

## Central Lancashire Online Knowledge (CLoK)

Title	Child-Led Research, Children's Rights and Childhood Studies: a Defence
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/36624/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/36624/</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568221996743">https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568221996743</a>
Date	2021
Citation	Thomas, Nigel Patrick (2021) Child-Led Research, Children's Rights and Childhood Studies: a Defence. <i>Childhood</i> , 28 (2). pp. 186-199. ISSN 0907-5682
Creators	Thomas, Nigel Patrick

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568221996743>

For information about Research at UCLan please go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLoK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/policies/>



# Child-led research, children's rights and childhood studies: A defence

Childhood

1–14

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0907568221996743

[journals.sagepub.com/home/chd](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/chd)**Nigel Patrick Thomas** 

University of Central Lancashire, UK

## Abstract

Recent articles by Kim and Hammersley have critiqued, respectively: the methodological and normative assumptions that underlie research 'by' children; claims made about the implications of children's rights for the ethics of research with children; and more broadly, some of the central commitments of Childhood Studies. This paper offers a response to these critiques, seeking to distinguish between those that clearly should be accepted, those that appear to be based on a misreading of the claims being made by scholars and researchers, and those that represent serious challenges to defend, redefine or rethink our aims, claims or practices.

## Keywords

Childhood studies, child-led research, children's agency, children's competence, children's rights

## Introduction

In this paper I seek to engage with some critical questions that have been raised about children's participation in research in childhood studies, which lead on to fundamental questions about the coherence of childhood studies as a field of inquiry. I do this by focusing on three articles by Hammersley (2015, 2017) and Kim (2016). Although each article has a distinct focus and line of argument, they cover overlapping territory and cross-refer to each other; in Hammersley's second article Kim is acknowledged as having read and commented on an earlier draft. It therefore seems reasonable to consider them together. In what follows I discuss each article in turn, summarising the key arguments and then responding to them, before making some general points about the nature of research and the direction of the field of childhood studies.

---

## Corresponding author:

Nigel Patrick Thomas, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1 2HE, UK.

Email: [npthomas@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:npthomas@uclan.ac.uk)

## **‘Research Ethics and the Concept of Children’s Rights’**

Hammersley (2015) sets out to challenge arguments and assumptions about the implications of children’s rights for the ethics and practice of research involving children. He notes that claims about children’s rights are used in childhood studies as a basis for advocating certain approaches to research with children, ‘often summarised in the formula that research should not be carried out *on* children but instead *with* or *by* them’ (p. 569). At minimum, this is taken to imply requiring children’s consent to participate in research, rather than relying on parental consent; stronger versions of the argument advocate methodologies that maximise children’s active participation, or even research conceived, directed and carried out by children (‘child-led research’).

Hammersley points out that rights claims in general are contested – either because the theory of universal human rights is rejected or because it is argued that rights rhetoric has ‘gone too far’ – and that specific rights claims may contradict each other. He suggests there are particular problems with deriving human rights from human nature, or children’s rights from the nature of childhood, especially if one takes a ‘social constructionist’ position, as many childhood studies scholars do. Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is often called upon to support these claims, he asserts that the CRC is mainly about welfare rights, and points out that the ‘right to a say’ in Article 12 is itself heavily qualified, and also is subject to the ‘best interests’ principle enshrined in Article 3.

Beyond questioning the basis of arguments from human rights or specifically children’s rights, Hammersley criticises their particular application to the ethics of research involving children. He argues that the CRC does not have clear implications for conduct of research with children, such as those claimed by Beazley et al. (2009), because it is only intended to apply to decisions of ‘significance’ about children’s lives ‘such as those concerning which parent a child should live with after a divorce’ (p. 576). This is a misreading of the CRC, and also of Beazley et al. (2009), as I explain below. Hammersley also rejects the argument that research cannot be justified unless it has the potential to improve children’s lives, on the basis that most research does not offer such benefits, yet is not harmful and so does not require that justification. He has no time for the argument ‘that the purpose of research is to amplify or promote children’s voices’ (p. 576). Finally, he argues that adults do not have a right to be actively involved in research, and so logically neither do children.

Hammersley is taking several different positions in this article, and it is worth trying to distinguish them. He appears sceptical about rights theory in general, but focuses particularly on the apparent contradictions between universal rights and social constructionist theory, or between the paternalism inherent in Article 12 of the CRC and the ‘presumption of competence’ advocated by many participatory researchers with children. He appears to question fundamentally this ‘presumption of competence’, although the only example he uses is Alderson’s attribution of participation rights to premature babies, which he acknowledges is exceptional.

In addition to the explicit positions adopted, there are a number of unstated, or incompletely stated, assumptions in the article, relating to the derivation and definition of rights, to underlying theories in childhood studies, and to the meaning and purpose of research. I will focus on each of these in turn.

In relation to *rights*, Hammersley appears to take it as read that universal human rights are generally presented as natural rights, so that logically children's rights must be justified by children's biological difference from adults. He supports this by reference to the CRC preamble which declares that 'the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth'.<sup>1</sup> However, to reduce the concept of 'natural rights' to biology is misleadingly reductive, and the distinction between children's rights and wider human rights is not so clear-cut as Hammersley implies. The same CRC preamble notes that 'the United Nations has, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenants on Human Rights, proclaimed and agreed that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth therein, without distinction of any kind'; in short, that universal human rights apply to children. Hammersley notes that most Articles in the CRC 'assign welfare and protection rights', which is true. However, there are at least six Articles that contain participation rights, of which he refers to only one (Article 12). These include rights to freedom of expression, thought, assembly and access to information: all to some degree equivalent to the rights held by adults in other Conventions, in domestic law, or in commonly agreed ethical discourse. Likewise, many rights that might be regarded as 'welfare and protection rights' are frequently claimed by or for adults – for example the right to work or to social security, the right to affordable health care or housing, and the right to continuing education. Too much emphasis can be laid on children's vulnerability as the sole basis for these rights. Indeed, it could be argued that the hard distinction between participation or autonomy rights and welfare or protection rights is a false one, in that full participation in society clearly depends on resources as well as freedoms; see Doyal and Gough (1991) on human needs, or Sen (1999) on capabilities. It follows that human rights do not depend on a particular level of 'rationality' or 'maturity', and conversely that children's rights do not depend on children's vulnerability or dependence. Furthermore, children's rights are not solely defined by the CRC. There is not, therefore, a fundamental contradiction between claims for children's rights and the 'presumption of competence' which features, to varying degrees, in childhood studies and research with children.

In relation to Hammersley's delineation of underlying *assumptions in childhood studies*, I take issue with several of these, including his account of social constructionism and its place in the field. First, not all childhood studies writers are adherents of children's rights – in fact some leading scholars, such as Allison James, have made clear they have no interest in that area of inquiry. Second, not all are committed to a strong version of constructionism, one in which social construction explains everything (which I tend to suspect is often a straw man like 'positivism', attributed to others rather than claimed for oneself). Rather, most childhood studies scholars would probably if pressed argue that specific childhoods are indeed socially constructed, but on a foundation of reality that includes biological differences related to age. Indeed, Prout and James, when they set out key features of the 'new paradigm', state:

Childhood, *as distinct from biological immaturity*, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies. (1990: 8; italics mine)

The growing interest in critical realism as an epistemological approach would tend to support that view (e.g. Alderson, 2013).

So I would say Hammersley makes too much of the apparent contradiction between an account of childhood as socially constructed and an acceptance that children have rights. That is not to say that there are not problems in the relationship between the two modes of discourse, some of which he notes. In particular the strict definition of childhood in terms of age (under 18 according to the CRC, except in jurisdictions where the age of majority is lower) is not easily compatible with a critical understanding of childhood and youth as social, legal and policy constructs. Second, whilst not entirely accepting Hammersley's account of the 'presumption of competence' and its implications, there is a degree of contradiction, or at least an element of balancing to be done, between respect for children's agency and ability to represent their own interests, and the legal and institutional protections given to children which in many ways seem reasonable. Few would argue against the appropriateness of legal prohibition of sexual relations between children and adults; likewise, there is widespread support for principles such as 'doli incapax' or the shielding of child offenders from the full rigours of the adult law. However, Hammersley's claim, if I understand him right, that there is a fundamental contradiction between the principal tenets of childhood studies and those of children's rights, does not in my view stand up.

Turning to the *meaning and purpose of research*, by 'research' Hammersley appears to mean scholarly research conducted by those with professional training with the purpose of adding to a recognised body of knowledge in a field, to the exclusion of any other activity. However, there are other accounts of what research can be, or can be for; I explain this further in my response to Kim (2016) in the next section. What I say here is that it is legitimate to hold that children, and indeed adults, have rights when research is to be conducted with them; and Hammersley's passing references to Beazley et al. (2009) do not do justice to the nuances of their account of 'children's right to be researched properly'. Children certainly, I would argue, have rights to give or withhold consent, and Hammersley does not come up with any convincing argument against this proposition. (Parents and carers also have relevant rights and responsibilities, especially in relation to younger children and babies, but this does not prevent children also having their own right to give or withhold consent.) I would also argue that children have a general right to consideration as potential researchers, co-researchers or research partners, albeit no automatic right to take an active part in any project; after all, professional researchers also have rights to decide what research they are going to do, and with whom. We do not need the authority of the CRC to make these claims, because they are not rights particular to children and because they can be argued from first principles in terms of human freedom; but if we do choose to rely on the CRC it is worth looking at Articles 13–17 as well as Article 12. As for Hammersley's contention that Article 12 is only intended to apply to decisions of 'significance. . . such as those concerning which parent a child should live with after a divorce', this is authoritatively contradicted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in their General Comment on Article 12 (2009), which claims a far wider scope for children's right to involvement, both as individuals and collectively, in a whole range of matters that affect their lives.

## 'Why Research "by" Children?'

Kim (2016) looks specifically at children conducting their own research with adult support. Her stance is both sympathetic and critical, with an aim to examine the core assumptions underlying this work. She identifies two kinds of rationale, 'methodological' and 'normative', each with two core assumptions. For the methodological rationale these are: (1) that children are competent to conduct research and (2) that children are epistemically better positioned to research about children. For the normative rationale they are (3) that conducting research fulfils children's rights to participation and (4) that conducting research empowers children. I will summarise what Kim has to say about each of these assumptions, and then make a general response.

- (1) *Children are 'competent' to conduct research:* Kim notes there are contested views about this. Some claim that children are capable of conducting research with sufficient experience and training, whilst others take the view that children are developmentally unable to produce research to adult standards. Kim suggests that the question plays out differently for children of different ages, and also depends on the weight given to normative justifications for children leading research, so that the different rationales may need to be considered together.
- (2) *Children are epistemically better positioned to research about children:* Kim observes that this is often justified theoretically in terms of a children's 'stand-point', but asks whether this is to essentialise children by assuming that one can represent all. She also notes there is some evidence that children are not better at gathering data than adults, and tend to choose simplistic (and non-participatory) methods.
- (3) *Conducting research fulfils children's rights to participation:* Kim notes that a key driver for children's participation in research has been 'the introduction of children's rights to participation in the UNCRC', and a central argument appears to be that through conducting research 'children can actively participate in the process of producing knowledge' and 'better participate in various decision-making processes' (Kim, 2016: 235). She concedes some evidence can be found for this, but is concerned that only a few children are beneficiaries, so that children's participation in research may actually be exacerbating inequalities between children. Kim also questions whether the CRC actually does support children's participation in research, referring to Hammersley (2015) and like him relying heavily on the qualifications in Article 12 relating to 'capability' and 'due weight'.
- (4) *Conducting research empowers children:* Kim is sceptical about claims that active participation in research is 'empowering' for children. Her reasons are clearly explained and merit serious consideration. She points out that evidence for an 'empowering' effect is unclear and patchy, especially in the longer term; that there is a problem of attribution (for instance, an increase in children's self-confidence could be the result of addressing a particular issue, under adult guidance, rather than the experience of conducting research as such); and that children's marginalised position is temporary, save for children who are marginalised because of other characteristics, which means questions of intersectionality need further exploration.

A more fundamental problem, Kim suggests, is that most research by children is initiated and conducted within an adult-dominated framework, with adult agendas, assumptions, methodologies and adults' 'normative aspirations'. Any benefits for children may therefore depend crucially on adult inclusivity and adult reflexivity, demanding

a recognition that what children themselves think of their research and what they think they gain from the experience may not always be what adult researchers anticipate and that there is no reason to assume that these will always be the same for each child. Moreover, in order for them to be 'researchers' in their own right, children themselves may, if possible, need to engage critically with their own assumptions — including those based on their own epistemological views — and rationales about the purposes of their research.

(Kim, 2016: 238)

I will respond to these assumptions and arguments in turn.

- (1) In relation to whether children are 'competent' to conduct research, it seems to me that this is not only a question of what we mean by competence, but also of what we mean by research and what counts as 'good' research. Even within an academic research paradigm, there is a multiplicity of methods and techniques, of methodological approaches and epistemological assumptions, and of fundamental objectives. Some research aims to develop theory, whilst other research is concerned to discover facts; some aims primarily to inform policy, while some is done to influence other researchers; some is evaluative, some is exploratory. And that is just within social research; literary, historical or scientific research may have quite distinct characteristics, to say nothing of research (legitimately so-called) by journalists, activists, or marketers. Children may have their own conception of research and their own aims and approaches. I should not assume that the purpose of a child's research project is the same as mine; nor, therefore, the criteria by which it is to be assessed.
- (2) In relation to children's epistemical positioning, it may be helpful to think in terms of *perspective*. Iris Marion Young (2000) points out that a perspective is not the same as an interest, or an opinion; members of a group may share a perspective while at the same time having a variety of views on different issues. A perspective is 'an approach to looking at social events that conditions but does not determine what one sees' (p. 139). If one accepts, with Qvortrup, that children across societies share a common structural position – a subaltern position, in fact – then it can well be argued that they may 'come at' research questions concerning children in a distinctive way – and that children are indeed 'experts on their own lives' (Clark and Statham, 2005). In addition, they may be able to access settings that would be difficult for adults – for example in the classroom or the playroom – and they may ask different kinds of questions (see Kellett et al., 2004).
- (3) In relation to the right to participate through research, Kim's concern that only a limited number of children are beneficiaries seems unconvincing. Participation is



not a 'zero sum' process; and there is no reason in principle why participation in research could not in some form be offered to all children. As for the qualifications in Article 12 relating to 'capability' and 'due weight', those may be of little practical relevance to the question of what rights children have in relation to research, and they certainly do not exclude most children from a putative right to take an active role. As noted above, Articles 13–17 also identify various kinds of participation, or self-determination, rights and are not mentioned by Kim, who repeats Hammersley's omission here.

- (4) In relation to Kim's difficulties with the claim that that active participation in research is 'empowering' for children, the points she makes are all, I agree, important. Claims about the empowering effect of child-led research do need greater specificity if they are to be credible. The extent to which such empowerment really occurs will vary between projects and settings, and may even be regarded as a measure of success or failure.

Finally, Kim's reflections on the need for adult inclusivity and reflexivity, and on the possibilities for children to 'engage critically with their own assumptions', are welcome in that they open a space for a more nuanced understanding of what is involved when children are actively engaged in research of various kinds. I return to this later.

Incidentally, Kim (2016) concludes her discussion of the methodological rationale with the comment 'it might be argued that the assumptions concerning children's competency and epistemic advantages which underlie the methodological rationales for children's research are a little romanticised' (p. 234). This is a fair point. As an advocate, I plead guilty to having viewed the development of participatory and child-led research romantically on occasion. It is exciting when one's sense of what might be possible is disturbed, and when conventional and established ways are opened to challenge. However, Kim is right to insist that we look at things coolly, objectively, logically and sometimes sceptically; and it is on those terms that I seek to engage with her, and with Hammersley.<sup>2</sup>

## **'Childhood Studies: A sustainable paradigm?'**

In his second article, Hammersley questions what he takes to be central tenets of childhood studies: that children are worthy of study in their own right; that childhood is a social construction; that children are and must be treated as active agents; and (returning to the theme of the first article) that participatory methods are the 'gold standard' for childhood research. He argues that these assumptions, taken separately and together, involve inconsistencies and tensions that 'vitiates their capacity to form a coherent and effective approach.' Let us look at what he has to say about each of these 'tenets', in turn.

*Children as worthy of study 'in their own right'*: Hammersley has several problems with this statement, which he notes can mean a number of different things. It can mean merely that children should be studied as a distinct social category, more concretely that children's groupings and cultures are worthy of attention, or more boldly that research should attempt to take a distinctive children's standpoint. In particular Hammersley (2017) points out that the category 'child' is itself problematic, with contradictions



between biological and social definitions, the implications of intersectionality, and problems with the CRC's definition of children as all those under 18. He concludes: 'since most children later become adults, it is difficult to formulate childhood in any other terms than degrees of competence or ability in relation to adult activities' (p. 117).

*Childhood as socially constructed:* This partly means that childhood is different in different societies; Hammersley argues that this threatens the first commitment, since it suggests that children should always be studied in the context of a wider society and culture. He also suggests that alleged deficiencies in children are attributed to adult stereotyping, in an exaggerated way, and that constructionism is applied selectively – not to children's 'voices' or rights, which are taken to be real, and not, for example, to child sexual abuse. Finally, he argues that a radical version of constructionism would deny any explanatory framework other than discourse and any area of inquiry except who and how is constructed as a child, which would exclude much current work in childhood studies.

*Children having agency:* Hammersley distinguishes 'factual' and 'normative' interpretations of agency. His discussion in 'factual' terms is largely non-controversial. It is in the normative interpretation that he detects difficulties for childhood studies, particularly if agency is interpreted as 'freedom from all constraints'. This conflicts, he argues, with the reality in which all freedom is constrained, and also with ideas of responsibility, protection of children from harm, and potentially with the freedom of others. These are 'questions that the field of childhood studies, as currently constituted, may not have the resources to answer' (Hammersley, 2017: 121).

*Participatory methods as the 'gold standard':* Here Hammersley repeats some of the arguments made in his first article, along with Kim's critique. He comments that research methods in childhood studies are predominantly qualitative and frequently marked by a commitment to 'allowing the voices of children to be heard'. More radical versions of this privilege participatory inquiry, with children directly involved in making decisions about research and/or carrying it out. The justifications for this he says include the methodological (adults cannot understand children, but children can), political (children have a right to participate) and ethical (greater autonomy, extension of informed consent). Hammersley questions all three: participatory inquiry is arguably not real research, because social research is a specialised expert activity, and researchers can understand other groups; there is no general right to control research about oneself, even for 'oppressed groups'; autonomy is not the only principle at stake – for example, avoidance of harm is also important.

There are problems with each of Hammersley's arguments, which I will present in the same order.

Hammersley is right to note that *children being worthy of study 'in their own right'* can mean different things. For some key authorities in childhood studies such as Allison James or Berry Mayall, it clearly means both that children should be studied as a distinct social category and that children's groupings and cultures are worthy of attention, and sometimes even that research should attempt to take a distinctive children's standpoint. It can also mean simply that children should be studied as social actors in the same way that adults are (e.g. in Fine's (1979) classic study of 'little league' baseball, where the fact that the subjects of the research were children was almost incidental). It is not clear why any of those different interpretations should give rise to difficulty, except that the

idea that research is *obliged* to take a distinctive children's standpoint is certainly open to challenge. Finally, Hammersley's statement that 'since most children later become adults, it is difficult to formulate childhood in any other terms than degrees of competence or ability in relation to adult activities' is a *non sequitur*; childhood can equally well be defined in terms of its structural position.

Regarding the *implications of a social constructionist approach*, I would reiterate my earlier comments, that most scholars of childhood studies would probably argue that childhood is socially constructed but on a foundation of real physical differences between children at different ages and adults. Hammersley's point that a radical version of constructionism would exclude much current work in childhood studies possibly explains why such a radical version actually has few adherents.

Whilst Hammersley is right to point to some difficult questions regarding *children's agency*, his assertion that they are ones that childhood studies 'may not have the resources to answer' is hard to sustain in the face of substantial recent work by Oswell (2013), Alderson (2013), Esser et al. (2016) and others on the concept of agency, to which Hammersley does not refer. (In both of Hammersley's articles he has a tendency to attribute views to the field of childhood studies that may reflect the positions taken by some scholars but certainly do not characterise the whole, so that he is sometimes at risk of engaging with a caricature.)

In relation to *participatory methods being the 'gold standard'*, my responses to Hammersley's earlier paper, and also to Kim, are relevant. I would add that Hammersley's contention that participatory inquiry is arguably not real research, because social research is a specialised expert activity, simply does not follow. He does not explain why participatory inquiry, conducted by professional researchers in collaboration with 'experts by experience', should not be recognised as an activity requiring particular kinds of expertise under the general heading of social research, and subject to appropriate standards in terms of methodology and ethical processes. As for his comment that research methods in childhood studies are predominantly qualitative, and frequently marked by a commitment to 'allowing the voices of children to be heard', this may be true up to a point, but it should be noted that there is also significant work that uses quantitative or mixed methods or that takes a more structural perspective. There is also much qualitative work that is not especially concerned with 'voice', but uses conventional ethnographic or interactionist methods.

### Three types of criticism, and the beginnings of a response

We can distinguish three categories of critique made by Kim and Hammersley in the three papers examined here: those that are clearly valid, and should be accepted to the extent they apply; those that appear to be based on a misreading of the claims being made by proponents of child-led or participatory research, or by scholars of childhood studies; and those that represent serious challenges to researchers and scholars to defend, redefine or rethink our aims, claims or research practices.

In the first category, we can probably accept that there has been too much research that proclaims children's 'agency' as if it were a new discovery, without examining the concept critically or reflecting enough on previous research, and without recognising the

importance of structure. This has been commented on frequently within the field of childhood studies (see e.g. Spyrou, 2018: 118ff). We can also acknowledge that some of the claims made for child-led research may have been over-enthusiastic or naïve, or on occasion somewhat dogmatic in asserting that it should be the only path for researchers to take.

However, to take these examples as representative is a serious error, and I have identified a number of ways in which Hammersley, in particular, falls into this trap and therefore into the second category, of criticism based on a misreading. It is not a central claim of childhood studies that there are no real and significant differences between children and adults, nor is it a central claim of childhood studies that children have rights as defined by the CRC, so the challenge to reconcile rights talk with social constructionism is largely based on a misunderstanding of what is being claimed by whom.

That is not to say that there are no contradictions in the field. As we have seen, the definition of childhood as a field of study is in itself problematic when the age of majority is clearly an artefact. There are also obvious tensions between claiming agency, and a degree of autonomy, for children and also wanting them to be protected – for example, from full legal responsibility for the consequences of their actions. These contradictions require to be addressed, as do the critical questions raised by Kim about the benefits and shortcomings of child-led research. All these issues clearly fall into my third category, and demand further scrutiny.

There is current work in childhood studies that seeks to engage with some of the unresolved questions and contradictions underlying the field, and a number of authors are developing increasingly sophisticated approaches to questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Alanen (2009) has explored the concept of *generational order* as a powerful way of framing our understanding not just of childhood but of societal relations, while Leonard (2015) builds on this to bring depth to the notion of children's agency, through her conception of 'generagency' (p. 9). Spyrou (2017) among others has called for a 'decentering' of childhood in favour of 'a critically open childhood studies' (p. 435), proposing a re-orientation of childhood studies based on relationality. In a recent edited collection Spyrou et al. (2018) bring together a number of authors to review the state of the field from a range of perspectives including spatial and temporal dimensions, materiality, questions of agency and subjectivity.

Meanwhile a large and growing body of empirical research continues to be produced, largely untroubled by such ontological uncertainties or epistemological dilemmas but perhaps no less valuable for that. For example, the current issue of *Childhood* at the time of writing includes (among others) articles on the lives of children with albinism, young people's interpretations of questions in a health behaviour survey, a critique of the pedagogy of war remembrance, a study of how refugee girls talk about friendship, and also a detailed and reflexive critical inquiry into the methodology of research based on 'listening to' children. None of these contributions is hampered by an obsession with children's agency or assumptions about their competence; none takes a radical social constructionist position, and none makes any obvious mention of children's rights. Both empirical research and theoretical exploration in the field of childhood studies are more varied, more complex, more reflective and more nuanced than Hammersley acknowledges.

In relation specifically to child-led research, it is important to recognise the wide range of work and the wide variety of different approaches under this heading – see for example Bucknall (2012), Cahill (2007), Fleming and Boeck (2012), Kellett (2010), Nuggehalli (2014), Shier (2015) – and also the different constructions of what counts as knowledge and what purposes it can serve.

(I have previously categorised these approaches as ‘children as research assistants’, ‘children as research partners’ and ‘children as research leaders’ (Thomas 2017: 161), problematising the terms children, noting the ambiguity and elision often present in categories based loosely on age, and research, which is defined differently in various more or less specialised contexts.)

Spyrou (2018) offers a different view of knowledge, and a different understanding of research, as a process of knowledge production. He writes:

The challenge of collaborative research work between children and adults is to create the space that allows for knowledge production that is different (. . .) and offers new ways of thinking about the world and our place in it. (2018: 176)

Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019) offer one such alternative view of knowledge, wider in conception of how it is produced and why it is valued. They argue, on the basis of their own empirical research, that:

Child-led research is challenging ‘traditional’ social research, by questioning what constitutes knowledge, within contexts of generational difference and power. (10)

Neither Spyrou nor Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall are uncritical in their examination of child-led research. In both contributions they ask searching questions about how far children and young people are genuinely able to direct and carry out their research projects, about the role of adults in facilitating or guiding, and also about what kind of knowledge is generated and how it is used. The same could be said of other adult researchers such as Kellett, Bucknall, Fleming or Shier. What is required, of course, is a critical, reflective (and reflexive) approach on the part of those working in this area, one that asks difficult questions about the purpose and the benefits of child-led research. That is what I see happening, to a great extent.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I venture to offer the following six propositions:

1. *Children do have rights in relation to research.* These rights are not dependent for their authority on Article 12 of the CRC. They are widely recognised and defensible human rights (and may include rights as actually claimed by children, who were not involved in drafting the CRC). I suggest that they include the right to give or withhold informed consent, the right to protection from harm and abuse, the right to consideration of participants’ views about the research process, and perhaps also the right to be offered an opportunity to take a direct part in the research if that is appropriate.

2. *Childhood studies is, and must be, a 'broad church'.* It is not a discipline, but a field. It is not necessarily wedded to 'radical constructionism'. Nor is it necessarily embedded in a rights discourse. There is no catechism, and the 'key tenets' are perhaps reducible to: children are a social group worthy of serious study; childhood is a phenomenon worthy of serious study. Within that envelope are many different areas of study, theoretical questions, methodological orientations, ethical assumptions. This may include scholarship that is centred on children and childhood, as well as scholarship that 'decentres' childhood to focus on intergenerational or broader social questions.
3. *There are real problems with the definition of childhood as an area of study.* Biological maturation is one kind of fact; chronological age is another; legal and cultural definitions are another; processes of social construction are real. These factors do not sit easily with a strict definition of childhood in terms of a single age point. If we are to be critical of the conception of childhood, we have to challenge these artificial boundaries and not allow the field to be defined by them.
4. *Agency and competence are empirical questions.* The 'presumption of competence' means not assuming that children cannot grasp something, but giving them a chance to find out what they grasp. It does not mean that all children are assumed to be capable of anything or everything. To assert that children have 'agency' is of limited value, without examining what is meant by that. Clearly children interact as agents with others and with their environment, as do adults; that is fundamental to any useful social theory. Clearly the extent of their freedom to think for themselves, to act for themselves (or in conjunction with others), and the extent of their power to change the world they live in are highly variable, dependent on their own capacities and on the constraints and affordances in their immediate and wider environment; those are empirical questions.
5. *Research can mean many things.* Hammersley defines social research in terms of the expectations of academic institutions and the standards employed in instruments like the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Within that he would, I suspect, privilege work that seeks to construct, develop and verify social theory. However, that is not the only kind of research. Even within the academic and professional context there is research which aims to find out facts, without necessarily developing theory. Let us say that all research seeks to generate knowledge: the question then becomes what kind of knowledge, for what purpose, and to whom is it important? We do research in order to find out something we do not already know, or to test something that we think we know but cannot be sure. (This does not necessarily mean something that no one else already knows – not all research is primary.)
6. *Child-led research can take many forms.* The above has implications for research by children, where some fundamental questions about who is the audience were raised long ago by Mary Kellett and others. It is unlikely that research led by children will ever have much of a presence in academic journals; why would it, when children are unlikely to read it there? In practice most child-led research results are likely to be consumed by the children themselves, by their peers in school or other settings, and perhaps by policy-makers and service providers to

whom demands for change are addressed. Research by academics in which children take an active role is another matter. Much of this, where it occurs, will continue to be aimed at an academic readership and judged by academic standards, and the way in which children's participation is handled will of course continue to be subject to critical review.

It would be unproductive for this debate to become polarised. It is hard to see how anyone could seriously claim that all children are competent to conduct all kinds of research; or conversely, that no child is competent to conduct any kind of research. The questions have to be about *which* children are competent to conduct *what* kinds of research, in *what* circumstances and conditions; and which children might *want* to conduct research and whether it would be to their benefit, also in context. But competence in conducting social research does not come with age; most adults do not have those skills. It comes with experience, reflection on that experience, and learning from others with greater experience. Children's active involvement in research processes is a more or less important part of their life experience for those children who have that opportunity. Observing that process and learning from that experience has been, and will surely continue to be, an important area of enquiry for childhood studies.

### Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 14th Conference of the European Sociological Association (RN04, Sociology of Children and Childhood), in Manchester August 2019. I am grateful for the encouragement and advice received from those attending.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

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

### ORCID iD

Nigel Patrick Thomas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5310-9144>

### Notes

1. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
2. By 'child-led research' I mean children conducting their own research with adult support (Kim's definition), and also research undertaken by children and adults in partnership, where both share direction and execution of the project.

### References

- Alanen L (2009) Generational order. In: Qvortrup J, Corsaro W and Honig M (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.



- Alderson P (2013) *Childhoods Real and Imagined Volume 1: An Introduction to Critical Realism and Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Beazley H, Bessell S, Ennew J, et al. (2009) The right to be properly researched: Research with children in a messy, real world. *Children's Geographies* 7(4): 365–378.
- Bucknall S (2012) *Children as Researchers in Primary Schools*. London: Routledge.
- Cahill C (2007) Doing research with young people: Participatory research and the rituals of collective work. *Children's Geographies* 5(3): 297–312.
- Clark A and Statham J (2005) Listening to young children: Experts in their own lives. *Adoption and Fostering* 29(1): 45–56.
- Cuevas-Parra P and Tisdall K (2019) Child-led research: Questioning knowledge. *Social Sciences* 8(2): 44.
- Doyal L and Gough I (1991) *A Theory of Human Need*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Esser F, Baader M, Betz T, et al. (eds) (2016) *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood*. London: Routledge.
- Fine G (1979) Small groups and culture creation: The idioculture of little league baseball. *American Sociological Review* 44(5): 733–745.
- Fleming J and Boeck T (eds) (2012) *Involving Children and Young People in Health and Social Care Research*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hammersley M (2015) Research ethics and the concept of children's rights. *Children & Society* 29(6): 569–582.
- Hammersley M (2017) Childhood studies: A sustainable paradigm? *Childhood* 24(1): 113–127.
- Kellett M (2010) *Rethinking Children and Research*. London: Continuum.
- Kellett M, Forrest R, Dent N, et al. (2004) Just teach us the skills, we'll do the rest: Empowering ten-year-olds as active researchers. *Children & Society* 18(1): 329–343.
- Kim C-Y (2016) Why research 'by' children? Rethinking the assumptions underlying the facilitation of children as researchers. *Children & Society* 30(3): 230–240.
- Leonard M (2015) *The Sociology of Children, Childhood and Generation*. London: Sage.
- Nuggehalli R (2014) Children and young people as protagonists and adults as partners. In: Westwood J, Larkins C, Moxon D, et al. (eds) *Participation, Citizenship and Intergenerational Relations in Children and Young People's Lives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oswell D (2013) *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prout A and James A (1990) A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? In: James A and Prout A (eds) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.
- Sen A (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shier H (2015) Children as researchers in Nicaragua: Children's consultancy to transformative research. *Global Studies of Childhood* 5(2): 206–219.
- Spyrou S (2017) Time to decenter childhood? *Childhood* 24(4): 433–437.
- Spyrou S (2018) *Disclosing Childhoods: Research and Knowledge Production for a Critical Childhood Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spyrou S, Rosen R and Cook D (eds) (2018) *Reimagining Childhood Studies*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Thomas N (2017) Turning the tables: Children as researchers. In: Christensen P and James A (eds) *Research With Children: Perspectives and Practices*, 3rd edn, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Young IM (2000) *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.