

Toward a Feminist Anthropology of Childhood

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the author's experience of joining a Child and Youth Studies department as a feminist anthropologist, the paper reviews the historically weak links between feminism, anthropology and child research. It then draws attention to a newer sociology and anthropology of childhood that is more closely engaged with feminism. Examples of anthropological work that foreground gendered children are used to prompt a re-visiting of the authors' own anthropological work on Irish Travelling People, and to demonstrate the possibilities of a feminist anthropology of childhood.

RÉSUMÉ

En débutant par l'expérience que l'auteure a eu en se joignant à un département d'Études de l'enfant et de la jeunesse en tant qu'anthropologue féministe, l'article revoit les points faibles qui existent historiquement entre le féminisme, l'anthropologie, et la recherche sur l'enfant. Cela, alors attire l'attention sur une nouvelle sociologie et anthropologie de l'enfance, qui s'engage encore plus étroitement avec l'anthropologie féministe de l'enfance. Des exemples de travail anthropologique qui met en premier plan les enfants qui sont classés par sexe et qui sont utilisés pour pousser à revoir l'oeuvre anthropologique de l'auteur sur les gens du voyage de l'Irlande.

INTRODUCTION

This paper arises out of an intensive period of reflection on the relationship between feminism, anthropology, and child research, which was prompted by my decision as a self-identified feminist anthropologist to enter a multidisciplinary Child (now Child and Youth) Studies department. I entered the Child Studies Department with reservations that stemmed in part from the fact that my anthropological training had not included any systematic discussion of childhood and had eschewed an engagement with psychology, the "master discipline" in the area. Along with qualms about my own training, I was also apprehensive about a new academic positioning within an interdisciplinary field focused upon children, aware that the topic of study was academically suspect (at least outside of psychology). I was even more preoccupied, however, by the possibility that a location within Child Studies might be (or be construed to be) antithetical to feminism.

This latter preoccupation arose out of an engagement with feminism that had been intensifying in the years following my doctoral fieldwork. During these years initial forays into scholarly presenting, writing, and teaching were

combined with the onset of childbearing and rearing and I had derived a great deal of support for my endeavors, both scholarly and maternal, from feminist scholarship and from networks of feminist women. From this vantage point I was concerned that a position in a Child Studies Department represented the epitome of a traditional location for a female academic and my fears were reinforced by the feminized faculty and student body in this Department.

A consultation of "child development" texts, written from within the discipline of psychology, quickly convinced me that my background as a feminist anthropologist did have something to contribute to the field of child research, but a search for relevant scholarship within feminist anthropology, or indeed anthropology as a whole, yielded very little. I rapidly broadened my purview to include child research in other disciplines such as sociology, history, cultural studies and education and began to think of my contribution to the Child Studies Department less in terms of "anthropology" and more in terms of "everything but psychology"! In spite of this I continue to be interested in the weak links between feminism, anthropology and child research, and this paper reviews some of the

context for this. It also discusses some of the more recent work that points toward the possibilities of a feminist anthropology of childhood.

FEMINISM AND CHILDHOOD

As I began to search for feminist discussion and analyses of children and childhood it became apparent that while children were never absent from feminist thought, they were most commonly addressed indirectly, as objects of adult actions rather than as full subjects in and of themselves.

One of the areas of research where feminism and childhood intersect is in the field of "gender socialization" which examines not only family life but also schooling, peer relations and popular culture. Many have pointed out, however, that the socialization paradigm tends to look at children as "adults-in-becoming" (Thorne 1987, 93), i.e. as passive learners of adult culture rather than as full subjects in and of themselves. In the feminist literature, this limitation tends to be reproduced as children are seen as passive objects of adult-initiated gendered ideologies and practices. In this field then, "girls" and "boys" are primarily conceptualized as "women/men-in-becoming," a perspective that downplays the possibilities of feminist theory and practice for children themselves.

A more dramatic example of the marginality of children within feminist scholarship is seen in the way that feminist discussions of children are most commonly encapsulated under the broader rubric of mothering. During the first wave of the North American women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, many feminists were concerned with children's issues, but this was within the context of a maternalist feminism which made its claims for both women's and children's rights on the basis of women's mothering roles (Alanen 1994, 32; Brush 1996, 430-1).

The second wave of North American feminism, dating from the late 1960s, has been described as spending "relatively little energy on children's issues" (Gordon 1992, 269), but second

wave feminists have continued to be preoccupied with the rethinking and restructuring of motherhood, a preoccupation that has required an ongoing engagement of some sort with children and childhood (Umansky 1996).

In both first and second wave feminisms, class and "race" have been crucial mediating variables in feminist analyses and practice vis-à-vis children (Gordon 1992, 1994). Polatnick's research on the politics of motherhood in the early second wave, for example, reveals how different approaches to motherhood were developed by lower-class Black, and middle class White women's groups. Poorer Black women, with their greater experience of communal forms of childrearing, she suggests, had more positive views of motherhood than did the middle class White women. For the former, "putting children first" (Polatnick 1996, 700) was also seen as an appropriate priority for feminist activism. Work with children was viewed as a means of confronting a variety of forms of oppression, and amongst other things, these Black feminists created a freedom school where they taught children about ways to confront "racial, class, women's, and children's oppression" (Polatnick 1996, 686).

In contrast to this, most of the members of the middle class White women's group, with their experiences of more privatised forms of child rearing, saw motherhood as oppressive. For them the "paramount consideration" was that of "freeing up women to do things other than mothering" (Polatnick 1996, 694). Polatnick suggests that while White middle class women may have seen themselves as having little in common with women committed to "putting children first," a blending of these differing perspectives on motherhood might have strengthened the feminist movement and countered its anti-mother image.

One member of the middle class White women's group studied by Polatnick was Firestone whose work *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) described women's childbearing and childrearing as burdensome and called for its replacement by technology. Ironically while Firestone's work is often cited as exemplifying a radical anti-mothering strand in early second wave feminism, she shared

with the Black feminists an explicit concern with children, and specifically with children's liberation. Her chapter "Down with Childhood" in the *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) discussed the work of historian Philippe Aries whose *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) had argued that childhood was an historically invented social category. Adopting this perspective, Firestone went on to argue that this invention was characterised by the oppression of children within the institutions of the nuclear family and the school. Because women and children were subordinated in similar ways, she argued, feminists would have to be involved in the struggle to liberate children from childhood (by facilitating their economic and sexual freedom) (1970, 104).¹

Despite the child-centred actions of the Black feminists discussed by Polatnick, and the call for children's liberation in the writing of Firestone, an explicit focus upon children has remained weak in feminism even as it has shifted toward more consistently positive assessments of various family forms and mothering practices (Ross 1995; Umansky 1996). Children characteristically continue to be discussed as passive objects of diverse forms of mothering, rather than as active participants in family (or other) social relations (Alanen 1994, 33).

In an influential paper titled "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother," Chodorow and Contratto (1992, 209-10) noted that feminist discussions of mothering have tended to reproduce dominant western (since the late nineteenth century at least) cultural assumptions about the passivity and dependence of children vis-à-vis omnipotent mothers. The result has been that such discussions contribute to, rather than challenge, both essentialist claims about children's "need" for mothering and various forms of "mother-blaming." They point out that feminist discussions of motherhood and mothering would benefit from greater critical attention to perspectives that grant children greater agency and intentionality (211).

An emerging interdisciplinary body of work on children's perceptions and experiences of family life (e. g. Brannen and O'Brien 1996; Moore, Sixsmith and Knowles 1996; Valentine

1997) offers a necessary broadening of perspectives on "the family," and a potential challenge to conservative invocations of children's "needs" within this sphere (Cohen and Katzenstein 1988, 33-37). While this work is important in its insistence on the generationed relations of family life, however, it could benefit from a more consistently feminist analysis that would examine the articulations of both generation *and* gender for both adult and child family members. It is also important that a feminist child research go beyond discussion of family life and especially mothering.

FEMINISM AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

The parameters of a broader engagement between feminism and childhood studies have been explicitly addressed by a number of sociologists. Starting from the premise that childhood like womanhood is a "cultural invention," Thorne (1987), Oakley (1994) and Alanen (1994) demonstrate how the feminist rethinking of the "private/public" dichotomy brings not only women but also children out of the private and into the public sphere. Like women and womanhood, children and childhood can be thus understood as being shaped by social, economic and political relations far beyond the parent (especially mother)-child relationship.

The de-naturalising and de-privatising of childhood, it is suggested, can simultaneously lead to a greater feminist appreciation of the articulation of gender and age/generation in different historical and cultural contexts. A feminist sociology of childhood, then, focuses attention on the degree to which "age relations, like gender relations, are built into varied institutions and social circumstances" (Thorne 1987, 99), i.e., how social phenomena are both "gendered" and "generationed" (Alanen 1994, 37).

In their respective discussions Thorne, Oakley and Alanen all emphasize the significance of "adulthood" for social relations, culture and scholarship itself (Thorne 1987, 86; Oakley 1994, 23; Alanen 1994, 27). How adulthood intersects with gender as well as other hierarchies of class, "race,"

sexuality, disability and nationality is also noted. Thorne, for example, points out the articulation of adult/child hierarchies with other forms of oppression and/or exclusion through the construction of women, colonized populations, minorities, and those with disabilities, as being "like children" (1987, 96). An interest in power leads these writers to a concern not only with children's subordination but with their forms of resistance to "adulthood": i.e., how despite the constraints of gender and generation, children are active creators and reproducers of dynamic social relations and culture (Thorne 1987, 101).

The issues raised by the adult study of children parallel those raised by other research across lines of difference and inequality, but as Thorne argues, age or generationally-based social inequalities have a dynamic quality that may result in the adult researchers experiencing "insights of memory" and/or "obstacles to seeing children clearly" as a result of having once been children themselves (Thorne 1987, 102). She and the others call for greater reflexivity amongst researchers about their own positioning within fluid constructions of childhood and adulthood as well as those of gender, class, "race", etc. The interest in seeing gendered children as creators rather than simply passive learners of society and culture is also linked to all three theorists calling for the need to recognize and analyze the "standpoints" of children or children's "ways of seeing" (e.g. Oakley 1994, 29).

As Oakley (1994, 20) points out, the study of children (unlike women's studies) did not develop out of a political movement for children's liberation, but she draws upon the model of feminism and women's studies to call for the "development of children's studies for children." Such a "children's studies" would amongst other things, seek to involve children "fully in the research process" (1994, 26). Thorne and Alanen also address the role of children in child-related research but are more cautious about the possibilities of their involvement. Thorne comments, for example, that while children may help with research they "will never be in central positions of knowledge-creation" (1987, 102), and

Alanen adds that existing adultist institutional constraints mean that children are unlikely "to articulate their achievement, experiences, and knowledge. For this they obviously need [adult] allies" (1994, 41). These comments raise important questions about the politics of child-research and more specifically, the question of children's participation, including their possible roles as generators and consumers of such research.

Although many of the arguments made above are now well established tenets of a growing sociology of childhood, the role of feminism as the inspiration for much of this theorizing is often downplayed in the emerging "canon" of sociological childhood studies (e.g. Cosaro 1997; Jenks 1996). The links are, however, acknowledged in some of the recent anthropological writing that has drawn inspiration from the same source.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD AND FEMINISM

Although there is a well-developed tradition of cross-cultural studies of child development within psychological anthropology, studies of childhood have not been part of the mainstream of the discipline. Within psychological anthropology moreover, the retention of a developmentalist paradigm has resulted in studying childhood as "a permanent state of becoming rather than a legitimate state of being-in-and-for-the-world" (Scheper-Hughes & Sargent 1998, 13). It has also largely eschewed an engagement with feminist or gendered analyses.²

The marginality of the anthropology of childhood is surprising when one reflects upon the "preoccupation with children in many societies and the impact this has on broader social relations" (Caputo 1995, 27). Given the demographics of most fieldwork sites, many anthropologists engage frequently with children during fieldwork and indeed the presence of children is often acknowledged in ethnographic texts, a fact that makes their analytical absence all the more striking. There are a number of possible explanations for this, but at least one is suggested by recent work on the erasure of women's writing in anthropology.

The papers in *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon 1995) reveal that several women anthropologists who did work on children and childhood (e. g. Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and Ella Deloria) saw their achievements downplayed or unrecognized within the emerging male-dominated anthropological canon.

At the same time, anthropology has implicitly or explicitly adopted the historically and culturally-bound model of children as pre-social, passive, dependent and part of a private "natural" domestic sphere beyond the realm of social or cultural analysis. The older metaphor of the fieldworking anthropologist as being "like a child" (Clifford 1997, 201) for example, relied upon the construction of both children and fieldworkers as those who were engaged in the process of learning adult culture through "socialization."³ According to this view, children were of only marginal interest because they were learners, not creators, of culture.

Within feminist anthropology (as within feminist scholarship as a whole) a serious engagement with children and childhood occurs most frequently in the context of a primary focus on motherhood. For example, in *Gendered Fields* (Bell, Caplan and Karim 1993) and *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* (Wolf 1996), two collections devoted to the examination of feminist ethnography, children are present but are discussed primarily within the context of the adult female anthropologists' own (usually problematically privatised) mothering or non-mothering.

An example of this may be seen in the writing of Caplan (1993) who refers to her changing views of Tanzanian women, and especially mothers, over the course of a long-term research involvement. She describes how she initially saw women in the field as very different from herself because as wives and mothers "they were...the antithesis of what I wanted to be: an autonomous professional" (173). She describes how later as a mother of two children herself, she became more interested in, and appreciative of, the ways in which Tanzanian mothers managed to combine childrearing and other forms of work without being accused "of neglecting and damaging their children" (176). She adds that her newly

positive evaluations of Tanzanian motherhood had to be revised again when her later research at a Mother and Child clinic revealed age-based as well as gender-based inequities and conflicts in the areas of family planning, as well as access to food and healthcare (177-78).

Interestingly, there is a similar "motherist" emphasis in Cassell's *Children in the Field* (1987), one of few examples of a volume devoted to issues of children and anthropological fieldwork. The collection centers primarily on the experience of being a parenting (and especially mothering) anthropologist in the field. Various first hand accounts, mostly from the parental perspective, are included and these reveal (often through contrasts with the more collectivized child care experienced in the field) a great deal about the gendered and privatised parenting characteristic of the populations from which the western-trained anthropologists emerge. They also uncover a shared and largely unproblematised cultural construction of the anthropologists' own children as physically vulnerable learners of culture.

Of epistemological interest is the way in which some of the papers attempt to directly incorporate the "voice" of the children of anthropologists, through the inclusion of their own "fieldnotes," diaries and letters. These texts reveal children's own reflections on the fieldwork experience which diverge in fascinating and often painful ways from those of their anthropologist parent/s. Scheper-Hughes (1987) for example, includes passages from the journals of her three children kept during her fieldwork in Brazil. All of the children found their required participation in their mother's fieldwork oppressive to some degree, but they varied in terms of what aspects of the experience were particularly traumatic (e. g. loss of privacy, death of pets), or enjoyable (e. g. soccer and the ready availability of different kinds of candy).

Scheper-Hughes' innovative article and the larger collection directs attention to the possibilities of a more sustained analytical focus on gendered children's participation in the anthropological enterprise. Schrijvers (1993) for instance, describing her fieldwork in Sri Lanka, briefly

alludes to how her own children were: "visiting around, playing with their new friends, and 'doing research' as they say. Sometimes they really come home with very useful information" (1993, 149). Her ambivalence regarding the role of her children in the fieldwork enterprise is apparent in the simultaneous trivialization and vindication of their activities.

That parenting and especially mothering forms the primary context for much feminist anthropological discussion of children is perhaps not surprising given a similar pattern in the broader feminist literature, but this narrow approach is limiting in part because it threatens to reproduce naturalized constructions of women (especially mothers) and children.

As mentioned earlier, however, feminists such as Thorne, Oakley and Alanen have sketched out the possibilities of a broader engagement between feminism and child research and this discussion has been influential in propelling the reinvigorated and broadened anthropology of childhood pioneered in the two edited collections *Children and the Politics of Culture* (Stephens 1995) and *Small Wars, The Cultural Politics of Childhood* (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998). In each of the latter volumes the editors acknowledge feminism as inspiration for their work when they 1) draw attention to parallels between the experiences of women and children, 2) emphasize how feminist theorizing can provide an analytical model for similar work in child research, and 3) include gender as a crucial variable in the creation of diverse and unequal childhoods.

In her introductory essay Stephens, for example, draws a parallel between the dichotomies of female/male and child/adult suggesting that the hardening of both was central to the development of modern capitalism and modern nation-states. She goes on to note how the gendered dynamics of political and economic processes are increasingly well-researched but that analyses of the role of "the child" in such processes are still relatively undeveloped (1995, 6). In a later piece on childhood and nationalism she argues that "child-centred studies (surely as much as research focused on women and gender) represent a promising new

area for rethinking the nation" (Stephens 1997, 11), and in both cases emphasizes the importance of including gender as one of many variables shaping childhood along with class, race, ethnicity, religion and geographical location.

In *Small Wars* (1998), Scheper-Hughes and Sargent make an even closer link between "women and children" in their discussion of how a new world order has disadvantaged both categories. Like Stephens they also, however, draw parallels between male/ female and adult/child hierarchies. An analogy between earlier views of women as being poor anthropological informants and the current absence of children's voices in ethnography is also made, and following Stephens, they invoke feminism when making their claim for the possibilities of child-focused research, arguing that a "child-centred anthropology contains all the elements for a radical paradigm shift, similar to the salutary effects resulting from the feminist critique of the discipline" (1998, 15).

The argument that feminist research on women and gender has paved the way for an anthropology of childhood is found again in Gottlieb's (1998) recent article on Beng infancy where she claims that feminist anthropology, by bringing women's "natural" tasks of childrearing into the cultural, has created a space for an anthropology of infancy. She writes: "now that women are at last accepted as properly anthropological subjects, it is theoretically possible that women's inevitable involvements with children, including infants, those seemingly humblest of all humans, may be the next source of ethnographic inspiration" (Gottlieb 1998, 131).

The repeated references to a close relationship between feminism and child research represents an important break with an older anthropology of childhood that did not engage with feminism to any significant degree. The repeated invocation of women's/gender/feminist studies as a model for child research, however, may have the paradoxical effect of juxtaposing feminist research and child research as mutually exclusive bodies of scholarship with the result that the potential for a "feminist anthropology of childhood" is obscured.

There is some indication of such a

juxtaposition in the newer work. For example, although both Stephens (1995) and Scheper-Hughes and Sargent (1998) list gender as a crucial variable of childhood difference and inequality, it is noticeable that although several articles within their respective volumes reveal the significance of gendered categories of girlhood and boyhood, only one article of the two collections refers to gendered children in its title (Sargent and Harris 1998). The lack of salience of gendered childhoods is in sharp contrast to the focus placed on the practices and meanings of gendered parenting (especially mothering).⁴

Similarly, Gottlieb (1998), despite acknowledging the importance of feminism in bringing infancy into the realm of the social, does not develop her passing references to the ways in which Beng infancy is itself gendered. In the new anthropology of childhood, it appears feminism is heralded as a model but a gendered analysis of children's lives may not always be sustained. Insofar as this is true, it suggests that it remains a challenge for many anthropologists of childhood, including feminists, to produce analyses that focus on both the gendered social relations of adulthood (especially mothering) that surround children, and the gendered lives of children themselves.

In reflecting on my own writing to date, I see this same tendency. My anthropological field research has focused on a minority population in Ireland - the Travelling People. I have written on a variety of topics including those of gender and childhood. What is striking in retrospect, however, is how I have conceptually separated these issues (e.g. Helleiner 1997, 1998a, 1998b). In the case of an article focusing on "gender" and anti-Traveller racism, I focus almost exclusively on the constructions and lived experiences of gendered adults, with a primary focus on women and especially mothers. In contrast, in the two articles focusing on the politics of "childhood" and anti-Traveller racism, I acknowledge a conceptual debt to feminist research, but with the exception of a discussion of children's gendered work (a particularly well developed sub-area within childhood studies), do not pursue in a systematic way a gendered analysis of the politics of Traveller

childhood.

What might a feminist anthropology of childhood look like? What movements are there towards analyses that take up the gendered lives of children?

TOWARD A FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

While Oakley suggests (making a parallel with women's studies) that the early stages of children's studies may require an emphasis upon "children's status as a homogeneous group in order to make them visible at all" (Oakley 1994, 22), James, Jenks and Prout (1998) criticize the tendency of childhood studies to play down variables such as gender and age that separate children from one another (1998, 186). Certainly feminism has long since relinquished models of homogenous womanhood, and an anthropological treatment of childhood premised on the recognition of diversity should be able to develop a more sustained feminist anthropology of childhood.

An example of anthropological work that does foreground gendered childhoods is *Children's Lifeworlds* (1994) by Olga Nieuwenhuys. This study of children's lives in Kerala, India, pays careful attention to the articulation of age and gender. In her discussion of the cultural construction of childhood, for example, Nieuwenhuys notes how girls reached social adulthood (i. e. marriageability) earlier than boys. She uses this example to remind the reader that "age hierarchies, as a rule, are only valid for specific gender roles" (Nieuwenhuys 1994, 24).

The focus of the study is on children's work and Nieuwenhuys examines the differential positioning of girls and boys in various forms of paid and unpaid labour. She draws in part upon feminist literature to understand the significance of children's gendered work for positions in their households, the education system, and the wider regional and global economy. She demonstrates how the low paid or unpaid work of male and female children in fact maintains the viability of their households and the competitiveness of local industries in the global market.

Nieuwenhuys suggests that feminist work inspired her commitment to emphasizing the active roles of children and her desire to capture "children's subjective views of the world around them" (Nieuwenhuys 1994, 7). She emphasizes how children reflect (in gendered ways) upon their lives and specifically upon their work obligations to their families; noting, for example, that children often place a higher value on their work than do the adults around them.

Nieuwenhuys includes a useful reflective account of the significance of "adulthood" in the field, but unfortunately does not combine this with a discussion of gender (Nieuwenhuys 1994, 4-6). In a more recent article, however, she takes a different tack, claiming that women, because of their experience of discrimination in the arena of work "are likely to be girls' foremost allies in contesting modern childhood's ideal of economic uselessness" (Nieuwenhuys 1996, 247). This statement about the potential of a gender-based commonality transcending age/generation is a provocative one for a feminist anthropology of childhood and in need of more discussion and investigation.⁵

Another monograph that can be seen as a pioneer of feminist ethnography of childhood is Barrie Thorne's *Gender Play* (1993). This study of children's lives in the playgrounds and classrooms of two American schools successfully achieves its goal of helping "bring children from the margins and into the center of sociological and feminist thought" (1993, 4).

Thorne focuses on children as active creators rather than passive learners of gender identities and roles. Her observations are aimed at demonstrating how the categories and identities of age and generation (e.g. "adult" and "child") as well as those of gender (e.g. "boy" and "girl") are heightened within the school setting through specific social relations and social practices such as gendered P.A. announcements, teacher-initiated gender-segregated seating plans and lines, as well as child-initiated chasing games and lunchroom geography (Thorne 1993, 27).

To a greater extent than Nieuwenhuys, Thorne combines detailed ethnographic

documentation of children's lives with a reflexive account of the research process. She equates the adult study of children with other forms of "studying down" (i. e. research on the relatively powerless) and describes how her attempt to approach children in spirit of "respectful discovery" in order to "uncover and document kids' points of view and meanings" (Thorne 1993, 13) was constrained by her more powerful and gendered adult status (Thorne 1993, 16-20).

The significance of a gendered adulthood in the research setting is explored through reflections upon how her own experiences of girlhood and motherhood influenced her interactions with and responses to children in the field. Thorne comments, for example, that her emotional attachment to girlhood meant that she experienced more detachment and clarity when analyzing boys' social relations and activities although she notes that this may also reflect the fact that "our categories for understanding have been developed more out of the lives of boys and men than girls and women" (Thorne 1993, 26). She describes also how her adult experience of mothering manifested itself through occasional feelings of maternalism toward some children. In her conclusion, Thorne reveals her explicit engagement with the feminist project of reducing gendered inequalities in schools, through altering adult practices.

An example of a less ethnographic but nonetheless anthropological feminist approach to childhood can be found in Purnima Mankekar's (1997) work on childhood and nationalism in India. In her analysis of the competing Indian discourses (including feminist ones) surrounding a young Muslim girl allegedly sold into marriage by her family to an elderly Arab man, gendered childhood (in this case, girlhood), is foregrounded in such a way that feminist theorizing can be directly brought to bear on the research rather than being invoked simply as a model for such theorizing. Her conclusion that the case of the Muslim girl "Ameena" drew widespread attention, commentary and various forms of intervention because of a constructed synecdochic relationship between the purity of "girl children" (as represented by Ameena) and "the purity of the Indian nation,"

provides an important gendered lens on wider discussion of childhood and nationalism.

In focusing explicitly on the positioning and politics of "girl children," Mankekar's paper reveals the possibilities for linkages between a feminist anthropology of childhood and the sub-field of "girl studies" that has drawn much of its impetus from a feminist cultural youth studies (especially the work of Angela McRobbie 1991). In contrast to the sociology or anthropology of childhood, "girl studies" appears to have emerged more organically from, and been embraced less problematically by, feminist scholarship. "Girl studies," while characterized by a focus on western female "youth," has recently been expanding to more global scholarship (e.g. Inness 1998) as well as the lives of younger girls (e.g. Walkerdine 1997).

This literature with its explicit focus on gendered childhood and its comfortable position within feminism can provide inspiration for a feminist anthropology of childhood while anthropological perspectives can in turn contribute more global perspectives and theoretical analyses of the relationship between "girlhood" and the politics of culture, racism, nationalism and, indeed, research and writing.

Inspired by these examples, I am revisiting my own field research amongst Irish Travellers in order to examine more closely the gendered politics of childhood and my own gendered and adultist positioning "in the field" vis-à-vis gendered children.

In my present writing I am trying to address how a state settlement policy and program for Travellers that has often been legitimated as a form of ungendered "child saving," has in fact portrayed Traveller "girls" more frequently than "boys" as "victims" of an itinerant lifestyle. Likewise I am interested in how anti-Traveller racist discourse that involved claims of "saving" non-Traveller children from Travellers has more often invoked the need to protect non-Traveller "girls" than "boys."

When it comes to lived experience, I am also paying more attention to how Traveller "girls" and "boys" have been targeted by the state and

other agencies in distinctive ways: for example, through gender-segregated educational programs and youth training programs. I am interested in the implications of these for gendered trajectories of an expanding period of "youth."

At the same time, I am discussing how reforms introduced by the Catholic Church for this minority population (e.g. attempts to discourage young, arranged and close-kin marriages), have intersected with existing cultural practices to create divergently gendered challenges and opportunities for Traveller female and male "youth" in the areas of sexuality, courtship and household formation. This kind of analysis should illuminate more clearly the location of female and male Traveller children and youth vis-à-vis an increasingly politicized cultural identity politics in Ireland.

In re-examining my own gendered adultism as a fieldworker, I am reflecting on how in the Traveller camp where I was living, both boys and girls visited my trailer several times daily to chat or to simply sit silently and watch my activities. I am retrospectively aware of the degree to which, while actively fostering relationships with children (and including information gleaned from my conversations with them in my fieldnotes), I was nonetheless uneasy about the cultural and ethical propriety of using children as respondents and was skeptical about the accuracy of the information that I gathered from them.

Looking back, my own gendered adultism is evident. Despite my relatively easy access to children, I was more interested in what adults had to say about children, and what children had to say about adults, than what children had to say about themselves. The result was little appreciation of the opportunity provided to explore gendered children's active participation in and shaping of social relations and culture and to reflect more deeply upon their interactions with me. By paying particular attention to the ways in which girls and boys actively interacted in gendered ways with me as a married, childless non-Traveller adult woman, I am trying to address the significance of gendered adult-child interactions in the field.

CONCLUSION

A call for feminists to pay more attention to "the child" and child researchers to pay more attention to feminism, may be received with ambivalence by those who see feminism as more properly focused on women, and child research as requiring a downplaying of gendered differences. I have suggested, however, that feminism and feminist anthropology in particular, can benefit from greater attention to children's lives beyond the mother-child relationship, recognition of the diversity of childhoods, and acknowledgement of children's agency and subjectivity. All of these destabilize hegemonic constructions of children and childhood that have and continue to impinge disproportionately on constructions of and experiences of women. While this requires a suspension of the problematic (albeit sometimes strategically useful) assumptions about the shared interests of women (especially mothers) and children, it promises a surer footing for research and practice.

At the same time, childhood studies, and the anthropology of childhood in particular, can benefit by not only invoking feminism as a model for a "child-centred" anthropology, but through using feminist theory as a tool for the analysis of gendered childhoods themselves. Grappling in a more sustained way with the gendered categories of "girlhood" and "boyhood," for example, allows child researchers to develop more sophisticated analyses of the socially constructed nature of

childhood as well as the diversities and inequalities that it subsumes. It also will assist in developing greater reflexivity about the significance of gendered adulthood in research practice and writing.

Finally, to return to my original preoccupation regarding my own academic location, one of the benefits of a feminist anthropology of childhood is the opportunity that it presents for introducing feminist thinking to a overwhelmingly female student population who have chosen to major in "Child Studies." In my experience this population is more willing to embrace feminist "girl studies" than the more "motherist" feminist literature - a phenomenon that reveals something of the relations of gender and generation in the academy itself.

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ENDNOTES

1. Firestone's discussion of the history of childhood includes some reference to the complications of class and gender. She argued, for example, that children of the upper class formed a "lower class," by virtue of their age and that: "childhood did not apply to women. The female child went from swaddling clothes right into adult female dress" (1970, 80-1). While these insights are not developed they anticipate more recent discussion about the fluidity of child/adult categories and their relationship to other forms of social inequality.

2. An example of recent work in the anthropology of childhood that pays little attention to gender is Briggs (1998) *Inuit Morality Play*. Although the innovative and rich ethnography focuses on a three year old Inuit girl's emotional education, the study keeps the focus on ungendered Inuit "childhood" rather than "girlhood".

3. Clifford in discussing what he sees as an earlier distinction between travel writers and anthropological fieldworkers makes a "provocative" contrast between the perceived "promiscuity" of travel writers and the "family values" claimed by anthropologists who, he writes, have tended to describe their fieldwork "as a process of getting along with others, of adoption, initiation, learning local norms-much as a child learns" (Clifford 1997, 201). Cole adds to this the observation that women anthropologists: "instead of being

trained or even encouraged to develop a self-concept as an adult anthropologist...have been socialized to position themselves as daughters in the field and as 'daughterly ethnographers' in their texts" (Cole 1995, 178-9). Her comments reveal how constructions of fieldworking anthropologists are both generationed and gendered.

4. In *Small Wars* (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998) in particular, several of the papers are as much (or more) about the cultural politics of mothering than childhood itself.

5. In another intriguing comment Nieuwenhuys notes that following her post-fieldwork transition into motherhood, she began to endorse increasingly adultist [motherist?] views of children's lives (Nieuwenhuys 1994, 6-7). Clearly there is much more to be explored in the area of gendered adultism, including maternalism and its significance for child research.

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