Agency Revisited.

Relational theories on childhood, children and their capacity to act

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Florian Esser, University of Hildesheim, Germany
Childhood Agency Revisited

1. Agency and Childhood Studies: state of the art
2. „The nodes themselves have no agency“: Relational perspectives on agency and network theories
   1. “Reassembling the Social“: actor-networks
   2. “Identities Seek Control“: positioning within a network
   3. “Netdom switches”: The multiplication of identities
3. Conclusion: The potentials of relational perspectives for Childhood Studies
Agency and Childhood Studies

“It [...] needs to be said that much of the writing on children’s agency draws on a particular rendition of the relation between agency and structure which largely ignores the huge wealth of writing more broadly within sociology on this topic.” (Oswell 2013: 38)

• agency as a pre-social human capacity; children‘s pre-existing agency to be found empirically
• no possibility to differentiate between children and adults
• alternative question: What agency derives for children from the fact that they are children?
„The nodes themselves 'have' no agency“ (Fuchs 2001: 256)

- agency theory “aims not just to sidestep the “structure and agency” problem, but to build on grounds of concepts that eliminate that problem” (White 2008: 15).
- relational social theories: dynamic relations define actors, not the other way around
- relational network perspectives: Bruno Latour, Stephan Fuchs, Harrison C. White
„Reassembling the Social“: actor-networks

- ’empirism‘: actors are defined through networks, not through an anthropological status
- Knorr-Cetina (2001): human identities are constructed in interplay with material worlds and their agency is distributed across them
- ANT und Childhood Studies:
  - Turmel (2008): „childhood collective“ and the developing child
  - Place (2000): „technomorphic bodies“ in an intensive care unit
„Identities Seek Control“: positioning within a network

- identities emerge from efforts to gain control; through positioning („social footing“) uncertainty is reduced (White 2008: 17)
- „persons“ as a special case of nodes within a network – „child“ as a possible identity within social networks
- How may children said to have agency if they are so often powerless in our society (Tisdall/Punch 2012: 256)?
- powerlessness not as the opposite to agency but as a possible effect of certain relations
“Netdom switches”: The multiplication of identities

- children are no self-identical beings
- “Even [sic!] as children, we mix different groups while intermixing our living in different realms.” (White 2008: 11)
- “Netdom switches” – changes between different network domains
- Empirical example from fieldwork in SOS children’s villages: holistic child as construction of one netdom
Conclusion: The potentials of relational perspectives for Childhood Studies

• What agency is related to childhood and which positions as actors may children have?
  – childhood as a social construction that plays a part in defining agency and at the same time is defined through children’s agency
  – agency as a *social* phenomenon
  – possibility to address questions of power beyond simple dichotomies

• agency as an object of research – self reflexivity as a standard for Childhood Studies (Spyrou 2011)
Thank you!

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