STRUCTURE AND AGENCY
SQUARING THE CIRCLE

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Valentine (2011) argues Giddens’ notion of structuration continues to be influential in childhood studies.

‘every act which contributes to the production of a structure is also an act of production and as such may initiate change by altering the structure at the same time as it reproduces it’ (Giddens 1979:69)

‘children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live’ (Prout and James 1997:8)
Qvortrup – childhood must be understood as structural component of ‘developed’ societies

Collective location of children in childhood should be of interest rather than individual differences among children

‘whereas children are the unit of observation, childhood should be the unit of analysis’ (Saporiti 1994:193)
Qvortrup – children’s exclusion from labour market – introduction of mass schooling etc

Set in motion new conceptions of childhood as distinct phase of life separate from adulthood

Childhood characterised by continuity and change

‘When the child grows up and becomes an adult, his or her childhood comes to an end but childhood as a form does not go away and will stay there to receive new generations of children (Qvortrup 2011:26)
Alanen (2001) draws on Mannheim. Generational cohorts based on age may share and experience a common history and this may lead them to develop a sense of solidarity. By living through the same historical, political and cultural period, cohorts could develop similar attitudes which could turn into shared consciousness that could facilitate social transformation.
Narvanen and Nasman (2004) Qvortrup’s usage of term generation is conceptually vague

Life phase more accurately framework than generation

Mannheim problematic – simply being born during a particular time period not enough to typify a generation

Mannheim three components – generation as a location, actuality and unit
For generation as an actuality and generation as a unit – individual members of a generation must actively reflect on their shared experiences and use their common location to implement change or at the very least question the knowledge created and passed on by previous generations.
Valentine (2011) some childhood sociologists adopt very minimal meaning of agency.

‘the babies share in promoting and sustaining their basic health care...this could be taken as evidence of their incipient responsibilities. Their agency as right holders was interpreted during our interviews with parents and staff in the babies’ positive responses and possible resistances; babies’ crying out for care, wriggling into a comfortable position (Alderson et al 2005:79)
Moran-Ellis (2013) childhood sociologists do not make clear enough distinctions between meaning making, action and agency.

Action is seen as tantamount to agency.
Agency

- King (2007) ‘is it the same “social agent” as exists in social theory, that is an agent capable of bringing about changes in social structures or has the concept mutated in entering the pedagogical programme of children’s autonomy’
- Agent seen as property of self – led to plethora of small scale micro studies based on illustrating children’s subjective, active, meaning making everyday activities
King (2007:208) ‘the account of the child as “social agent” owes much more to the new sociologists of childhood’s preferred image of rational, competent, self-controlled children than to any evidence that the social institutions on which society depends actually change themselves as the direct result of children’s concerted actions and that these changes reflect what the children wanted or intended’
Five unresolved myths:

1. myth of individual child – capability defined as individual trait rather than emerging from situated contexts
2. children and adults occupying separate worlds
3. children and adults occupying divided, homogeneous space
4. overwhelming location of children’s agency within small scale micro settings
5. the myth of the social agent ‘agency neither starts nor finishes with any individual agent’
Generagency

- Gener – aspect of concept involves acknowledging ongoing relevance of generation for understanding the location of childhood and adulthood and the implications of this positioning for both parties
- Agency – aspect recognises children as agents who actively construct their own everyday lives and those around them but do so within the positioning of childhood relative to adulthood
- Since adulthood and childhood are experienced relationally then it is likely that agency is practiced relationally
Alanen (2011:170) empirical research drawing on generation as a conceptual lens could reveal:

1. those structures that can be identified as specifically generational
2. the inter-dependent positions that these generational structures define for generational groups to take and to act from
3. the social and cultural practices of positioning – both the self – and other positioning – through which the current generational structures and the generational order as their composite structure are generated, maintained and (occasionally) transformed
Generagency

- Inter-generagency – myriad of ways in which childhood and adulthood is performed and enacted across the various locations that make up the everyday lives of both children and adults
- Underlines fact that children and adults do not live in separate worlds, they share the same world but from different locations largely based on generation
Inter-generagency

- Boundaries exist between adulthood and childhood but like all boundaries these positions are not fixed and immutable but porous, fluid and constantly shifting and changing
- Adulthood and childhood are practiced relationally
- Relationships are for most part asymmetrical but also interdependent and reciprocal
- Within this broad asymmetrical relationship children accept, resist, challenge and modify relationship in myriad ways
Highlights heterogeneity of children’s everyday lives within the structural location of childhood.

Children do not experience boundaries in uniform ways – other structural boundaries such as class, gender, ethnicity intersect with childhood (applies to inter-generagency) – these variables interact socially and practically with generation.
Intra-generagency

- In practising agency, children appropriate, use and transform adult understandings of the social world
- Thorne (1993) Gender Play
- Connolly (1998) ethnicity and masculinity
- Corsaro (1997) ‘interpretive reproduction’
- Inter-generagency and intra-generagency co-exist
- Children and adults – placed along a relational continuum intersecting inter-generagency and intra-generagency
- Draw on previous empirical work