

Critically evaluate the usefulness and limitations of the concept of agency in childhood studies

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ABSTRACT

Many years after the United Nations General Assembly signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, not all countries make it easy for children to be active agents in their own lives (Burman, 2013). Children's agency could be termed as their ability to behave purposefully, speak for themselves, and actively reflect on their social worlds, shaping their lives and the lives of others. Childhood studies is part of a wider multinational initiative that examines whether or not the concept of agency is useful in the study of childhood. Specifically, this study aims to examine whether the concept of agency can be relevant in the study of children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child's emphasis on children's agency is directly linked to these ideas (Leonard, 2015). Overall, there are places where kids can learn about their own choices in early childhood education. On the other hand, pedagogical and institutional practices can either help or hurt children's agency (Green, 2015), because adults don't always notice situations that might make it hard for kids to be in charge or give them chances to be involved in making decisions. There is a growing amount of study on children's agency, but there are still certain issues that need to be resolved. In this essay, I will argue that the concept of agency advocates the usefulness and limitations in childhood studies. On the one hand, under different social backgrounds and environments, the concept of agency can promote the development of sociology of childhood's and the theory of children's research relationship in developmental psychology. On the other hand, different definitions of agency will affect the effective management of children by adults, and the dilemma of combining agency with local reality.

KEYWORDS

Agency; Children; Childhood Studies

1 The usefulness of the concept of agency in childhood studies

1.1 The concept of agency can promote the development of childhood studies in children's sociology

Leonard (2015) defines agency as the ability of an individual to act independently. At the same time, Prout (2015) believes that sociology of childhood is a child-centered research. When there is repeated interactions between active subjects, childhood can be constructed in a more diversified and localized way. Specifically, in the view of childhood under the social macro-theory, children's agency is only a basic and spontaneous human characteristic. When children play a social role, agency is often neglected. However, sociology of childhood not only pays attention to children's agency, but also requires researchers to discover and pay attention to children's agency. A key usefulness of the concept of agency in childhood studies is that it can promote the development of children's sociology. Research shows that high-value academic achievements can be predicted with a high degree of agency (Burman, 2013). For example, in one study, pupils who seek explanation from their teachers have been shown to perform better on standardized tests. As a counterbalance, students who are reluctant to approach their teachers for assistance or clarification tend to perform worse academically. In addition, pupils who are able to grasp the underlying meaning of an assignment tend to perform better and have a more positive attitude toward it (Wang, 2017). As a whole, students who seek out methods to connect their learning to their own lives and find ways to grow and improve are more likely to succeed at school. However, Xiao and Yuan (2019) pointed out that contrary to students' innate interest in certain courses, agency refers to stimulating and controlling their learning ability in various disciplines, and students who have a strong sense of self-determination are also more likely to be active participants in or leaders of extracurricular organizations and athletic teams. For example, these students are more likely to take the initiative on social issues that matter to them and are more willing to routinely challenge themselves and actively participate in activities that allow them to make and learn from mistakes. As a result, students with a strong sense of self-determination and a willingness to take action can use their agency to make a difference in their neighborhoods and in society as a whole. This view is supported by Wang (2017) who writes that students should actively take care of their professional life and study in the face of the unpredictability and changing characteristics of the current job market. In other words, education plays a critical role in preparing students for success in the workforce once they leave the classroom. Students must have a passion and an aptitude for lifelong learning in order to succeed in today's fast-paced and constantly expanding world. Research shows that employees are increasingly expected to build their own skills rather than relying on their employers to give on-the-job training in a market where corporations are increasingly likely to contract the expertise they need for a particular task or project (Joseph, 2020). To succeed in the workforce, students must be able to determine what they need and have the motivation to do so, even

though it is difficult. A major criticality of Prout's work is that social life is full of fragility and uncertainty, and when children experience social life, they need to change, Which is evidence that studying the concept of agency can help children solve the problems they may encounter in society in the future (Prout, 2015). Thus, agent people will be more likely play a role in society, such as taking on leadership responsibilities in their teams and pursuing challenging tasks, as well as share their thoughts and opinions.

1.2 The concept of agency can promote the development of relationship theory in child research in developmental psychology

Another usefulness of the concept of agency in childhood studies is that it can further deepen the theoretical research of relationships in developmental psychology. In fact, developmental psychology has had an impact on existing cognition. For example, from James and others' opposition to developmental psychology to Piaget's child-centered emphasis on respecting children's way of thinking, until this view was questioned in childhood studies, and finally to the recent years, Woodhead (2009) thoughts that developmental psychology should be related to such studies as physical development, maturity and relationship. The term "children's agency" is ambiguous and lacks clarity (Mizen and Ofusukusi. 2013, cited in Push, 2016, p186.) Therefore, when we study children's agency, it is far from enough to just admit that they have agency. What is more needed is to analyze their agency in different situations. As Burman (2013) says that providing each child with a variety of options isn't enough to instill a feeling of self-determination in them. For example, an understanding of one's impact on the world and one's place in it is fostered when children have a strong feeling of their own agency. At this time, adults should listen to children's voices, words and ideas and shows them that they are valued and their ideas are taken seriously. Children's perspectives on the world may differ from ours, but they are often more lucid due to the lack of daily distractions, and this can provide us with a fresh perspective on the world (Burman, 2013). Similarly, Wynees (2018) believes that in the sustainable development relationship between children and peers or adults, children should cultivate agency, because the positive way of communication is embodied in the way children perceive things, change things and try to challenge the social world. Specifically, in children's communication, the collision of different ideas is also a manifestation of exerting agency to establish rule awareness and implementation mode. Teachers can help them like scaffolding, so that children's agency can be promoted with the help of teachers, and the significance of adult social communication can be realized and children also explicitly exercise their rights and establish a sense of responsibility in the game (Wynees, 2018). However, Wynees (2018) points out that for some children, agency and sense of responsibility have established an inseparable relationship, so they are reluctant to make decisions. For example, in the case of parents' divorce, children may worry that their agency will hurt each other, and agency can also be reflected in silence. In contrast to Wynees (2015), Leonard (2015) comments that the study found that children are willing to support and help their mothers get out of this unfortunate environment when their mothers are abused by their partner. This research has often emphasized that children have the ability to understand their own lives and can play an influential role in shaping their relationships with more capable adults. In the relationship between children and parents, teachers and other important adults, children have the ability of independent action (Burman, 2013). Therefore, it is very important to consider children's agency from the perspective of relationship, and to perceive children's thoughts in the relationship with others in different situations (Sutterlüty and Tisdall, 2019).

2 The limitations of the concept of agency in childhood studies

2.1 The concept of agency may limit the rational management of children by adults

Different definitions of agency may restrict adults' effective management of children. The agency means that children have the ability to participate in decision-making and freedom of movement, but there are also vulnerabilities in children's lives (Edmonds, 2019). For example, in the process of development, children will not passively accept the influence of the external environment. Due to the fact that children are naturally curious about things, they are highly selective in stimulating the environment and show initiative as a living body, so agency may lead children to actively accept negative influences. Similarly, Sultan and Andresen (2019) found that habitual drugs and drugs make children experience happiness beyond their normal physical ability, which will lead to children losing their agency and reason, because they are paralyzed by drugs, and their spirit is no longer under control. In other words, children's initial exposure to prescription drugs for ADHD was under the supervision of teachers, doctors and parents. Then, after children experience the feeling of intoxication and excitement in the drug therapy, they will try to achieve their agency by using this drug or more excessive drugs. For example, children conceal their use of non-medical prescription drugs or even drugs from parents and teachers. When children focus on drugs or the pleasure of drug use can alleviate their problems in mental health, social barriers, family conflicts, learning difficulties and so on, children need to play their own agency and

choose a comfortable environment. This research has often emphasized that drugs provide children with a source of agency, but at the same time, they also cause children to suffer from uncontrollable vulnerability. Which is evidence that children do not play many roles as agents in the environment where parents, teachers and doctors intervene to prescribe medicines for children. However, when children are looking for over-the-counter drugs or drugs, they need to actively seek drugs and the pleasure they bring. At this time, parents, teachers and doctors have been unable to control their children well. Unlike Ruth, Braces-chyrek (2021) argues that the concept of agency tends to be taken for granted in academic discourse and is unproblematic. The view that children's agency is equal to freedom and unrestrained has been criticized by some scholars. For example, encouraging children to resist or challenge the authority of adults in their lives, as instructed by (Dalglish et al. 2017). However, there is an inconsistency with this argument. Specifically, it is difficult to find a balance between children's inherent vulnerability, dependence, inactivity and protection needs and their inherent rights as agents. Because children and young people exercise their agency from different angles, they see different positive and negative aspects. For example, vulnerability is one of the factors that influence children's agency. The following two cases can be a good comparison of the relationship between children's agency and adult management. First, poor children and war children may have lost their ability to make decisions for a long time. They are passive, accepting other people's arrangements and rely on adults' choices. The second situation is that in Rwanda, the first sexual relationship between a girl and a boy is just to prove the value of fertility. In this case, exercising agency is not in line with the development direction of social culture, and adults can not control and stop this behavior in time. Therefore, children's agency is related to moral and political beliefs. It means that under a given cultural background, what kind of agency is suitable for children needs a more complicated proxy view: a view that considers the background, structure, moral and political aspects of children's activities. Only by balancing the relationship between these factors and agency can children and adults have a balanced relationship.

2.2 The concept of agency is difficult to combine with the localization of childhood studies

The seeming disconnect between the principle of advocating for children's agency and its practical implementation. In fact, when the concept of agency is used as an analytical tool, the actual social culture related to children's agency may not be seen, which means that researchers can not see children's agency (Edmonds, 2019). Joseph (2020) highlights that some early childhood policies and programs around the world advocate children's right to exercise their agency. However, the adult -directed educational methods and strict organizational structures inhibit children's ability to make decisions and govern themselves in institutional education. Specifically, in the process of the transition from nursery facilities to primary schools, this change is more obvious. For preschool children, there are many kinds of teaching methods in kindergarten curriculum, but most of them are game-based teaching methods, which aim to cultivate children's interest and inspire children's preliminary cognition of things. For example, kindergartens all have regional activities, which are rich in content and flexible in form, and conform to the intuitive action thinking characteristics of young children. When children take part in collective regional activities, they can promote their agency and all-round development. Conversely, Green (2015) argues that primary school and educational environment is an institution created by history and culture. In the teaching environment of primary schools, the game-based teaching method is less than the goal-oriented formal teaching method, and most of the ways for children to get games come from the game activities during recess. For example, in the research of Prompona and Papadopoulou (2020), the students were investigated how to understand the role of recess games in Athens, Greece. Under different circumstances, children's opportunities to take agency in daily activities are limited, so it is more important for children to take part in games during recess. It means that children can choose or decide what kind of game mode and content according to their own ideas in the recess games. When children's activities are unrestricted, for example, in the free environment of recess, children can question the rules made by adults, and even experience and exert their agency, instead of obeying the rules (Blatchford, 1998). The focus of this study is to emphasize the role of agency in children's development, which is evidence to help children understand and understand the necessity of games from their own perspective (Caillois 2001; Henricks 2014; Sluss 2014). Specifically, the significance of children's play activities during recess lies in letting children express their opportunities and create new ideas. If the school reduces or cancels the game activities during recess, this kind of behavior is not in conformity with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, because children's opinions should be respected, especially in all activities or decisions involving children (UNCRC, 2009). This view is supported by Wang (2017) who writes that prior studies have highlighted the absence of research on children's experiences with their agency rights in real-world circumstances. In other words, at present, many parts of the world have formulated relevant policies based on the concept of agency, ostensibly to promote children's exercise of the rights brought by agency. However, these policies may be formulated to understand children's own views, rather than combining these views with children's experiences in real life, and only staying on social development policies related to agency or specific social environment. Therefore, when local children are influenced by local culture or expectations, their agency practice will also be affected (Edmonds, 2019).

3 Conclusion

To sum up, this essay has considered the positive and negative aspects of the concept of agency in childhood studies. The usefulness and limitation of this method are studied in two parts. As part of usefulness research, the concept of agency can promote children's awareness of their social roles. Because when children are educated at an early age, if they can realize their social role and give full play to their agency, for example, when they encounter difficulties in their studies, they can actively try to solve them. When employment pressure is high later in the day, children belonging to this group are more likely to succeed and play their part in society. In addition, the concept of agency can further promote the relational theory of developmental psychology. Because in different circumstances, children's responses to exercising their agency is different. For example, in two different relationships between divorced parents and abused mothers, children show two attitudes: silence and positive support. On the other hand, children enjoy agency, but it doesn't mean that they are completely free, free from moral, political and cultural factors. The voices that fully encourage children to challenge adult management will put children in a negative environment. Therefore, when children want to fully implement their own agency, it will influence the effective management of adults. In addition, in the environment from kindergarten to primary school, the rights of children as agents are complicated and difficult to realize. When teachers exercise their rights to their children, the social and moral order of the school has a very important influence on how children treat their sense of agency. Thus, when children are trapped in a specific cultural environment, their rights as agents cannot be well realized. Taking all these into consideration, this essay cannot express the argument that the concept of agency promoted the development of childhood sociology from a macro perspective, and the empirical example of employment pressure that may be used are not convincing. However, these arguments may also prove that childhood studies have realized the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, giving children a say in how to make choices and express their opinions.

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