

# Review

## Children and childhood studies

Cook, Daniel Thomas (Ed.). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd.: 2020, 1.888 pp., \$840.00.

In spring 2020 the SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies was published. It was almost exactly three years earlier that I got an invitation to contribute to the project. The two designated editors, Erica Burman (University of Manchester)<sup>1</sup> and Daniel Cook (Rutgers University) spoke of an 'exciting and ambitious project' which would 'identify, map and define the field of research with and around children and childhood for the foreseeable future'. The encyclopedia was to take an interdisciplinary approach, including the arts, humanities, social sciences and law and be of interest to students and researchers in psychology, sociology, social welfare and cultural studies. Childhood and the Family, Child-Development, Childhood Research Methods, the History of Childhood, the Rights of the Child, the Social Construction of Childhood, the Sociology of Childhood were meant to become central topics. At first, I was hesitant to contribute to a project of this size and scope with its technical, logistical and intellectual challenges. How could as many key specialists in the area be found? How could the editors possibly ensure that such a number of authors would stay committed? Obviously, they found authors who valued the project and were willing to devote themselves to it. The four volumes of the encyclopedia comprise over 600 entries written by hundreds of contributors. One of them – the entry on *Child-Centered/Child-Led Research* – is written by me. The list of authors who contributed to the encyclope-

dia does not only come up to the promise of an interdisciplinary approach to children and childhood studies, but the authors also come from diverse local backgrounds from the Global North as well as from the Global South as much as they represent different generations of childhood researchers and hold different levels of qualifications and professional backgrounds.

When Daniel Cook kindly agreed to give me some background information on the process of editing the encyclopedia in a Zoom-conversation in Spring 2021, he gave me an insight how the title and topics of the encyclopedia were chosen. The title had to ensure that the encyclopedia would not be confused with the rather psychological approach of child-studies. In 2009, Chicago Press published a compilation of distinguished child-development researchers with the title: "The Child – An Encyclopedic Companion". In contrast, the title of the SAGE Encyclopedia was to instantiate an academic field which explores children and childhood beyond disciplinary boundaries and brings different disciplinary understandings into a dynamic relation. In accordance, the encyclopedia introduces childhood studies as an area of scholarship which involves many fields of interests, theories, concepts and a multitude of key thinkers. Developmental psychology is and remains one of the approaches which is identified to be relevant for the studies of childhood, with contributions on *Jean Piaget* (Leslie Smith), *Lev Vygotsky* (Bert Van Oers), *Development* (China Mills), *Developmental psychology* (Ameera Ali) and *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Amy Nohelle Parks). But it is put into a context of controversies around *Developmentality* (Lynn Fendler) as much as the critique from the *New Sociology of Childhood* (Madeleine Leonard), which is articulated in a huge number of entries.

While the encyclopedia brings childhood

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1 Erica Burman has withdrawn from editing the encyclopedia but remained a member of the editorial board.

studies into sight as an interdisciplinary field, they become also visible as a field with a strong orientation towards researching children's daily lives and a critical exploration of research methods to do so. *Agency* (David Oswell), *Voice* (Sirkka Liisa Komulainen) and *Participatory Research Methods* (Michael Gallagher) are explored as concepts, which have been of importance for initiating an empirical orientation of childhood studies and have undergone conceptual critiques and changes, which seek to avoid tendencies to essentialize children's competencies or stabilize dichotomies. Moves towards research practices which account for interdependency and relationality are debated as attempts to better account for the diverse life circumstances of children, as much as the responsibility of the researcher for the material consequences childhood studies may have for children's lives.

In their entry on *Childhood* Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Sarah Hennessy emphasize that 'how childhood is understood affects children's daily lives by influencing child-rearing norms, schooling, a wide range of scientific truths, and children's place in society' (299). As in many other entries, childhood studies are brought into sight as a research field which not only explores possibilities to understand the diverse, complex and messy realities of children's daily lives, but also has the potential to illuminate how children's lives are shadowed by specific understandings of childhood. Nick Lee speaks in his entry *The Child* of a complex relation between social and scientific representations of the figure of the child and the actual lives and experiences of children. For Lee, the insight into discrepancies between images of the child and actual children is a major finding of childhood studies.

Against the background of the multitude of disciplines which contribute to the field of childhood the entry on *Childhood Studies* (Rachel Rosen) critically evaluates the uniqueness of childhood studies and highlights questions which still challenge childhood studies: Are there possibilities to move beyond the dichotomized debate of commonality or difference? How can children's bodies and temporality be brought back into childhood studies? How

does it become possible to understand why particular constructions of childhood persist or change?

While the associate editors and members of the international editorial board initially agreed on anchor entries, many of the entries were open for the authors' negotiations. Having been given general headwords, authors could respond with their expertise. Daniel Cook described the process of finding the thematic core of an entry as a back and forth between the authors and his/her associate editor which was inspired by the idea to bring in the knowledge and expertise 'that was out there' into the encyclopedia. The guideline that authors were given for writing their entry was to address a general audience of students, scholars and others and to write according to their interests and strengths. As a result, the encyclopedia comprises a broad, interesting variety of entries, which come up to the expectation of representing influential key concepts and debates, as much as they allow an exploration of themes which may be relevant within childhood studies. The 600 entries are organized in 20 different chapters, which cover broad categories like *Areas of studies/Fields of Interest, Institutions and Organisations, Key thinkers and Cultural Figures*, but also more specialized categories like *Medical Discourses and Practices, Media or Religion*. For my teaching, I could not only find relevant entries for all my lectures and seminars in the area of *childhood research* and *early childhood education and care*. I also found a lot of inspiration for bringing in new aspects. What I highly appreciate is the possibility to make connections: Every entry provides suggestions to other entries relevant in the thematic context. Furthermore, while the entries are written without citations (yet they include references to relevant figures or researchers), every entry suggests further reading. Accordingly, there are multiple possibilities to deepen and expand a thematic interest. When I asked my students about their experience in working with texts from the encyclopedia, they discussed how certain aspects re-appear in a number of entries in different connotations. They experienced circular movements around certain topics

and an irritation of their desire for definite understandings after reading one text. In the course of the lectures and seminars, they found that it was exactly this irritation which allowed them to get to the core of themes and concepts, instead of hoping to find an objective definition. One side effect some of my students appreciate is their growing self-assurance in reading English texts. Their initial hesitation to do so was counterbalanced by their experience of well-written and thoroughly structured texts with a clear and recognizable focus.

When I agreed to write this review, I made sure that it would not include my reading of all the entries. I have not even read a third of them. But whenever I develop a thematic interest in the context of children and childhood studies, I find many inspirations. I got to know authors I have not come across before. The encyclopedia has broadened my horizon and made childhood studies even more exciting to me than they were before.

*Christina Huf,  
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität  
Münster*