



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Theorising transgressive developmental trajectories and understanding children seen as 'different'

Book Section

How to cite:

O'Dell, Lindsay; Brownlow, Charlotte and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, Hanna (2017). Theorising transgressive developmental trajectories and understanding children seen as 'different'. In: O'Dell, Lindsay; Brownlow, Charlotte and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, Hanna eds. *Different Childhoods: Non/Normative Development and Transgressive Trajectories*. Routledge.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2018 Routledge

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315623467>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Chapter 11

Theorising transgressive developmental trajectories and understanding children seen as ‘different’

Lindsay O’Dell¹, Charlotte Brownlow² and Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist³

¹The Open University, UK, ²The University of Southern Queensland, Australia,

³University of Umea, Sweden.

In this final chapter we revisit the three inter-related themes that have structured the book to explore how they offer possibilities with which to refine and extend knowledge about non/normative development and ‘different’ childhoods. Burman (2008b) asks: “How can we move from being subjects of development’s collusions to becoming agents of its change?” (p. 230), and calls for new ways of viewing development that cease to perpetuate ‘deviations’ from the norm as pathological, but rather challenge hegemonic cultural norms. Through the book authors have discussed ways of showing (and imagining) how development can be done and experienced differently, producing different kinds of possible child subjects. In the discussion below we consider possibilities of understanding, theorising and researching development differently.

Themes of ‘deconstructing developmental tasks’, the ‘location of development’ and the ‘limits of childhood’

This collection has been structured around three core themes that speak to critiques (both within and outside) of developmental psychology. It is clear that the themes are inter-related and that the topics covered by individual chapters move across themes. The chapters bring together a number of issues that are relevant to understanding and developing theory about non-normative or different childhoods. In

the first theme, *deconstructing 'developmental tasks'*, the authors explored ways in which normative development is concerned with the successful mastery of (appropriate, normative) skills and abilities. The specific tasks discussed were; the assumed need to develop appropriate (but not excessive) engagement with hobbies and interests; the need to develop a gendered identity (rather than fluid gendered identity or a non binary identification) and the development of (assumed to be) appropriate styles of friendship and ways of being social.

The second theme focused on *locating development* and explored how development takes place in particular geopolitical and classed spaces and within particular understandings of gender, ethnicity and other intersections of social identity. The chapters discussed geographical location as it intersects with understandings of nation, childhood, and gender for child migrants in a host country; gender and role models within families and other care settings; the location of the child as a vulnerable subject; and development as located within particular understandings of mothers' work, food and social class.

The third theme of this collection explored *the limits of childhood* and the ways in which children who are seen to stand outside the category of 'child' are represented and understood. The two examples offered in the book were child workers and children who have committed murder. In both chapters the construction of a child was seen in relation to the duties of adults to provide for and protect children and to ensure that they develop appropriately.

Contributors to the book have explored a number of ways through which 'normality' and hence difference is brought into being. The first is through technologies to measure development and normative functioning. These include

Ryder and Brownlow's discussion (in chapter two) of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) to understand and make sense of children's hobbies and interests as either normative or in need of control and correction. Psy disciplinary knowledge more generally is brought into play in understanding the lives of many children, for example in Robb et al's discussion (in chapter five) of the assumed need for male role models for boys. Johnson's chapter discusses the ways in which 'gender' as a binary category is brought into being through psy disciplinary knowledge of gender development. Other technologies are also invoked to measure development in particular ways and used to hold parents (particularly mothers) to account if their child is not developing 'appropriately'. For example Woolhouse (in chapter five) discusses the use of BMI (body mass index) as a technology to measure children's weight as a way to frame and problematise working class women's food practices.

It is evident from contributing chapters, from our previous work (O'Dell & Brownlow, 2015) and that of others (Goodley et al, 2016; Walkderine, 1993) that developmental discourse has constructed a notion of a 'normal' child against which particular children are measured against and seen to be different. This is discussed by Ryder and Brownlow in chapter two, where they discussed how mothers compare their child (all of whom had a diagnostic label of autism) to an idealised 'normal' child in order to understand and locate their child's hobbies and interests as either acceptable or in need of modification. Ideas about normative childhoods are also played out in the media, as shown for example by Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Brownlow in chapter four discuss how girls' magazines serve as a site of management and articulation of normative friendship and sociality for girls.

Comparisons of 'different' childhoods to assumed normative activities and tasks of childhood position children who transgress these as either culpable or as in need of protection. For example, in chapter nine, O'Dell et al discussed how the dominant construction of childhood as a time for play and school position child workers as unable to be 'real' children. Intervention is thus required to enable child workers to 'have a childhood' (i.e. to attend school) and participate in work but only if it fits with engagement under the direction and protection of adults.

Commentators such as Mayall (2012) have noted that INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations) who traditionally have aimed campaigning at a model of childhood as one in need of protection, have moved to a focus on children's rights. This is evident most clearly in the human rights perspective on childhood articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC, 1989). However, universal ideas about childhood as a time for play and school continue to dominate, with the assumption that development is unquestionably good (Burman, 2008b).

Although INGOs may have shifted to an understanding of children's rights rather than a focus on protection, dominant understandings of childhood still draw on a view of children as in need of protection, adult supervision and dependency. Contributors to the book have critiqued the dominant discourse of childhood being inherently need of protection. For example in chapter seven, where Callaghan and Fellin detail ways in which children who live with domestic violence utilise creative strategies for keeping themselves and their siblings safe and to find spaces of safety and comfort. Discussions on unaccompanied child migrants and child workers also point to the complex interplay in seeking to protect (particular kinds of) children and

the conditions in which children live. The authors argue for children to be seen as active agents in their development, but note that they are often operating within systems and institutions that, in acting on their behalf, often constrain and limit, or fail to see resilience or agency.

The construction of the child as in need of protection positions children, who for many reasons act independently of adult supervision, as culpable. For example in chapter eight, Mahati and Palmary discuss how the role of aid workers to protect independent child migrants is conflicted with judgements about the children and whether they 'deserve' help. Transgressions, particularly for girls working outside the camp to earn money, move them from the category of child and thus positioned as undeserving, contributing to the high level of incidents of sexual assault/rape for these girls.

Authors of chapters in the book have powerfully demonstrated the dangers of 'difference' for children, adults, and cultures/nations. Callaghan and Fellin (in chapter seven) discussed how mothers who have been subjected to domestic abuse are blamed (or at the least held accountable) for the wellbeing and potential harm arising from their children witnessing violence in the home. Blame and accountability is a common thread through the book. For example, working class mothers are held accountable for the health of their families (as discussed by Woolhouse in chapter five) whereas in discussions, particularly within the media but also enacted in policy, the need of boys to have male role models renders invisible the role (and contribution) of women present in the lives of children and normalises the absence of fathers (see, Phoenix, 2009).

Accountability and moral judgements are starkly in evidence in Holt's discussion in chapter ten about children who kill. Holt discusses ways in which previous experiences of abuse or 'damage' in childhood can shift blame to construct children who have killed others as concurrently a victim as well as an aggressor. Holt is careful to argue that not all difference is of equal moral weight and that children who kill may be thought of as 'the final frontier' of childhood. She argues that it is important to view children as "not only their difference", rather than children move in and out of normativity and difference.

Possibilities for understanding and theorising normality and difference

The idea that children's development is not universal, but rather contextual and socially/historically constructed, has been advocated by both those within and outside of developmental psychology as a discipline (for example Burman, 2008 a & b; 2015; James & Prout, 2015; Morss, 1996; Walkderine, 1993). In the section below we discuss how the collection of chapters as a whole can inform critique and theory about development and the move through time. The discussion moves between and through developmental psychology as a discipline, reflecting our alliances and affiliations as a set of authors and reflects a broader tension in considering how to theorise the move through time and ideas about deconstructing development. Morss (1996) argued that "Human development is too important to be left to psychology". Responses have variously been described as 'deconstruction', 'anti-development', 'postdevelopment', and 'non development' (see Burman, 2008b; Motzhau, 2006; Morss, 1996). Burman's work illustrates, particularly through her two 'sister' books 'deconstructing developmental psychology' and 'developments: child, image, nation', the need to be both within and out-with the discipline to critique the notion of

development and knowledge about different childhoods. As Callaghan et al (2015, p. 256) suggests:

“Burman encourages us to see our scholarly activities as always contextual, as produced within and for specific contexts and moments, and as fulfilling particular purposes”.

Our aim is to open up spaces for discussion rather than close down or fracture debate into disciplinary boundaries. In this respect our endeavor is similar to Burman’s above and also informed by the approach taken by Goodley et al (2016) in their theorization of being human. Goodley et al argue, in their discussions about disability and being human (which at times is difficult for disabled people to claim or be accorded by others), that they want to, “remain *critical* of the category of the human, at the same time as we *claim* the human” (p.772, italics in original). Similarly we want to remain *critical* of the notion of development (as a progressive unitary cumulative acquisition of skills through time) but at the same time *claim* development (in its diverse and strategic forms) as a powerful discourse for articulating children’s move through time in ways that are strategic, political and provisional. Further Goodley et al argue, “We find ourselves disavowing the human (we desire it but also resist its narrow confines) whilst re-centering disability as the space through which to rethink what it means to be human” (p. 772). Similarly we find ourselves wanting to recognise development (but also resist its narrow confines) to use developmental claims where required, and also acknowledge that the need to be legitimated and seen as ‘normal’ is powerful for many who struggle with difference.

In the following section we sketch out issues that we view as tasks for engaging in thinking differently about development. The themes we have identified as

useful in this endeavor (and discussed below) are: the need for technologies of measuring development; rethinking the move through time; challenging representations of different and normative childhoods and prioritising a relational focus.

Developmental psychology and technologies of measuring development

Considering developmental psychology as a discipline, Burman (2015, p.412) noted that “we are far from knowing or being able to deliver on models, theories, and practices concerning what developmental psychology could be.”. If we view developmental psychology as a discipline producing knowledge and technologies with which to measure normative development, one task would be to think critically and creatively to produce different technologies with which to understand and document development in its diverse forms. For example, in considering friendship (a core topic in developmental psychology curricula, texts, and research) developmental psychologists have traditionally focused on particular tasks, such as reciprocity and sociality. Traditional developmental research operationalises ideas about being social, making friends and playing in particular ways (Brownlow et al, 2015). As an illustration, parallel play is where children engage in activity by themselves but in close proximity, ‘parallel’, with another child). It is assumed to be common in young children but to give way to more social forms of play involving others as the child grows older. Children (and adults) with autism who do not progress from parallel to social play are seen to be developing inappropriately (Brownlow et al, 2015). Failure to play ‘properly’, in this instance, engaging in social kinds of play, pushes the child into a category of not developing appropriately (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010).

In the example of children with autism, mainstream understandings of the development of sociality and friendship construct the normal child against which autistic development is seen as in need of concern and correction. Work is required to broaden, enrich, and extend ideas about what it means to be social, including the need to recognise diversity, enable autistic socialising, and recognise alternative ways of being social. Developmental descriptions need to take account of the diversity of children's experiences, capabilities, and capacities. Continuing with this example, the task is then to produce technologies, measures, and ways of viewing friendship that attend to the abilities and location of the child rather than an assumed universal norm.

Rethinking the move through time

The assumption of a universal developmental trajectory brings into being particular kinds of children, developmental activities, and normative development. Within this assumption there are two inter-related issues in need of critique. One is the proposition of a developmental trajectory, i.e. the assumed link between past, present, and future, and the second is to question the assumed inevitability and naturalness of particular outcomes of development.

Viewing development as an uncomplicated link between past, present, and future is unhelpful to many. There is a body of literature that has critiqued the notion of inevitable harm arising from childhood trauma (including Callaghan & Fellin's chapter in this volume; O'Dell, 1997, Warner, 2008). It is clear that the rehabilitated subject is constructed in normative ways; particular kinds of long term outcomes are seen as demonstrating 'recovery' from abusive experiences (such as being sexually active within largely heteronormative, monogamous limits) whereas other kinds of outcome are seen as directly linked to past trauma (such as being celibate or choosing

not to become a parent), O'Dell, (1997, 2015). Linked to the themes in this book, we argue that there is a need to trouble the assumed outcomes of development, to query the notion of successful transitions into adulthood, where success is narrowly measured in terms of independent living, a regular paid job at the regular labor market and forming a long-lasting partnership and family in a social and chronologically age-appropriate time.

The construction of development as progression is naturalised in everyday practice and discourse. For example, in the introductory chapter to this book we discussed the 'red book' (Personal Child Health Record, Royal College of Paediatricians, 2009, cited in Goodley et al, 2016) a small book with a red cover, given to all parents/carers of newborn children in England. The book is a way for practitioners and parents/carers to record measurements of a child's health and development from birth until they are at least school age. Goodley et al (2016) argued that mechanisms such as the 'red book' structure ideas about normative development within normative trajectories. They give the example of children with Down's Syndrome whose parents/carers are given a special insert for their red book which charts the development of a typically developing Down's child, although Goodley et al note that development is conceptualised in this insert as very similar to 'normative' development, just at a slower pace. Goodley et al highlighted the experiences of parents whose child had Down's syndrome and how their child's development does not accord with the trajectory outlined in the special insert. Children with Down's syndrome are constructed concurrently as needing to follow a similar developmental path to 'normal' children but at the same time as deficient and different to them. The opportunity to articulate the development of disabled children in a different way is

lost within attempts to maintain development as a singular, progressive, cumulative move through time (Goodley et al, 2016).

There is an established body of work (within and outside of developmental psychology as a discipline) that has sought to deconstruct developmental psychology and offer an alternative approach to understanding the move through time that is not conceptualized as a coherent, cumulative process. Theorists, particularly those informed by critical disability, queer and crip approaches, have interrogated assumptions of development and ability in imagining the future (Slater, 2015). In the book *Growing 'sideways'*, Bond Stockton (2009) discusses the notion of 'sideways growth' to interrogate the assumptions of a normative trajectory through time. Stockton talks about ways of growing that sidestep normative expectations, suggesting that, "One could explore the elegant, unruly contours of growing that doesn't bespeak continuance" (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 13).

Similarly, a queer theoretical perspective of normative development and time, or what Halberstam (2005) refers to as 'queer temporality', enables an alternative to heteronormative time (in which time and developmental trajectories are not based on the generation of families, with development and life course revolving around heterosexual reproduction) and which resists definitions of non-normativity (such as voluntary childlessness) as an expression of immaturity or lack of development (see also Hemmings' 2002 among others' critique of a linear model of sexual development from the perspective of bisexuality).

If the move through time is conceptualized as 'elegant and unruly' (as suggested by Bond Stockton, 2009) rather than progressive and cumulative, theorising development takes on a different focus. The move through time may be best

understood as a process of flux and fluidity, in which links between past, present and future are partial and subject to renegotiation rather than being pre-determined.

Challenging representations of different/normative childhoods

Through this collection authors have discussed ways in which the image of a normative child is invoked to exemplify particular concerns, such as symbols of a nation (Mahati & Palmery), as well as an overarching concern about the state of childhood. Earlier in this chapter we discussed how representations of childhood are drawn on in campaigns by INGOs, which have largely shifted from a focus on protection to that of child rights, whilst retaining a normative construction of childhood and assumptions about appropriate tasks and activities for children. However the appeal to protect (particular kinds of) children is still powerfully felt and represented in media images of children.

Where children transgress assumptions about normative childhood they are generally positioned as having lost out on childhood, or to be seen as outside of the realm of being a child. This is particularly evident in Holt's chapter in this volume. The discourse of loss of childhood is strongly articulated in public discourse, policy and media, the need to protect (particular kinds of) children and permit them to 'be children' is strongly articulated, however other kinds of children (such as unaccompanied child migrants) demonstrate the limits of adult concern and the intersection of protection with constructions of childhood innocence.

Knowledge about the developing child and processes of development is picked up in particular ways within public discussion and representation of normative/different childhoods. Developmental psychology and ideas about

children's development are invoked and used in uncomfortable and unhelpful ways in policy and practice concerning children and families. For example the use of developmental knowledge in parenting programmes, which "entrench normative assumptions about childhood in the production of 'good outcomes' for children." (Callaghan et al, 2015, p.263; see also Holt, 2010). Critical work is necessary to highlight the ways in which knowledge about children's development is being selectively (and politically) drawn on to inform policy and intervention.

Burman (2015, p.413) notes the "disjuncture between the imagined child and the everyday lives of children". Work is required to broaden, enrich and extend the scope of investigation into the everyday lives of children, to see them in a unidimensional way- as the young carer, child with autism, etc, but as inhabiting a number of positions and identities, at times normative and at others non-normative or transgressive. We are not arguing that all difference is good, there are examples provided in this volume where difference is contested, uncomfortable and problematic. However, in discussing children who kill Holt (this volume) argues 'children are not only their difference'. It is evident that children move in and out of difference and normativity, "commonality and diversity are, simultaneously, at work in all children's everyday experiences of childhood" (James & James, 2001, 30).

A relational focus

Through the book the authors have discussed examples of childhoods and families which transgress normative assumptions of care as provided by adults and given to children. Rather than simplifying care as unidirectional, a more helpful frame is to view childhood as a time in which responsibility and ability to care for others is not dependent on categorisations such as age, but rather participation in society,

community and family. A critically informed relational focus is required to examine the many forms of family structure and children's varied roles within them with a focus on interdependencies rather than the assumed dependency of a child on adults (Peel & Riggs, 2016; Mayall, 2012).

The construction of children and childhood as different to adults and adulthood, is both self-evidently 'real' (age definitions permeate legislation and conventional understandings of, for example, being a citizen with right to remain in host countries; Bhabha, 2003) and also illusory (the move between childhood and adulthood is self-evidently blurred and fluid). Holding 'childhood' and 'adulthood' as binary concepts simplifies experiences and creates the conditions for some forms of non-normativity. Drawing on the educational theorist Dewey who was writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt (2014, 125) suggest that "Neither adulthood or childhood is to be regarded as a finished 'product'- rather, *change* is the constant". Hence work both within and outwith developmental psychology is needed to broaden, enrich and extend knowledge about childhood in diverse family structures, including other institutions/spaces that children are located within, rather than the traditional focus on school and home, Mayall (2102).

Different childhoods, transgressive trajectories: Considering childhood differently

We have used the notion of transgression as an analytical tool to destabilise the assumption of a normative trajectory, to explore how 'deviations' from assumed normative development need not be considered as pathological to be corrected, but as locations/sites of re-negotiation, transforming how we understand children's spaces,

tasks, and abilities. We have argued that work within and outside of developmental psychology as a discipline is needed.

Lee and Motzkau (2011) argue for childhood to be understood as multiplicities, with generation of what they call ‘navigational aids’ rather than grand theory. Such navigational aids can come from many sources: critical kinship studies (Riggs & Peel, 2016) to locate children in diverse families; postcolonial theory (Balagopalan, 2014) and cultural psychology (Crafter, 2015) to locate children in cultural context; critical developmental feminist work (Burman, 2008b and 2016), to locate children’s development in an intersectional analyses of gender, class, ethnicity; queer, crip and critical disability theories to deconstruct notions of time, ability and normativity (Slater, 2015).

Callaghan et al (2015) point to the tension of challenging and dismantling developmental psychology while also using it as a platform to speak and to practice. Whilst recognizing the tension, we argue that moving between and within developmental psychology as a discipline offers an effective critique to both the use of developmental research/knowledge to naturalise normativity in interventions and policies for/about children, as well as tools to deconstruct development as a singular, cumulative progression through time.

References

- Balagopalan,S. (2014) *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, labour and schooling in Postcolonial India*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Bhabha,J (2003) The citizenship deficit: On being a citizen child. *Society for International Development* 46, 3: 53-59
- Bond Stockton, K. (2009) *The queer child or growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Duke University Press: USA
- Brownlow,C., Bertilsdotter Rosqvist,H., & O'Dell,L. (2015) Exploring the potential for social networking among people with autism: Challenging dominant ideas of 'friendship'. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 17(2),188-193
- Burman,E. (2008a) *Developments: Child, Image, Nation*. London, New York: Routledge
- Burman,E. (2008b) *Deconstructing developmental psychology* (2nd Edition). London: Routledge
- Burman,E. (2015) Limits of deconstruction, deconstructing limits. *Feminism & Psychology* 25,3 408-422
- Burman,E. (2016) *Deconstructing developmental psychology* (3rd Edition). London: Routledge
- Callaghan,J., Andenaes,A., & Macleod,C. (2015) Deconstructing Developmental Psychology 20 years on: Reflections, implications and empirical work. *Feminism & Psychology* 25,3: 255-265
- Crafter,S. (2015) Cultural psychology and Deconstructing Developmental Psychology. *Feminism & Psychology* 25,3: 388-401
- Goodley,D., Runswick-Cole,K., and Liddiard,K. (2016) The DisHuman child. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*. 37, 5: 770-784

- Goodley, D. & Runswick-Cole, K. (2010) Emancipatory play: Dis/abled children, development and deconstruction. *Disability & Society* 25,4: 499-512
- Halberstam, J. (2005). In a queer time and place: transgender bodies, subcultural lives. New York University Press: New York.
- Hemmings, C. (2002). Bisexual spaces: A geography of sexuality and gender. Routledge: New York.
- Holt, A. (2010) Managing 'spoiled identities': parents' experiences of compulsory parenting support programmes. *Children & Society* 24,5: 413-423
- James, A., & Prout, A. (eds) (2015). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Lee, N. & Motzkau, J. (2011) Navigating the bio-politics of childhood. *Childhood: An international journal for Childhood Studies* 18,1: 7-19
- Mayall, B. (2012) An afterword: some reflections on a seminar series. *Children's Geographies* 10, 3: 347-355
- Morss, J.R. (1990) *The biologising of childhood: Developmental Psychology and the Darwinian myth*. Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Morss, J.R. (1996) *Growing critical: Alternatives to developmental psychology*. London: Taylor Francis
- Morss, J.R. (2002) The several social constructions of James, Jenks, and Prout: A contribution to the theorization of childhood. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 10: 39-54
- O'Dell, L. (1997) Child sexual abuse and the construction of academic symptomologies *Feminism & Psychology* 7, 3: 334-339

- O'Dell,L. (2015) Observation and Commentary: Whose development are we talking about? *Feminism & Psychology* 25, 3: 402-407
- O'Dell,L. and Brownlow,C. (2015) Normative development and the autistic child. In O'Reilly,M. & Lesseter,J. (ed) *The Palgrave handbook of child mental health*. Hampshire, UK. Palgrave Macmillan
- Personal Child Health Record, Royal College of Paediatricians, 2009, cited in Goodley et al, 2016
- Phoenix,A. (2009) De-colonising practices: Negotiating narratives from racialized and gendered experiences of education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 12,1: 101-114
- Quennerstedt,A. & Quennerstedt,M (2014) Researching rights in education: sociology of childhood encountering educational theory. *British Journal of Education* 35,1: 115-132
- Riggs,D. & Peel,E. (2016) *Critical kinship studies: An introduction to the field*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Roberts,R., O'Connor,T., Dunn,J., Golding,J., (2004) The effects of child sexual abuse in later family life: mental health, parenting and adjustment of offspring. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28,5: 525-545
- Slater, J (2015). *Youth and Disability: A Challenge to Mr Reasonable*. Routledge: London
- United Nations convention on the rights of the child UNHRC, (1989)
- Walkerdine,V. (1993) Beyond developmentalism? *Theory & Psychology* 3, 4: 451-469