars in the past ten years, has already started to blur the line between prevention and participation discourses. This blurring has not only complicated the implementation of children's rights but has also engendered some common ground in the interpretation and usage of the UNCRC. Most importantly, 'the child's voice' has been found as a common denominator that links the four basic principles constructively. It has thus become one of the central features in the predominant childhood discourse.

However benevolent, the concept of the child's voice is also a contested one which deserves to be reflected on critically. In this article I show that children constantly present counter-knowledges that are not identified as the child's voice because they do not endorse, follow or conform to the 'UNCRC childhood'. Moreover, I portray how projects that aim explicitly at children's empowerment through voice-giving may unintentionally mask, bury or silence their experiences and views. Hence it becomes evident that new approaches to bring children's situated knowledges forth more extensively need to be developed. In this paper,

² Article 3: In all actions concerning children [...] the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. This principle was the main concern of the 1959 Declaration.

Foucault's conception of (de)subjugated knowledges is employed as a methodological starting point in the search for, and disclosure of, children's awareness, experiences and understandings. In conclusion I suggest that in particular the knowledges that are contradictory to the dominant discourse can be made more perceptible by listening to concerns that are presented in various 'voiceless' forms of lived childhoods (Kallio & Häkli, 2011a). To unearth these unvoiced concerns extensively and non-selectively, the theorisation on sociospatial positionality can be found as a helpful vantage point.

The child's voice in the UNCRC childhood discourse

The concept of the child's voice is based mainly on the 12th article of the UNCRC, which states that 'in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child [should be] given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'³. In their reading of this principle, the UN *Committee on the Rights of the Child* (CRC, 2009) states that 'States parties are under strict obligation to undertake appropriate measures to fully implement this right for all children—this article establishes not only a right in itself, but should also be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights'. In practice this means that 'children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognised as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view' (CRC, 2005). Listening to children's voices hence implies that children are heard in their daily environments in all situations and not merely through (semi-)official consultation procedures and participatory projects. Ideally, their experiences, understandings and views should inform all practices, decision-making and planning concerning childhood in general and children's lived worlds in particular, including those linked to their protection and provision – on all spatial scales.

As a concept, the child's voice thus brings together the basic principles of the UNCRC and, at least partly, overcomes the ambiguity between them. Being a morally-reasoned human right that has been conferred on all human beings by the United Nation's *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, it has been acknowledged as an indisputable virtue that enjoys wide acceptance and is promoted by researchers and policymakers alike throughout the world. Yet if we look at how childhoods unfold in the world, following Hannah Arendt's (1958) advice, there is much more to it than what first meets the eye.

The first dilemma pertains to the UNCRC childhood discourse *per se*. One of the central aims of the Convention has been to define what 'childhood' is, i.e. which conditions are desirable and which ones can be included universally within the scope of (good) childhood. This starting point greatly effects how and which children's voices are heard. The UNCRC begins by portraying the child as 'every

³ Other essential articles related to this right are 2, 3, 5, 6, 13, and 17, as portrayed by the CRC (2009).

human being below the age of eighteen years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'. Starting from this definition, it draws distinctions between the child and other human beings, specifying a particular conception of childhood in its 54 articles. This conception is not interpreted in unison – even the States parties of the Convention are far from unanimous in their interpretations and reservations concerning the treaty (see the UN Treaty Collection, 2011). The UNCRC is the result of a complex, long-term struggle, and there are many ways of reading it, some of which are more critical than others (Detrick, 1992, for critical readings see Roche, 1999; Harris-Short, 2001; Kallio & Häkli, 2011b). Yet, the relevance of children's universal rights is seldom questioned, and there are a number of key themes in the Convention, such as the principles introduced above, which have been widely acknowledged and which are constantly drawn upon both in policymaking and research (e.g. Such & Walker, 2005; Skelton, 2007; Whitty & Wisby, 2007; Evans & Spicer, 2008).

There is hence a strong 'double hermeneutic' dynamism that underlies the UNCRC-led childhood discourse and promotes its extensive establishment. As a broadly accepted means of making sense of the society, analytical concepts not only reflect but also construct social practices (Giddens, 1987). The ensuing discursive hegemony makes it difficult and sometimes impossible for other childhood discourses to be heard or noticed, which is problematic also in terms of the child's voice. As the UNCRC sets out to support certain kinds of childhoods, those lived worlds that do not fit the given conception are not identified as normal or desirable ones, but quite the contrary. The deviations are often defined as problems or hindrances that should be solved and corrected.

Consequently, if young individuals portray views that contradict with the UNCRC discourse, they are not typically accepted as the child's voice that should be heard but pathologised as something else. This means that children's voices do not get heard if they are based on 'wrong childhoods', and the biased conceptions of childhood are not diversified on the basis of these children's situated lives. A brief example presented by Pekka Haavisto, the UN Senior Advisor in the Darfur peace process and the previous EU Special Representative for Sudan and Darfur (2005–2007), makes a case in point⁴. The young boys living in the conflict area at the refugee camps have two future prospects: to carry water from the well for their mothers or join the rebel groups to fight alongside with men. Having lived the whole of their lives at the camp, few find the previous more inviting. Yet their willingness to participate in the violent conflict is rarely brought up in terms of the child's voice.

Another problematic, yet less frequently noticed, aspect pertaining to the child's voice concerns participatory practices that have been introduced widely as a means for hearing children. The idea of participatory involvement is to engage

⁴ Presented in a research seminar on International Relations at the University of Tampere, March 17th 2011.

children in projects where they can, in one way or another, voice their concerns, state their opinions, and take action in the matters that are being processed. As children get engaged with research, development, administration and policymaking processes that seek to hear their voices and empower them, it is not normally recognised that, as an unintentional consequence, this action may also undermine children's social positions, in more ways than one. Such risks can be realised by, for instance, acknowledging how governmental rationality, i.e. governmentality, works through this voice-giving (e.g. Bragg, 2007; Mannion, 2007; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; for governmentality see Häkli, 2009).

From the governmentality point of view, when children's voices are constituted and mobilised through participatory techniques, the risk of drowning their own experiences and views is threefold (for a more detailed account see Kallio & Häkli, 2011b). Firstly, the children who get involved are typically recruited to participate in *distinct* ways on *selected* issues, for the production of a *particular kind* of information (cf. Venn, 2007, 122). These ways, issues and information follow, more or less directly, some reading of the dominant childhood discourse, meaning that the concerns that can be voiced are selected. Secondly, at the same time as these voices do get heard, others are silenced. The experiences and views of those children who are not involved in participatory work easily get subjugated as 'naïve, hierarchically inferior, non-scientific, or otherwise not acceptable' if they do not support the participating children's views and/or follow the given reading of the dominant childhood discourse (Foucault, 2003, 6-8). Thus, they are prone to be unrecognised as the child's voice. Thirdly, the participating children's knowledges, too, may paradoxically get silenced in participatory procedures. As they undertake participation on the *set* grounds, their potential to act on *different* grounds is hindered. If their own ways of acting, the issues they find important, and the information that they normally produce in their everyday lives differ notably from those exploited in the participatory project, the recruitment aspect makes it very difficult for them to exercise the child's voice on their own grounds.

Bringing these problematic matters together reveals that hearing children's voices universally is not a simple task and that the predominant ways of giving voice to children are not adequate in order to qualify all children's knowledges. Next, after a brief introduction to Foucault's methodology, I portray some empirical illustrations that shed more light on these two aspects. I discuss both minority and majority world childhoods to emphasise that, regardless of the geographical context, the idea of hearing children's voices may fail in at least three ways. Children's knowledges can be subjugated by defining their lives as 'non-childhoods', by recruiting them in participatory practices that channel their voices, and by concealing their voices with other children's voices that are defined as *the* child's voice.

The first illustration is grounded in a selection of documents produced by UNICEF concerning children's familial roles which reveal that, when blatantly

contradictory with the dominant childhood discourse, children's knowledges are not identified as the child's voice. The second set of reflections discusses certain knowledges that are masked, buried or silenced in participatory processes, to portray the problems related to the voice-giving involvement. In conclusion, some less participatory means for qualifying children's situated knowledges are discussed. As I have argued elsewhere concerning young people, this approach aims to advance particularly the social and political positions of those children who are underprivileged and 'hardest to reach' with participatory methods (Matthews, 2001; Kallio & Häkli, 2011a).

Disclosing situated knowledges with archaeological tools and genealogical means

When Michel Foucault started to work as a professor of the history of systems of thought at the *Collège de France* in 1970, he began developing his research methodology from an archaeological mode towards a more genealogical approach. In the opening lecture to the *Il faut défendre la société* lecture course in 1976, he elaborates this transition (Foucault 2003, 10–11): 'Archaeology is the method specific to the analysis of local discursivities, and genealogy is the tactic which, once it has described these local discursivities, brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released from them.' In his archaeological reading of this lecture passage, Chris Philo (2007, 348) notes that Foucault wanted to say that he had not turned away from archaeological work but, rather, was expanding his methodological apparatus. Philo purports to show that, in his later work, Foucault did not distinguish between the terrains of discourse and everyday social life, as is sometimes suggested. Instead, he wanted to *use* the archaeologically unearthed knowledge, employing genealogical means to new ends – to write out histories informed by desubjugated knowledges.

As Elden (2001) points out, during the first half of the 1970s Foucault took up various themes which he discarded later or left unprocessed, but the completion of *Discipline and Punish* in 1975 marked the end of one research period. To the extent that methodology can ever be ready, it was at this point that Foucault had developed the tools he needed for discursive critique. Later on he extended this apparatus in his studies on biopolitics and governmentality, yet this work did not transfigure the basic ideas of the methodological approach (for an overview see Häkli, 2009). In this article I draw on Foucault's methodology as it is presented in *Society Must Be Defended* and elaborated in the following lecture series *Territory, Security and Population*.

The archaeological-genealogical methodology of discursive critique builds on the analysis of *subjugated local knowledges* which can be elicited in two ways. First, particular *historical contents* can be used as proof of the struggles and battles that are fought during the production of certain truths. To fulfil the criteria of such content, the local knowledge must have been hidden or veiled in functional coherences and formal systematisations. Moreover, they should help us to reveal

the dividing lines that this masking is designed to hide. Second, *disqualified knowledges* bring out subjugated knowledges from another direction. They may be naïve, hierarchically inferior, non-scientific, or otherwise not acceptable knowledges and appear in different forms – for instance as acts, beings or arguments. Their central feature is that they have not been counted as ‘knowledge’. To be defined as ‘disqualified’, in relation to other mundane knowledges, they need to differ from the ‘qualified’ knowledges to such an extent that, in Foucault’s (2003, 6-8) words, their power lies only in the fact that they differ from all other knowledges.

Accordingly, the archaeological part of discursive critique comprises the delving into, digging up and dusting off of the local knowledges that are buried in and masked by the very histories and truths that we know and accept. The genealogical phase that follows this excavation, however, sets to release, i.e. desubjugate, these knowledges, in order to write new histories that do not attempt to tell the truth about the past but to grasp truths concerning the present. The definitive endeavour of discursive critique is the insurrection of subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 2003, 9):

[Genealogies] are about the insurrection of knowledges [...], primarily, an insurrection against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and workings of any scientific discourse organized in a society such as ours. That this institutionalization of scientific discourse is embodied in a university or, in general terms, a pedagogical apparatus, that this institutionalization of scientific discourses is embodied in a theoretico-commercial network such as psychoanalysis, or in a political apparatus – with everything that implies – is largely irrelevant. Genealogy has to fight the power-effects characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific.

The double hermeneutically-developing UNCRC childhood discourse unquestionably entails these kinds of centralising power effects that are bound up with the institutionalisation and workings of scientific discourses. It thus presents an opportune case for discursive critique that aims at the insurrection of children’s subjugated knowledges and the redefinition of the histories of the present childhoods. The orientation parallels Goodale’s (2006) ‘critical intellectual history of human rights’ approach that sets off from an anthropological basis. As an analytical departure point, he makes a distinction between ‘universal’ and ‘universalist’ methodologies, where the former refers to the ontological nature of human rights and the latter to a range of ideas and social practices that emerge in relation to universal claims. A universalist approach to human rights employed by Goodale (2006, 27) provides:

[A]n anthropology that studies the social force of the idea of human rights, the way different actors encounter and shape the idea of human rights as part of broader forms of social and legal practice. Human

rights embody a set of ideas about the world that have become dominant, and a critical intellectual history of this development would locate the appropriation, vernacularization, politicization of, and resistance to human rights within the broader histories that help explain these “local” encounters. — And as recent ethnographic studies of human rights have confirmed, power, knowledge, and violence do indeed come together in an intense and often dangerous swirl in the legal and political contexts in which universal human rights discourse is invoked. An anthropology of human rights can shed light on this multiplicity of power within human rights processes. Moreover, if an anthropology of human rights is, by definition, an anthropology of power–knowledge–violence, then it will lend itself to a kind of cultural critique that has been missing within international human rights theory and practice, especially over the last 15 years.

Before moving on, I wish to emphasise that the subsequent analyses should not be taken as addressing childhood standards or child policy principles *per se*. The illustrations and examples are neither to be understood as statements of any kind concerning the particular aspects of the childhoods they disclose. Instead of viewing childhood and human rights as ontological entities, I take a relational approach to both. This is to say that I am not principally engaging with the cultural relativism debate that ponders the universality of children’s rights but, like Goodale (2006), Ortnner (2006) and others who employ practice theoretical approaches, I focus on the universalism of children’s rights – their unfolding and meanings in the world of power–knowledge–violence where children lead their lives.

Silencing children through functional coherences and formal systematisations

In the past twenty years, the UNCRC-led childhood discourse has taken on a global position as representing what childhood is or at least should be like. It has been approved of by most supra-national governmental and non-governmental organisations addressing childhood issues, and it is widely employed as a starting point for national legislation and institutional strategies. The general principles of the UNCRC also offer a seemingly neutral tool for use by local child policy practitioners, and a shared language for multi-disciplinary cooperation on micro and macro scales. Concurrently, a broad branch of research has set out to promote the implementation of the UNCRC in policymaking, development work and research practices (e.g. Such and Walker, 2005; Roose and Bouverne-De Bie, 2007; Skelton, 2007; Bell, 2008). In Foucault’s terms, it can thus be understood as a regime of truth that constitutes the social world as governable and administrable (Häkli, 2009).

The United Nations Centre for Human Rights (1996) asserts that the Convention ‘has the same meaning for people in all parts of the world’ and that it ‘takes into account the different cultural, social, economic and political realities of individual States.’ Yet it was realised early on, even when the UNCRC was being

prepared, that the concept of childhood proposed in it did not allow for certain culturally relativistic approaches in its interpretation and implementation (for an overview, see Detrick, 1992; Harris-Short, 2001). The UN rights derive largely from Western conceptions of proper childhood, determined first in the post-war period for the Declaration (emphasis on provision and protection), and completed during the 1980s when the Convention was being prepared (most importantly the participation aspect). This, in itself, is not a novel finding, but the academic critique presented against the discourse has not succeeded in undermining its hegemonic status (e.g. Boyden, 1990, 191; Stephens, 1995; Woodhead, 1997, 80; Kulynych, 2001; Chirwa, 2002; Jones, 2005). In mainstream research and policymaking it is still acceptable to base one's arguments on the UNCRC without discussing the foundational complications embedded in it.

This is evident, for instance, in the policy line endorsed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), rooted in the UNCRC: 'UNICEF's mission is to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. UNICEF is guided in doing this by the provisions and principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.' (UNICEF, 2011). In the following, I illustrate the socially constructed nature of the dominant childhood discourse by showing how UNICEF portrays children as family members. Following the cultural relativism critique, the illustration reveals that the regime of truth that was engendered on the basis of the UNCRC is not based on children's knowledges and lived worlds at large but draws on rather selected understandings and interpretations. The functional coherences and formal systematisations built up and mobilised by actors such as UNICEF present this conception as *the* childhood. The voices arising from 'wrong childhoods' do not echo at the back of the normative discourse and, as becomes apparent, UNICEF, regardless of the critique, continues to mask, bury and silence many children's knowledges in its present work.

Creating conformity: The child as a family member

The UNCRC conception of children as family members offers one vantage point into the way childhood is portrayed in the dominant childhood discourse, exemplifying the foundational problems pertaining to its hegemony. While 'family' is not clearly defined, the first twenty articles outline it as a basic unit of a national institution consisting of the child, his/her parents and/or other legal guardians, and possibly other members – presumably other children under the parents/guardians' custody, and the extended family and local community (Harris-Short, 2001). Yet in most cases the only family relations mentioned are those between the child and his/her parents. Children's familial role thus more or less equals that of a person under parental custody. In this narrow and categorical conception of children's familial roles and communal positions, the UNCRC ends up either excluding a great number of young individuals or pathologising many lived childhoods.

Leaning on the UNCRC, UNICEF portrays all young people who are married and/or have children of their own before the age of 18 as oppressed children. In a recent report concerning women below 18 years of age in underdeveloped and developing countries⁵, UNICEF (2008) states that: ‘Required to perform large amounts of domestic work, under pressure to demonstrate fertility, and responsible for raising children while still children themselves, married girls and child mothers face constrained decision-making and reduced life choices.’ The complement presented in the 1st Article of the UNCRC – ‘unless under the law applicable to the

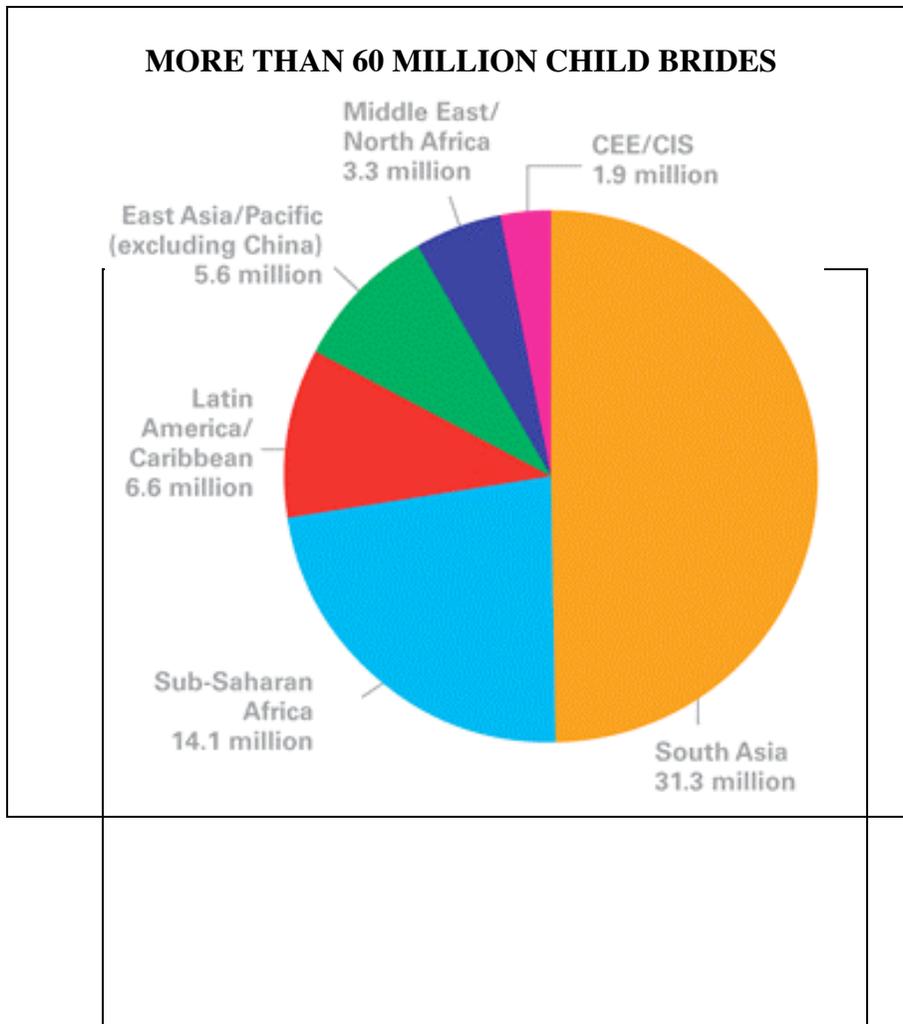


Figure 1: Number of women aged 20–24 who were married or in a union before the age of 18, selected countries (UNICEF’s ChildInfo, 2006).

⁵ UNICEF employs this geographical focus in their analysis, discussing the marriages and child births of children living in economically advanced societies elsewhere, e.g. in the context of well-being and health (UNICEF, 2007a). Other human rights organizations analyse and report these issues more globally (e.g. Population Action International, 2007).

child, majority is attained earlier’ – is not used to narrow down the category of young people whom these statements concern (see Figures 1 and 2). Therefore, all people from 0 to 17 living in marriage or having children of their own are portrayed as underprivileged beings with no future or good standard of living to hope for, leading pathological childhoods by definition. In proportion to them, the other teenagers who are not married or have children of their own are presumed to lead relatively better lives due to their ‘normal’ family relations, regardless of the context.

Years of Education	Age of Marriage					
	<18	<=15	16 – 20	21 – 25	26 – 30	30+
Benin	0.6	0.5	0.8	1.4	2.4	2.3
Colombia	3.2	2.9	3.5	4.0	4.1	4.0
India	1.1	0.8	1.8	3.2	3.9	3.5
Turkey	2.7	2.8	3.2	3.5	3.5	3.2
Age of First Birth						
Benin	16.7	15.7	19.1	23.0	26.4	26.8
Colombia	17.3	16.2	19.4	23.3	27.0	30.1
India	17.5	16.7	19.6	23.9	28.2	32.7
Turkey	17.6	16.8	19.7	24.0	28.3	32.6
Husband – Wife Age Gap						
Benin	11.0	11.6	9.9	7.9	7.1	4.9
Colombia	5.7	6.0	5.0	3.7	1.9	1.6
India	6.8	7.3	6.0	4.7	4.2	4.4
Turkey	6.2	7.3	4.7	2.9	2.1	2.8

¹ This sample refers to ever-married women over the age of 25 sampled by the DHS for whom we have data on the age of marriage.

Figure 2: Underage women’s age of first birth, selected countries (Jensen & Thornton, 2003; UNICEF, 2005).

The statistics presented by UNICEF (2005) show that at the beginning of the 21st century there were millions of girls in the majority world who had got married before coming of age (Figures 1 and 2). According to the organisation, they were being oppressed by early marriage and often also by having a child of their own before the age of eighteen. The message is underlined by endorsing extreme representations, typically portraying very young girls and elderly men in organised marriages (Figure 3). Respectively, as oppression and the potential harm caused by early marriage and childbirth are emphasised and generalised, young people’s position as spouses and parents is not discussed at all (cf. Robson 2004).



Figure 3: The winner of the UNICEF-sponsored international ‘Photo of the Year’ competition (UNICEF, 2007b).

The benefits of being married and having the first child during the late teens in the socio-cultural and geo-economic location where these lives are led do not constitute a point of interest in UNICEF’s statistics and reports. For instance, the family institutions based on guardianship, where marriage and childbirth may be crucial in providing young individuals with wellbeing and good living conditions, are not identified or reflected upon (White, 2007). Neither are unions where both spouses are relatively young mentioned as exceptions. This is odd because, for instance in Zambia, the age difference between spouses is typically less than ten years in unions where the wife is younger than 20 years of age (UNICEF, 2005, 37). The life expectancy of Zambians being below 40 years of age, the pertinence of these marriages can hardly be questioned on the grounds highlighted in Figure 3. Rather, it is the HIV/AIDS phenomenon that presents notable challenges to Zambian marriages at large. Interestingly, these viewpoints were brought up when the UNCRC was being prepared, where it was suggested by many representatives that, since the age of fifteen is typically considered as a minimum age for marriage, the Convention should concern only people below this age (Detrick, 1992, 115). Had this age limit been selected, UNICEF would probably identify fewer child brides by some millions in the world.

Following Foucault, the definitions and alignments mobilised by UNICEF operate as functional coherences and formal systematisations. Without downplaying the fact that some young individuals are forced into early marriage and childbirth against their will, and that in certain locations socioeconomic conditions encourage the parents to marry their daughters off at an early stage, this

approach does not allow for various cultural, social, economic and political realities. The approach does not acknowledge those people's local knowledges who are comfortably married at an early age, or the views of those who feel that they have not managed to get married early enough, or the experiences of the youth who cannot lead satisfying lives due to their unmarried status (e.g. Robson, 2004; Kesby *et al.*, 2006; White, 2007). Neither does it include the views of those families where children and adults together attend to the family, sharing responsibilities for livelihood, childcare, housework, and so on (e.g. Punch, 2001).

The alienating and strongly evaluative discourse (re)produced by UNICEF on the grounds of the UNCRC is consistent with Foucault's (1961, 1975, 1976) findings concerning 'madmen' in proportion to the sane life, 'criminals' in terms of citizenship and freedom, and 'homosexuals' from a heteronormative point of view. Without taking sides over the question of appropriate ages for marriage or childbirth (or the terms of sanity, criminality and sexuality), it can be found that in its conception of children's family relations UNICEF states very clearly what is desirable and what is not in terms of young people's family building and communal status – regardless of their living environments. This normative statement is not only culturally and geographically biased but also considerably political (Stephens, 1995, 20; cf. the normalising effects of heteronormativity, e.g. Browne *et al.*, 2007). By masking millions of lives as 'inappropriate', the interpretation hides the fact that young individuals who are entitled to the basic rights proposed by the UNCRC (free education, protection from hard labour, etc.) may nevertheless live in union and have children of their own. The knowledges about such normal and good childhoods ought to be qualified as children's voices, too, to diversify the dominant conception of childhood and discursively desubjugate these childhoods.

This brief illustration is by no means an exhaustive assessment of the hegemonic discourse on childhood, but it serves well to demonstrate how the UNCRC has ended up promoting particular kinds of childhoods (Ruddick, 2003; Skelton, 2007). As one of the most important global children's rights actors, UNICEF defines certain kinds of childhoods as 'normal and good' and others as 'deviant and unwanted' on the basis of the UNCRC. They produce functional coherence and formal systematisations that are mobilised by thousands and thousands of children's rights advocates, policymakers and practitioners on multiple scalar levels all around the world. At the same time, UNICEF and all of these actors effectively state who can use the child's voice. By suggesting that young people should marry and have children only after they have turned 18, regardless of cultural differences, their economic situation, life expectancy, religious traditions, or any other code, norm or condition, they disqualify millions of children's local knowledges, veil a number of childhoods, and turn these people's lives into subjugated historical contents.

In Foucault's (1979, 183) terms, such a policy line can be understood as a disciplinary technique which aims at normalising children and their childhoods according to (arbitrary) norms. Therefore, it forms one of the major problems

embedded in the UNCRC. According to his methodological approach, this hegemony can be undermined by bringing into play children's knowledges that differ totally from the knowledges qualified by the dominant childhood discourse, consequently revealing such historical contents of children's lives that have been hidden or veiled in functional coherences and formal systematisations, thus making space for divergent children's voices. Scholars in various disciplines have demonstrated this successfully through a number of case studies by approaching distinct childhoods from culturally sensitive starting points (e.g. Stephens, 1995; Freeman, 2000; Katz, 2004; Punch, 2001; Robson, 2004; Kesby *et al.*, 2006; Kjørholt, 2007; Lund, 2007; White, 2007; Bühler-Niederberger and Krieken, 2008; Kallio, 2008; Pence and Morfo, 2008; Vanderbeck, 2009). Nearly without exception, participatory methods have been employed to uncover children's situated knowledges and to bring their voices to the fore. Though often successful, participatory work also entails complications, which I shall now discuss.

(Dis)qualifying children's knowledges in participatory processes

Critiques of the UNCRC tend to focus on ethnic and cultural differences, recognising that its Western bias is its innermost problem, as portrayed in the previous section. The debate on children's participation and the ambiguity of children's rights comprises an exception to these by concentrating mainly, but not exclusively, on minority world childhoods. For instance, children's differing roles in welfare and security policies have been studied extensively in the last ten years (e.g. Such and Walker 2005; Skelton 2007; Whitty and Wisby 2007; Evans and Spicer 2008). To mention just a few studies, in their analysis of British family and crime policies, Such and Walker (2005) reveal that the components of the '3Ps' are not adopted appropriately in British child policies either. Children are treated as responsible citizens when they commit crimes or violate institutional norms but are not trusted in issues concerning their everyday family lives (see also James, 2011). Equally, Skelton (2007) presents a critique of UNICEF's implementation of the participation principle. She argues that even in Western contexts the organisation has failed to involve children and young people in decision-making and continues to confront them as 'innocent beings' or 'future becomings' (cf. Uprichard, 2008).

These critiques of current Western child policies have questioned the UNCRC both as an ethos and a set of practices. Yet even these studies seldom target the latest child policy trend, the participatory involvement *per se*. When carried out with communicative means and recognising the challenges proposed by the ambiguity of children's rights, these policies are commonly welcomed by children's spokesmen, NGOs and many researchers. However, to take Foucault's (1980) notion of the relationship between power and knowledge seriously, we should critically consider also those perceptions and implementations of the UNCRC that aim to endorse participation. This notion has been made in several critiques concerning mainstream approaches to childhood in the past few years (e.g. Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-de Bie, 2006; Bragg, 2007; Mannion, 2007;

White, 2007; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Vanderbeck, 2008). By asking which knowledges are qualified and disqualified, and which historical contents are brought forth and buried in participatory practices, we can make better sense of how children and young people's voices do or do not get heard.

The second set of reflections sets out to reveal the dilemma embedded in the ideal of participatory involvement. This allows the contemplation of the child's voice from a direction totally different from the previous one. In the minority world contexts that I next present, the starting points, norms and justifications of children's rights appear much more normal, natural and easily adjusted, and the socially constructed nature of childhood that builds on the dominant discourse may, at first, seem less problematic. Yet a closer look reveals that children's local knowledges may be hidden, veiled and disqualified in participatory settings and minority world contexts, too, even if in diverse ways.

The unintended consequences of participatory involvement

The current trend in Western⁶ child policies is to involve underage people to participate in institutional, local, national and supra-national planning and decision-making processes. It is argued that because children cannot act as responsible political actors like adults they need to be given tools for specific political agency with the help of participatory strategies, and in this way are assisted to use their right to be heard in matters concerning them. In other words, the idea is to enhance children's political agencies by 'upgrading' their societal status. This is deemed important because it is considered to empower children and young people as family members, pupils, community members, citizens, and so on (Sinclair, 2004; Lister, 2007).

Participatory child policies are generally designed in keeping with cultural, social, economic and political equality, following the UNCRC line, and implemented by constructive means with good intentions. Hence it is not surprising that children's involvement is typically envisaged optimistically as a means to empowerment and not, for example, as unpredictable actorhood based on dissenting views, norms and interests (Gallagher, 2008). Overall, children's participation is portrayed as having merely positive effects and not considered as something that may threaten or challenge adults' politics, at least if the adult engagement is based on democratic values. In actual fact, it is repeatedly argued that the discouragement of participatory child and youth policies endorses the patriarchal oppression of children and young people, as brought out by Skelton (2007, 178):

Just as men were, and are, reluctant to give up their established forms of political (and other types of) power to allow women to play a

⁶ This trend can be found also in some supra-national and non-Western policies (e.g. UNICEF, 2002). Yet to link my arguments with the current Anglophone research that deals mostly with Western child policies, I delimit the discussion to them.

meaningful role, so adults will resist the loss of authority and power that a child-centred, young person–friendly model of democracy will require. Change can be wrought and children and young people can grasp power (with adult support and advocacy) but it will be a long, long struggle.

Foucauldian interpretations of participation, however, reveal that there is another side to this story. Vendenbroeck and Bouverne-de Bie (2006, 136) argue that: ‘Active citizenship can be seen as an empowering concept giving a voice to children, but it can also be considered as a technique assuring coercion or as a strategy that governs at a distance through the art of self-examination. It can, finally, be seen as an example of an inclusive policy that excludes.’ Sympathetic to participatory practices but critical of their ideology, this insight reveals that participatory policies do not axiomatically empower children, nor do they self-evidently underpin children’s political agency.

Indeed, if politics is understood in terms of freedom of will and opinion, it leads us to ask whether children can act on their own grounds within this type of participatory involvement *at all* (Kallio & Häkli, 2011b). As policy actors they are, like everyone else, bound to self-examination which supports good government (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Craddock, 2007; Venn, 2007). However, *unlike* their adult counterparts, children are not free to question the *terms* of this government. They cannot be made responsible for various aspects of their lives, for example, by endangering their health or choosing between school curricula (Kallio, 2007; Lund, 2007). This position does not offer fruitful grounds for children’s potentially disagreeing voices⁷.

Some substantial evidence of the unintended effects of participatory practices has recently been presented by researchers who have conducted long-standing participatory research projects with children. Drawing on an ethnographic research project, Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, 504) sum up that: ‘[T]o encourage children to participate in creating knowledge about themselves is also to encourage them to take part in the processes used to regulate them.’ They argue that ‘emphasising “participation” may actually serve to reduce the possibilities with a research encounter’, and requiring children to ‘participate might actually constrain the possibilities for them to act.’ (p.507). Gallagher (2008, 142) illustrates this paradox with an excerpt from his field work. Following the ideal of participatory research,

⁷ This has also become apparent in the empirical research of our research group studying Finnish child and youth policies and children and young people’s participation. On the basis of our preliminary analysis, the more general critique of participation seems to apply to childhood and youth as well (see Kallio and Häkli 2011b). We have interviewed municipal child and youth leaders to discover what kinds of issues and views are, and are not, presented by children and young people in participatory processes, and made acquaintance with the children and young people’s own perceptions through the reports that they have produced as part of their work in municipal and national Children’s Parliaments and Youth Forums. As the analysis is yet to be completed, I will not discuss the results here. For further information, please see the *Space and political agency research group* at the University of Tampere.

he endeavoured to involve primary school children as knowledge producers in his study through a block building project. To his distress, the process ended up placing one of the children in a subordinate position in her peer cultural community: as she tried to participate in the research project, she was unable to act appropriately in the ongoing peer cultural action. The corollary to this was that the other children made use of her weakened position by debarring her from the peer group and ruining her work. This could not be helped by the researcher who had no access to the webs of power embedded in the children's mundane world.

In a similar manner, Bragg (2007) noticed the two-way effects of her participatory research project. She claims that '[The Students as Researchers] project seems to promote practices of reflexivity and self-problematisation amongst those who carry out the research, encouraging them to take responsibility for themselves as well as contribute to school success' (p.352). The interviews that she undertook with the primary and secondary school children who participated in the project revealed that the participants had taken on a double role: they conceived themselves both as the objects and subjects of knowledge – as their own critics. Therefore, they no longer had access to the subject position of a pupil where they could complain about absurd educational methods or be weary of dull lessons and unpleasing food supplies. They were on the schools' side now, feeling that by performing as docile students they would best assist in the common objectives, and that it was their own fault if they did not take the initiative to improve the matters they found disruptive.

These examples help to concretise the Foucauldian concerns of children's participation (more examples in Prout, 2000; Barker and Smith, 2001; Matthews, 2001; James and James, 2004; Kesby, 2007; Evans & Spicer, 2008). In both cases, the children were involved in research projects as assistants but, at the same time, they had to act in their peer cultural communities and institutions, too. As they got engaged as research participants, their social positions and agencies changed unavoidably, leading to unpredictable and multiple results. The same goes with children's involvement in policymaking, as I have argued elsewhere (Kallio & Häkli, 2011b). When children participate in formal arenas, they cannot cut loose from their quotidian relationships and communities. The adoption of new roles changes children's agencies, statuses and positions in the complex social networks of their mundane environments thus bringing about some transformations in these communities⁸. Consequently, the relationships and power relations upon which peer cultural groups, families, school communities, etc., operate have to be reconstructed and renegotiated, at least to some extent.

For one more illustration, let us take a Foucauldian look at a participatory child policy model proposed by Such and Walker (2005, 54-55). Their policy analysis of the British 'rights and responsibilities' debate suggests that, to better

⁸ For a more detailed account on children's political subjectification/socialization, see Kallio & Häkli (2011c).

serve children, policy must 1) Provide a space in which children can live and express their own childhoods; 2) Understand these childhoods in the present and not in terms of their futurority; and 3) Learn from the private lives of children and families. These suggestions lean on their empirical findings, according to which children participate actively in the negotiation of responsibility at home and are able to take care of household chores without direct supervision ‘because they are trusted there’.

From these starting points, Such and Walker argue that responsibility is a meaningful and everyday aspect of many children’s lives, and that children would do responsible things if we trusted them more in policymaking since they would find it rational and desirable: ‘Children’s desire to do responsible things and their understanding that these can often stem from doing things responsibly offers a potential model for better engaging children and young people in policy and politics.’ (2004, p.55). In concrete terms, the authors suggest that the childhoods that children lead and experience in the space⁹ provided by participatory policies should be acknowledged in policymaking, i.e. qualified as *acceptable knowledge*. This suggestion is based on the supposition that since many children know how to act responsibly at home, and are willing to do so, they should be given the chance to act responsibly also more widely.

Learning from Bragg’s study it can be assumed that, were this strategy implemented, some of the ‘responsible’ kids would probably readily participate in the ‘provided space’. Yet the whole idea of providing children with space for ‘living and expressing childhood’ contradicts the idea that children *are* readily agents on their own right and not merely ‘becomings’ (Skelton, 2007). The paper thus ends up by implying that ‘without aid and encouragement from adult-designed “participatory methods” children cannot fully exercise their “agency”’, therefore accentuating adult-led voicing and not vice versa (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008, 503). The endorsement of children’s responsibility as proposed by Such and Walker would probably also lead to what Bragg (2007, 350) calls ‘hybrid identities’ through which children feel both obligated to and responsible for the functioning of a given child policy process – or ‘recruitment’, as articulated by Venn (2007, 122), that involves children in selected issues in distinct ways for the production of particular kind of information. When involved in policymaking as responsible actors, children are turned into docile dissident forces that, as part of the governing mechanism, are forced to adapt to good conduct through the conduct of conduct (Foucault, 1991). Such child policies act as biopolitics that direct societal development from inside out through children’s recruited subjectivities (Foucault, 2007).

⁹ The essence of this ‘space’ is not explicated in the paper but presumably the idea parallels the one presented by the CRC (2009, 7): ‘States parties should encourage the child to form a free view and should provide an environment that enables the child to exercise her or his right to be heard.’ This is a prime example of the double-hermeneutic dynamism that underlies the dominant childhood discourse.

Furthermore, Such and Walker also fail to consider the fact that in the policy line they suggest, the less responsible, communicable and conformable children would probably not be able to, or even willing to, participate in this manner. Bragg's (2007, 354) study evidenced that 'those who cannot or will not measure up are marginalised as deviant and risky subjects who threaten the new normativity' (for similar accounts see Tobin, 1995; Vandebroek and Bouverne-de Bie, 2006; Komulainen, 2007; Roose and Bouverne-de Bie, 2007; Eriksson and Näsman, 2008). Following governmental rationality, this kind of marginalisation is most efficiently mobilised through the responsibly participating children who scorn their indocile coevals. Hence, the involvement of certain children in policymaking helps to disqualify other children's knowledges as not acceptable, thus endorsing inequality.

To recap, as regards the child's voice, the problem of participatory involvement is threefold: when the participating children are recruited to act on the set grounds, their action evolves selected voices and hinders both other children's *and* their potential to act on their own grounds since differing knowledges are easily subjugated by the qualified child's voice. These notions together reveal that participatory involvement alone cannot overcome the challenges related to listening to children's voices. A critical perspective forces us to acknowledge that, regardless of good will and intentions, giving children opportunities to participate and get involved does not always ensure that their voices get heard appropriately and equally. Even though participatory practices are able to provide some children and young people with experiences of empowerment and a 'voice' in certain matters concerning them, diverse experiences are generated and other knowledges silenced in these processes. The inconvenience is that these mundane effects are hard to foresee and control. Therefore, original methodological approaches are needed to make childhoods audible and visible more extensively.

Desubjugating childhoods by qualifying children's situated knowledges

Listening to children's voices has been acknowledged as a valuable principle by researchers and policymakers worldwide in the past twenty years, and a means for the implementation of children's rights have been developed from these starting points in a variety of contexts. However, as I have argued above, there are several complications embedded in this principle, not least because of its interconnectedness with the contested childhood discourse based on the UNCRC. Hence, new ways of approaching children and their lived worlds, and hearing children's voices, are needed. One question that begs the answer is: how can children's voices be heard without recruiting, banalising or homogenising them?

A Foucauldian response to this question involves the qualification of children's local knowledges and in this way the desubjugation of certain subjugated knowledges. In practice, this idea can be implemented in many ways. Those defending participatory methods often claim that the hearing of children's voices requires that they are informed about and involved in processes as active

participants, regardless of the complications related to these methods (Kesby, 2007). Yet if participation is identified as a central part of the problem, less and non-participatory methods ought to be developed. This requires that the analysis is based on the knowledges that children and young people generate and produce in their everyday practices, as actors in their lived worlds.

To consider briefly how such ways of listening to children's voices can be realised, I propose *sociospatial positionality* as grounds for distinguishing children's situated knowledges in their lived worlds. In their recent article, Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard (2009, 242–244) suggest this concept as a gateway to understanding how the social and the spatial co-evolve. Leaning on feminist geographical thinking they present that: 'Positionality highlights difference, the situated understandings of subjects, groups, and institutions, but also inequality and, thereby, always power relations. Yet, a subject's (institution's) positionality cannot simply be read off from her (its) social situatedness, because the social and the spatial are mutually constitutive.' This attitude is well-known to those familiar with critical participatory and action research, as well as feminist and postcolonial studies more widely.

Critical geographers have discussed positionality and the situated nature of knowledge from spatial points of view extensively for over twenty years (e.g. Katz, 1992, 2004; England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Valentine, 1998; Nightingale, 2003; Hopkins, 2007). In geographical childhood research, Cindi Katz, in particular, has paraded this methodological attitude throughout her work, making use of extensive field work projects carried out with children and young people in Howa (Sudan) and New York (US). Also other children's and youth geographers have subsumed positionality and the situatedness of knowledge as a starting point of their methodological and ethical stance (e.g. Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1998; Jones, 2001; Valentine, 2003; Hopkins, 2007; Bell, 2008; Griffith, 2008; Hopkins & Bell, 2008; Morrow, 2008; Vanderbeck, 2008; Kallio and Häkli, 2010).

Like Leitner and Sheppard, geographers studying childhood and youth stress the importance of noticing both the connections between the researcher and the research subjects, and the spatial connection between related actors and sites. As Katz (1992, 505) states: '[W]e must position ourselves on the borders between description and analysis; between here and there; between the present, past, and future; between the exotic and mundane; between the unique and general.' Traditionally, these kinds of remarks are given in the context of ethnographic, participatory research. What I would like to suggest is that they can also be found useful when operating with different types of methods and materials, without engaging children in the process.

The space of betweenness, as formulated by Katz, where sociospatial positionalities can be identified, is a topological space where various actors, matters and happenings that seem remote in topographical space appear as connected. It is a space where individual and collective experiences and distinct

conceptions of childhood can be perceived in the same frame, and the relational processes of sociospatial co-evolution explored. As Rose (1997) and England (1994) emphasise, both the researcher's own position and the positions of those researched (who in childhood research are certainly not only the children!) form the lens through which these processes can be critically unfolded. Thus approached, participatory methods do not appear as the only relevant strategy for revealing hidden historical contents in childhoods and qualifying children's silenced knowledges. Rather, they seem to generate a *specific* set of methods that, besides producing knowledge on certain issues, aim to provide children with resources for action (Kesby 2007, 2819; Lister, 2007).

To complement the approaches that aim at such empowerment, a rigorous and multifaceted examination of children's sociospatial positionalities may help to extract different kinds of situated knowledges from lived childhoods without engaging the children in the process as actual participants. Trails of subjugated childhoods can be followed by locating voices that are based on disqualified knowledges by, for instance, looking into children and young people's acts and articulations in virtual (semi-)public spaces (chat forums, play and game worlds, social media sites, etc.) and by examining their ways of representing themselves, relating themselves to others, and presenting ideas on specific matters. Another way to track children's voices in their lived lives is to study the documented histories of childhood institutions as archives where qualified knowledges are celebrated (e.g. the school, the nursery, the maternity clinic). The children's voices that do not inform these narratives can be identified as subjugated. Situating these voices into broader socio-cultural, politico-historical and geo-economic frames helps us to challenge the prevailing childhood discourses and come up with more pluralistic understandings of the worlds where children lead their lives (cf. Kallio, 2009; Mitchell and Elwood, forthcoming).

Taking into account the complexities related to participatory work with children, these kinds of methods can be found less challenging and risky in terms of research ethics (cf. the special issue of *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 2001). Therefore, I suggest that they are worthy of consideration, when applicable. As adults are engaged in and responsible for the process of listening, children can be, at least partly, released from voicing their concerns in particular situations. Instead, they can be provided with the right to "speak freely" for themselves in their mundane environments. As in more traditional ethnographic research, the space of betweenness is employed to attain a diversified and critical understanding of the childhoods in each case. This allows for the empirical explication of the structures that frame and enable children's lives in distinct locations, and the bringing to light of children's knowledges that are developed in their lived childhoods. As an alternative to participatory strategies, this methodological approach provides one potential that enables the move from hearing selected children's voices towards listening to the diversity of childhoods at play.

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