

Not Mere Objects: Uncovering Children's Subjectivities in Migration

Virtual Conference, held May 16–17, 2022. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, the Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Dresden, the German Research Foundation (DFG), and the Free State of Saxony. Conveners: Sheer Ganor (University of Minnesota), Bettina Hitzer (Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Dresden), Friederike Kind-Kovács (Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Dresden), Swen Steinberg (GHI Washington). Participants: Mehrunnisa Ali (Ryerson University), Kimberly Cheng (New York University), Olga Gnydiuk (Central European University, Vienna), Simone Laqua-O'Donnell (University of Birmingham), Rich Lee (University of Minnesota), Magali Michelet (University of Neuchâtel), Chelsea Shields (University of California, Irvine), Kay Tisdall (University of Edinburgh), John Wall (Rutgers University).

Children's subjectivities in migration were the topic of the third workshop of the international standing working group "In search of the Migrant Child." Organized by Sheer Ganor, Bettina Hitzer, Friederike Kind-Kovács and Swen Steinberg, the workshop discussed different methodological approaches to and historical case studies of children's subjectivities. As the organizers stated, this focus was neglected for a long time, as administrative processes of migration have envisaged child migrants as governed objects and shaped the sources of historical research in that regard.

In his opening remarks Swen Steinberg highlighted that the aim of the organizers was to make the agency of young migrants the focus of discussion, to learn more about dif-

ferent (interdisciplinary) definitions of subjectivity and how children's voices are represented in different historical sources. The workshop began with a roundtable discussion that offered a wide range of interdisciplinary perspectives on children's subjectivities. Mehrunnisa Ali, Early Childhood Studies specialist, presented a documentary film project with migrant and refugee children from Syria in Canada. Listening to these children created new knowledge about migrant families by focusing on children's perspectives on family situations and family roles as well as school and society instead of reducing them to "traumatized beings." Ali emphasized the importance to reach out and actively integrate migrant children into societies due to underlying societal power structures. Psychologist Rich Lee gave insights into his long-term psychological research on adoptive families and pro adoptive narratives regarding Korean adoptees, whose voices have long been neglected in research. With a more critical lens, Lee pointed to the changing perspectives of individuals in long term studies from children to youth, adults, and becoming or being parents. Addressing new and more critical topics like racism, cultural issues and feelings of loss discussed by the adoptees in his research, he came to the conclusion that parents and adopted children tend to avoid speaking about negative aspects of adoption, as well as negative feelings regarding the meaning of names, sexualization and objectification of birth families. This emphasizes the importance of including adoptee perspectives in research for a more balanced view on adoption.

Kay Tisdall built on this point from a social and political science perspective when speaking about her applied research in childhood studies and on children's human rights. She encouraged researchers to see children as social actors instead of focusing on their socially constructed immaturity. Because children are socially constructed as ideally being in their family or in schools, children out of this context, for example in the context of migration, are something

policy and institutions tend to struggle with. Therefore, Tisdall pleaded for the active participation of children in such contexts and the recognition of their rights as essential to understand children as social actors. Subsequently, the political ethicist John Wall introduced the concept of “childism,” similar to feminism, which grew out of Childhood Studies to study children’s agency and subjective experience. As he explained, the lens of childism enables the deconstruction of adulthood, that often covers children’s experiences. This helps to make such individual experiences and children’s perspectives visible. By using the example of court decisions on migration, Wall explained that the concept of “best interest” is often interpreted from the adult’s point of view, which can lead to false protectionism. Wall suggested that courts should listen actively to children and learn from their expertise as well as reflect their own norms and views. The implementation of childism could help to rearrange borders and power structures between children and adults.

In the discussion that followed the roundtable presentations, chaired by Sheer Ganor, several challenges were emphasized for scholars trying to access migrant children’s subjectivities. In general, it is difficult to approach children (which often leads to small samples), and the focus on adult approval and affirmation influences their behavior. Particularly in legal systems, children are silenced and frequently aware of what they should or shouldn’t talk about. Therefore, research should not only be focused on agency and voices alone, but also on silences – to gain a more comprehensive view. Further, the potential of (critical) theory in the field of childhood and adoption studies as well as different approaches to uncover children’s subjectivities and their entanglement as beings in the context of their social and cultural environment have been discussed. Overall, the interdisciplinary roundtable discussion demonstrated how similar the approaches as well as challenges in researching children’s subjectivities are

across a range of fields and disciplines. This underlines the importance and potential of interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration in the field of childhood and migration studies from a historical perspective.

The workshop's first regular panel, moderated by Bettina Hitzer, mirrored these manifold perspectives on children and their subjectivities. Following the concept of the first and second workshop of the "In Search of the Migrant Child" series, the speakers focused on individual primary sources. Simone Laqua-O'Donnell presented about missionary children and the construction of childhood, represented in a letter by a thirteen-year-old girl to her parents who were missionaries for the Basel Mission in India. Because missionary children were sent to boarding schools for education, correspondence was their only contact to family members for years. Although shaped by epistolary conventions as well as the social and cultural expectations of her missionary background, short passages can be identified where changes in words, tone and narratives suggest glimpses on personal reflections, as Laqua-O'Donnell suggested. The subsequent presentation by Chelsea Shields analyzed a questionnaire from social science research about youth and futurity in the Caribbean. This source is an example for many similar studies about the "new man" and society in the Caribbean in the 1960s, where children were imagined as actors in a decolonized future. Quite unusually, the participating children were asked about their own autobiography of the future. The results revealed their values, their material and romantic desires, family ideas and (changing) family structures, but also how they had been shaped by patriotic and social narratives of personal fulfillment or nationalist ideas in private life. However, Shields critically questioned the tensions between the presented subjectivities and the overall frame of the survey, constructed by adults and influenced by *zeitgeist*. The overarching questions what such letters or questionnaires reveal about the children and how a comparison with sim-

ilar sources can help to trace down personal perspectives was discussed after the two presentations as well as ways to extract their voices and interpret their silences to identify different forms of subjectivities.

Bettina Hitzer opened the second workshop day with introductory remarks that called attention to three points. First, focusing on children's subjectivities draws attention to children as vulnerable beings. Nevertheless, they possess knowledge and should be heard like adults, thus bringing together conflicting ideas and notions. As Ali highlighted in the opening roundtable, children are constantly looking for adults' approval, which calls into question whether they are as independent as we would like them to be. Second, Hitzer called for a distinction between children's subjectivities and their voices because subjectivities can be superimposed by conventions, norms, and practices of the distinct document genre, situation, and the relationship of the person addressed. Therefore, attention should be paid to these influences, and the relationality of documents, for example in comparison with other sources of the same child or other children at the time. Third, children are often firmly linked to the future. In addition to their reactions to the expectations of adults, we can also ask for their dreams, fantasies, and desires. This led to the question whether there are differences in children's and adults' voices in sources and what impact this has on our understanding of them as social beings influenced by their environment.

In the workshop's second panel, chaired by Sheer Ganor, Friederike Kind-Kovács presented a short autobiography of a Hungarian girl and her narrative of migration during the First World War. The text originated from a collection of 50 children's autobiographies to accompany postwar fundraising campaigns. Guided by the question of how war and migration affected this child's life, the source contains reflections on childhood, essentializes impressions of the

past, and presents the concerns, norms, and challenges of her life. Drawing on the phenomena of growing up too fast in migration, the division between the notions of an idealized childhood and life in migration afterwards emerges in this source. Kind-Kovács cautioned that children were asked by adults to write for a purpose, and that the text went through editing, translation, and selection processes. From a different perspective, Olga Gnydiuk presented reflections on refugee children's subjectivity in humanitarian relief and rehabilitation processes after the Second World War. Her source, a letter from a search and tracing officer of the International Refugee Organization that was part of a case file, reports on a child but doesn't provide access to the child's voice itself. However, Gnydiuk argued, the girl's actions as outlined in the document could point to her subjectivity: the refugee girl refused to accept the organization's plans for her future and presented her own perspective. The discussion of this panel was focused on the impact of translation and layers of editing for the identification of children's voices in migration contexts. This led to an insightful debate about fundamental methodological questions: if and how did (and do) children's voices differ from adults? How can children's subjectivities be traced, even if their voices are not passed down? And to which extent did migration (and war) influence the reflections on and narrations of childhood?

In the third and final panel, chaired by Swen Steinberg, Magali Michelet offered insights into oral history interviews with so-called "Wardrobe Children" – migrant children hidden in apartments – from migrant families in Switzerland and the reconstruction of their experiences through sensory experiences. Michelet used the description of atmosphere and children's capacities of observation to learn more about the daily life of (illegal) migrant children and their families. The visual and auditory memories make it possible to detect family and migration history other than the "success

stories”; such memories uncover the repercussions of immigrant policies and discrimination migrant parents often tried to hide from children. Kimberly Cheng presented a different approach to oral history interviews by the example of Jewish refugees in the Shanghai Volunteer Corps as part of her study on the relationship between Jewish refugees and their Chinese neighbors in Shanghai during the 1930s and 40s. As the city had been divided by foreign forces, its semi-colonial nature shaped the experience of Jewish refugees, who often came there as children or teenagers fleeing from Europe. With two former refugees recollecting their perspectives on the paramilitary organization, the sources provided insights into the knowledge of young people about social institutions as well as the awareness of race, hierarchies, and segregation policies in the interactions between European and Chinese people. The questions of how to conceptualize teenagers and the impact of age in general were the focus of discussion following the panel. The use of sensory experiences in analysis was another widely debated point. Even if historians may find it challenging at times to make sense of a childhood sensory memory, it should be viewed as a perspective on how children experience and memorize a situation differently than adults – and differently than an adult would expect it.

In her concluding remarks, Friederike Kind-Kovács underlined the fundamental effects of migration on children and the different forms of subjectivities researchers need to be aware of. The workshop demonstrated this complexity of children’s subjectivities and how they are shaped by social environments. This emphasizes the necessity of including power structures and the influence of adult norms when researching children as actors and uncovering their voices and expressions. In the final discussion, the usefulness of the concept of children’s subjectivities for further research was unanimously agreed on. Nevertheless, more work on definitions is needed, especially regarding its relation to voice, agency

and identity, and how to identify and analyze silences. This discussion was continued at the conference “Entangled Histories of Childhood Across Borders,” convened at the Pacific Office of the German Historical Institute Washington at UC Berkeley on September 19–21, 2022.

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