



From the singular to the plural: Exploring diversities in contemporary childhoods in sub-Saharan Africa

Childhood

2016, Vol. 23(3) 455–468

© The Author(s) 2016



Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0907568216648746

chd.sagepub.com



Afua Twum-Danso Imoh

The University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract

The challenges that sub-Saharan Africa has faced in the post-colonial period have come to characterise the way the region is perceived. These narratives are especially evident in the various ways children's lives are discussed, leading to a particular focus on childhoods in difficult circumstances or at the margins. This has eclipsed the mundanities of everyday life for many children whose lives are not characterised by 'lacks'. This article seeks to move beyond an overwhelming focus on childhoods defined by what they lack by illustrating the multitude of childhoods which exist in the continent.

Keywords

child work, children in difficult circumstances, colonialism, formal education, history, plural childhoods, Africa

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa remains the poorest region in the world almost 60 years after the first country in the region – Ghana – achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1957. Recent estimates suggest that 40% of Africa's 1.2 billion people are currently living in extreme poverty (i.e. on less than US\$1.25 per day), which is greater than the world average. By 2030, this figure is projected to increase by over 50 million (Oxfam, 2015). The harsh economic realities that have characterised much of sub-Saharan Africa in the post-colonial period have been well documented and they have, understandably perhaps, shaped the way the continent and its people are portrayed and depicted by the

Corresponding author:

Afua Twum-Danso Imoh, Department of Sociological Studies, The University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.

Email: a.twum-danso@sheffield.ac.uk

outside world (Cole, 2011; Johnson et al., 2007; Onuoha, 2016). As Johnson, an economist has written with colleagues:

Conventional wisdom has long been negative on African growth. Sub-Saharan Africa is commonly regarded as destined to remain poor either because of its geography (including its unique disease burden) or its ethnolinguistic fractionalization (leading to repeated conflicts) or its deep-rooted corruption. The precise mechanisms vary, but a standard argument has been that Africa's economic prospects are not bright because its long-standing problems are hard to fix. (Johnson et al, 2007: . 1)

The resulting outcome of these persistent challenges that have affected large parts of the continent is the focus of much of the literature on sub-Saharan Africa on widespread poverty, the diseases that have wreaked havoc on its populations and the violent conflicts that have devastated communities and societies. That such studies are critical is not in dispute, given the multiplicity of challenges the continent has faced in the past and continues to encounter in the present day. However, such an overwhelming focus on the challenges that much of the continent and its peoples face is also problematic. As Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has warned, we must be aware of the danger of the single story when talking about sub-Saharan Africa. In her Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) talk filmed in July 2009, she argues that 'the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete' (TED Website).

These narratives that are produced and reproduced about the continent are especially evident in the various ways childhoods and children's lives are discussed not only by global media and international policymakers and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) but also by researchers focusing on children's lives within the diverse contexts that exist in the region. What emerges from the discourses produced in these different fora are images of childhoods in sub-Saharan Africa which are closely associated with extreme or difficult circumstances. Such a portrayal of African childhoods has eclipsed the mundanities of everyday life for many children whose lives are not characterised by 'lacks' and difficulties.

Hence, this article seeks to explore the pluralities that exist within childhood constructions and experiences in sub-Saharan Africa and highlights the need to move beyond an overwhelming focus on childhoods defined by what they lack towards a consideration of a multitude of childhoods which exist in the continent – not least as a result of the historical and global processes that have impacted many societies in the region. In discussing these issues, this article will predominately draw on secondary literature although primary data will also be used to illustrate key points.

The conventional wisdom on African childhoods

Much attention on childhoods and children's lives in sub-Saharan Africa has focused on marginalised childhoods or children living in difficult circumstances. In particular, there is an abundance of literature on street children (Bordonaro, 2011), child workers (Spittler and Bourdillon, 2012), the impact of HIV/AIDS on children (Ansell and Van Blerk,

2004) and children's involvement in conflict (Shepler, 2014). While the focus of these studies is valid, they have arguably contributed to portraying African childhoods in a rather negative and pessimistic light. This is well captured by Ensor (2012: 1) in the introduction to her edited volume:

The limited corpus of reliable research on Africa's youngest citizens has tended to adopt a negative outlook. Given Africa's turbulent realities, this pessimistic viewpoint is not entirely unwarranted, but [such generalization] fails to acknowledge encouraging current trends towards brighter possibilities.

This focus on predominately marginalised childhoods or the lives of children in difficult circumstances is not specific to sub-Saharan Africa and, in fact, has been noted as an issue of concern by a number of researchers working in other contexts (Balagopalan, 2014; Panter-Brick, 2002; Punch, 2003, 2015). For example, both Panter-Brick (2002) and Ansell (2015) have critiqued the tendency of researchers and NGOs to focus on particular groups of children such as street children or AIDS orphans. Specifically, their argument is that this attention detracts from the poverty that affects a wider group of children in these contexts. The issue here is that while these critiques encourage researchers to take a broader view to children's lives in the South, their attention remains centred on the lacks that face childhood. Punch (2015) supports this point when she argues that even when research studies focusing on these contexts strive to move away from extreme circumstances and, instead, highlight the mundane everyday lives of children such as Katz's (2004) notable volume, there remains a focus on the lives of poor children.

Such a concentration on the lives of the poor and those living in difficult circumstances may possibly be driven by a desire to demonstrate the dissonance between the global hegemonic ideal, with its roots in the North, and the local realities of a significant number of children in many contexts in the South (Holt and Holloway, 2006; Kesby et al., 2006; Punch, 2015).¹ As a result of the almost single-minded attention on this particular group of children in diverse southern contexts, those few researchers who have sought to examine childhood experiences that are not on the margins have been challenged for their choice of focus. For instance, Benwell (2009) whose research examines children's outdoor mobilities in a middle-class suburb in Cape Town, South Africa, has spoken, in various fora, of how since the completion of his research he has been frequently asked to justify why he chose not to locate his study in a more economically deprived township (in Punch, 2015: 691).

Studies exploring the lives of children who are experiencing difficult circumstances and living in extreme poverty are worthwhile and, indeed, vital. There is no dispute about that. However, such narratives foregrounding the experiences of the marginalised and those in difficult circumstances have contributed to the creation of a false dichotomy between Northern childhoods and the multitude of childhoods that are located in the diverse contexts that exist in the South. For instance, while work has been recognised as a key element of the childhoods that some children in the North occupy, few studies seek to explore this dimension of these children's lives in that context. Instead, accounts foregrounding children's play and leisure activities can be identified in their abundance (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). In contrast, while a proliferation of studies on

children's work in southern contexts have been produced from the point of view of various disciplines, the fact that children in these contexts also engage in play – especially as a leisure activity in and of itself – has been underexplored (see Benwell, 2009; Hollos, 2002; Punch, 2003). Not only does this encourage false dichotomies between childhoods in the North and South (James, 2010), but they also have exclusionary consequences for those groups of children in both the South and North whose childhood experiences do not fit the stereotypes assigned to them (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Hence, this almost single-minded focus on marginalised childhoods in the South has, in effect, contributed to the continued 'othering' of childhoods in countries within these contexts (see Balagopalan, 2014). Consequently, it has prevented the emergence of a more holistic picture of childhoods (see Kesby et al., 2006) which considers not only the lives of the poor and marginalised but also the lives of those who are *not* experiencing difficult circumstances and whose childhoods are not characterised by lacks. Ultimately, this is problematic as it limits not only the theorising of childhoods in the South (Kesby et al., 2006; see also Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Punch, 2015) but also the range of children's lives explored by empirical studies.

'The destabilisation' of conventional wisdom: The role of historical and global processes

The limited attention paid to the broad range of childhoods that exist in diverse southern contexts has led to an overemphasis on the differences that exist between childhoods in the South and those in the North. Correspondingly, it has constrained efforts to identify the commonalities that may exist between the experiences of certain groups of children in both the North and the South. This continuing emphasis on differences between childhoods in these contexts is somewhat simplistic given the world we live in today, characterised almost as much by global processes and historical transformations as local realities and social norms transmitted from one generation to another (Balagopalan, 2002, 2014; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Holt and Holloway, 2006; Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Panelli et al., 2007; Punch, 2015, 2016; Stephens, 1995; Tisdall and Punch, 2012).

This concentration on identifying differences in experiences of childhood and thereby dichotomising the South and the North fails to acknowledge the key role historical developments have played in the shaping of contemporary childhoods in societies in the South (Balagopalan, 2002, 2014; Kesby et al., 2006; Stephens, 1995). For instance, writing about Zimbabwe, Kesby et al. (2006: 187) claim that focusing on traditional models of childhood which emphasise the work in which children engage instead of exploring their activities that relate to play and school 'fails to conceptualise all childhoods in contemporary Zimbabwe as hybrid creations of the nation's complex historical geography'. This viewpoint is expanded on in Balagopalan's (2002, 2014) research on childhoods in India. Specifically, she argues that James and Prout's (1990) culturalist paradigm 'fails to include, as an essential component an analysis of the transformation that colonialism and modernization have brought about in these indigenous non-western 'cultures' of childhood' (Balagopalan, 2002: 21).

Colonisation, to which both Kesby et al. and Balagopalan refer, is one important consideration as many now-independent countries across Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean were, until the second half of the 20th century, colonised by European powers such as Britain, Germany (until the First World War), France, Belgium and Portugal. With particular regard to sub-Saharan African countries, colonisation led to efforts to inculcate changes in behaviours by a powerful state apparatus which was charged with civilising indigenous populations through the introduction of a range of laws and policies. These included those that directly affected children such as education, marriage, family life, hygiene and social welfare (Aderinto, 2015; Alber et al., 2010; Spronk, 2014). While a number of policies had little effect on local populations, it must be acknowledged that some transformations in local behaviours and practices among certain sectors of indigenous populations were observed during this period, many of which affected conceptualisations of childhood and childrearing practices within these groups (Aderinto, 2015; Alber et al., 2010).

Education which was, at least initially, driven by non-state actors such as missionaries is especially notable when examining the impact of colonialism on a number of societies in the region. Missionaries, it has been argued, especially those who offered a more academic curriculum (see Ball, 1983), were key agents of many of the changes that became apparent in the later colonial and post-colonial period (see, for example, Smythe, 1997). Boarding schools, in particular, were introduced as part of a policy of what Foster (1965: 51) refers to as 'detachment of individuals from the traditional milieu' (in Ball, 1983: 238; see also; Smythe, 1997; Stephens, 1995). As a result of such strategies, Smythe (1997: 135), whose research explored the impact of missionary education among the Fipa of Tanzania, has claimed that 'Western education is obviously one of the most salient changes in Fipa childhood during the 20th century'. Her reason for focusing on education as one of the key drivers of the changes that occurred during this period was because many of the Fipa children who received education in the so-called mission schools 'integrated their teaching and priorities into their lives and began instilling these priorities in their own children' (Smythe, 1997: 109). This thus ensured that the values they had acquired from missionaries were transmitted from one generation to the next.

The legacy of these efforts by colonial state and non-state actors remains visible today in countries now independent in sub-Saharan Africa as well as elsewhere (see Balagopalan, 2002, 2014). These developments that are a feature of the historical fabric of many countries imply that any analysis of childhoods in former colonial territories is difficult to fully comprehend unless they are considered within a broader historical view, which takes into account not only tradition and social norms but also colonisation and the impact of missionary activity in their contexts. A noteworthy example highlighting the need to incorporate a historical analysis in studies of childhood relates to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since its earliest days, the Convention has been widely critiqued for its Western-bias, which, it is argued, has led to a perceived dissonance between its vision of childhood and the realities of children's lives in various southern contexts (see, for example, Boyden, 1997). However, a consideration of these historical developments allows us to uncover attitudes and behaviours among certain sectors of the population in diverse contexts which may correspond with

the vision of the Convention in a number of respects (see Hollos, 2002; Stephens, 1995). Therefore, the experience of colonialism and missionary education and its impact on particular groups of people in former colonised territories may have led to a situation whereby clear distinctions between what is 'Western' and what is 'traditional' may have become somewhat blurred among certain social groups.

In addition to the historical transformations that have impacted societies on the continent, global processes, which have intensified in recent decades, are also increasingly intersecting with local structures and impacting the lives of large numbers of children in even quite remote parts of the world. In light of these dynamics, it is important to recognise that the global and local 'are not conceived of in terms of universality and particularity', but as 'intimately bound together' (Holloway and Valentine, 2000: 767). With specific regard to sub-Saharan Africa, Andre and Hilgers (2015) claim that since societies in the region have, in recent decades, been 'ever more affected by a deep dynamic of globalisation that impacts on both social structuration and individual disposition', it is important to explore how globally constructed ideas about childhood affect social structures and individual dispositions in these contexts (p. 121). This impact that global, economic, social, cultural and political processes have had on structures in sub-Saharan Africa (and elsewhere) raises a critical question for us to consider: what are the implications for the pluralities of childhoods found in different locales when the structures that shape these childhoods are increasingly being, themselves, moulded, not only by local forces and realities but also by global processes which are simultaneously seeking to affect other countries in similar ways?

Situating African childhoods within historical and global processes

When analyses of contemporary African childhoods are situated within the context of historical developments and global processes, what becomes evident is not only the diversities within childhood experiences between the continent and the global hegemonic ideal but also the commonalities.

Children's work, for example, has long been a major subject matter explored by a significant proportion of the literature on childhoods in sub-Saharan Africa (Benwell, 2009; Hollos, 2002; Punch, 2003). Indeed, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of articles, book chapters, edited volumes and monographs all seeking to explore children's engagement in work, either as a result of economic necessity or as a result of cultural norms which stipulate that becoming an adult involves the accomplishment of increasingly complex tasks at different stages of a young person's life (Bass, 2004; Spittler and Bourdillon, 2012). Such a focus on children's work on the continent is understandable. However, a broader focus on global processes and historical developments allows researchers to acknowledge that formal education has also become part and parcel of the construction of childhood for an increasing number of families in both urban and rural areas (Panelli et al., 2007; see also Kesby et al., 2006) and from different socio-economic backgrounds.

This increasingly visible model of the 'school child' can partly be attributed to initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All which were

adopted by governments and championed by different United Nations (UN) agencies as well as the World Bank (see Alber, 2012; Epstein, 2012). In northern Benin, for instance, these campaigns initiated in the 1990s have been significant as their impact has reached into quite remote areas of the country:

The Borgu, the region where the Baatombu live, has traditionally been the region with the lowest schooling rate. Therefore, the massive schooling campaigns at the end of the 20th century, and recently the campaigns to send girls to school, have influenced and changed the practices in northern Benin even more than in southern Benin, where schooling rates have generally been higher. (Alber, 2012: 180; see also Alber et al., 2010)

Therefore, largely as a result of these initiatives, a substantial number of families in societies across the continent have, in recent decades, come to recognise the perceived benefits of schooling. However, this is not a new development. As far back as 1962, Barrington Kaye (1962), in his study of childrearing in Ghana, noted that while the different communities in that country had initially viewed 'Western education' with scepticism, 'schooling is now highly regarded and parents are anxious to send at least their sons to benefit from a formal education' (p. 180; see also Grier, 2006; Smythe, 1997; White, 1996). This desire for children to access so-called 'Western education' by Ghanaian parents was, according to Kaye, attributable to a number of factors. First, many parents came to feel that this investment they placed in their children's education would reap dividends once the child became employed. Second, many adults sought the increased social status bestowed upon parents of children who had received this type of education. Such sentiments remain evident today in Ghanaian parents' desire to ensure that their children gain access to this form of education regardless of socio-economic background (see Twum-Danso, 2008). Furthermore, in an increasingly globalised world, many parents have come to believe that 'Western-style education' will provide their children with the skills to operate within a global economy which they recognise has ramifications for their domestic economy (Alber, 2012; see also Kesby, et al., 2006; Panelli et al., 2007). This persistent desire for formal education is paradoxical as, for many young people, this education has failed to yield the expected dividends and have left many unemployed or underemployed (Epstein, 2012; Honwana, 2012). However, although the education system, as currently provided within the state system in many African countries, raises cause for concern, it does not detract from the fact that the 'school child' is now also a feature of childhoods on the continent alongside representations of the 'working child'.

Instead of focusing so overwhelmingly on the work in which children engage, the notion of children's work can be used more comparatively to explore social stratification and differentiation in contemporary sub-Saharan African societies. According to Andre and Hilgers (2015: 125), the lives of children who work and those who do not in African contexts 'is a key feature distinguishing social groups, their relationship to the world and their perceptions of labour'. Specifically, they assert,

In families from the upper and middle classes, there is a stronger separation between the realm of family and the sphere of labour, between the realm of adults and children, to the point that children are barely perceived as producers or providers to the domestic income. This is so, even

though in middle class homes work-related activities such as fetching water or washing clothes are still, according to the lines of the seniority system, deemed valuable activities for children since they have strong socialising virtues. (Andre and Hilgers, 2015: 125)

As a result, if work can be utilised to distinguish the experiences of social groups and the childhoods children experience within these differing groups, it then opens up the space to explore those childhoods which are not characterised predominately by work.

That such childhoods are evident have been recognised in a small number of studies (see (Bass and Sow, 2006; Benwell, 2009; Cole, 2011; Hollos, 2002; Honwana, 2012; Walton and Pallitt, 2012). For example, in her discussion on how 'waithood' affects African youth differently, Honwana (2012) acknowledges that while some young people attain adulthood too soon and others experience delayed adulthood,

waithood manifests itself differently among a small group of elite youths who are generally able to afford a good education in private schools and abroad and are often well connected to networks of the powerful that facilitate their access to secure jobs. (p. 5)

Therefore, for this small group of young people their attainment of adulthood occurs in a timely manner, which may correspond with expectations informed by global ideals.

Although the existence of such childhoods is not new, their increased visibility can partly be attributed to recent developments that have been taking place in the continent. For example, economically, sub-Saharan Africa is currently among the world's fastest growing continents. In 2014, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that Ethiopia, a country that is otherwise associated with famine, drought and 'starving children', was the world's fastest growing economy at more than 10% (Oxfam, 2015). Similarly, other countries such as Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique, Tanzania and Rwanda are also growing at rapid rates. Much of this growth in these countries has been driven by natural resources, an increase in commodity exports and growth in the tourism sector. While there are reasons to be sceptical about this economic growth (see Onuoha, 2016) – not least because of the high levels of inequality that can be found in many African countries which means that very little of the benefits of economic growth reach the poor – it is worth pointing out that this growth has generated employment and benefited some individuals and their families (see Spronk, 2014). This has, in turn, had implications for how children and young people from such families experience childhood and youth in their contexts (Honwana, 2012). In particular, these developments have corresponded with the increasing visibility of a – albeit – small group of children whose childhoods are characterised by the technologies they use either for play or for communication (see Walton and Pallitt, 2012), their use of social networking sites to interact with their peers and others (Cole, 2011; Honwana, 2012), their access to satellite TV (and hence, North American programming and advertising; Bass and Sow, 2006; Cole, 2011) and the various ways they spend the leisure time they have at their disposal.

These children's experiences in predominately high-income suburbs of African cities highlight the plurality of childhoods that do exist within countries in the continent based on numerous variables including class and socio-economic background, level of education and place of residence (see Bass and Sow, 2006; Ensor, 2012; Hollos, 2002; Honwana,

2012). These differences between groups within a particular context can affect perspectives of childhood and childrearing as well as children's lived experiences (see Naftali, 2014). Such a diverse range of childhoods force us to question our insistence on foregrounding those childhoods characterised by 'lacks' instead of additionally exploring the 'other' childhoods that can also be identified. This is a point raised by Burr (2006) who, in her study of street children in Vietnam, observed that foreign NGO workers in the country appeared to ignore the plurality of lifestyles that children experience in both Vietnam and countries that comprise the North. She asks, 'Why should a Western child be assumed to be indulged and spoiled? Is it always the case that a Vietnamese child is bred to work ...?' (Burr, 2006: 81). She concludes that these perceptions overly exaggerate the distribution of wealth in the West and stereotype the form that childhoods tend to take in the South (Burr, 2006). Burr's question is also relevant to sub-Saharan African contexts since not all African children are, indeed, 'bred to work'.

The continuing persistence of the 'local' amidst global and historical transformations

The existence of these 'other' childhoods notwithstanding, a note of caution is also required when searching for connections or similarities between the childhoods of certain social groups in sub-Saharan Africa and those in societies in the North. In particular, it is critical to point out that even those childhoods that bear similarities to the global hegemonic ideal, which is closely intertwined with the history of the majority of countries that constitute the North, are also deeply connected to local realities. This emerged quite clearly in my own research on children's experiences of physical punishment in Ghana which included, as part of its sample, a group of children attending a private international school in a high-income suburb of Accra (Twum-Danso, 2010).² One of the participants from this school was a 15-year-old boy called 'Fifi' who described himself as 'funky, funny and fabulous'. Of his 2-week account of his day-to-day life in the 'big mansion' in which he lived with his parents, four siblings, grandmother, cousin and aunt, he writes the following:

On a normal day everyone is up and doing his/her chores. We take our baths and eat our breakfast. We spend some time watching television and chatting or playing. Sometimes we go out to watch films in cinemas to relax our minds and brains and attend certain parties at times. We also go on site to my dad's land to work and I must say it's a wonderful experience. We come back home eat our dinner, watch television. We sometimes crack jokes and we are off to bed ... In my family every child has the same right as the other. My dad whips when necessary. Chores are being done and clothes are washed. Anyone found loitering when everybody is working is given some punishment. We are treated fairly and equally. My dad sometimes is very lenient on us [and] listens to our views, he is not autocratic ... These past two weeks all the children were given a break from doing so many chores and my dad let my mom increase the food we get every day. My dad also decided to take us to a hotel to have fun. We swam and ate a buffet of food. We relaxed and felt very very comfortable. At the hotel where we lodged, he made them give us royal treatment and everyone had his or her private room. Golf was played by the children and also table tennis.

In another example, 14-year-old 'Paa Kwaw', who lived with just his mother and father as his older half-brother had moved into his own place, described his relationship with his mother thus:

My mum is a very caring, strict young woman who loves me very much. She cares for me a lot to the extent that she puts me in place whenever I misbehave either by throwing insults at me or whipping me but she has not whipped me since I turned 14 because I am now a young man. Early this year in April I was part of a Ghanaian delegation that competed in [a] United Nations Conference in Washington and as part of the fun activities attached to the trip I was given [by his parents] \$500 for shopping and I bought a play station portable (P.S.P) and when I returned I misplaced [it] and my mum decorated me with insults on that day but eventually she promised to let me get one when I travel to New York next year for the same conference. This example shows how strict and caring she can be.

My final example is taken from the diary of 13-year-old 'Mansah' who lives with just her parents and her younger brother and sister because her two older brothers are in boarding school and her older sister is married and working as a doctor. In explaining how children in her house are treated, she writes:

Children in my family are treated according to what you do and how you behave. For example, my brothers were playing when they were supposed to be learning and they were beaten by my father. The other day I won an award in school and my dad gave me an amount of money to use for anything.

I do not seek to suggest that these accounts are representative of the childhoods of even all those who share a similar socio-economic background to 'Fifi', 'Paa Kwaw' and 'Mansah'. However, they do highlight the point that even childhoods that may appear to correspond with global ideals are still firmly rooted within social norms which continue to regulate relationships between adults and children and inform parenting styles. As a result, care must be taken not to draw simplistic parallels between such childhoods and those in the North in our search for commonalities (see also Benwell, 2009; Nieuwenhuys, 2010).

Bridging the divide: Implications, opportunities and possibilities

The above discussion demonstrates that the differences that exist in experiences of childhoods between contexts in the North and South must not be dismissed, not only in relation to those childhoods that remain far removed from the global hegemonic ideal but also with regard to those that appear to share some of its characteristics. However, a single-minded focus on these differences, by especially focusing on children in difficult circumstances, childhoods at the margins or childhoods characterised by lacks, only provides partial insights into the nature of contemporary childhoods in diverse southern contexts. Instead, there is a need to develop a more holistic picture of childhoods within a particular context. This is critical as, to fully understand childhoods in our world today, we need to consider both commonalities and diversities – both within and across contexts. By adopting this approach, we will be able to bridge the divide between the

singularity and the plurality theses which has dominated discourses within childhood studies since its earliest days (James, 2010; Qvortrup, 2005).

In trying to bridge this persistent divide between these two approaches, James (2010) calls for the need to incorporate perspectives that both underscore commonality and plurality within what he calls the 'fabric of childhood studies', with the warp, the stronger components which provide the foundation, representing the commonalities of childhood and the weft, made up of finer strands, comprising the diversities. For James (2010), such an approach allows childhood studies to incorporate 'the concerns of those studying childhood in Western Industrialised countries with *the very different issues* [my emphasis] confronting those working with children in the majority south without these being seen as oppositional or in competition' (p. 496). Hence, the premise underpinning James' argument is based on a desire to include priorities which are seen as vastly different from each other.

While this article is repeating this call for integration, my starting point is quite different – that the priorities of researchers focusing on the North and South need *not* be so vastly different, because while there are differences, there are also important commonalities (see also Punch, 2015). Hence, while kindergarten policies in Scandinavia may be the focus of attention for some researchers focusing on the North (James, 2010), such a topic would also be pertinent for those exploring the diverse contexts that exist in the South. The point here is that researching childhoods in the South does not always have to be part of a humanitarian concern or centred on 'lacks'. The reverse point can also be said of researching childhoods in Northern contexts. Indeed, if the commonalities in experiences of childhoods are the foundation of the 'fabric', then it would be more appropriate to use these as our point of departure. This is important, because if we are to integrate the different strands within childhood studies effectively, we must start our discussions from the points of convergence rather than those of difference and dissonance.

The adoption of an integrated approach which takes our commonalities as its point of departure has important implications. First, it may lead to further scrutiny of dichotomies such as the Global North and the Global South and their continuing utility to our understanding of experiences of childhoods (see Holt and Holloway, 2006). Second, it may lead to the production of more comparative studies across these contexts which take into consideration numerous variables that inform childhood experiences in both the North and South (see Hecht, 1998; Punch, 2015, 2016). Third, it may also better resonate with the approaches of academics based in southern contexts who are often prepared to talk not only of the differences but also of the commonalities they can see, or wish to see more of, between childhoods in their contexts and those in the North. Finally, it creates the opportunity for more useful dialogue between academics and practitioners whose belief in the commonalities that should exist in experiences of childhoods is at the very core of their programming in diverse contexts.

With specific regard to sub-Saharan Africa, the consideration of the full range of childhoods that exist in the region will further allow the development of more complete 'stories' of constructions of childhoods and children's everyday lives. This may go some way to countering the pervasive pessimism that has largely been associated with discourses surrounding childhoods in the continent and pave the way for the inclusion, in our discussions, of the multitude of childhoods that do exist within this region.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. While acknowledging the limitations of the terms 'Global North' and 'Global South', they are useful in framing the arguments put forward in this article. Specifically, I use the terms Global North or 'northern' to refer mainly to Western European and North American countries as they comprise much of what is considered northern. Furthermore, these countries continue to play a dominant role in global economic and political structures and have been instrumental in the setting of norms and ideals which are now held up as the gold standard globally. In contrast, I use Global South or 'southern' to refer to those countries predominately in the southern hemisphere whose cultural, political and intellectual traditions have different origins from those in Western European and North American societies. While some of these countries considered to be in the south are emerging as economic and political powers on the global stage, the values, norms and intellectual traditions of these countries remain on the periphery of global discourses and debates.
2. The data on which these points will draw are based on a 1-year research project which sought to elicit children's perspectives of physical punishment in Ghana between 2009 and 2010. The focus was on school-going children, aged between 10 and 16 years, attending a reputable private school in an affluent suburb of Accra as well as public schools in rural and urban areas in the Greater Accra and Eastern regions. With specific regard to children in the private school, data were collected through diaries completed by 10 children (5 boys and 5 girls) aged between 11 and 15 years. Ethical processes met included initially obtaining consent from the school. The research team then went to each class and provided the pupils with both verbal and written information about the project. Those who were interested in completing the diaries were asked to see researchers during break time and were provided with consent forms for both themselves and their parents to complete. Once these were returned, each child was given an exercise book to keep as a diary for a period of 2 weeks. A set of questions were also provided to guide participants as they completed their diary. Once the diaries were returned, they were immediately transcribed onto a computer and anonymised, with pseudonyms given to each diary submission.

References

- Aderinto S (eds) (2015) *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alber E (2012) Schooling or working? How family decision processes, children's agencies and state policy influence the life paths of children in northern Benin. In: Spittler G and Bourdillon M (eds) *African Children at Work: Work and Learning in Growing up for Life*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, pp. 169–194.
- Alber E, Haberlin T and Martin J (2010) Changing webs of kinship: Spotlights on West Africa. *Africa Spectrum* 45(3): 43–67.
- Andre G and Hilgers M (2015) Childhood in Africa between local powers and global hierarchies. In: Alanen L, Brooker L and Mayall B (eds) *Childhood with Bourdieu*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 120–141.
- Ansell A and Van Blerk L (2004) Children's migration as a household/family strategy: Coping with AIDS in Lesotho and Malawi. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30(1): 673–690.
- Ansell N (2015) 'Once upon a time ...': Orphanhood, childhood studies and the depoliticisation of childhood poverty in southern Africa. *Childhood*. Epub ahead of print 12 June. DOI: 10.1177/0907568215589419.

- Balagopalan S (2002) Constructing indigenous childhoods: Colonialism, vocational education and the working child. *Childhood* 9(1): 19–34.
- Balagopalan S (2014) *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ball S (1983) Imperialism, social control and the colonial curriculum in Africa. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 15(3): 237–263.
- Bass L (2004) *Child Labor in Sub Saharan Africa*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publisher.
- Bass L and Sow F (2006) Senegalese families and the confluences of ethnicity, history and social change. In: Oheneba-Sakyi Y and Takyi B (eds) *African Families at the Turn of the 21st Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publisher, pp. 83–102.
- Benwell M (2009) Challenging minority world privilege: Children's outdoor mobilities in post-apartheid South Africa. *Mobilities* 4(1): 77–101.
- Bordonaro L (2011) From home to the street: Children's street-ward migration in Cape Verde. In: Evers S, Notermans C and Van Ommering E (eds) *Not Just a Victim: The Child as Catalyst and Witness of Contemporary Africa*. Leiden: Brill Publisher, pp. 125–146.
- Boyden J (1997) Childhood and the policy makers: A comparative perspective on the globalization of childhood. In: James A and Prout A (eds) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London; New York: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 187–226.
- Burr R (2006) *Vietnam's Children in a Changing World*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Cole J (2011) A cultural dialectics of generational change: The view from contemporary Africa. *Review of Research in Education* 35: 60–88.
- Ensor M (2012) Introduction: African childhoods: Education, development, peacebuilding, and the youngest continent. In: Ensor M (ed.) *African Childhoods: Education, Development, Peacebuilding and the Youngest Continent*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–15.
- Epstein A (2012) Dinka youth and the culture of formal schooling in post-conflict South Sudan. In: Ensor M (ed.) *African Childhoods: Education, Development, Peacebuilding and the Youngest Continent*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 173–186.
- Grier B (2006) *Invisible hands: Child labor and the state in colonial Zimbabwe*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hecht T (1998) *At Home in the Street: Street Children of North East Brazil*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hollos M (2002) The cultural construction of childhood: Changing conceptions among the Pare of northern Tanzania. *Childhood* 9(2): 167–189.
- Holloway S and Valentine G (2000) Spatiality and the new social studies of childhood. *Sociology* 34(4): 763–783.
- Holt L and Holloway S (2006) Editorial: Theorising other childhoods in a globalised world. *Children's Geographies* 4(2): 135–142.
- Honwana A (2012) *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change and Politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.
- James AL (2010) Competition or integration? The next step in childhood studies? *Childhood* 17(4): 485–499.
- James A and Prout A (1990) Introduction. In: James A and Prout A (eds) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.
- Johnson S, Ostry J and Subramanian A (2007) *The prospects for sustained growth in Africa: Benchmarking the constraints*. NBER Working Paper, Working Paper No. 13120, May. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Katz C (2004) *Growing up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

- Kaye B (1962) *Bringing up Children in Ghana: An Impressionistic Survey*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Kesby M, Gwanzura-Ottmoller F and Chizororo M (2006) Theorising other, 'other childhoods': Issues emerging from work on HIV in urban and rural Zimbabwe. *Children's Geographies* 4(2): 185–202.
- Naftali O (2014) *Children, Rights and Modernity in China: Raising Self-Governing Citizens*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nieuwenhuys O (2010) Editorial: Keep asking: Why childhood? Why children? Why global? *Childhood* 17(3): 291–296.
- Nieuwenhuys O (2013) Editorial: Theorizing childhood(s): Why we need postcolonial perspectives. *Childhood* 20(1): 3–8.
- Onuoha G (2016) 'A rising Africa' in a resource-rich context: Change, continuity and implications for development. *Current Sociology* 64(2): 277–292.
- Oxfam (2015) Africa: Rising for the few, Media Briefing, September. Available at: https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/world_economic_forum_wef.africa_rising_for_the_few.pdf (accessed 20 July 2015).
- Panelli R, Punch S and Robson E (2007) *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives*. New York; Abingdon: Routledge.
- Panter-Brick C (2002) Street children, human rights and public health: A critique and future directions. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 147–171.
- Punch S (2003) Childhoods in the majority world: miniature adults or tribal children? *Sociology* 37(2): 277–295.
- Punch S (2015) Possibilities for learning between childhoods and youth in the Minority and Majority worlds: Youth transitions as an example of cross-world dialogue. In: Wyn J and Cahill H (eds) *Handbook of Children and Young Adulthood*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 689–701.
- Punch S (forthcoming 2016) Cross-world and cross disciplinary dialogue: A more integrated, global approach to childhood studies. *Global Studies of Childhood* 6(3).
- Qvortrup J (2005) *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shepler S (2014) *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone*. New York; London: New York University Press.
- Smythe K (1997) *Fipa childhood: White fathers' missionaries and social change in Nkansi, Ufipa, 1910–1980*. PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.
- Spittler G and Bourdillon M (eds) (2012) *African Children at Work: Work and Learning in Growing up for Life*. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- Sprong R (2014) Exploring the middle classes in Nairobi: From modes of production to modes of sophistication. *African Studies Review* 57(1): 93–114.
- Stephens S (1995) Children and the politics of culture in late capitalism. In: Stephens S (ed.) *Children and the Politics of Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 3–48.
- Tisdall E and Punch SK (2012) Not so 'new'? Looking critically at childhood studies. *Children's Geographies* 10(3): 249–264.
- Twum-Danso A (2008) *Searching for a middleground in children's rights: The implementation of the convention on the rights of the child in Ghana*. PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, Birmingham.
- Twum-Danso A (2010) Children's perceptions of physical punishment in Ghana. Unpublished Research Report, Nuffield Foundation, London, September.
- Walton M and Pallitt N (2012) 'Grand Theft South Africa': Games, literacy and inequality in consumer childhoods. *Language and Education* 26(4): 347–361.
- White B (1996) Talk about school: Education and the colonial project in French and British Africa 1860–1960. *Comparative Education* 32(1): 9–26.