# TABOO

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# Table of Contents

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Adultism

***Adam F. C. Fletcher & J. Cynthia McDermott***

An emergent consciousness is alerting the world to adultism. This new awareness is apparent in the increasingly sophisticated literature addressing the issue as the fields of psychology, civic engagement, education, healthcare, parenting, governance and social services begin grappling with it through theory and practice. This special edition of *Taboo* addresses several of these, gathering disparate international authors in a single edition to highlight current cross-disciplinary understandings of adultism.

In this special edition, there are fifteen articles by twenty-one authors from five countries, including Argentina, Germany, the United States of America, Ireland and Greece. At least ten disciplines are addressed in this collection. Two writers are from Argentina, one from Greece, five from Germany, one from Ireland and eleven are from the United States of America. Two of the American submissions specifically identify co-authors as young people. Seventeen writers come from higher education institutions with four inclusions from the private sector.

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Xamuel Bañales is in the Ethnic Studies Department at California State University, Stanislaus in the United States of America. Their contribution, "De/colonization: A Framework to Understand and Transgress Adultism," suggests moving from "discourses of liberal inclusivity" toward social transformation. Highlighting a de/colonization framework, this essay examines the interwoven relationship between adultism and colonization and shares how failing to address that reality can perpetuate oppression.

A German submission comes from Julia Höke of the Catholic University of Applied Science NRW and Katrin Velten from Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin University of Applied Sciences. Their article, called "'I don't know.' Analysis of a Powerful Interaction Strategy of Children in Dealing with Adult-Dominated Interactions," examines the hierarchical order implicit in intergenerational interactions, especially interviews between children and adults. They examine their own research and share observations about how to better facilitate these interactions in order to gather more effective data.

Writing with students, Alison Cook-Sather is the director of the Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) program a signature program of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford College in the United States of America. The writing partners along with Cook-Sather in this study are Abyssinia Braud, Brisa Kane and Abhirami Sures who are undergraduates who have worked in pedagogical partnership with faculty through SaLT, and their collective piece is called "How Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships Counter Adultism in Higher Education." In the article they explore how this program counters adultism on multiple levels, and share ways it can be dismantled.

In an essay called "A Future Without Adultism," Canadian-American advocate Adam F.C. Fletcher of the Freechild Institute for Youth Engagement in the United States of America proposes a hypothetical future absent of discrimination against youth and bias benefiting adults. Fletcher proposes that in the place of adultism and other oppressions is sustained democracy, freedom, and justice for all.

"Exploring Age-Based Oppression: Adultism, Ageism, and Their Potential Interactions" was submitted by Katherine King, the Geropsychology Concentration Director and an Assistant Professor of Psychology in the Clinical Psychology Department at William James College in the United States of America. Their article provides a first-person account of adultism. Focused on understanding the geropsychology workforce shortage, it also centers on findings from several studies demonstrating adultist concerns among graduate students considering careers serving older adults. Included are an Adultist Concerns Scale, qualitative research gathering student concerns, and related findings from studies exploring how adultist concerns relate to ageism and discomfort with death. There is also a review of educational resources exploring age- based oppression.

A longstanding advocate/educator focused on adultism from the United States of America, Paul Kivel's contribution is called "Working with Young Peo-

ple as Adult Allies." In this piece, Kivel provides a necessary introduction to the concept of adultism and proposes practical steps for adults, including educators, youth workers and others, to take action to address adultism by becoming allies.

Sharing their perspectives from Germany, Manfred Liebel of the Social and Educational Sciences Department University of Applied Sciences Potsdam and Philip Meade explore different ways of conceptualizing the concept in their paper, "Intersectional Tensions in Theorizing Adultism." Employing a Marxist lens, they argue adultism's capitalist roots and suggest pathways toward countering it.

Verena Marke of Leuphana Universität Lüneburg in Germany shares a piece called "Critical and Intersectional Childhood Studies: A New Theoretical Framework of Adultism from Transdisciplinary Fields of Critical Age, Gender, Race, and Disability Studies." Based on a Hawaiian case study of reframing self- and group identity in age-different learning environments, Marke reveals how classroom power relationships can be transformed to address adultism.

A professor emeritus at Antioch University Los Angeles in the United States of America, J. Cynthia McDermott contributes an article entitled, "Protection Is Insufficient." They explore the rights of children and the roles of people responsible for ensuring those rights. Highlighting the creation of the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the piece examines how adultism is present throughout this early work, and suggests that protecting children is not sufficient to empower them.

Santiago Morales from the Universidad de Buenos Aires and a CONICET Doctoral Fellow, based at the Instituto de Estudios de América Latina y El Caribe of the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales of the UBA, shares a Spanish-language article called "Adultocentrismo, adultismo y violencias contra niños y niñas. Una mirada crítica sobre las relaciones de poder entre clases de edad." He employs a critical, intersectional approach to adultcentrism that highlights the role of adult violence innate within adultism and calls out its systemic nature.

Ryan Oto of Carleton College in the United States of America writes with Amina Smaller, a youth author, in an article called "Reclaiming Civic Life in Schools: Lessons on Contesting Anti-Black Adultism through Acts of Solidarity." Based on Amina's lived experience as a student, this article illustrates and addresses how anti-Blackness and adultism work together called anti-Black adultism. It shows how upsetting anti-Black adultism can lead to sustained intergenerational work toward racial justice in schools.

From Argentina comes an article by Paülah Nurit Shabel of Cónsejó Naciónal de Investigaciónes Cientí ficas y Tecnicas and the Institutó de Ciencias Antrópóló gicas-Universidad de Buenós Aires. Called "Intergenerational Present. Unexpected Proximity Against the Adultist Temporality," this piece examines temporality from an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach. This piece is a conceptual exercise that leads readers to an edge in intergenerational relationships: If time is not linear maybe you can make friends with a child.

Writing from Ireland, Karen Smith of the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice at University College Dublin contributes an article called "Using Adultism in Conceptualizing Oppression of Children and Youth: More Than a Buzzword?" Examining the intellectual underpinnings of adultism, this piece draws on multiple disciplines to show how the concept is employed today. It ultimately challenges specific debates within the areas of Childhood Studies and Youth Studies and the fields of Education and Social Justice and suggests new ways to confront adultism in the academy.

Aikaterini Varella from Greece shares a piece called "Exploring & Combating Adultism in Early Childhood Education and Beyond." Exploring initial reactions to the concept of adultism, Varella shares different reactions to notions of adult power, children's dependence and protection, limits, guilt, the intersectionality of discrimination, and the internalization of adultism. She then explores how to unpack and challenge those realities, and counters prescriptive approaches to stopping adultism.

The force of each of these articles adds to the multi-disciplinary cannon addressing adultism; the sum of this entire edition shows the need for further research and examination to raise the profile of this topic across fields. It also shows the potential for trans-disciplinary approaches to encourage holistic perspectives of the very people most affected, children and youth. The whole of these writings shows us that seeing adultism across topics and beyond singular points-of-view can encourage advocacy, action, and outcomes affecting the greatest numbers of people worldwide. This is one of the greatest ways scholars, academics, and other thinkers can contribute today.

# Decolonization: A Framework to Understand and Trangress Adultism

*Xamuel Bañales*

## Abstract

There is growing body of scholarship that examines adultism through various methodologies and in a variety of settings, including labor, education, and society. In addition, studies of adultism increasingly recognize how this from of power intersects or is parallel with other forms of oppression. This research is generative for illuminating the various way in which adultism and other forms of power operate or contribute to limiting or exclusionary practices that young people face. However, how can we move away from discourses of liberal inclusivity toward social transformation? Why do the causes, effects, or outcomes of adultism from a critical perspective often fall short? What can decolonial thought offer to understandings of adultism? This essay proposes a de/colonization framework to advance understandings of adultism and center liberation. I argue that adultism and colonization are not separate but birthed in relation to one another. Furthermore, discourses on adultism that fail to seriously engage with de/colonization risk perpetuating the oppression that they attempt to challenge, trouble, or address.

## Adultism: An Introduction

One definition of adultism is "the systematic exploitation, abuse, and mistreatment of young people by adults" (Kivel & Creighton, 1996, p. 73). DeJong and Love (2015) employ a similar definition of adultism but expand on it by discussing "adult supremacy," which comprises "a set of beliefs, attitudes, policies,

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and practices that construct adults as developed, mature, intelligent, and experienced, based solely on their age and ensures that adults control the resources and make the decisions in society" (p. 490). Writing about adultism, Bell (1995) contends that, "except for prisoners and a few other institutionalized groups, young people are more controlled than any other group in society." As adults decide what is "wrong" and "right" for youth from the time they are born, Bell argues that most young people are told "what to eat, what to wear, and when to go to bed, when they can talk, that they will go to school, which friends are okay, and when they are to be in the house," and that "the opinions of most young people are not valued; they are punished at the will or whim of adults; their emotions are considered 'immature'" (Bell, 1995). Such understandings of adultism are useful for calling attention to the ways in which power shapes or informs social structures and relations between young people and adults.

There is growing body of research that examines adultism in a variety of settings, including labor, education, and society (Fletcher, 2015; Pensoneau-Conway, 2017; Bertrand, Brooks, & Domínguez, 2020; Corney et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2023). In addition, studies of adultism increasingly recognize how it intersects or is parallel with other forms of oppression (McClellan, 2020; Hall, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2023). For example, Sutherland et al. (2023), conceptualize adultism as a structural and scalar phenomenon that is analogous to racism or sexism; the authors regard adultism as integral to the structuring of policy, culture, and economy, and conceive how it is spatially reproduced, reasserted, and resisted. Finally, there is scholarship that considers the ways in which the participation or activism of young people and adults who work together can interrupt, challenge, or trouble adultism (Bertrand, Brooks, & Domínguez, 2020; Liou & Literat, 2020; Oto, 2023). Thus, recent literature on adultism demonstrates how it operates in different spaces, it relates to domination across power, and it can be confronted to work towards social change.

In the literature on challenging adultism, one approach to initiate social change is through a reformist approach, which advocates for youth participation, partnership, or inclusion with adults in institutional settings. For example, Bertrand, Brooks, and Domínguez (2020) focus on the ways in which educational researchers and practitioners can challenge adultism that constrains youth's sanctioned participation in decision-making sites in education. They interrogate adultism at interpersonal, institutional, and curricular levels, and argue that researchers and practitioners have a responsibility to challenge adultism as this can open possibilities in which youth and adults collaborate to advance equity. A major finding is the "need for adults to decenter their adultist perspective to create a space for young people" (p. 20). Although liberal inclusivity advances may be important to implement reformist change, this approach preserves existing communal values, often through moderate to slow measures that maintain the existing colonizing social ideas and procedures (Maldonado Torres et al., 2023). Consequently, how

effective will considerations of decentering adultism or making space for young people be if the larger social/institutional structure and colonizing logic that maintains and perpetuates it is left uncontested or intact?

Despite that contemporary scholarship and understandings of adultism are generative, a component that is missing in this work is critical engagement with colonization/coloniality and decolonization/decoloniality, particularly as it relates to place, context, ideology, and practice. As a result, adultism as an analytical lens is often divorced from colonialism/coloniality, which negates the socio-historical relationship that not only creates but also binds them. This is important because studies about adultism that fail to connect to colonialism/coloniality—by which adulthood and other age-based categories are created—thereby erases their racialization. Although literature on adultism may consider it parallel, similar, or intersecting with other forms of oppression, like racism or sexism, this perspective assumes that these axes of power are separate and ahistorical, obscuring the matrix of simultaneous, interrelated, and overlapping relations and structures that Western imperialism and modernity/coloniality produces. Hence, without a serious commitment to decolonization, the purpose, strategies, or solutions of challenging adultism, at best, achieves liberal inclusivity, which is not only made possible by, but also reifies, the narratives, logics, epistemologies, and violence of modernism/colonialism (Glenn, 2015). In other words, discourses on adultism that do not actively engage with de/colonization, wittingly or unwittingly, run the interconnected risk of: (1) addressing one form of power at the expense of another; (2) perpetuating or reaffirming the system which produced the oppression; and (3) rendering fraught solutions, rather than the liberation of marginalized populations, specifically young people of color.

Thus, this essay seeks to advance a de/colonial framework to understand, engage, and theorize adultism to move beyond liberal inclusivity or ahistorical notions of oppression toward the liberation of marginalized populations and collective transformation. The fundamental premises are: (1) decolonial thought is a generative framework by which to understand and transgress adultism; (2) adultism is the systematic exploitation, abuse, and mistreatment of young people by adults that is created and reaffirmed by modernity/coloniality; and (3) decolonization or decoloniality is the goal by which to achieve liberation and collective transformation. Specifically, colonialism serves as a basis why which to understand adultism, and decolonization becomes the objective to challenge, disrupt, or transgress it toward liberation. The first part of the article describes key concepts, themes, and theories that are central to decolonial thought. The essay continues by engaging the imbricate nature of adultism and colonialism. In the sections that follow, I focus on the colonizing oppression of young people in a contemporary context and conclude by looking towards decolonizing forms of youth activism and organizing.

A de/colonial framework to understand and transgress adultism is critical

for several reasons. For example, professionals who work with young people, including educators, psychologists, family therapists, or others, may not only take the implications of age and power for granted but also see them detached from colonizing processes. By examining the role of young people during colonialism throughout the Americas can underscore how they were central in shaping understandings of labor, race, gender, age, and power in modernity/coloniality. Furthermore, placing attention to politics of age and colonization can elucidate how they relate to empire as well as modern/colonial subjectivity. Since the oppression of youth is a technology of colonialism (DeJong & Love, 2015), the patterns that emerged in understandings of racialization are connected to religious and political beliefs and experiences that were rooted in how colonial childhood and generations followed. This points to how central adultism and colonialism were to imperialism and to shaping the contemporary context.

## Decolonial Thought

The term "decolonial" has been central in critical conversations and spaces that have long trajectories in many parts of the planet, but particularly in the geographical area of the Americas. Two scholarly frameworks serve as points of departure: (1) theories of coloniality/modernity emergent in Latin America that are used widely to examine colonial power through formations of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and (2) decolonial feminisms, which draws upon women of color thought in the U.S. that responds through scholarship, coalition, and creative action to the impact and simultaneity of oppressive systems (Lee-Oliver & Bañales, 2023). Decolonial scholars focus on colonialism/coloniality and decolonization/decoloniality, which have gained increasing traction in academic spaces, activist movements, and social media. Furthermore, scholars of colonialism often challenge and expand discourses of decolonization by centering material concerns, including advocating for land sovereignty and reparations (Agozino, 2021; McDonnell & Regenvanu, 2022).

Scholars of decolonial thought trace modernity and the emergence of colonialism as far back as 1492 when the invasion/invention of America begins (Dussel & MacEoin, 1991; Dussel, 1995). Unlike Eurocentric Marxist perspectives which locate modernity in the Industrial Revolution and in philosophies of the Enlightenment, decolonial thinkers trace the development of modern civilization in its "underside," which describes the colonial encounter of the Americas: the colonized, exploited, marginalized that are pushed or excluded to the fringes (Dussel, 1995; Alcoff & Mendieta, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2008). Furthermore, modernity cannot be understood without its "dark side" of coloniality as they are constitutive of one another and exist simultaneously (Mignolo, 1995; 2011). Hence, modernity/coloniality "are two sides of the same coin and not as two separate frames of mind: you cannot be modern without being colonial; and if you

are on the colonial side of the spectrum you have to transact with modernity—you cannot ignore it" (Mignolo, 2005, p. 6). However, colonialism denotes a political and economic relation of domination over the sovereignty of a nation or people, while coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerge because of colonization and continue in the contemporary, well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Decolonial scholars also consider that colonialism and coloniality are an integral component of racism and capitalism. Encapsulated in the concept of the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), it describes a new model of domination in the Americas established by two central axes: the idea of "race" and structure of labor control. The project of colonizing the Americas became a model of power that would be inseparable from systems of domination (like capitalism) structured around the idea of race. As such, colonization and an its long-standing patterns of power that emerged came to define economy (labor exploitation, land appropriation, control of natural resources), authority (army, institutions, administration), culture (family, control of gender and sexuality), and knowledge and inter-subjective relations (epistemology, education, and formation of identity) (Mignolo, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

In addition, decolonial feminist scholars, who draw from U.S. Third World women of color thought, centralize heteropatriarchy in the coloniality of power (Lugones, 2007; Maile, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Médez, 2015; Alarcón et al., 2020; Lee-Oliver & Bañales, 2023; Bañales forthcoming). For example, pointing to pre-colonial nongendered cosmologies and gynecratic egalitarianism, Lugones (2007) introduces a new understanding of gender constituted through modernity/coloniality by arguing that colonization imposed a new gender system. Central components of decolonial feminisms includes affirming that gender is a construct of modernity/coloniality, expanding the narrow treatment of gender in theories and analyses about decolonization, and centralizing resistance, plurality, and coalition to defy the logics of categorial, hierarchical, and dichotomous colonial power (Sandoval, 2000; Lugones, 2007, 2010; Pérez, 2010; Rodrigues, 2022). Furthermore, contemporary decolonial feminist scholarship addresses racial capitalist heteropatriarchy through a variety of critical topics, such as ableism, transgender embodiment, nonbinary epistemologies, and coalitionary action (DiPietro, 2020; Lee-Oliver & Bañales, 2023; Salas-Santa Cruz, 2023).

Methodologically, decolonial thinkers look outside the colonial centers of power and focus on the "others of empire" to reclaim the epistemic traditions (or *saberes*/*conocimiento*) of the colonized (Walsh, 2007; Mignolo, 2009; Anzaldúa, 2015; Medina & Whitla, 2019). An example of this are women of color and decolonial feminisms which have contributed to establishing a literary method that bridges the personal with the political, theoretical, creative, and spiritual. The method includes critical scholarship, poetry, prose, political analysis, fiction, storytelling, autobiography, self-reflection, and other forms of creative writing

and practice that often examined one's own life (see Hull et al., 1982; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Davis, 1990; Pérez, 2007, 2010, and 2019; Lee-Oliver & Bañales, 2023). In addition, women of color and decolonial feminist methodologies includes multi-issued and solidarity coalition building approaches to politics, organizing, and action (Lugones, 1987; Sandoval, 2000; Pérez, 2010; Fujiwara & Roshanravan, 2018; Mohanty & Carty, 2018; Alarcón et al., 2020; Bañales, 2023; Bravo & Figueroa-Vásquez, 2023; Lee-Oliver & Bañales, 2023; Maese, 2023). For instance, women of color in the U.S. worked in solidarity and linked struggles across transnational colonial borders by recognizing the similarities of their racialized, economic, gendered, and sexualized oppression among themselves and with women in the Third World (See Sandoval, 2000; Lugones, 2003; Bacchetta, 2010). In the context of the Americas, specifically settler colonial societies like the U.S., a decolonial framework is appropriate for understanding the relationship between adultism and colonialism.

## Colonialism and Adultism: Co-constructed in Relation

Colonialism is not only a past historical event but an ongoing structure (Glenn, 2015) that has adultism at its core. As colonization applies to indigenous peoples, the term involves "the conquest and expropriation of territories; massive loss of life through war, forced labor, and disease; erasure or marginalizations of cultures and languages; and the redefinition of a process of violent conquest as 'inevitable' because of supposed differences in levels of 'civilization'" (Mallon, 2012, p. 1). Settler colonialism required the forced and violent removal of indigenous people with the goal of seizing and establishing property rights over land and resources, including using militarized genocide. In addition, settlers occupied land and established an exclusionary private property regime and coercive labor systems, such as chattel slavery (Glenn, 2015). Theoretical conceptions of colonization also include the racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies that European modernity created and reinforced as it colonized, enslaved, and disappeared populations through the planet (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

It is the modern/colonial context that creates adulthood. Etymologically speaking, the word "adult" first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1656 and "adulthood" not until 1870 (Jordan, 1976, p. 4; Merser, 1987, p. 56; Côté, 2000, p. 13). Although "adults" existed in the colonial era, the idea of adulthood did not until much later after "manhood" or "womanhood" became less common (Jordan, 1976; Merser, 1987). In colonial times, social roles were understood as being a "static" or "fixed" phenomenon, but as modernity evolved, the idea of the "human" signified the process of "becoming" (Jordan, 1976, p. 2), when society understood people as changing and capable of recreating themselves. As Jordan (1976) states, "[w]e have moved, over the years, from condition

to process. In our culture, adulthood as a condition used to be simply assumed; as a process, it now seems to demand explanation" (p. 11). By the 20th century, the concept of adulthood popularized in American culture, and it emerges by a process of exclusion that came from prior definitions of other stages in the life cycle. The temporal category of "adult" is not produced in isolation but is defined relationally with other age-based categories, such as childhood and adolescence (Wyn & White, 1997; Côté, 2000).

While adulthood did not become common until the 20th century, discourses of colonialism were central to modern formulations of childhood. For example, DeJong and Love (2015) identify five discourses of colonialism that constitute modern constructions of childhood. These are: (1) child/adult dualism parallels the colonizer/colonized and other binary opposites, such as evil/good, inferior/superior, and savage/civilized; (2) individuals with souls to be saved parallels the colonizer as civilized savior of the colonized, child-like primitive and heathen; (3) Western Man as discoverer of nature and truth parallels how colonized people, like children, are considered a blank slate to shape and instill moral codes; (4) linear time and assigned value to growth and progress parallels childhood/colonized as preparation and development for adulthood/colonizer; and (5) childhood as dependent or dependency parallels the colonized as helpless, ignorant, and backwards while positioning the colonizer as advanced and in power and control.

Colonial discourses of childhood—and therefore inadvertent notions of adulthood—communicate and extend a modernist logic across empire building. When examining Dutch colonization of the East Indies and its implications to Europe, Stoler (1995) underscores how European concepts and discourses were mobile and circularly transportable between the colonies and metropole. This included age-based understandings, categories, and identity constructs that intersect with race and class as they traveled through a "circuitous imperial route," for "becoming adult and bourgeois meant distinguishing oneself from that which was uncivilized, lower-class, and non-European" (p. 151). From this perspective, colonists not only transported age-based prescriptions through imperialism but also reflected a power that structured the colonial context of the colonizer and colonized (Memmi, 1997). Thus, childhood is a modern social construct (Ariès, 1962) that is central to the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), by which an always already racialized adultism emerges intimately tied to labor, gender, and violence.

Although child labor in Europe had a long tradition that ideologically extended to the Americas, this did not parallel but took new forms with colonialism. In the Americas, labor came in a context that included murder, enslavement, and constant breaking up of families or clans. This involved not only racial and gendered bloodshed, but also inter-generational violence which included using young people in various ways as tools of conquest (de las Casas, 1992). Alongside the genocide of Indigenous people in the Americas, the enslavement of Africans exemplifies the development of the colonial project through young people. For

instance, European boys constituted forty percent on crews as pages, cabin boys, and apprentices (Hecht, 2002, p.9), and research on the Transatlantic Slavery Database has revealed that by the late nineteenth century nearly half of the enslaved people forced out of Africa were children (Duane, 2010, p. 14). Since children accounted for a significant proportion of the enslaved population that was transported in the late eighteenth century across the Atlantic, practical and economic concerns shaped the standard method of categorizing slaves according to age-based categories. There was no concrete way to determine the exact age of the enslaved since age records were not standard, but height was usually the measure to gauge who was considered a child, adolescent, or adult. Many planters had a clear preference for adult African males, but there is evidence that young people were also prioritized and sold in sizeable proportions. For example, in one ship of captives sold in Jamaica, thirty percent were boys and girls, many not more than eight or nine years of age (Diptee, 2007, p. 50-51). Although some planters specifically requested young slaves, they were hesitant of those that they deemed too young. Nevertheless, if the price was low enough, enslaved young Africans were purchased despite wariness. Often in plantations, when they did not contribute to the alarming mortality rates, enslaved children began working at the age of five or six, and served as full hands in the fields by the age of twelve (Marten, 2007, 3). Although many enslaved children were made to perform agricultural tasks on plantations, some were also geared towards domestic or skilled labor (Diptee, 2007).

The idea of children working—in factories, mines, and agricultural areas in Europe or as slaves in the Americas—was possible because young people were seen as a cheap and easily exploitable source of labor (Cunningham, 1990; Diptee, 2007). However, despite imperial-colonial connections, such as colonial attitudes about the exploitation of child (enslaved) labor that reflected a long-standing British tradition of utilizing children to work, there were of course fundamental differences. One major difference is that most child laborers in the Americas were enslaved/colonized, while those in Europe generally were not. That is, children in Europe, regardless of harsh labor conditions, were generally regarded as subjects of the crown, while enslaved children were considered property of the crown, like their colonized adult counterparts. Both enslaved children and adults had no legal protection or rights to wages, and enslaved families were legally under the control of white plantation owners and their social and economic interests (Diptee, 2007, p. 53-54). Colonized children rarely had access to education or literacy. In the late eighteen hundreds and early nineteen hundreds, many enslaved children experienced similar levels of unhygienic surroundings, poverty, and material deprivation like other poor free (non-slave) children. In contrast to free offspring, however, enslaved children, like their parents, had little control of their lives. For example, the infancy of a slave child in Brazil depended on whether the owner wished to use, rent, or sell the mother as a wet nurse to a third party (Kuznesof, 2007).

Slavery's continuous violence threatened the integrity of families, challenging the relationship between mothers and their children.

When colonizing did not happen in an explicitly violent manner, the project of conquest happened *through* young people in other ways. For example, colonizers epistemologically targeted young people to enact and develop the coloniality of power. Since "civilizing" indigenous youth meant lessening the constant threat of warfare, colonists would come to see cultivating the Indian child as necessary for conquering the New World (Duane, 2010, pp. 22-27). In New Spain, where religion and warfare were principal activities, converting indigenous young people was instrumental to further colonialism. Unlike the Spanish settlers who were considered violent, immoral, and unjust, early missionaries had the objective of converting Indians to the Catholic faith and to transmit knowledge and useful skills. One of the ways they accomplished this was by employing children who were taught in specific ways. Following King Charles' recommendation of converting the children of the Aztec nobility to set examples for the rest of the population, the Franciscans taught religion, music, reading, and writing in Spanish and Náhuatl to the sons of the nobility. In turn, indigenous youth served as translators of sermons, serving as teachers and preachers to parents, elders, and to others in the region. At the college of the Holy Cross in Mexico City, seventy Indian boarding students, from twelve to seventeen years of age, received instruction in Latin grammar, logic, rhetoric, and aspects of philosophy and theology, music, and herbal and therapeutic medicine (de Estrada, 2007, pp. 18-21).

Because understandings and experiences of European children in the Americas differed with those of the colonized young, traditional concepts of childhood and children also served to further conquest. Children were familiar and malleable enough to place new meaning on them in the colonial context to make sense of the latter. When colonists in early America sought to make sense of intercultural contact and conflict, they turned to the child to help them articulate their feelings of vulnerability, while also displacing that powerlessness away from white adults who did not want to reveal their sense of loss of control. The child, like slave, wife, and servant were understood in Europe as symbols of servitude. Children, however, particularly the very young, represented the most dependent on those who had more power. Because of insecurity and for their purposes of control and power, colonists called and conceived those they deemed subordinate as "children," since this associated them with dependence, subservience, and inferiority in being (Duane, 2010).

By depending on old meanings of childhood, colonists utilized infantilizing metaphors to portray the colonized and enslaved as children. The comparison was based on an imaginary European normality that suggested that European children and colonized adults were generally on the same developmental level (Studer, 2021). The colonized perpetually have been "compared and equated with children, a representation that conveniently provided a moral justification of imperial polices of tutelage, discipline and specific paternalistic and materialistic strategies

of custodial control" (Stoler, 1995, pp. 150-151). To offer an example, the viceroyalty of Peru and other authorities commonly characterized native Andeans as childish and childlike (Dean, 2002, p. 21). Regarding Africans in the New World, "Colonial whites maintained that the enslaved were an inherently lazy, dishonest, and immoral racial group and that they could only be productive if guided by whites who would have the power of the law and the whip" (Diptee, 2007, p. 59). Many whites viewed slaves as children regardless of age that needed to be clothed, nursed, fed, and looked after (King, 1995, p. xvii). Proslavery writings similarly portrayed all enslaved as children in need of care, and popular culture at times also kept (white) women out of political spheres by aligning them with children too (Duane, 2010, p. 5). The notions that Indians were better off under European tutelage and that Negroes were naturally of a childlike character prevailed into the twentieth century. As such, colonies were described as childlike or in need of paternal guidance that were unable to reach European levels of reason and modernity on their own (Studer, 2021).

Many of the comparisons of the colonized with children were gendered and applied with varying degrees. For instance, in French colonialism in Northwest Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonial authors described Muslim women as childlike and compared their intellectual capacities, reasoning, and behavior to those of children (Studer, 2021). In addition, the infantilizing metaphor of the colonized became scientific reality in the mid-19th century when craniology became popular by scientists. Gould (1993) provides several cases: Paul Broca sought measures to prove the inferiority of Blacks and women, arguing that the brain was larger in adult males in "distinguished" men and in superior races than in the elderly and in women; a German anthropologist argued that the Negro brain had a spinal cord like that of children and women and came close to the type of brain found in higher apes; a renowned German anatomist wrote that the Negro brain was like that of children and females; and a scientist compared the brain of adult Blacks with that of a white fetus seven months old (pp. 73-112). Although white women were also compared to children as inferior, it's important to note that white feminists in the late 19th century asserted their own "maturity" by depending upon a contrast with other adults who remained more childlike (Rollo, 2018). Moreover, in contrast to the independent, educated, and modern "Western woman" in control of her body and sexuality, there is a homogenous view that the "Third World Woman" is a traditionalist and oppressed (Mohanty,1988; de Carvalho & Senkevics, 2017).

Although the hierarchy existing between adult and child is older than European colonialism, when combined with the infantilization of racialized populations it brings a new set of ways to understand this relation of power. The child/adult binary is a central feature of colonial racialization and early modern philosophical and scientific construction of whiteness and white superiority (Rollo, 2018). Furthermore, colonial domination is partly maintained "through the socialization

of settler children who learn to accept their subordinate position, and learn not to question or challenge the beliefs, attitudes, policies, and practices of colonialism" (DeJong & Love, 2015, p. 495). Indians, Blacks, and to some degree white women, were depicted in deficit or excess to male whiteness, which was the standard in delineating the boundaries of a "proper" adult. Those who survived genocide and slavery and grew older, in many ways, could never "grow up" since they did not have the luxury of enjoying the same privileges as white adults. So long as white children moved away from "savagery," the puritan concept and its disciplinarian ways became normalized: the heteropatriarchal order of colonial authority was reaffirmed. What this revealed was a racialized childhood of which whites could emerge as potential adults and the infantilization of the colonized in perpetual servitude and primitiveness. A racializing adultism is fundamental to colonialism, and this logic, culture, and structure of coloniality continues in current times.

## The Coloniality of Youth

The colonizing oppression of young people persists in the contemporary. One of the ways that the coloniality of youth is evident was in the numerous, negative, and national discourses about gang and juvenile crime by both conservatives and liberals at the end of the 20th century. John J. Dilulio—then a Princeton professor in politics and public affairs—published the influential article "The Coming of the Super-Predator" in 1995 (Dilulio, 1995). This article predicted a "new wave" of youth "criminals" that would soon terrorize the nation by 2000. The increase in urban populations of Black and Latino youth was the cause, and these "super-predators" would soon brutalize, rape, and murder fellow (white) citizens for no apparent reason. This theory gained popular attention at the time when, in the name of "protecting" Western interests in ensuring the constant "flow of oil," the U.S. engaged in one of the largest military operations since the post-World War II era against Iraq known as the Gulf War (McAlister, 2001). In the State of the Union Address given on January 23, 1996, then President Clinton shared his plan to take back the streets from crime, gangs, and drugs by forming community partnerships with local police forces. He made reference to The Crime Bill of 1994, which provided funds for 100,000 new police in communities, and stated that he was "directing the FBI and other investigative agencies to target gangs that involve juveniles in violent crime, and to seek authority to prosecute as adults teenagers who maim and kill like adults" (Clinton, 1996).

William Bennett—another Princeton professor and former director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President Bush Sr. and President Reagan's former Secretary of Education—along with Dilulio and John. P. Walters continued with the super-predator thesis in their 1996 book *Body Count* (Bennett, Dilulio, & Walters, 1996). The book was published in an election year in which these influential political commentators further developed the popular theory of

super-predator youth (of color), which served as the scapegoat that alleviated the nation's racial and economic anxieties both nationally and abroad during the Clinton's presidential term. Articulating the description of this term, the authors of *Body Count* write:

> America is now home to thickening ranks of juvenile 'super-predators'—radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more preteenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious communal disorders. They do not fear the stigma of arrest, the pains of imprisonments, or the pangs of conscience. They perceive hardly any relationship between doing right (or wrong) now and being rewarded (or punished) for it later. To these mean-street youngster, the word 'right' and 'wrong' have no fixed moral meaning. (p. 27)

The "super-predator" term encoded youth of color as "different" to the law-abiding (middle-class white) adults, and the theory behind this term identified young people of color as fearless, dangerous, and violently out of control. According to the authors, the surge of youth violence was a result of "moral poverty," which included the failure of parents and the local community of not providing young people appropriate training to become hard working, law abiding, moral citizens.

The super-predator theory spoke nothing of the crisis of adulthood and pervasive racism in which displaced anxieties were placed upon youth of color. Based on the 1997 U.S. Census Bureau data, Males (1999) provides an explanation for the development of the super-predator theory by highlighting the racial demographic transition in which the younger (of color) populations (35 percent were under 18) did not reflect the 80 percent of America's adults over 40 years old who were whites of European origin. Since the U.S. experienced higher birth rates in communities of color during the late 1970s and early 1980s, politicians and intellectuals used racist logic to have people believe that "the country could expect a dramatic increase in crime in the next ten years, when those poor, inner-city children entered their teen years" (Tovares, 2002, p. 68).

Media representations in the late 1980s and 1990s also characterized this generation in a negative manner, such as being apathetic, apolitical, and ignorant on the one hand, and deviant, violent, or criminal on the other. For example, Giroux (1997) argues that Hollywood film productions demonize both urban white and Black youth. In several films, white youth are or depicted through the lens of stupidity and amusement or presented and framed "through the degrading textural registers of pathological violence, a deadening moral vacuum, and a paralyzing indifference to the present and future" (Giroux, 1997, p. 44). However, what connects these two types of negative representations of young whites is their contrast to other 1990s Hollywood representations of Black youth, which are largely shaped largely by classist racial tropes. Pointing to films produced by Black filmmakers, Giroux contends that their narrow representations of Black male youth reinforced the dominant neoconservative understanding of blackness as the "oth-

er" and a social problem. In many ways, popular culture in the U.S. at the turn of the 21st century demonstrated the workings of coloniality and adultism in which the racial order founded on the designation of childhood and adolescence/youth as a site of naturalized criminality, violence, and servitude to which Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are relegated (Rollo, 2018).

In addition to negative discourses and media representations, the coloniality of youth is also evident in the juridical attacks of young people. One example was Proposition 21 in California, which was known as the "Juvenile Crime Initiative" on the March 2000 ballot. According to the 2000 California Primary Election Ballot Measure Summary, Proposition 21 would increase "punishment for gang-related felonies, home-invasion robbery, carjacking, witness intimidation and drive-by shooting, and [would create] crime of gang recruitment activities" (California Secretary of State). Despite that data had shown that anti-gang measures, such as the 1988 "Street Terrorism Enforcement And Prevention Act" (known as STEP Act) had little to no real effect in reducing violence (Klein, 1995), and that juvenile crime statistics had recently dropped at the state and national levels, Proposition 21 passed by 62 percent majority. Like other ballot measures in California during the 1990s that were orchestrated with racist agendas (HoSang, 2010), along with the increase of the prison industrial complex (González, 2009 [2000]), led many to strongly believe that Proposition 21 would disproportionately affect and further criminalize low-income youth of color.

Challenging this reiteration of the coloniality of youth, Proposition 21 sparked a unique decolonizing social movement before the state's political landscape that came to be called as "the new youth movement" (Martínez, 2000). This movement included a statewide coalition of majority youth groups that came together and launched a grassroots, militant street-protest campaign all over California against the proposition (Tilton, 2010). This coalition was unique as it recognized the importance of many intersecting categories of difference—such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and religion—strategically linked through age. Young people from various communities and backgrounds took part in creating an integrated identity politics by forming a racially and culturally heterogeneous political movement against Proposition 21 organized strategically under the category of "youth." Although the anti-youth law passed in California, people were transformed in the movement and through the activist and consciousness-raising process. Furthermore, this movement served to further decolonize identity, knowledge, and power (Bañales, 2012).

## Conclusion: Decolonizing Youth Activism

The idea of decolonization was birthed with colonization itself but did not become a project until the twentieth century. Although opposition to colonization manifested before, it is in the 20th century that the decolonial turn is substantiated.

Announced by the groundbreaking scholarship of W.E.B Du Bois in the early 1900s, the decolonial turn is concretized through interrelated (particularly post World War II) global assertions that intellectuals like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon articulated, and the manifestation of social and political transformation (Maldonado-Torres, 2006, 2007, and 2011B). The collapse of the European Age in the first two World Wars, along with the wave of decolonization in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and other territories, in the 20th century led to critical reflection of oppressed people across the globe (Prashad, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). While anti-colonial and decolonial politics, intellectual thought, and artistic expression previously existed, it is in the mid-20th century that the amount of self-awareness and coalitional efforts that challenge colonization and imperialism intensifies, such that it impacted traditional epistemic fields like anthropology (Gough, 1968, Hymes, 1972; Lewis, 1973; Asad, 1973). The decolonizing turn, although having roots in the 18th century independence movements, and solidified during the mid-20th century, does not mean that the goal is to "go back" in space and time, or that colonization exists now in the same way as before. In contrast to Jürgen Habermas' conception of the unfinished project of the Enlightenment/modernity, another way to understand decolonization is as an unfinished project (Maldonado-Torres. 2011A).

Youth activism was central to enacting the decolonial turn of the 20th century (Bañales, 2012). As Sylvia Wynter suggests, the 1960s social movements could be understood as the possible beginning of a new opening of the epochal shift that began the process of resignifying symbolic representations and reordering episteme (Wynter, 1995). The decade of the 1960s was unique because "it marked the first time that youth *as* youth played a central role in the shaping of oppositional movements aimed at those in power….Young people had never before taken to the streets by the thousand to dramatically challenge those institutions responsible for the perpetuation of racial inequality at home and military intervention abroad" (Muñoz, 1989 [2007], p. 1). One example of this activism took place On February 1st, 1960, when four Black college students challenged the racist Jim Crow system in the U.S. South head-on by sitting at the lunch counter designated for whites only at the Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. This direct action initiated what would later be known as the "sit-ins," and by the fall of 1960, over seventy thousand people had participated in this form of protest in over one hundred communities (Levy, 2019, p. 17).

Like the young activist of the 1960s who demanded for revolutionary change across the planet, youth continue to be the catalyst for social change, immersed in decolonizing action in variety of ways, including on the ground at the grassroots level and through social media (Liou & Literat, 2020). For instance, young people: organized marches, vigils, sit-ins, and occupations for Black Lives Matter (Bort & Aleah, 2020); raised awareness, expressed their voices, and enacted activism to stop Asian hate, protect sacred lands, or make change in Native American

and Indigenous communities (Bañales, 2014; Channel Kindness, 2021; Menjivar, 2021; Drake, 2022); ushered a new era of political activism—from the DREAM Act, to DACA, to deportations and policing—that influenced elections, shaped policies, and sparked national conversations about exclusion and belonging (Arteaga, 2020); spearheaded feminist movements worldwide, calling attention to social injustices like gender-based violence (Restless Development, 2023); led the charge against climate disaster, including rising sea levels in the Pacific (Burton, 2019; Weik, 2023); worked for social transformation and breaking boundaries by centering Queer, Trans, and gender-nonconforming identities and experiences (Duppere, 2017); and engaged in ongoing struggles for the liberation of Palestine (Park, 2023). Often, the organizing of young people draws upon a "pedagogy of solidarity" (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012) that is unapologetically committed to decolonizing goals to activate youth-led spaces, anti-oppressive youth-adult partnerships, and activisms done in coalition amongst youth and adults (Liou & Literat, 2020; Oto, 2023). As decolonizing youth activism demonstrates, interrogating adultism simultaneously requires challenging the European/Euro-American modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world system (Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres, & Saldívar, 2005) or the heterosexual colonial/modern gender system (Lugones, 2007).

To conclude, this essay brings into conversation adultism and theories of de/colonization and de/coloniality. The purpose was to: (1) propose decolonization/decoloniality as a framework by which to understand, theorize, and transgress adultism; (2) bring awareness to the imbricated relationship between adultism and colonialism/coloniality; and (3) point to decolonizing youth activism to further achieve liberation and social transformation. If we are dedicated to anti-youth oppression or dismantling adultism, a commitment to decolonization/decoloniality is essential. While decolonization may refer to historical movements of cultural reclamation or land sovereignty, decoloniality relates to liberation in the contemporary. In many forms, to decolonize is to "undo" or "unlearn" the logic of colonization of the past as it continues to the present, even if colonial domination in a historical sense may not be overt. Furthermore, decolonization and decoloniality are not only about resisting oppression but also about affirming, insisting, and creating from a multiplicity of spaces and modalities that challenge and transgress colonizing values, relationships, attitudes, institutions, and society. As much as colonization/coloniality is negation, destruction, violence, and hate, decolonization/decoloniality is affirmation, creation, healing, and love.

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# "I Don't Know" Analysis of a Powerful Interaction Strategy of Children Dealing With Adult-Determined Interactions

*Julia Höke & Katrin Velten*

## Abstract

Interactions between children and adults are always shaped by the generational order, in which children position themselves as children and adults as adults. This assumption applies particularly to interview situations—even when children are perceived as experts and their perspectives are valued, a risk remains that children in interviews may submit to and adapt to the ideas of adults. Adults, who, on one hand, aim to allow space for children's independent expressions but, on the other hand, face the necessity of conducting 'good' research in the context of research criteria or publication strategies, run the risk of unintentionally dominating children despite their best intentions and, in the worst case, behaving in an adultistic manner. In our re-analysis of interview data with children, we examine sequences in which children evade this dominance with the response "I don't know." For deciphering such statements, we present two possible interpretations. An engagement with these patterns in interviews with children can enhance the professionalism of adult researchers, improve the quality of data analysis, and make a substantial contribution to the development of ethical principles for researching with children. Beyond specific research processes, the re-analysis can stimulate a better understanding of children and their actions in the generational order.

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## Introduction

### *Children as Experts of Their Life World: Challenges in Interviews*

Asking children about the phenomena that affect them, involving them and including them in research not only as data providers, but also as experts on their lifeworld, is a current norm in so-called Western societies (Honig, 2009; Kellet, 2010). The researchers pursue the goal of working against adultism on two levels: fundamentally, it is about preventing or avoiding discrimination by adults through the capture and consideration of children's perspectives, especially in areas or on topics that are relevant to them. On an advanced level, inclusive, and participatory research settings should ensure that children can openly express their perspectives, feel recognized and valued in this setting and not dominated by adults. Accordingly, numerous studies have emerged in recent years in the fields of childhood and primary school research that capture children's perspectives and include them in research in various ways. This increase in studies is also accompanied by a debate on ethical issues that focuses on the relationship between children and adults in research situations (e.g., Christensen & Proud, 2002; Alderson & Morrow, 2020). Beyond general ethical guidelines, we take a critical look at the micro interactions that arise in such research projects, especially in interviews with children. The following interview excerpt with Marie, 5 years 6 months, is from one of these research projects, specifically from one that aimed to explore the perspectives of children on their participation opportunities in a German kindergarten through material- and photo-supported interviews:

*I: Today I want to ask you a few questions, I already said in the morning circle that I'd come again and I brought a few photos that I took here in the kindergarten, look, this is the first photo I brought to you. [...] Would you like to take a look at it, do you know what's on it? What is it?*

*Marie: I don't know exactly.*

*I: You don't know? I think I have seen a poster like this at the back of your room where there are the little building blocks and the reading corner.*

*Marie: I don't know.*

*I: "Meeting" is written on it. Do you have meetings here sometimes?*

*Marie: [nods]*

*I: And who takes part in the meetings?*

*Marie: I don't know.*

*I: Are you there too? You are, aren't you?*

*Marie: I think so.*

*(Study I, Marie, K7)*

Against the background of the claim to collect the child's perspective and to address the interviewed child in her expert status, the quoted interview excerpt is thought-provoking. A preschool-aged girl is interviewed by an adult interviewer about her everyday life in the daycare centre and her experiences with the everyday organization of the discussion group. She is taken seriously as an expert on her living environment and is asked to describe her experiences. The interview is supported by photos taken by the interviewer in the daycare centre prior to the interview. However, Marie responds to the interviewer's questions with "I don't know," she does not reveal her perspective. She kept to this response format throughout the entire interview: out of 27 verbal statements, 11 were "I don't know." Against the background of the image of the child as an expert, the interpretation suggests that Marie's statement "I don't know" is her lack of knowledge about the phenomenon being interviewed, perhaps because she is new to the institution, has been ill for a longer period of time or has not (yet) taken part in the services mentioned. While conducting the interview, an unexpected situation unfolds from the researcher's perspective, challenging the assumption that Marie is incapable of providing any information about the phenomenon in question. Asked about the role and task of the chosen group spokesperson, the child reports in the same interview sequence:

*I: And do you have to know something to be a group spokesperson? Or is it just like that?*

*Marie: Just like that.*

*I: Just like that.*

*Marie: But I don't know.*

*I: Would you also like to be a group spokesperson?*

*Marie: [nods].*

*I: Mmh [agreeing], but it's [girl's name] and [boy's name] who were elected. [.] And why would you also like to be the group spokesperson?*

*Marie: I don't know.*

*I: Is it quite nice to be the group spokesperson? Do you go there-*

*Marie: I was before.*

*I: Mh?*

*Marie: Group spokesperson.*

*I: You have been a group spokesperson before?*

*Marie: For the grasshoppers.*

*I: Oh, you were already the group spokesperson for the grasshoppers. And what did you have to do there? What did you do as a group spokesperson?*

*Marie: I don't know.*

*(Study I, Marie, K7)*

From this statement, the original assumption that the answer "I don't know" is related to/can be justified by not knowing or not being aware of the phenomenon of group discussion no longer appears to be the only plausible interpretation of the statement "I don't know": Marie has certainly had her own experience, at least about the role of the group spokesperson. However, she does not elaborate with the interviewer on the specific details of this and the extent to which her experience may be relevant to the phenomenon under discussion. Instead, she persists in using the response format "I don´t know." Thus, Marie restricts the interviewer's scope for action by withholding information about the meeting time and the role of the group spokesperson. This occurs despite repeated inquiries and prompts, the diversity, and objectives of which we have previously outlined in a publication discussing the reflection of adulthood in adult-child research situations (Velten & Höke, 2023). Based on the experience described, we address the following questions in this paper:

> What significance do answers such as "I don't know" and similar forms have, if not as expressions of a lack of knowledge?
>
> How can these responses be classified in light of the assumptions of children as experts/ the sociological concept of the agency of children and the equally crucial concept of the generational order, particularly when articulated by children in conversations with adults?

We concentrate on interviews with children, intending to investigate them as experts in their lifeworld. In previous studies, we employed a re-analytical approach to scrutinize our research projects, aiming to identify interaction patterns among adults that encourage children to generate narrative passages and sustain the interview context (Velten & Höke, 2023; 2021). It became apparent that, despite the normative assertion to avoid adultistic behaviour when interacting with children and to critically evaluate one's authority as an adult during interviews, critical interaction practices of adults emerged. From the perspective of adultism, these practices suggest that, despite well-intentioned efforts, children may not be taken seriously in their interests and needs. Additionally, they highlight that interpretive control over the design of the interaction, whether goal-oriented or not, remains with the adults.

This article delves into a central interaction pattern of children responding with "I don't know," an element we interpret as wielding a substantial influence on subsequent developments and the scope for action of the adult researcher. Our objective is to uncover insights into how this interaction pattern of children can be understood from an adult perspective in relation to the claim of participation and the risk of adultism. Furthermore, we aim to explore its potential contribution

to the ongoing professionalization of adult researchers concerning their research skills.

## Theoretical Framework

### *The normative image of the child as an expert and the standardizing interpretative sovereignty of adults*

In Western societies, over the past two decades, a conceptualization of children has emerged. This conceptualization shifts the understanding of children away from a perspective of being passive recipients undergoing predetermined educational programs imposed by adults for developmental purposes. Instead, it embraces the notion of 'children as competent actors' who actively influence relationships, shape their surroundings, and contribute to their own developmental and educational narratives right from the outset. Informed by insights from cognitive and developmental psychology, neuroscience, and infant research, which reveal the early demonstrable cognitive processes and learning capabilities of young children, and drawing on the principles of the new sociology of childhood (Honig et al., 1999; Heinzel et al., 2012) that underscores the political and social dimensions of children and childhood, the prevailing notion in educational contexts is that children engage in constructive and co-constructive learning within environments tailored specifically for them. This leads to the claim that children should/must be able to participate in decisions that are important to them and, thus, in everyday educational life (e.g., UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This not only applies to the public sphere, but since the 1970s there also has been a shift away from the 'hierarchical family' towards the 'negotiating family' in the private sphere regarding the organization of family life. In research with and about children, too, an image of the 'child as the expert' is increasingly gaining ground (Eßer et al., 2016; Wöhrer et al., 2017, p. 7). Based on the assumption that children themselves are agents of their educational biography and are therefore capable and empowered to act, they are not only seen as data providers, but also as experts of their lifeworld (Wöhrer et al., 2017, p. 7). Capturing their perspective, but also involving them beyond the respondent status in all research phases, is a central concern of numerous studies in the context of participatory research with children (Hüpping & Velten, 2022).

The social relationship between children and adults, on the other hand, is characterized by the basic assumption that adults have the power of interpretation, e.g., of what is appropriate and right for children. This sovereignty of interpretation is also exemplified in the formulation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which is intended to enable children to participate. Under the formulation of the legal right to participation, both children's ability to participate and the identification of phenomena that affect them and in the context of which they must be involved are described as as tasks assigned to other individuals,

possibly adults (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, § 12 My opinion). Children's participation is dependent on the decisions of adults as to whether and to what extent the child fulfils the requirements for participation regarding his or her age and stage of development, and which matters affect the child. To address this dependency, Lundy identifies four key concepts that must be considered to realize the inclusion of children in decisions: space, voice, influence, and audience (Lundy 2007, 2018). The core of the Lundy model is therefore to create space for the design of interactions between adults and children that serve to provide children with the information they need to form their own opinions on the one hand and to give them the opportunity to express their opinions on the other. This voice must be acknowledged, considering ethical aspects in terms of influence, and finally made accessible to decision-makers in the context of the audience. Following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the participation of children is now explicitly enshrined in national legislation in most Western countries, e.g. in Germany in the Child and Youth Welfare Act "(1) Children and young people shall be involved in all public youth welfare decisions affecting them in accordance with their stage of development" (Germany, Social Code (SGB), Eighth Book (VIII) Child and Youth Welfare, Section 8). This passage underscores that participation is not unconditional. The expression "in all decisions affecting them" prompts the consideration of who determines which decisions impact the child and which ones do not. Moreover, adults retain the authority to determine at what developmental stage a child can participate in specific decisions. This poses a significant risk of communicating and behaving in an adult-centric manner, thereby engaging in discrimination against children based on their age and developmental stage.

The interpretative sovereignty of adults is also discussed in childhood research. On the one hand, the aim is to consider and critically reflect on the roles of adults in research and, on the other, the connection between children's ability and possibilities to act against the background of the 'concept of generational order' (Velten & Höke, 2023). From the perspective that it is not enough to "merely concentrate on 'giving children a voice' in a methodologically reliable way" (Honig et al., 1999, p. 13, English translation [Höke & Velten]), not only adults and their practices of action are considered, but also how children participate in the processes of shaping social contexts and in their standardization and structuring (Betz & Eßer, 2016; Heinzel et al., 2012; Zeiher, 1996). In the often more politically than methodologically conducted debate on capturing children's perspectives, an "advocation" (Bühler-Niederberger, 2019, p. 158) for children's agency can be noted. This is based on the normatively charged paradigm of "giving children a voice," which tends to construct children as individuals to whom a voice can/should/must be given. This often accompanies the stylization of researchers as spokespersons for children, rather than serving the purpose of a reflective analysis of the actual agency and possibilities in many research projects (Betz & Eßer, 2016; Velten,

Alexi & Höke, 2018). Following Hunleth (2011), "Child-oriented' methods are also oriented towards adults and dominant assumptions of childhood. As such, the use of child-oriented methods without critical reflection may actually reinforce adult representations of children" (Hunleth, 2011, p. 92).

### *Adult-child interactions as reproductions of generational order*

When examining interactions between adults and children, these interactions inevitably reflect the underlying generational order, which neither children nor adults can escape. Both children and adults function as social actors, with children inherently reliant on adults. In this context, Bühler-Niederberger (2020) introduces the concept of "competent compliance" into the German-speaking sociological discourse on childhood. This concept emphasizes that children consistently act in alignment with desired behaviours, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed. Within these behaviours, children exhibit a capacity for being "social all-rounders," demonstrating an ability to perceive rules, comprehend (divergent) expectations, and operate within them (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020, p. 237ff.).

Against this background, questions arise regarding the feasibility of entirely avoiding adult dominance in interactions with children (Höke & Velten, 2021). Interactions between children and adults unveil typical, ritualized, and habitualized patterns of engagement employed by both parties to jointly establish the interaction and the inherent positioning as a child or an adult (Kelle & Schweda-Möller, 2017; Velten & Höke, 2023). Drawing on interviews with children, our research on interaction practices in research settings (Velten & Höke, 2023) reveals that adult researchers strategically implement interaction patterns to facilitate the integration of children into the respective research situation and sustain it throughout the interaction (see Table 1).

These interaction patterns can also be related to educational interactions, e.g. when children are praised (and thus evaluated) for their work ("You did a great job!"), their interest is directed back to the educational subject ("It's interesting

**Table 1**
***Adult Practics in Interview Settings***
(see Velten & Höke, 2023)

| *Practices of…* | *Subtypes* |
|---|---|
| Affirmation | Emotionally charging the situation/ information<br>Forge an alliance or bond<br>Summarising or paraphrasing<br>Praising |
| Ordering and structuring | Citing the research setting´s anticipated duration<br>Transferring responsibility to the research setting<br>Redirect the interaction to the research interest |

what you're saying, but now look at your book again", consideration of their current needs and interests is rejected with reference to the educational setting ("But this is school!") or their loyalty to the person or thing is demanded ("But we want to do math right now").

Suboptimal or critical interaction patterns on the part of adults occur when children refuse to fit in with the interaction patterns intended or expected (by the adults). In our re-analysis of interviews, we were able to determine that two interaction patterns stand out here in particular because they not only reveal insights into the course of the interaction expected/desired from the adult perspective, but also because—especially against the background of a different course of the interactio—they reveal the adult's power to act in the conversation and thus disregard the declared goal of ascertaining the child's perspective and their interests in the content and course of the conversation: the continuous follow-up questions, although the child has already clearly signalled that he or she no longer wants to answer, and the "if - then" constellation that occurs when the interview situation is about to be terminated, which we refer to as a "turning point" (Velten & Höke, 2021).

### *Methodological structure of the re-analysis*

Building on our previous research, we now turn our attention to the expressions made by children. During the analysis of diverse data sets, we frequently observed the recurring use of phrases such as "I don't know" in response to questions posed by adults. What significance do answers such as "I don't know" and similar forms have, if not as expressions of a lack of knowledge? We are exploring the functions of these statements for children in the context of organizing interaction within the generational order. Additionally, we aim to examine how these responses can be approached from an adult perspective concerning the assertion of participation and the risk of adultism. The following specific questions arise in the analysis of the data material:

1. How do expressions like "I don't know" manifest in interactions between adults and children, and are there discernible patterns in the occurrence of such responses based on the age, gender, and conversational setting of the children?

2. To what extent do these statements function as interaction strategies or practices employed by children, and what roles can be identified in their usage?

Our data material stems from three distinct studies, each involving individual and group interviews conducted with children.

The entire dataset was analysed as follows: Initially, the interview transcripts were examined for instances of children saying "Ich weiß (es) nicht" ("I don't know"). Additionally, expressions like "Keine Ahnung" ("No idea") and the interviewer's questions such as "Weißt du noch" ("Do you remember") were included when negated by the children. In Study I, there was also one instance of a child

**Table 2**
***Survey of the Studies Employed***

| *Study I (Höke, 2016)* | *Study II (Höke, 2020)* | *Study III (Velten, 2021)* |
|---|---|---|
| Period May to June 2015 | Period June to July 2016 | Period March to November 2013 |
| Sample n = 13<br>(four to six years) | Sample n = 11<br>(first graders) | Sample n = 22<br>(age at first Interview<br>five to seven years) |
| Sequential interviews based on children´s photos (adapted from life-world interviews, Fuhs, 2012, Clark & Moss, 2011) looking at "children´s experiences with formal participatory structures" | 7 School visits (adapted from life-world interviews, Fuhs, 2012, Clark & Moss, 2011) looking at "places that are meaningful from the children's point of view"<br>Children chose not to participate, to participate alone, in pairs, or in a group | Sequential Interviews (at two times) based on the children's photos (adapted from the Mosaic Approach, Fuhs, 2012; Clark & Moss, 2011) looking at children´s self-efficacy experiences in both kindergarten (t1) and primary school (t2)<br>Children were usually interviewed individually |

saying "Das kann ich nicht wissen" ("I cannot know that"), and in Study III, the statement "(Habe ich) vergessen" ("I forgot") occurred frequently within an interview. This resulted in a total of 32 interviews (12 from Study I, 3 from Study II, 17 from Study III), from which sequences were filtered using sequential analysis (Schütz et al., 2012). The individual interaction sequences were then organized regarding their distribution based on age, gender, and specific interview settings for Research Question 1. Subsequently, all sequences were evaluated in an inductively conducted qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) to identify functions related to the statements.

## Results

### *Research question 1: Occurrence of "I don't know"*

Across the entire data material, it can be determined that "I don't know" is an answer that the children seem to use frequently in the interview. However, there are differences between the different interview settings.

In Study I, the children were interviewed individually in a 1:1 interaction between child and adult. In addition, the participants in the interview sat together at a table and looked at photos together. In the 13 interviews conducted here, the statement "I don't know" can be found in 12 interviews. Similarly, the statements "I don't know" and "no idea" can also be found in 29 of 44 interviews in Study III, which were also set up in a comparable 1:1 setting between child and adult interviewer (with photos and at a table).

Study II was methodologically designed differently to Study I and III. Out of the 11 participating children, six opted for an interview situation involving two children. Five children were interviewed individually, although in each solo interview, another child joined twice during the interview, resulting in a group situation. Additionally, the questioning was not structured as a traditional interview setting. The involved children moved through the school with the interviewer, deciding themselves which rooms and places they should visit. In these locations, beyond the children's narratives, activities naturally emerged. For example, the children not only talked about the climbing frame but also actively climbed it. They didn't just discuss the sandbox but demonstrated its use—during one interview, a boy climbed into a large cardboard tube and rolled across the floor while conversing. In Study II, the expression "weiß ich nicht" ("I don't know") is much less common. It appears in a total of 5 sequences, occurring once each in a group discussion and an individual interview, and three times in another individual interview.

The differences between Study I, Study III and Study II suggest that the design of the interview situation has an influence on whether and in what way a child says "I don't know" or not. While in a 1:1 constellation between child and adult, the generational order is reproduced much more strongly about the pattern "adult asks—child answers." This appears to be less dominant in group constellations with more than one child. In addition, the situation design in Study II opened more scope for the children to concentrate on their current activity instead of responding verbally to the questions asked. However, and as our re-analyses reveal, merely increasing the number of children in the research situation or opening up presumed alternative approaches to the interview setting does not lead automatically to a reduction in generational order processes. In previous publications, especially in Velten and Höke (2023), we have demonstrated that the interaction patterns of adults in the interviews across all three studies do not differ. This holds true, particularly when facing the potential abandonment of the interview situation, a scenario that also arises in the interviews of Study II. Therefore, in our view, addressing generational order and preventing adultistic actions involves more than just planning the interview; the interaction patterns of adults appear to be a crucial key in this regard (Velten & Höke, 2023).

Regarding a possible gender-specific difference in the use of the statements, Study III shows that "I don't know" appears to be a statement used equally by girls and boys. The children also used this statement at both survey times. In some cases, there are changes in the frequency of children's use, but not a systematic decrease from T1 to T2 or vice versa. However, it is striking that the phrase "no idea" is used by one girl in Study III, and here only three times in one interview, but in comparison by three boys a total of 11 times on average (from 7 to 18 times) in a total of five interviews. This could indicate a gender-specific difference in the use of "no idea."

### *Research question 2: Functions of "I don't know"*

*I don't know: Expression of not (yet) knowing*

Within the "I don't know" sequences, the function of actually documenting not-knowing via this utterance plays a central role. We assume that the question asked was basically understood by the children. The five sequences in Study II that have already been extracted can all be classified in this category. During the visit to the outdoor area, for example, a child and the interviewer look together at the flower bed created by the children. When asked which flower it was, Alina replied *"I don't know. They grow like that at my friend's too"* (Study II, Alina, K11). In another interview, the interviewer asks about the use of a particular material for painting "*And when do you do that?"* Thea states *"I don't know either"* (Study II, Thea, K9*)*. These interview sequences can be assigned to the function that the children here actually do not know something. This function is also found in the interviews analysed in Study I and III.

A differentiated analysis reveals that this lack of knowledge relates to different areas. In addition to the lack of factual knowledge, as in the examples above, there is also a lack of recall details of certain situations. For example, some children said that they could not remember both a specific excursion plan and the planning of a party at the daycare centre (Study I, Manuel, K3; Study I, Diana, K4; Study I, Nico, K8). These are in particular the sequences that were selected in advance according to the criterion that the interviewer asks, "Do you remember". In addition, statements of "I don't know" refer to the fact that the children cannot recognize what is visible in the photos ("*A pond, um, a forest [.] What is that supposed to mean? I don't know"* (Study I, Nico, K8)).

Furthermore, children also use "I don't know" as a way of evasion when they cannot immediately come up with an answer to the posed question, even if something does come to mind later. This is particularly evident in one sequence concerning the election of the group spokesperson, where the interviewer asks, *"Who gave you the points there?"* Initially, Andy responds, *"I don't know",* but then clarifies in response to the follow-up question, *"Was it [educator] and [educator]?" "I think so",* and adds, looking at the other children, *"We too"* (Study I, Andy, K1). Similarly, the use of "I don't know" also appears as a means of qualifying one's own response, for example, in Study III, when Sami discusses his perspective on his prospective areas of participation in school (*"I don't know, um, maybe (1) climbing?"*) or talks about the role of the educators and their actions or interactions during an experience he deems significant for participation (*"I don't know, actually, they don't really say anything"*).

However, the expression of not knowing also reveals sequences that point to the children's lack of access to certain information. For example, two children in Study I say "I don't know" when asked what the group spokespersons discuss with the teachers in their group spokesperson meetings (Study I, Diana, K4; Study I,

Helena, K13), as they have never been to these meetings. Even though they should be informed about the results of these meetings by the group spokespersons, at least conceptually, they do not put this into context. A lack of access can also be due to the fact that the child was not present on a particular day (*"I don't know, I wasn't there",* (Study I, Diana, K4)), but also due to the fact that educational professionals do not make their decisions transparent to the children: *"The educators preferred to have the small Lego bricks there and the large Duplo bricks here? Do you have any idea why? You could also say you make a big building corner*". Pia: *"But I don't know why"* (Study I, Pia, K12).

### *"I don't know": Expression of Non-Understanding*

The phrase "I don't know" is utilized by children as an utterance in sequences where they are unable to provide an answer to the posed question. This inability arises from either the question itself being ambiguous, the direction of inquiry being unclear, or the cognitive interest not being comprehensible to the interviewed child. In a sequence from Study III, for instance, Christian responds to the interviewer's question about what he can determine in kindergarten with, *"I don't know because I don't know what that means."* When the interviewer inquires further, *"Ah okay, should I explain to you what that means? Being the determiner?"* Christian affirms this (Study III, Christian, t1 Kita, lines 34-47). The assumption of the interviewer, having chosen a formulation for autonomy or self-determination that is common and understandable for children, is falsified here. In another example, Simon, a child in Study I, responds to the question of when the clown visited the daycare with, *"Um, I don't know yet,"* and then adds*, "At half past fifty maybe?"* (Study I, Simon, K6). This sequence clearly demonstrates that Simon associates the question of "when," meant by the interviewer in relation to a specific event (at the daycare festival), with a time, which he cannot answer. In another sequence in the same interview, a similar structure is evident. The interviewer has extensively discussed with Simon the role of the soccer coach in negotiating rules during soccer play, and now draws an analogy to the daycare centre, which Simon cannot comprehend (Simon: *"No, there's no coach here*." I: *"Is there someone else for that? Someone similar to a coach?"* Simon: *"Umm, I don't know yet"* (Study I, Simon, K6)). The difficulty in establishing analogies is also evident in the interview with Andy, also from Study I, where the interviewer, using a photo of a conversation protocol, inquires whether they *"sometimes discuss such things"* in his daycare group. Andy initially responds, "*Hmm, I don't know,"* and upon the repetition of the question, *"Don't you have discussions like that at all?"* he then responds, "*Well, actually yes, but not like those,"* referring to the documentation of the discussion about the conversation protocol (Study I, Andy, K1).

The expression "I don't know" is further employed by children when confronted with complex questions regarding reasons, explanations, or processes.

This is particularly evident in the interviews of Study III, which inquire about self-efficacy experiences and, consequently, objectively complex intrapsychic processes. For instance, there is repeated use of the response pattern when the interviewer asks "why" or "how":

*I: But why did you still continue to attempt that [a high shot in football, KV]?*

*Toni: Because I believed I could do it.*

*I: You believed that. Why did you believe that? Tell me, I find it hard to imagine.*

*Toni: Uh, I don't know anymore.*

*I: Mhm, how do you know for sure that you can do it? Why do you believe that?*

*Toni: (3) No idea*

*(Study III, Toni, t1 Kita, lines 181-188)*

In this sequence, Toni articulates in an elaborate manner that he recognizes a belief (= a broadly defined concept of general self-efficacy) that motivates him to overcome a subjectively significant challenge in playing football. However, he also expresses that he cannot further differentiate this process/general belief and thus marks the limits of his response to this question in the interview. Similarly, in Study III, there are sequences where the response "I don't know" is given, and it can be inferred over the course of the interview that children may doubt or at least question the seriousness/truthfulness of the adult interviewer's claim to acknowledge the perspectives and ideas of children as expert knowledge:

*I: How do you go about it when you want to play something then?*

*Adriana: (Laughing) I don't know.*

*I: Is it strange that I ask so much [Adriana nods and laughs], but you know, I want to tell you why I ask so much. I was a child too, it's been a long time, and I'm not always here in kindergarten and can grasp everything, that's why I ask such things in detail and want to know exactly how it was. (2) Can you tell me how you did it this morning when you had the idea [to play something, KV]?*

*Adriana: No, I don't know.*

*I: You don't know?*

*Adriana1: Mm [shaking her head]*

*(Study III, Adriana, t1 Kita, lines 69-74)*

Here, for example, Adriana seems to hesitate in response to the interviewer's inquiry, laughing. Even after the interviewer's explanation and the reaffirmation of her claim to learn about Adriana's perspective, she still maintains her response and does not share the inquired experience.

*"I don't know": Expression of No (longer) Wanting*

Examining the interaction patterns between children and adults in the context of generational order, the use of "I don't know" becomes apparent in sequences where children do not mark either a lack of knowledge or understanding of a question but rather withdraw from the conversation/intended course of conversation by the adult interviewer. The "I don't know" instances used at the beginning to illustrate the phenomenon also fall into this interpretation. Furthermore, more sequences in the data material indicate this function of the response pattern. This is evident, for example, in the following excerpt from the interview with Nico, where his willingness to actively participate in the interview seems to be absent:

*I: Do you know who the group representatives are in your group?*

*Nico: No.*

*I: No, you don't know at all?*

*Nico: Nope.*

*I: And do you know what their task is?*

*Nico: No.*

*I: Do you always discuss everything together with everyone?*

*Nico: Yeah, I forgot.*

*(Study I, Nico, K8)*

Especially relevant for the expression of no (longer) wanting are interview passages in which "I don't know" is frequently used by the children in succession. A similar sequence can also be found in the interview with Manuel (Study I, Manuel, K3). However, even the single "I don't know" from Lena in response to the question about the role of the group representatives can be interpreted in this way:

*I: And what do group representatives do? (...) Why are they that?*

*Lena: I don't know.*

*I: Mhm, so you don't know what the group representatives do? Just that they are [Girl's name] and [Girl's name]?*

*Lena: Mhm (affirmative).*

*I: Mhm, and why are they [Girl's name] and [Girl's name]?*

*Lena: Mh because they had more circles.*

*I: Mhm [.] Did you choose them? [.] Mhm, and why do you think they had so many circles?*

*Lena: Mh [.] I'm bored.*

*I: You're bored?*

*Lena: Yes.*

*(Study I, Lena, K2)*

After the interviewer continues with her questions despite Lena's "I don't know" and Lena answers them briefly, Lena then signals clearly that she is no longer interested in continuing the interview. This is also evident in Study III in the interview with Serkan, where the "I don't know" responses appear in the last third of the interviews, which could additionally indicate a state of fatigue:

*I: Yes ((Laughter)) What do you think, how do you imagine it in school? Tell me (3) what do you do there all day?*

*Serkan: Uh? I don't know.*

*I: What do you do first?*

*Serkan: I don't know. Oh, I don't want to anymore.*

*I: Okay, then I thank you*

*(Serkan, t1 Kita, lines 186-190)*

In addition to the frequent occurrence of the response pattern, Serkan explicitly states here that he is withdrawing his consent to participate in the interview.

## Conclusions

In our re-analysis regarding the occurrence and functions of the use of the interaction pattern "I don't know" and similar statements, it becomes evident that children use this response to express a lack of knowledge, recollection, or experience. At times, they also employ "I don't know" to initially defer a substantive response or to relativize their subjective perspective on a phenomenon. Thus, the interaction pattern appears as one that children utilize against the background of their experiences, knowledge, skills, and reflection on the subjectivity of their own perspectives. It can be evaluated as an interaction pattern through which children interact competently and effectively, aligning with the expectations associated with incorporating children's perspectives and even making them the primary purpose of the interaction.

Furthermore, the re-analysis also reveals that there is more to the response "I don't know" than the initially apparent assumption that the child lacks the knowledge to answer the question or express themselves on the relevant phenomenon. We have developed two interpretative perspectives, which we articulate below:

(1) "I don't know" seems to be a strategy through which children signal that they do not understand the question/impulse from the interviewer or the associated interest in knowledge. This could have both a linguistic dimension, involving

the clarity and formulation of questions/impulses, and a generational dimension if we assume that the response pattern "I don't know" is used by children when, as Bühler-Niederberger (2020) suggests, they cannot sense what answer is expected of them. Despite the claim and assurance that they are being questioned as experts in their own lives and that there is no right or wrong answer to the questions asked, children remain uncertain about what they "should say" in response to the posed question. The space promised/opened up for children by the adult interviewers, where they, in Lundy's (2018) terms (at least in the interview), have the space to raise their voices, and the perspectives they disclose are meaningful in terms of audience and influence, does not seem to lead children to recognize it as a real space for action for themselves. They seem to "distrust the situation," and rightly so, as in their everyday lives, but also in the specific interview situation, they usually have experiences of action and interaction that contradict the promise of appreciation and recognition of their opinion, the intention to provide them with space for participation, and the claim to audience and influence (Velten & Höke, 2023). From this perspective, ethical responsibilities for researchers capturing children's perspectives entail the obligation to critically reflect on these micro interactions, posing questions such as: What signs within interviews with children indicate that their consent is no longer given? How can this be managed professionally and ethically responsibly?

(2) It becomes clear that children use "I don't know" as an expression of no longer wanting to mark that their interest or willingness to continue participating in the interview has diminished. "I don't know" appears here as a powerful strategy for children, leading the interviewer to either introduce a new topic into the interview or actually terminate the interview. The ad hoc practices we previously identified, such as reinforcing the child through praise or ordering and structuring through summarizing statements, no longer apply at these points. Similarly, with this interaction pattern, there are no "if... then" statements, which we consider critical turning points in interview situations when children more or less overtly refuse to engage in the conversation (Velten & Höke, 2021). Instead, the response "I don't know" leads to an involuntary acceptance by the adult researcher to admit the child's apparent lack of knowledge and to comply with the child's marked withdrawal from the interaction. In terms of children's agency, the response "I don't know" appears here as a powerful functional strategy for children to resist an adult-dominated conversational situation and simultaneously avoid conflict. Children once again appear as "social all-rounders" (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020), highly competent in ensuring their own interests in these situations.

## Outlook

It can be assumed that the interaction strategy "I don't know," which we have elaborated on, is not a spontaneous strategy that emerges only in the interview

situation. Instead, it seems to suggest that children have already assessed and evaluated this interaction strategy in other interactions between them and adult individuals before, to withdraw from certain conversations that are uninteresting, irrelevant, or unpleasant for the child. It would be remarkably interesting for further research projects to analyse interaction patterns between children and adults both in the pedagogical practice of childcare facilities or primary schools and in the family context. This would help to precisely elaborate on how children establish agency in these contexts. Building on these insights, an awareness of power structures in interaction patterns can be developed, which is essential for avoiding adultism.

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# How Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships Counter Adultism in Higher Education

*Alison Cook-Sather, Abyssinia Braud, Brisa Kane, & Abhirami Suresh*

## Abstract

Higher education students, formally adults, are nevertheless subject to adultism. The co-authors of this article—the director of the Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) program and three undergraduates who have worked in pedagogical partnership with faculty through SaLT—discuss how this program counters adultism on three levels: conceptually, structurally, and personally/interpersonally. We conclude with implications of this work for others interested in creating structures, practices, and relationships that counter adultism in higher education.

## Introduction

Students who join higher education contexts are, by formal definition, adults. And yet, they are often nevertheless subject to forms of adultism that cast them as children to be directed rather than as partners to be engaged in the co-creation of learning and teaching. In an early discussion of adultism, Bell (1995) argued that its underlying behaviors and attitudes are based on the assumption that adults are superior to youth and "entitled to act upon young people without [their] agreement." More recently, writing specifically about higher education, Peseta (in Peseta & Suresh, 2024) asserted that, "mostly, students are kept at arm's length, treated as people who don't know things, and usually, they have the least power to change

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or influence…practices because they're not given the conceptual or material tools to do so." These forms of acting upon students and preventing their empowerment mean that the assumption that faculty know better than students what and how those students should learn shapes most student-faculty relationships and most educational practices in colleges and universities. In this article we present and reflect on a program that strives to counter these forms of adultism and affirm an egalitarian approach to teaching and learning in higher education.

A pedagogical partnership program called Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) has been housed since 2007 in the bi-college consortium of Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College, two liberal arts institutions in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. SaLT is premised on this definition of pedagogical partnership: "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7). Key to this definition is the phrase "equally, although not necessarily in the same ways." It is precisely the differences of position and perspective that make partnership work powerful—and that counter adultism. In the SaLT program, this partnership work typically takes the form of semester-long, one-on-one partnerships between faculty members and paid undergraduate students who are not enrolled in the faculty member's course. The student partners observe one of their faculty partner's class sessions each week, meet weekly with their faculty partner, and meet weekly in cohorts of other student partners with the first author of this article, Alison, in her role as director of the Teaching and Learning Institute in which SaLT is situated (Cook-Sather, Bahti, et al., 2019).

Contrary to adultism's assumed superiority of older people over younger people, the SaLT program positions young adults alongside older adults as having essential knowledge and respect-worthy capacity. The student partners who participated in the pilot semester of SaLT in 2007, all of whom were BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), were positioned as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106) about teaching and learning alongside and in collaboration with their faculty partners (Cook-Sather, 2018b; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013). After the pilot semester, the identities of student partners diversified, but the commitment remained the same: to co-creating equitable teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2022) through drawing on students' identities, experiences, and insights both to affirm those students and to redress forms of harm that equity-seeking students often experience in higher education (de Bie et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, SaLT's basic one-on-one partnership model expanded to include Pedagogy Circles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, co-facilitated by pairs of experienced SaLT student partners with the goal of supporting dialogue among faculty, professional staff, and students (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023). In particular response to the intersection of the pandemic and anti-Black racism,

we developed Pedagogy Circles for BIPOC Faculty, co-facilitated by experienced BIPOC SaLT student partners (Cook-Sather, Stewart, et al., 2023), intended to be spaces of joy and celebration as well as spaces for discussion of how to navigate predominantly white institutions.

As suggested by the description above, SaLT strives to counter the premises of adultism not by asserting that young adults are superior but rather by arguing that the work of teaching and learning—and, more generally, developing as human beings—needs to be done in partnership. The program operates on the assumption that the experiences and perspectives of both older and younger adults are essential to the creation of equitable, inclusive, and productively challenging teaching and learning in higher education. In short, it strives to replace adultism with egalitarianism.

The co-authors of this article have participated in SaLT in one of two ways: as director of the program, from her primary role as a faculty member in the Education Department and in the Bryn Mawr/Haverford College consortium (Alison), and as student consultants (often called "partners" in other such programs)—paid undergraduates who work in one-on-one or small-group partnerships with faculty and staff (Abyssinia, Brisa, and Abhirami). Alison co-created this program in partnership with students, faculty, and staff in the Fall of 2006 and has facilitated it ever since, supporting the participation of hundreds of faculty and student partners. Abyssinia joined SaLT as a student partner in the Spring of 2023, working in a one-on-one partnership, and since then has worked with two different faculty in one-on-one partnerships and co-facilitated two Pedagogy Circles: one open to all faculty, staff, and students, and one Pedagogy Circle for BIPOC Faculty. Brisa joined SaLT as a student partner in the Fall of 2023 and recently completed her first partnership as of this writing. Abhirami joined SaLT as a student partner in the Fall of 2022, has worked in several one-on-one partnerships, and has facilitated two Pedagogy Circles: one open to all faculty, staff, and students (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023), and one that is centered around experiential learning.

We also bring different dimensions of identity to this work. Alison is a white, middle-aged, able-bodied, cis-gendered woman educator who has worked for nearly three decades in an Education Department in the predominantly white bi-college consortium of Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Abyssinia is a black, first-generation, fourth-year undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College majoring in sociology, with minors in dance and education studies. Brisa is a white, cis-gendered, queer, third-year undergraduate at Haverford College majoring in anthropology and education studies, hopefully with an independent minor in disability studies. Abhirami is a Tamil-Indian American, fourth-year undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College who identifies both with the South Asian diaspora and with being raised in the United States and is majoring in mathematics and minoring in education studies.

In this article we share some of the core concepts we bring to our work in the

SaLT program to offer a sense of the thinkers and practitioners who have informed this work. We then draw on our core concepts and on our own (and our awareness of others') experiences in SaLT to suggest that this program counters adultism on three levels: conceptually, structurally, and personally/interpersonally. We conclude with summarizing how this pedagogical partnership work creates structures, practices, and relationships that counter adultism in higher education.

## Core Concepts

The core concepts we bring to this analysis include: reciprocity as informed by the work of Freire (1972) and scholars of pedagogical partnership in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leota & Sutherland, 2020); the culture diamond (Griswold, 2012) from sociology; recognition of students with disabilities as resources (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023); and listening as a central practice (Schultz, 2003).

The core concept Alison brings—reciprocity—is informed by a tenet of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, to which she was introduced more than three decades ago in graduate school. While much of Freire's work has informed Alison's teaching and her facilitation of the SaLT program, most directly relevant to this discussion is Freire's (1972) idea of teachers as teacher-learners and students as learner-teachers working in dialogue and with mutual respect. The sense of reciprocity Alison embraces is further informed by Māori principles to which she was introduced a number of years ago when visiting Aotearoa/New Zealand to give several talks on pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather 2018a). While there, Alison learned about the Māori principles of mana ōrite (the prestige that other people attribute to you; to be the same as, equal) and ako (to learn and to teach through a process that is relational and social) (Leota & Sutherland, 2020), both of which inform Alison's thinking about respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility in teaching and learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Abyssinia brings the core concept of the culture diamond. According to Griswold (2012), the culture diamond is made up of four different elements: social context, cultural objects, creators, and recipients. One is not more or less influential than the other; rather, all elements interact and inform one another to create culture. The diamond is an accounting device for culture that imposes theories but is not a theory within itself, and you can put arrows on the diamond in any direction. Abyssina sees the cultural diamond as a useful way to analyze the culture of a teacher-centered classroom in comparison to a co-created classroom.

The core concept Brisa brings—recognizing disabled students as resources—focuses on accessibility approached through appreciating the different strengths teachers and students bring to partnership work and to teaching and learning. We have laws and frameworks for accommodation, but what does that look like in reality? Bringing in voices of people who need the accommodations, learning from

them what they actually need, and beginning to rethink the idea of accommodation are all ways student partners can work with faculty (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023). While teachers have knowledge of content, students can provide important insights into how to make classrooms accessible, and student consultants in particular can bring voice to what accessibility could look like (Price, 2011).

Like Alison, Abhirami brings a commitment to reciprocity, but she chooses to foreground listening and empathy through partnership. As Barthes (1985) noted, "Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act" (p. 245). Furthermore, "the act of listening," as Shultz (2003) argues, is "based on interaction rather than simply reception"—it is "fundamentally about being in relationship to another and through this relationship supporting change or transformation. By listening to others, the listener is called on to respond " (p. 9). At its core, partnership work creates relationships that change traditional student-faculty power dynamics through both listening and empathy. To have empathy, as Rogers (1975) explains, is to "perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the 'as if' condition" (pp. 210-211). The multiple kinds of listening that inform and are informed by empathy make pedagogical partnership well suited to counter adultism through replacing hierarchy with reciprocity. These forms of listening consider students a key source of information and insight, through which students are respected for their work. There are many different avenues this work can take, but all of them require and draw on the skill of listening, as well as maintaining a balance of empathy while problem solving and engaging in critical thinking.

## How SaLT Counters Adultism

Drawing on our core concepts and our own (and our awareness of others') experiences in the SaLT program, we discuss below how SaLT counters adultism on three levels: the conceptual, the structural, and the personal/interpersonal.

### *Countering Adultism Conceptually*

Viewed through the core concepts Alison brings, the SaLT program invites faculty to be teacher-learners and undergraduate students to be learner-teachers. In these both/and roles, student and faculty partners engage in weekly, semester-long dialogues based on mutual respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) as they reflect on, develop, and revise teaching and learning. SaLT also strives to be a form of "ako in action," the name of a pedagogical partnership program developed at Victoria University of Wellington in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leota & Sutherland, 2020). Uniting teaching and learning in a single word, ako calls for shared responsibility among teachers and learn-

ers. These two core concepts require and facilitate a reconceptualization of roles (teacher, student) and responsibilities (teaching, learning) that counter adultism.

Viewed through the core concept Abyssinia brings, the SaLT program helps illuminate and shape the classroom, which has its own culture within the higher education space. Typically, professors are in a higher power position, but SaLT student consultants shift the culture. When a faculty member works with a student consultant, it is no longer just teacher and student, but the third participant, a student consultant, and that shifts the dynamic. Considering how culture is produced, we can understand the social context as the structures of higher education, the cultural object as the way the classroom is run, and the student consultant disrupting the arrow from creator (faculty member) to recipient (students) because a student (student consultant) is also a creator. These shifts counter adultism by altering the typical power dynamics and creative processes.

Viewed through the core concept Brisa brings, the SaLT program reorients dominant conceptions of ability and disability to focus on equity. SaLT recognizes strengths that students and teachers bring to partnerships—acknowledging faculty members' content-specific knowledge and students' lived experiences of navigating higher education contexts. Focusing specifically on access, most institutions see accommodations as a legal framework, but recognizing students as informants can shift how both instructors and students understand their relationship to one another and to how to make the classroom inclusive. It is a shift from accommodation for a few students to equity among all as a foundation for learning. All student consultants can be equity advocates. As one former student consultant explains, she can "see injustice and exclusion more readily" because of her partnership work, and also feels greater "agency and power" to advocate for justice (Abbot in Cook-Sather, Cort, et al., 2023). Students with disabilities in particular can be positioned as mentors to instructors (Dollinger & Hanna, 2023) and as those who can help effect a shift "from accommodation culture to equity culture" (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023). Here it is not adults "entitled to act upon young people without [their] agreement" (Bell, 1995) but rather older adults informed and guided by the experiences and expertise of younger adults.

Viewed through the core concepts Abhirami brings, the SaLT program enacts forms of listening and empathy building that counter adultism. Engaging intentionally in the "psychological act" (Barthes, 1985, p. 245) of listening to younger adults, instructors in student-faculty partnerships are "in relationship" (Schultz, 2003, p. 9) with students. Former student consultant Amaka Eze (2019) describes how she moved from listening to responding to leading as she gained experience through four different pedagogical partnerships with instructors, and in the pedagogy circles that Abhirami has co-facilitated, instructors are supported in engaging in "listening, reflection, and intentionality" (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023, p. 213). Empathy in both directions comes from such listening. Undergraduate student partner Muri Marinho Mascarenhas (2022) explains that they "began viewing my

professors with more empathy; many of them were working very hard to improve their teaching and supporting their students as best they could." Similarly, instructors develop empathy for student experiences through hearing from their student partners, who offer "insight into students' experiences" that faculty are "not hearing from students enrolled in [their own] courses" (Hirschfeld, 2022, p. 4). Conceptualizing reciprocal listening and empathy as the basis for the relationship of student and faculty partners counters adultism by making both parties' experiences the focus of respectful attention.

### *Countering Adultism Structurally*

The core concepts we outline above—Freire's (1972) idea of teachers as teacher-learners and students as learner-teachers working in dialogue and mutual respect; the Māori principle of ako that calls for shared responsibility among teachers and learners (Leota & Sutherland, 2020); the culture diamond (Griswold, 2012) as applied to classrooms as cultures; the idea of positioning students with disabilities as advocates for access (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023); and listening and empathy as central to reciprocity in partnership (Hirschfeld, 2022; Marinho Mascarenhas, 2022; Suresh & Rolfes, 2023)—all inform the design of the SaLT program, which then works on the structural level to counter adultism.

The most basic structure the SaLT program offers is an interrelated set of liminal spaces within which older and younger adults can be in dialogue (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). These spaces typically do not exist in higher education, but through SaLT, older and younger adults are afforded time and supported in dialogue by flexible guidelines that foster an exchange that values younger adults' experiences and perspectives. The weekly meetings between faculty partners and student partners support teacher-learners and learner-teachers (Freire, 1972) engaging in "ako in action" (Leota & Sutherland, 2020) premised on listening, empathy, and re-imagining the culture of the classroom.

Within this basic structure of student-faculty partnership, the weekly meetings of Alison in her role as director of SaLT and groups of student consultants provide another kind of liminal space. In this space, Alison listens to and learns from students, and students listen to and learn from Alison and one another. Students are positioned as experts and knowledge holders about educational practice (Cook-Sather, 2023); in the weekly meetings, they practice articulating their knowledge, perspectives, and questions. There are multiple student consultants in each weekly meeting, and they are there to support and affirm one another as well as guide and learn from one another.

Another way in which SaLT counters adultism on the structural level is through its absence of training for student consultants. There is no prescribed form to the partnerships, no specific subject-matter knowledge that student part-

ners are required to have, and no specific pedagogical knowledge they need to develop. Just being thoughtful learners makes these students experts in creating inclusive and empowering classroom spaces. Student and faculty partners build their own structure based on the strengths they bring; structure is created through the relationship, which also refuses the typical lines along which expertise falls (e.g., disciplinary). The assumption is not that younger adults (in the student role) need to be taught by older adults (in the director or faculty partner role) about how to engage in dialogue and partnership. Rather, the SaLT program trusts students to figure out their roles using guidelines and leaning into the support but not following prescriptions regarding what to focus on or how to interact. SaLT values what students bring—their identities, their experiences, their insights, their capacities. Students share these in an orientation and in weekly meetings, but to train would contradict and violate the principles we are talking about here. The guidelines and weekly meetings are structured as support rather than as constraint; our group sessions support troubleshooting, collaborative problem solving, and celebrating what student consultants accomplish in the partnership work. The structure is the space for talking and working together.

Finally, the fact that students are paid for their work is an additional form of countering adultism: students are recognized as those with expertise (Cook-Sather, 2023). Students are being paid to co-create culture (not just offer or gather feedback), in keeping with the culture diamond that Abyssinia draws on to understand her work as a student consultant. When students with experiences of or expertise in disabilities take on this job, they are recognized for expertise based on a condition that is more often cast as a deficit (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023; Brown et al., 2020).

### *Countering Adultism Personally and Interpersonally*

The conceptual and structural ways in which SaLT counters adultism inform and are informed by the personal and interpersonal experiences student consultants have in the program, which counter adultism for individuals and collectively. SaLT's conceptual and structural countering of adultism inform the personal experiences student consultants have in teaching-and-learning-focused relationships between older and younger adults in which both perspectives are not only valued but also essential, thereby affirming what each person brings. Alison often returns to a statement one student offered that captures this sense that student consultants have: being a student consultant "made me feel like who I am is more than enough—that my identity, my thoughts, my ideas are significant and valuable" (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015). Through SaLT, student consultants are affirmed for who they are and for what they bring to partnership work.

One of the primary ways in which student consultants bring to bear their identities, experiences, and perspectives in is serving as mediators and translators—doing personal and interpersonal work built on internal understandings and enact-

ed through facilitation of relationships. One student consultant describes how she drew on her student identity for this work: "I am often a translator, rearticulating student feedback to faculty members, explaining why I think the students found an assignment unclear or a website confusing" (Cunningham, 2012, p. 2). Other student consultants draw on aspects of shared identity, such as the same first language, to support their faculty partners, as one student consultant explains:

> …sometimes [my faculty partner's] personality didn't translate very well into the classroom, in terms of humor, and her students thought she was rude. It was [an] interesting experience for me as a partner because she was a Spanish speaker and so was I, and so I understood in a way, but other students didn't. She would say a joke and I would translate. Trying to say in English what you would say in Spanish doesn't always work. (Student quoted in Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019)

Still other student consultants speak from their positions as underrepresented on their college campuses but positioned in the SaLT program as those with important perspectives that can contribute to more equitable campuses by supporting the transformation of instructors' teaching practices. One student consultant reflects:

> I am looking at the hierarchy between the professor and the students, and [my faculty partner's] identity and [the students'] identity, and then there was me, I was the only black person there. … I remember that being very hard but something we talked a lot about. I remember [my faculty partner] getting a lot from it. Having to change the way he was positioned to listen to students like me and other people. (Student partner quoted in Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019)

Because SaLT treats students as adults with contributions to make and professional capacities to build, it contributes to students' professional development. One student consultant explains how the work affords an opportunity to develop skills through "all-encompassing engagement, transcending information-transfer and activating a fundamental mental musculature of opening up, of leaning into discomfort and the unknown to discover and create common ground through mutual understanding" (Bernstein, 2019, p. 3). Such an experience reflects a personal and interpersonal dynamic that recognizes students as critical thought and practice partners. The core concepts and the structures of SaLT provide student consultants with spaces within which to enact and further develop their professional capacities. As one former student consultant notes regarding pedagogy circles, she "supported many power exchanges amongst faculty, students, and staff and learned how to set a standard of equity and respect for all community members through her facilitator role" (Cook-Sather, Cort, et al., 2023).

Infusing both the personal experiences and the interpersonal exchanges in SaLT is the presence of vulnerability, openness, and honesty. These work against adultism because older adults entrust student consultants with their vulnerability, which shifts the power dynamic. As one student consultant describes: "[My faculty partner's] trust of me in sharing reservations and roadblocks [about the course

he was teaching] made me trust him in return and make myself vulnerable, too, in sharing experiences and ideas" (Sylla, 2018, p. 5). This is not about the older adult holding all the power; it is, rather, reciprocal vulnerability, which is one of the opposites of power wielding.

Student consultants experience these personal and interpersonal dynamics of the SaLT program differently depending on what they have experienced in education—and, in some cases, partnership—previously. Abyssinia came to partnership work through an already established relationship with a dance professor, and that provided a foundation for the subsequent partnership work she did with faculty outside of the Dance Program. Brisa's parents are teachers, so she grew up in educational settings, and her parents have talked to her as a peer. This experience contrasts how Brisa has experienced most classroom spaces, but it gave her a sense of partnership that she could bring to her work as a student consultant. And in reflecting on her experience of co-facilitating pedagogy circles, Abhirami and her co-facilitator noted:

> Without even knowing us, faculty participants trusted us with their most vulnerable concerns. The trust we had in each other as co-facilitators was something they were able to connect with and draw on in conversation and learning. To be validated for our experiences is incredibly joyful and empowering. (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023, p. 213)

## Implications

The ways in which SaLT counters adultism in student-faculty pedagogical partnership also carry over into the ways in which many faculty partners begin to reconceptualize their work with students enrolled in their courses. The relationships that student consultants foster with faculty through SaLT pave the way for faculty to view their courses, classrooms, and pedagogy through the process faculty member Brenda Thomas articulates: "Learning happens through relationship" (Thomas & Sorbara, 2023, p. 212). This relationship is informed in part by getting to know students. As Lauren Crowe writes: "Understanding more about how social identities affect experience in the class has shifted how I seek to understand the student experience in all classes and how I view my own growth as an instructor" (Abraha & Crowe, 2022, p. 8). Similarly, Amy Hirschfeld (2022) notes: "By better understanding the student perspective and experience from my [student] partners, I became committed to transforming my pedagogy to better meet the needs of students and to disrupt inequitable academic power structures," specifically though looking for "ways to make students feel welcomed and valued in the classroom as their whole selves, fully deserving of flexibility, empathy, and understanding" (p. 1, p. 5).

The arc of the partnership work moves from the young adults in consultant mode, offering their experiences and perspectives, to more confident young adults in a partnership role: collaborating to co-create equitable and inclusive learning

spaces and approaches. Student consultants move from trying to figure out their role with older adults, which contrasts sharply with most of their experiences in higher education, to more of a collaborative relationship through which they are working on shared goals. In short, they move from assisting to co-creating.

## Conclusion

Faculty member Tina Wildhagen captures the shift in mindset many faculty who work in partnership experience: "What I have learned through working in partnership with [my student partner] Dionna is that active reflection introduces the possibility for teaching to become the thing that it should be: an ongoing project between teachers and students, open to improvisation, revision, and reflection" (Wildhagen & Jenkins, 2020, p. 7). This rethinking of teaching replaces the forms of adultism that cast students as children to be directed with an understanding of students as partners to be engaged in the co-creation of learning and teaching. Rather than keeping students "at arm's length" and treating them "as people who don't know things" (Peseta in Peseta & Suresh, 2024), SaLT affirms an egalitarian approach to teaching and learning in higher education that positions young adults alongside older adults as those with essential knowledge and respect-worthy capacity.

We have discussed the ways that SaLT embraces and enacts core concepts that affirm reciprocity between older and younger adults in teaching and learning relationships, as informed by the work of Freire (1972) and scholars of pedagogical partnership in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leota & Sutherland, 2020). We have also drawn on the sociological concept of the culture diamond (Griswold, 2012), argued for recognizing students with disabilities as resources (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023), and asserted the power of centering listening as a practice (Schultz, 2003) in partnership. In addition, we have discussed the ways in which SaLT counters adultism structurally, through offering an interrelated set of liminal spaces within which older and younger adults can be in dialogue (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017), through replacing training with support that draws on student consultants' existing and evolving strengths and capacities, and through remunerating the labor in which student consultants engage. Finally, we have discussed the personal and interpersonal dynamics that the SaLT program draws on and fosters, affirming the whole selves that student consultants bring to partnership work, positioning student consultants to bring to bear their identities, experiences, and perspectives as mediators and translators, and supporting student consultants' professional development.

We hope this discussion of student-faculty partnership as an egalitarian practice will inspire others to develop such programs to counter adultism within pedagogical partnership programs and in the classrooms such programs support.

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# A Future Without Adultism

*Adam F. C. Fletcher*

## Abstract

Conceptualizing the absence of adultism is an important step forward for young people, advocates and researchers. This paper shares a hypothetical future absent of discrimination against youth and bias towards adults. The author proposes that in the place of adultism is sustained democracy, freedom and justice for all, regardless of age and many other biases, as well.

## Introduction

What would a future without adultism look like? Perhaps young people could provide the best visions for this possibility. However, as a systemic cultural, social, economic and political reality that varyingly affects everyone, this phenomenon can and should be examined by all members of society of any age. This paper is not about predictions. Instead, it examines signals throughout our society, looks back to see forward, and uncovers patterns to proceed (Gorbis 2019). While oppressive suffering happens everywhere because of adultism, this paper is intended to show that a better world is possible.

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## Understanding the Need for a Future

The term "adultism" has been varyingly employed since at least the 1840s, when it was used to describe traits of an animal that matured faster than expected (Wright, 1849, 241). One of the first print usages of the word applied to humankind came in the 1890s, when it was a rationale for excluding women from the vote (Bryce, 1896, 633), Since then, adultism has bridged a series of definitions and understandings. Early applications applied to appearances and behaviors of children that appeared adultlike. Starting fifty years ago, the overarching analysis focused on discrimination against youth as embodied by Flasher (1978) and Bell (n.d.). In the past two decades, emergent literature has examined the presence and applications of adultism throughout systems affecting young people (Eubanks et al., 2010; LeFrançois, 2013; Fletcher, 2015a). It has been addressed as an institutional, cultural, and personal phenomenon (Fletcher, 2015a); with identifications and analyses in a wide-reaching number of fields, including education, architecture, governance, social services, economics and far beyond.

However, as an existential dilemma affecting all people for some period of their lives, adultism should be addressed differently than most have attempted. Adultism is an ecological phenomenon that can only be truly understood by grappling with the absolute permeation of its existence throughout the entire realities that face every child, every youth and every adult around the entire world. Anything less than that not only undersells the absolutism of adultism but serves to perpetuate and habituate its presence and profound impacts on everyone in every situation, everywhere, all the time. The present breadth of adultism can be daunting.

Because of this, it is important to consider the possibilities of a future without adultism. Some light futurisms could prompt practitioners, researchers, parents and young people themselves to envision this for themselves. According to Sardar (2010), futurism is an attempt to systematically explore predictions and possibilities about the future and how they can emerge from the present, whether that of human society or life on Earth in general. This paper is an attempt to apply futurism to adultism. Considering the ubiquity and constraints of the phenomenon, this paper is necessarily over-reaching. However, from this practitioner/advocate's perspectives emerging from experience, examination, and exploration in hundreds of settings with thousands of young people and adults, this paper could serve as an informed prediction and projection of possibilities throughout our society.

## Seeing the Entire Picture

In this paper, I use a holistic perspective of adultism that looks at entire systems affecting all humans to highlight the individual parts of the lives of young people. This differs from reductionist examinations of adultism that look only at specific relationships within the lives of children and youth. Generally, these examinations focus on one of two components, specific interpersonal roles and

specific physical locations. The interpersonal roles that have been examined include parenting (Brett, 2011; Pensoneau-Conway, 2017), teaching (Fletcher, 2015b), babysitters (Nagasawa et al., 2023), mental and physical healthcare providers (Bettencourt, 2020; Augsberger, et al., 2023), lawyers and judges, elected officials, police, and more. The specific locations for adultism that have been identified range from playgrounds to classrooms, dinner tables to living rooms, hospitals to playgrounds, and even in our court system, legislatures and elsewhere throughout society.

While those perspectives offer important viewpoints, they do not successfully encapsulate the extent to which the lives of all people are undermined by adultism. Understanding that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, a holistic perspective of adultism can encourage readers to understand the entirety of its sociological impacts. This ecological view must encapsulate the psychological, social, political, emotional, educational and cultural elements of children and youth, as well as their economic, judicial, and religious backgrounds (Lopez, 2021). It must also include the positive and negative experiences, adversity and trauma, and the helpfulness and hopefulness of young people.

With that massive breadth firmly established, we can move beyond any attempt to gaze into a crystal ball and identify what adultism portends and what we are seeing actualized throughout society right now.

## A Glimpse of Youth

In the future, society will recognize that the constructed signals of being young, both biological and sociological, were inherently biased against people who were not seen as adults. Acknowledging that the designation of being young imposed a hierarchical relationship between caregivers and the cared for, this organizing system afflicted children, youth and adults from the arrival of newborns through to the deathbed of elders.

These foreseeable possibilities may show us a young person sitting by a glen looking over a small stream trickling past their feet. Moving from being a naturalist's daydream to being a daily reality for countless young people worldwide, this is an idealized image meant to hold possibilities for the future without adultism. Gone are the struggles for daily existence that marked the daily lives of more than half the world's young population for centuries. Instead, patient calmness and de-stressed lifestyles have replaced the tensions of poverty, destitution, discrimination and near-ceaseless suffering. This glimpse of youth is packed with bias; however, it's near-perfect idealism that is intended to allude to the potential for every child and every youth everywhere, to live in a future without adultism.

Although a potential byproduct, the absolute independence or equality of young people is not the goal of this anti-adultist transformation. Rather, the goal is to assert the full humanity of children and youth where each is seen as themselves

and as part of the larger whole of their families, communities, nations and world. This is the interdependence so desperately needed in modern confines, rather than the extreme independence that is ill-begotten by hyper-commercialized forces focused on their accumulation of power at the expense of humanity's well-being.

The damage of excluding and excommunicating people from civic life because of their ages is shown to be wholly detrimental, making democracy a hollow, futile gesture of personal power in the face of corporate and imperialist powers (Fletcher & McDermott, 2023). The absolute determination of young people and their adult allies to stay engaged despite those challenges is made plain in a future without adultism, whereupon the dire necessity of engaging all children and youth in the civic, economic, educational, social and cultural lives of their communities and countries, as well as throughout our entire world, is made obvious through the benefits to everyone, everywhere, all the time. Alluding to the power of collectivism, the end of adultism necessarily reinforces the need to invest in young people's democratic well-being. Beyond typical civic engagement, an anti-adultist future will reinforce the roles of young people throughout society (Kurth-Schai, 1988). Engaging all children and youth as full-enfranchised voters, a future without adultism necessitates young people being acknowledged and empowered producers and makers, consumers and civic actors, leaders and drivers throughout society. Moving collectively towards a powerful democratic future, enfranchising all children and youth with the vote, empowering them as full community members and equitably engaging them throughout society could help overcome the democracy deficit disorder so replete throughout society today.

In this future, common expectations for all young people revolve around complete equity throughout every station of society. Focused on the innate tendency towards fairness within all children, a future without adultism necessitates the centrality of justice throughout society. Already keenly aware of what they want to receive in relationships of all kinds, in the future children grow up embedded in cultures of justice that embrace their senses of balance, trust and security that infuses harmony throughout the world. Simply put, equity becomes the balance young people feel in relationships with adults in all roles, as measured by them. Parents, teachers, counselors, police, service providers, business operators, politicians and countless others take on this challenge. Absent the overwhelming prejudice of adultism, together young people and adults will not only be able to observe inequities but will be empowered to take action to correct situations where adultism emerges. The binary aspects of popular culture, government systems, judicial structures, educational processes and economic models will all be challenged. This means that racial strife, gender bias, socio-economic discrimination, neurodiversity and other inequalities, along with many other negative markers of aspirational industrialized nations will melt away through learning, advocacy and collective action, all of which end in a future without adultism. Ignorance among the masses is replaced with unity, connectivity and trust-building. This transformation will be

marked by the emergence of a new popular anti-adultist consciousness, one that treats all people as allies, not despite their ages but because of their ages.

## Launching Towards Transformation

A future without adultism means the rights of every child are recognized as tantamount to the rights of all humankind, and because of that safety and well-being are prioritized higher than any other status on Earth, including economic control, military might, and political willfulness. Food, water, shelter safety and the necessities of life are delivered wholescale, expanded and elaborated on, and ensured for all people, everywhere, regardless of age or station in life. Adultism ends because basic needs are met.

For the past fifty years, the work of advocates, educators, and researchers focused on identifying the age segregationist practices, behaviors, attitudes, and policies that imposed discrimination against people because of the years they had been alive. Studies have examined the systemic laws, pervasive cultures, and personal attitudes and beliefs of the entire population that enabled adultism. This revealed the continuous oppression of people not viewed as adults simply because they were young. Intersections with racism, homophobia, classism, intellectual biases and more are shown to exacerbate adultism, making oppression a cross-identity, non-binary classification that affects some more than others. This results in a stream of trans-disciplinary approaches to inform policymaking at the global, national, state and local levels around the world. In the future, a symbiosis of progressive social change and academic study focused on ending adultism will provide paramount thought leadership in many areas, and in turn, influencers, politicians, pop culture figures and others will come to a consensus that discrimination against all young people everywhere must end. Rather than singularly relying on policymaking as a kludge for transformation though, thousands of entities and billions of people worldwide will assume responsibility for the cause of teaching, advocating and acting against adultism.

Young people themselves will be the most successful forces for social change. Faced with the persistent call to action, children and youth will use technology, interpersonal relationships, formal and informal avenues to develop a transnational, multilinguistic, culturally astute and socially progressive movement of peers and allies to release the oppressive chains of isolation, segregation, alienation and stagnation that faced them. Adultism will be clearly acknowledged as the oppressive force at the root of each of these struggles, and this will result in a massive global movement for change.

In the future, families will be immediately enlightened by this new understanding. Around the world, parents will become conscientious and concerned about the oppressive behavior and beliefs facing the young within their homes and nearby. Grandparents, foster families and all sorts of primary caregivers joined

together with extended families and concerned neighbors to address various trauma-informed beliefs, assumptions, customs, laws and ideas that bound adultism as an organizing construct throughout society. Rather than perpetuate the generational myths that continually tied together society in an oppressive mesh of power and control, these family units dismantled the historic concepts of children-as-powerless, children-as-property, and "children-as-adult-in-the-making" (Kohn, 1993). They were replaced with new acknowledgment of children-as-full-humans and children-as-self-actualizers. Long present but persistently denied, these acknowledgments became de rigueur in every part of society, including popular media, psychology, legal entities, economics, education, governments, families, architecture, and far beyond.

At the same time these family shifts occurred, young people were mainstreamed into governmental and civil functions throughout society. This included elected officials and government workers confronting policies, procedures, processes and personnel that imposed, supported and sustained adultism throughout the systems of governance. Upending the social order that necessitated gerontocracy, eliminated popular sovereignty and challenged the health of democracy, governments worldwide individually and collectively transformed almost every threat against young people by ensuring their access to public goods and services in every circumstance regardless of their age. This immediately ensured access to healthcare, food security, shelter, clothing, and education for each child and youth as they were so inclined. It realigned each formal system of care to ensure child-led and youth-led processes at every level, from the individual to city, state to national, as well as the transnational and global levels. Programs were designed by young people working equitably with adults in every government-ensured setting, including hospitals, jails, social services, parks and recreation, and more. Never veering from dismantling adultism, new common practices were adopted and adapted in every nation according to their cultural and social priorities. Practices known to undermine the lives of children and youth were canceled. Chattel treatment, sex trafficking, child soldiers, extreme poverty, war, social stratification and more were all confronted directly and dismantled accordingly. In this future without adultism, any activity seriously endangering children and youth, including physical, mental, or emotional health, is immediately stopped. Suffrage for all regardless of age, guaranteed incomes, taxation according to wealth, economic liberation, elimination of political office age restrictions, and other strategies to stop segregation according to age and the adult abuses of young people.

Special attention to addressing adultism was taken throughout education systems at all levels, including primary, secondary and higher education (Fletcher, 2015b). A certain shared understanding swept the world, and suddenly and without a doubt all educators and educational leaders understood that nearly all formal educative processes around the world were based on imposition and made compulsory because of adultism. Focused on force and coercion instead of curiosity,

inquisitiveness and desire, in a future without adultism educators come to understand that their biases constantly and continuously undermine their best intentions. In this future, grade-based classroom curriculum, carrot-and-stick behavior management, age-based segregation in schools, the isolation of learning topics, bias towards teaching styles and against learning differentiation, tiered approaches to advancement, testing and assessments, and many other typical tools used in the past were either completely relegated to the dustbin of history, or reimaged for new applications. In the course of a generation, adultism in education was almost entirely deconstructed and reconstituted to form the basis of a new self-engaged approach to teaching and learning focused on ability rather than age. This way relied on each child coming to understand themselves as their own learning motivator, and educators acting as guides and facilitators rather than as lawyers, judge and jury for every student, all the time. Places once relegated as age-determinant schools became open spaces for exploration, examination and enlightenment designed to meet the unique needs, proclivities and purpose of each learner. They became ageless, sometimes solitary and sometimes in groups, always safe and never demeaning. In most communities, this was a wholly new vision for schools.

Within mere years of beginning this campaign nearly every minor and major child-serving and youth-serving organization around the world signed on. This included the 250 million young members of the "Big 6 Youth Organizations," including the Young Men's Christian Association, YMCA; World Young Women's Christian Association, YWCA; World Organization of the Scout Movement; World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, IFRC; and The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award. It also engaged local organizations serving dozens and hundreds in their communities; individual social entrepreneurs working to engage young people and adults in their homes and neighborhoods; and many others. These entities became lightning rods for addressing adultism in its myriad forms. Along with realigning their own activities to ensure the absence of discrimination against young people, they became deliberate intercessors, mediators and activists demanding massive, wide-scale shifts throughout society. They taught parents, they engaged policymakers, they challenged the unwilling, and they instigated the intransigent. Most importantly though, they taught and actively engaged young people and adults from all stations in life in these new ways, spreading the ideology of anti-adultism while proving the effectiveness of age equity and the impetuous outcomes of past crimes against the young committed simply because of their age.

The mental health implications of this transformation were most pronounced. The overarching adultist order faced the power of righteous indignation against by people of all ages, requiring ways to channel that energy toward healthy expressions. The aggrieved perspectives of the young as well as older people became the basis of many positive, powerful social changes. Counseling and treatment options were infused throughout society and made available to everyone free of

charge. At the same time, pharmaceutical-free practices became the rule of the day for treating the multiple challenges that emerged among those addressing adultism within themselves, that they had perpetuated, and that they were facing daily. Bridging inequities present around the world, mental health care became a prioritized possibility for all people regardless of age, with developmentally appropriate care and education provided to all people.

## Positions of Possibility

In the future in each of these locations, children and youth of all ages have assumed, been granted, and otherwise amassed vast abilities to engage throughout the world. Rather than passively accept whatever adults hand to them, each young person has become actively powerful and moves with intentionality and potentiality throughout their days. Using a constructivist approach, starting from the youngest ages each child discovers, is taught and is reinforced to understand the concept of Self. Their self-image, self-esteem and ideal self are bound together by practices reinforcing interdependence with the larger world. Increasing awareness of this larger world embraces their individual contributions, positioning each child and every youth as an important, contributing and ultimately essential member of society. These positions of possibility represent the grandest potential for each young person, effectively serving to elevate and uplift society.

By dismantling adultism throughout their spheres of influence, each young person effectively gained the capacities to be able to research, plan, facilitate, evaluate, make decisions and advocate for what mattered most to them and their communities. As they became deliberative problem-solvers, essential mediators, critical thinkers and much more, the ripple effects spread beyond their homes, throughout their schools, across their communities and around the world. Most importantly though, the outcomes start within each individual child as they increase their awareness, skills, knowledge and abilities to excite, motivate, engage, participate, involve, and empower others. Starting in batches, their successes in these ways extend to classmates and peers, siblings and cousins and far beyond, permeating the highest reaches of adulthood throughout the nations. Parents and mental health providers, childcare workers and police officers, soldiers and presidents all become committed to the possibilities of living in a world without adultism. Extinguishing the inferno of oppression, they envision the end of intersectional divisions and biases and the elimination of the terroristic exploitation of power, and working together with young people as partners, embrace this future without adultism wholeheartedly. Within a short period, world leaders, megacorporations and even authoritarian dictators dedicated their power and authority to restorative justice, reconciliation and democratic collaboration as well as global community-building, all because of this future.

Within these possibilities it is revealed that adultism is not only unfair to chil-

dren and youth; it is unjust *towards* adults, too. Adults with too much power, authority, control or responsibility can feel guilt or shame, or overburdened by their station in life. While appearing as the tyranny of plenty, adultism manifests itself in the lives of adults. In turn, adults perpetuate adultism when they are motivated by the reward of power and the punishments of its absence. This creates the normative expectation that all adults exercise their authority and control over young people, standardizing the experience of adultism in any environment where people who are not recognized as adults are present. The unrealistic reality implicit within this is that all adults aspire to be dominant, in turn nurturing artificial barriers between the young and those who are older. These barriers encourage internalized adultism, which relies on adultcentrism and primacy while infantilizing young people with explicit and implicit signaling about their apparent inferiority. The psychological effects of adultism encourage a sense of subjugation, necessitating the authority, rules, punishments and judgment of adults to reign supreme over the young. All of this requires consent, or at least dismantles resistance, among adults who have positions of control in society. The burden of adultism is simply too much for many adults, with countless numbers extracting themselves from interactions with young people, further perpetuating age segregation and isolation. In a future without adultism, the cynical and ultimately nihilistic beliefs that drive this concentration on domination will be overcome.

## Conclusion

The future is still wide open. Allowing for the continued reality of adultism facing countless generations remains an option. Intransigence, resignation or otherwise standing idle is a choice, too. The ugly realities faced by children, youth and adults because of the impacts of adultism remain present and amplified by the web of oppression present throughout our society.

Ultimately though, the most powerful step any of us can take individually is to transform the ways we see and treat children and youth every single day. Through mental health counseling and regular care, we can heal the trauma within us that perpetuates our worst adultist tendencies and nurture new neuropathways that relieve the anxiety embedded within much adultism. If every one of us did this, we could change our own attitudes and behaviors and start witnessing young people emerge triumphantly in wholly equitable intergenerational relationships, and adultism could practically end (Lesko and Webb 2023).

New cultural norms can emerge within a generation, and in a lifetime powerful, positive change can happen. More importantly, we can continue to influence, educate, motivate and advocate succeeding generations of children, youth and adults as they change the world we share. As the future here describes, there is no greater action we can take.

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# Exploring Age-Based Oppression: Adultism, Ageism, and Their Potential Interactions

*Katherine D. King*

## Abstract

This manuscript provides a first-person narrative review of the author's research exploring age-based oppression, including the story of how these ideas developed in cultural and historical context. Projects reviewed in this paper began from a wish to better understand potential factors impacting the geropsychology workforce shortage. Over time, research has expanded to encompass other questions related to ageism, adultism, discomfort with death, and media representations of emerging adults and older adults at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. A measure of adultist concerns is also described along with findings from several studies using this scale. Qualitative comments from graduate students in psychology and counseling are reviewed through the lens of adultism, suggesting multiple connections between students' lack of interest in working with older adults, adultist concerns, and attitudes about intergenerational relationships. Lastly, discussion questions and learning activities are suggested to help educators engage the topic of age-based oppression in a variety of settings.

***Keywords:*** adultism, ageism, generational solidarity, age-based oppression

## Introduction

Within the field of psychology, geropsychology is a niche specialty focused on the mental health of older adults. Only about 1-2% of psychologists specialize in this area (Moye et al., 2019), and I am one of them. I am a clinical psychologist

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primarily serving older adults, as well as an associate professor and the geropsychology concentration director within a clinical psychology doctoral program.

This is a story that begins with an extraordinary workforce shortage. There is a striking paucity of geropsychologists available to serve the rapidly growing population of older adults (Hoge et al., 2017). Many in the field of geropsychology are attempting to understand what keeps students away from this specialty, and how to better attract more clinicians to serve this population. Papers on the topic have dramatic, and entirely appropriate, titles invoking a "big shortage" that is a "crisis" requiring "urgent action" (Merz et al., 2017; Jeste et al., 1999; Moye et al., 2019).

In research thus far, I have zeroed in on adultism as a potential contributor to students' lack of interest in serving older adults. In this paper, I will share how I came to this understanding. I will review key findings of past projects and take a fresh look at existing data through the lens of adultism. I will conclude with a discussion, describe directions for future research, and offer suggestions for learning activities to improve understanding of age-based oppression.

## Narrative Review of Research

### *Project 1: Why don't you want to work with older adults?*

The first study I undertook in this area surveyed graduate students in a counseling training program (King, 2018). My primary goal was exploratory, with the hope of simply capturing the kinds of comments I had heard students make about older adults in the classroom and informal discussion. The second goal was to see whether students with or without an interest were significantly different in terms of demographics or other potentially relevant attitudes.

The exploratory portion of this study gifted me with numerous thoughtful qualitative responses to two simple, open-ended questions: "What benefits or sources of satisfaction might a person experience in helping older adults?" and "When you think about providing treatment to older adults, what personal concerns or hesitations come up for you?"

At the time, I did not view the results through the lens of adultism. Yet looking at responses now with this awareness, I can identify several related themes. Below are three prominent themes with new commentary on each. These include:

***Feeling disqualified due to younger age.***

*"I believe that because I am younger, older adults will think that I am unable to help them because I don't have much experience in life."*

*"I look young, so my concern is that older adults will think that I am unable to relate to them so therefore cannot help them."*

*"I have worked with adults and it is hard to convince them that you are qualified when you are so much younger than them."*

*"They may find me too young"*

**Commentary.** Among many potential outcomes, Bell (1995) states that adultism can lead to "undermined self-confidence and self-esteem; an increasing sense of worthlessness; an increasing sense of powerlessness; a consistent experience of not being taken seriously… [and] feeling unloved or unwanted" (p. 2). Student responses here illustrate these themes. Students seem to anticipate that older adults will not want to work with them, and that they will have to convince them of their expertise. Such students likely walk into patient encounters with reduced confidence, and with a sense of powerlessness to change how they are viewed. It is certainly true that some older adults will reject a younger person as a therapist. No prior research has explored how commonly this actually occurs, nor is there any data identifying therapist qualities that older adults may uniquely prefer. Anecdotally, I have found that acceptance by older clients has been much more the norm in my own clinical practice.

***Sense of disconnection with older generation.***

*"I don't know much about the population…"*

*"Unfamiliar age group."*

*"Age gap, generation gap, unable to understand their culture."*

*"Not being able to relate to their problems."*

**Commentary.** Many messages in the mass media emphasize a generational divide, implying that people in different age groups have more differences than similarities. Superficial differences in music and fashion tastes are overemphasized, leading people to assume they "just can't relate" to one another.

Albert Memmi (2000) has written of four parts of racism. First, there is an "insistence on a difference." Second, whatever is seen as different is valued negatively. Third, those qualities are generalized to the entire group, and fourth, such negative value is used to legitimize hostility. Although writing about racism, these components are useful to consider for many oppressed groups. Love and Phillips (2007) apply this theory to both adultism and ageism, and at minimum the first component is illustrated here. Young people in our survey understand older adults to be so different that they feel they cannot understand or relate to them at all, which then for many students leads to a lack of interest in helping them.

***Assumption of older adult competence or wisdom.***

*"Wisdom, as also they are a source of knowledge."*

*"Wisdom/experience from them."*

*"Incredible perspective and wisdom."*

*"Their experience and wisdom; their stories."*

*"Learn from their knowledge and wisdom."*

**Commentary.** Many adults and older adults lay claim to wisdom to justify the power they hold over youth and young adults. Wisdom is generally seen as something that young people do not—and cannot—have, unless they are particularly gifted and labeled "wise beyond their years." This assumption can contribute to feelings of inadequacy in young adults, and foster the feeling of being an "adult-in-the-making" (Fletcher, 2015) well into one's adult years.

The idea of wisdom remains poorly defined, often granted by cultural or religious groups after having achieved certain age or life milestones. Yet research has shown that aging alone does not confer wisdom. For example, Webster et al. (2014) found that wisdom peaked in midlife rather than older adulthood Weststrate and Glück (2017) revealed that how one processes one's life experiences (e.g., with enhanced meaning making) was an important aspect of developing wisdom.

In the second part of this project, I explored whether there were differences between interested versus uninterested students on various potentially relevant attitudes and demographic factors. Indeed, T-tests showed multiple significant differences. For example, students uninterested in helping older adults were more likely to want to avoid sick or dying clients ($p < 0.0001$) and more likely to believe this work would be depressing ($p = 0.001$) or challenging ($p = 0.003$). Germane to the topic of adultism, those who were uninterested were significantly more likely to feel that they did not have enough life experience to treat this population ($p = 0.03$).

With regard to demographic differences, interested students were more racially and ethnically diverse (56% African American, Latinx, Asian or Other, and 44% White/Caucasian students), while uninterested students were primarily White (68% White/Caucasian and 32% African American, Latinx, or Other). Although this result may be due to sampling error and has not yet been studied on a larger scale, it raises the question of whether White individuals receive a different kind of socialization about age and aging than other racial or ethnic groups that potentially impacts their ability to feel confident helping older adults as a young person. Although this question has not been explored systematically, it could be that exposure to white supremacy culture has a particular impact on White youth's attitudes towards older adults. In my experience as an educator, I have noticed that students who are reluctant to engage with older adults seem to also be influenced by components of white supremacy culture such as perfectionism, paternalism, and the fear of open conflict (Okun, 1999). These may impact their comfort working with older individuals they perceive may hold them to a high standard.

It has also been found that there are distinct differences in the cultural embeddedness of older adult caregiving in European Americans compared to Asian American, Hispanic American, and African Americans (Pharr, et al., 2014). The latter groups view caregiving as a normative family activity, whereas European

Americans "lacked a cultural prescription for caregiving" (Pharr et al., 2014, p. 6). It may be that interest in working with older adults extends from these cultural differences, and people from cultures where caregiving is more normative may have greater interest.

### *Project 2: Exploring Adultism, Ageism, and Geropsychology Interest*

Between the previous study and the next project, I encountered the idea of adultism and immediately saw its application to the research I was doing. In reviewing literature, I discovered there was a paucity of research exploring adultism. I learned that many scholars have used the term ageism to capture all forms of age-based oppression. I was skeptical about the utility of this, generally valuing precision of terminology in scientific inquiry. Distinct terminology contributes to the visibility of each form of oppression (Fletcher, 2015). Using the same word ("ageism") to describe all age-based oppression obscures the unique experiences of oppression experienced by different age groups. Since ageism has long been applied to describe oppression of older adults for an extended period, separate terms such as adultism or childism seem more useful to capture the phenomenologically different experience of childhood age-based oppression. Similarly, youngism has been suggested as a term used to describe the experience of young adults in the workplace (Francioli & North, 2021).

While there was little research on the topic of adultism, there was even less that examined the intersections between different forms of age-based oppression. I sensed there was a relationship to be discovered here but was not quite sure what it was. I remembered the voices of peers, and now students. Their concerns about how older adults would treat them did not seem like ageism, but more like fear. In reflecting on the source of this fear, it seemed likely to me that they had been on the receiving end of adultist oppression by adults or older adults and that this was informing their fears now. While it's certainly possible that their concerns were also related to a simple lack of confidence due to the early stage of their training, it seemed to disproportionately impact how they felt about working with older people. This made me suspicious it went beyond normal early career insecurity, and informed plans for the next phase of research.

The next project was a survey of graduate students in the clinical training program where I had recently been hired. I wanted to understand the students' interest in, experience with, and exposure to older adults, and I began to work with a co-investigator with similar interests. Inspired by the idea of adultism, we developed an Adultist Concerns Scale for this project. This scale was based on our shared professional experiences and comments from the previous study described above. It was specifically designed to evaluate the degree to which students expressed concerns about adultist attitudes that prospective older adult clients might hold. The scale has five items, each rated on a seven-point Likert scale

from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). The items are: an older adult client would think I am not competent because of my age; an older adult client would think that I can't understand them because of my age; an older adult client would think that I haven't had enough life experience because of my age; an older adult client would think that I can't help them because of my age; an older adult client would not want to work with me because of my age.

In this study, 109 psychology doctoral students completed the Adultist Concerns Scale. They were 82% female, 18% male, and predominantly White. The scale performed well, with strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .952$) and factor loadings between .853 and .929 (Graham & King, 2022). Scores ranged from 9 to 35, with an overall mean of 22 ($SD = 6.79$). Adultist Concerns were significantly negatively correlated with age ($p = .000$), meaning that younger participants tended to score higher on these concerns. Females had a significantly higher mean score ($M = 23.18$, $SD = 6.46$) when compared to males ($M = 17.75$, $SD = 6.54$; $p = .003$). Although needing further exploration and replication, it may be that growing up experiencing both sexism and adultism together later increases a person's concerns about how older adults will view their competence.

With the Adultist Concerns Scale as part of our survey, we were able to explore multiple hypotheses related to adultism. One project expanded on the existing Working with Older Adults Scale (WOAS; Graham & Rosén, 2020) by exploring new variables as potential distal antecedents impacting people's plans to work with older adults. We found that adultist concerns influenced subjective norms (e.g., perceived social approval of doing this work), which was one of multiple variables predicting the intention to serve this group (Graham & King, 2022). To our knowledge, this is the first paper in the field of gerontology to expressly identify adultism as a factor influencing student interest in working with older adults and potentially contributing to the larger workforce shortage across geriatric health care specialties.

This study also gathered more qualitative data, asking students what they wanted to learn about helping older adults. This data was later published as part of a program evaluation manuscript (King et al., 2023). Although qualitative analysis did not focus on applying the lens of adultism, reviewing responses now I can identify multiple responses capturing this theme. For example, students reported wanting to learn:

> *"How to handle when they talk about your lack of experience."*
>
> *"How to relate to them."*
>
> *"I would love to know the best way to approach helping them to understand that despite being much younger, you can help them and make a difference in their life."*
>
> *"How to navigate conversations related to my lack of life experience."*

Similar to prior qualitative comments, these responses again demonstrate stu-

dents' sense of disconnection from older adults. They anticipate that they will have to convince older clients of their skills, and fear that they will be unwanted or deemed incompetent largely due to their age.

### *Exploring Adultist Concerns, Ageism, and Death*

We went on to explore connections between adultism, ageism, and discomfort with death (Church, et al., 2020). Ageism and death anxiety have been explored in past research, with one such study revealing a positive association between ageism and fear of the dying process (Galton, et al., 2022). Other studies have found links between ageism, aging anxiety, and/or death anxiety (Rababa, et al., 2023; Kolushev et al., 2021). For our study, we wanted to understand whether discomfort with death (e.g., "I experience fear, dread, or other uncomfortable emotions when I think much about death") had any relationship with adultist concerns or ageism, which we measured using the Relating to Older Persons scale (Cherry & Palmore, 2008). Our hypothesis started with the assumption that death and dying tend to be taboo subjects that frequently brings up themes of dependency, loss of autonomy, and fear of pain or isolation. For this reason, individuals' age-related attitudes or concerns might be inextricably linked with how they relate to death and dying more broadly. Indeed, although we did not find a relationship between discomfort with death and ageism in our study, we did discover a significant positive correlation ($p = .000$) between discomfort with death and adultist concerns (Church, et al., 2020).

Another study we conducted at this time directly explored relationships between adultism and ageism (King, et al., 2020). We found statistically significant positive correlations between adultist concerns and overall ageist behaviors ($p = .002$), as well as negative ageist behaviors in particular ($p = .002$). Although we were not able to establish what drives this correlation, one hypothesis may be that past experiences with adultist oppression makes one more likely to anticipate future oppression by older adults as well as more likely to develop ageist attitudes against older adults. Future research is needed to more fully explore these relationships.

### *Project 3: Media Portrayals of Emerging and Older Adults*

The story took an unexpected but enriching turn during the COVID-19 pandemic. I saw stark evidence of both ageism and adultism in public discourse at this time. At the beginning of the pandemic "the discursive stage was dominated by the 'vulnerable old' in need for help by the 'normal' population" (Ellerich-Groppe, et al., 2021, p. 168). I also became familiar with the idea of intergenerational solidarity at first time. For example, Ayalon et al. (2021) published an impactful editorial in an important gerontology journal pointing out ageism and the need for generational solidarity. They wrote "with the pandemic there

has been a parallel outbreak of ageism. What we are seeing in public discourse is an increasing portrayal of those over the age of 70 as being all alike with regard to being helpless, frail, and unable to contribute to society" (Ayalon et al., 2021, p. e49). They emphasized the need to foster intergenerational solidarity, called for an end to divisive public policies (e.g., arbitrary age cutoffs to access certain COVID-19 treatments), and articulated the importance of creating opportunities to foster personal connections across age groups to help move beyond intergenerational strife.

We conducted a survey of undergraduate students soon after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other things, we asked them about their perceptions of media portrayals of emerging adults and older adults at that historical moment (Pestritto, et al., 2021). Participants were 97 undergraduate students (51.5% female, 46.5% male), and their responses demonstrated a keen awareness of largely negative media portrayals of both groups. Many observed that emerging adults were portrayed as not taking COVID-19 seriously, being reckless or irresponsible, uncaring, careless, or selfish. For example, they wrote:

> *"They are portrayed as reckless and careless…"*

> *"Many young adults are portrayed as not caring…I've seen lots of people getting upset about it and things on media about kids throwing parties on beaches…and making it seem like all young adults are doing this and don't care."*

> *"Either young adults are giving no care to the virus and going out and partying, or we're 'destroying the economy and country' by staying socially isolated… We're also being painted as callous and uncaring people who give no care to 'expendable deaths' and are mocking those at risk…"*

Participants also observed changes in how older adults were portrayed, primarily reporting awareness that older adults are viewed as needing protection or care, being vulnerable, and being potential pandemic victims.

> *"I've noticed that the media has fixed in everyone's minds that they [older adults]…are weak and vulnerable…"*

> *"It shows that they're more at risk, but I think has shown them in a positive light because I feel like a lot of these changes are to protect them."*

There was notable mirroring in the language used to describe portrayals of older adults and emerging adults. Young people were portrayed as careless; older adults were portrayed as in need of care. Young adults were reckless and doing risky things; older adults were at risk and vulnerable. Young adults were selfish; older adults needed us to act selflessly to protect them.

Just as Ayalon et al. (2021) noted, the public discourse at the time was clearly both reflecting and contributing further to age-based oppression. Although some of this messaging seems to have subsided since the global pandemic was initially

declared, what was revealed at that time were attitudes that likely form an undercurrent of age-based oppression long present beneath the surface.

## Takeaways and Future Directions

I never thought my interest in the geropsychology workforce shortage would inspire me to begin studying childhood experiences—yet this seems to be a feature of sincere scientific inquiry. Finding a compelling question and following all leads takes you to unexpected places. Our research so far raises critical questions about early experiences of adultism and later attitudes, experiences, and career choices related to older adults.

Increasingly, I have come to understand ageism and adultism as having a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing quality. When children learn that age is a viable reason to oppress somebody, many will internalize this and potentially perpetrate age-based oppression against others. Perhaps this starts with maligning younger siblings or peers, expands to distrust or hatred of "grown-ups" like parents and teachers, and grows further into ageism against older adults as well.

When adults engage in adultist oppression of children, it can't help but foster generational divisions. These youth are likely to grow up feeling badly about how they were treated, feeling badly towards adults who treated them poorly, and—perhaps most tragically—badly about themselves. Internalizing these experiences, many may go on to develop gerontophobia, ageist attitudes, or other insecurities that lead them to limit their lives by avoiding anyone they perceive as older.

Over time, people may come to internalize and expect hierarchical, oppressive relationships based on age or related constructs such as generational position in families and society. If such people later have children, grandchildren, students, mentees, or other younger people in their lives, they may find themselves perpetrating the same adultist oppression to this younger cohort. Generational discord likely also breeds dehumanization across age groups, and increases the risk of cross-generational violence within and outside families. When other forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, white supremacy culture, domestic violence) intersect with this age-based oppression, outcomes can be expected to be even more negative for all involved.

There are no winners here, individually or societally. Lack of generational solidarity has social and political implications, as it decreases the likelihood of effective coalitions across age groups on matters of shared concern. For example, Roy and Ayalon (2022) recently published a paper exploring intergenerational tension within the climate movement. They describe youth activists blaming older generations for the current crisis, while youth may be accused of being too idealistic or naïve in their efforts. They also share heartening examples of intergenerational solidarity and call for an effective movement resting on values of "compassion, empathy, understanding, consideration, cooperation, respect, trust,

and hope" (Roy & Ayalon, 2022, p. 11). On a more intimate level, the mental health benefits of intergenerational relationships are well-established for older adults (Earl & Marais, 2023; Davey & Eggebeen, 1998). Comparably less has been done looking at similar benefits for youth, though some research has demonstrated benefits to close grandparental relationships (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007).

The full personal and societal consequences of adultism remain poorly understood. Facing anti-youth attitudes, young people may internalize adultist beliefs and come to devalue their own contributions, competence, and worth to society. It may also lead to later mental health problems, impostor syndrome, low self-esteem, and a more limited sphere of potential career choices.

The story of intergenerational relationships and age-based oppression is still unfolding, with plenty of work that remains to be done. Thus far, our own research has been limited in scope and thus in its generalizability. Future development of sound measurement tools to capture different dimensions of adultism is essential to engaging in further systematic research in this area. From there, links between adultism and ageism, potential adult consequences of childhood oppression, and other outcomes can be more fully explored. We also need to better understand how age-based oppression intersects with other forms of oppression, and establish how such experiences play out across generations in a potentially mutually reinforcing cycle.

## Learning Opportunities

How do we help people better understand adultism and ageism, and how they potentially relate to one another? There has been a vanishingly small amount of work exploring age-based oppression as a singular entity potentially impacting people of all ages. One recent publication provided learning activities to help people understand how both adultism and ageism are forms of oppression (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2021). Using the Five Faces of Oppression as a teaching tool (Young, 1990), they suggest students generate both adultist and ageist examples of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. They provide multiple useful examples from their own teaching. For example, an adultist example of exploitation is forcing older children to babysit younger siblings without pay, while an ageist example could be grandparents babysitting without compensation. For violence, an adultist example could be physical punishment of children, while an ageist example could be elder abuse by caregivers.

Love and Phillips (2007) created a comprehensive lesson plan extending over four modules of at least three hours each. Themes include understanding ageism and adultism; institutional ageism and adultism; cultural ageism and adultism; and, transformation and change. These lessons also integrate Young's five faces of oppression (1990), as well as Memmi's four dimensions (2000). The lessons include short descriptions of new concepts, prompts for personal reflection and

discussion, videos to stimulate discussion, and instructions for group leaders to support effective facilitation.

### *Suggested Activities*

This section grows out of my experience as a geropsychologist and psychology professor, as well as my readings and research so far on the topic, to offer potential starting points for personal reflection and discussion on the topic of age-based oppressions.

***Questions for Everyone:***

How can I challenge generational divisiveness (such as "us-versus-them" comments) when it shows up in close relationships, professional settings, and society more broadly?

How do I not idealize or devalue any group based solely on their (or my) age?

How do I help people of all ages foster a belief in their own value and worth?

How can I show up in my world in a way that does not perpetuate any form of age-based oppression?

In what ways does age-based oppression intersect with other forms of privilege or marginalization that I experience?

***Questions for Adults and Older Adults:***

As I get older, how do I share my growing expertise and experience without developing a sense of entitlement to power or wisdom based solely on my age?

How do I encourage youth, students, junior colleagues, and others younger than me, to own their voice(s) and share their perspective, regardless of fears about their age?

How do I help younger people to stop being afraid of the "grown-ups" by being an adult ally in my varied social locations?

How do I challenge myself to continue to see the value that youth bring to the world and my life? This may be each new generation in your family, or each new cohort of students or younger employees.

***Questions for Youth and Young Adults:***

What fears or concerns come up when I imagine relating to older adults? What life experience(s), media representations, or other factors influence these concerns?

How can I affirm the value that I have to offer the world as a young person so that I can overcome internalized adultism?

Have I ever had a relationship with somebody older where I felt like a peer or equal? What did it feel like, or what do I imagine it might feel like?

How do I challenge myself to continue to see the value that older adults bring to the world and my life? (If family relationships are challenging, consider older adults in your community or society more broadly.)

### *Activities For Everyone*

**Age-Based Deservingness.** Age is often used as an excuse to grant certain rights as well as to withhold or take them away. Consider the following questions, then explore where these attitudes come from and whether you might like to change any of your existing views.

Do I engage in any age-based entitlement, believing people have more value, more rights, etc., solely due to age? For example, you might believe that older adults are entitled to respect simply because of their age, with no regard to how that person behaves or treats others.

Do I engage in any age-based devaluation, believing people have lesser value, fewer rights, etc., solely due to age? For example, you might believe that children can have their bodily autonomy violated through physical discipline, or that children shouldn't have the right to express opinions about family matters.

**Sentence Completion Activity.** See how many different ways you can complete these sentences. See what is revealed about implicit biases you may carry, messages you might have received from society, and attitudes or assumptions you'd like to unlearn.

Young people are…

Old people are…

**Policing Age-Appropriateness.** When are you "too old…" for something? When are you "too young…" for something? Consider these questions as they relate to your context. Some general examples might be related to the age-appropriateness of certain styles of dress, certain rigorous activities (e.g., marathons, bungee jumping, enjoyment of sex, travel, getting married, having children, being a rock star, learning a new skill, starting a new career). Who decides what is "appropriate" for each age group?

**Opportunities to Experience Equality.** Consider ways you can develop meaningful relationships across age differences that emphasize equality and mutual respect. Many institutions create "service learning" programs that may be ageist against older adults (assuming older adults are needy and dependent). Alternatively, programs may be set up for older adults to provide "mentorship" or "life lessons" in ways that might be adultist in their presumption that wisdom or expertise only flow from older to younger persons. There is certainly a place for

service learning and mentorship, but consider the radical potential of programs simply encouraging meaningful friendships and work relationships.

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# Working With Young People as Adult Allies

***Paul Kivel***

## Abstract

In this piece, Kivel provides a necessary introduction to the concept of adultism and proposes practical steps for adults, including educators, youth workers and others, to take action to address adultism by becoming allies.

## Introduction

As adults (and youth) who work with and support young people, we can use some help and direction in how to do this work well. We are part of a group that, both in fact and in young people's perception, sometimes has discriminated against and abused power over youth. It may also be hard for us to think clearly about young people, because we were once young and perhaps retain our own unresolved conflicts from those earlier years. After all, adults sometimes exercised power abusively over us when we were young.

Abuse and violence have intimately touched all young people. If we define abuse as restricting, putting down, controlling, humiliating, or hurting another, it is clear that abuse is a daily experience for most young people. We have a word for this system of abuse: adultism.

Obvious examples of adultism are all around us: physical and sexual abuse, extreme forms of "discipline," fights, the corporal "toughening up" process for boys, and the instillation of fear in girls. The still-pervasive teaching of male and female roles—that women are dependent victims, men are abusive and people

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who are queer or trans are unnatural—is a disaster for young people. But beyond this, emotional, verbal, financial, sexual, social, and political forms of abuse exist. Perhaps the most pervasive form of this abuse is our educational process itself, carried on in schools, families, religious and cultural institutions, and the public media. This process, despite the best intentions of some teachers and administrators, continually invalidates or trivializes young people's intelligence, denies them access to important information (for example, about birth control), and then faults them for not having it. The process arbitrarily subjects them to either control or dependence and denies them life resources—safety, money, transportation, and the chance to speak for and represent themselves. Perhaps most crucially, it continually passes on adults' resignation to the fact that what people can do and what the world will allow have limits—in other words, we teach them our own hopelessness.

In young people we find powerful resistance to such teachings and, at the same time, internalization of them. Youth fight the roles and inhabit them, and in that confusion they abuse one another and themselves.

How can we be allies of young people in these circumstances? The first step is to affirm that we are indeed allies. We care, and we are in a great position to support youth. We all have memories of an adult or two who was there for us, and we all have some immediate information about what we can do for youth in our lives. But more basically, many young people have become accustomed to mistreatment by adults. We can contradict that learning by becoming an adult who cares and is willing to do something to express that care. We can do a lot more.

The following suggestions are meant for those of us who work with youth in youth-centered settings. In general, this work occurs within adult-constructed institutions, such as schools, detention centers, residential programs, and recreational and cultural programs, that contribute to the power inequality between adults and youth and that represent that inequality to many young people. Awareness of the power dynamics in these settings as well as the barriers already set in place by the adult abuse of youth outside these institutions is a prerequisite to being an effective ally. This also means being aware of the existence of other power differences (such as racial and class inequities) that may separate us from the young people we work with. However, "being aware" does not mean "being paralyzed by" or "being helpless about"! It means considering where our own confusion about these differences lies, recognizing where confusion and misinformation may exist for young people, and being prepared to talk honestly about these issues.

As adults, the best thing we can do with youth, right from the start, is to contradict directly, in our actions, the traditional adult behaviors youth often encounter.

For example, where youth are traditionally denied information, we provide it, answering all questions and not faulting the asker for lacking the facts. No question is trivial. Similarly, young people and children hear in hundreds of ways that they are stupid or not smart enough. In contrast, we start with the assumption that they are smart and are doing everything they can to live creative and non-abusive

lives. We assume that the only deterrents to their success are institutional barriers and the abuses that have happened to them.

Youth often have incorrect information or misinformation about, for example, the ways boys and girls should act, or behave, or about each gender's "natural" or biological qualities. This confusion exists in addition to the misinformation that adults have passed on to them about race, class, gender identity and sexual identity. We do not necessarily blame young people for believing these things, because it makes sense for them to believe stereotypes about African Americans, Jews, or people with disabilities when an entire culture teaches and reinforces these images. We can only explore such seemingly inherent beliefs by allowing them to surface, keeping the discussion open, and letting young people work out the issues with each other.

This work is in part about making information—and thereby power—accessible. It is also about acknowledging feelings stemming from the abuse people have already experienced. To carry on our work we must make what we say simple and direct, structured around a few basic goals. We must be clear and use real-life language. In particular, we can avoid the jargon we have all learned to use that distances us from what we are trying to convey. Such words as "perpetrator," "instigate," "continuum," and even "violence" can be walls to real experience. Even the words adults use to categorize young people—"youth," "teen," and "adolescent," —can serve to pigeonhole young people, holding them at a distance. This work is also about how we as adults can learn from young people. In thinking about the traditional roles of young people, we begin to think about the traditional roles of adults.

Roles emerge that we are supposed to have mastered—knowing how much work is appropriate; making our way in a world alive with violence and unequal power distribution; feeling we have to know everything; and assuming responsibility for the support, maintenance, safety, and physical and mental health, twenty-four hours a day, of young people as well as ourselves. We notice how we have all learned what consequences can follow from making mistakes. We think about the lies we have ingested from counselors, educators, and child-care experts that result in the feelings all adults experience: "I've been trying so hard and this isn't easy, so I must not be good enough." By sharing power with young people, we can let down the adult "guard" we've learned and experience a refreshing relief from these oppressive roles. By trusting the expertise of young people, by finding out what they think and what their lives are like, we lighten this load of adult responsibility. Giving up the role of omniscient teacher with all the answers gives us a chance to learn ourselves.

Adults in cultures across the world often have turned to young people for inspiration. The younger generations' hope that the world can be different, their outright insistence on justice and fair treatment (sometimes mislabeled "rebelliousness"), their insight, and their irreverence are essential to our own freedom. Acknowledging this fact to ourselves is a crucial step forward in our work with young people.

Adults do not routinely show respect to youth or treat them as having equal rights. Here again we can turn the situation around by being personal and direct, speaking informally for ourselves and from our own experiences with honesty, respect, and humor.

Beyond adultism's stipulated roles, young people carry misinformation about themselves that is always appropriate for us to correct. A boy who has learned that men are, on a basic level, monsters needs interaction with adults who clearly believe that men have learned violence but are not naturally abusive. This boy will also benefit from being exposed to adults who support the many ways men resist abuse—crying when they are hurt, walking away from fights, seeking nontraditional careers, and fighting for the rights of women, people who are LGBTQ+, and children. A girl who has learned that women survive based upon how they look and how they relate to men needs an adult ally who supports her efforts to move beyond these limiting social expectations.

Another part of the disaster of adultism is the teaching of other oppressions to young people, especially those of race, class, and gender and sexual identity. Here, too, our supportive corrections are crucial (and, of course, not easy to make). A racist or homophobic remark or abusive act that goes unchallenged hurts everyone, including the perpetrator. It lowers the youthful community's hopes that these oppressions can be overcome and eliminated from the world. It passes on, directly, the abuse that keeps youth separated from each other in the first place.

Young people do form a community; they have learned together, and they have collectively experienced control by adults. Calling upon them to resist abuse as a community is a genuine act of alliance. It means supporting them by recognizing their collective strengths and the ways they have resisted abuse. Further, it means expecting them to be powerful and to handle their problems by reaching out to each other, with our help and confidence backing them up.

Finally, we do this work for ourselves and to keep alive our own hopes for a non-abusive world. We do this work not "for" young people but "with" them, knowing that we are engaged in our collective liberation.

We should not hunt for or expect gratitude from young people. We can just enjoy being with them, teaching and learning together. We can get support for our work by finding other adults to talk with, especially when hopelessness, exhaustion, or our own unresolved teen issues creep back into our lives. We must support each other, make loads of mistakes, fix them, and continue with our work.

## Facilitating Social Justice with Young People

One of the tasks of the educational system is to prepare young people to live and prosper in the world. In a school system, this task is undertaken in large part by daily instruction of groups of students roughly the same age. One thing common to all students, regardless of likenesses or differences, is their participation in

this learning community. How this community is structured and facilitated, how students are positioned to relate to each other, what and how they are taught — these are all lessons, whether explicit or hidden, about how they are to live with and act toward each other and others in the world. How people live together, after all, reflects how they define and practice justice and is itself a part of what constitutes justice.

The topic of social justice draws attention to students' relationships to each other as well as to the larger world. What are these relationships? How do people "get along" with each other? Does differential treatment exist? Is inequality of resources, opportunity, or access a concern? What differences are represented in, or made invisible in, the classroom? How do students' experiences of the larger world enter the classroom with them and manifest in who speaks most and who is silent? What does the institutional setup do to lessen or heighten these differences?

However "social justice" is to be defined, the term applies to the classroom itself: Young people learn together the factors that separate and unite them as well as how their learning community operates. To teach social justice is to support them in functioning as a cooperative community, becoming visible to and learning from each other and themselves, examining their differences and commonalities. It is a process by which students come to consciousness about who they are, about the unjust institutions of power that they live within, and about how people can come together to build community and to establish justice. In other words, teaching social justice goes beyond the individual or group; students are taught to become conscious of the institutions in our society and how these institutions affect our lives. The purpose of the process is emancipatory, enhancing young people's ability to think critically and to engage in the profoundly multicultural challenges of the twenty-first century with a commitment to social justice.

Some kinds of multicultural education propose that the goal of this education is simply to develop awareness of each other's "cultures," as if in accomplishing this task we would then all have equal places in the playing field and would in fact be "equal." Awareness here is not enough; stating that we are "all the same" would not only be false but disingenuous. Even if the same resources within a classroom could be provided equally to all students, students come to a classroom already separated in their abilities to use those resources. What may ultimately be hardest to face in any classroom is the recognition of stratification—the fact that some students are part of groups that are elevated and others are part of groups that are diminished. In addition, when young people in the United States are compared to young people across the globe, young people in the United States are elevated in privilege and resources far above the majority of youth worldwide. There should be not simply equal access but equal success under a suppler and wider definition of what counts as success. The goal of social justice education is to facilitate students to face and work together across their separations and to engage in critical thinking about the history of those separations in order to become effective allies for justice.

How does facilitation work? Obviously it involves the students, the facilitator, and the process itself.

## In the Classroom

The first thing to notice is that students come to the discussion of "social justice" with misinformation or outright falsehoods, experiences of mistreatment or outright hurt, and some expertise in each of the areas you address. The process of taking on the "isms" invariably, at one point or another, touches upon difficult occurrences from students' lives outside the classroom as well as current separations, visible and not, among youth right in the room. And it also calls upon students' equally powerful experiences of taking stands against unequal treatment and having others take stands with them.

Moreover, the classroom—and the educational system it represents—is one of the basic institutions of society. Expect to see the disparities of our larger society mirrored in the differential treatment students witness and receive. The disparities and differential treatment are alive in the ways students treat each other, see each other, and see and treat you. They are further mirrored by the relationship of your institution to other institutions serving other youth populations.

At the very least, every student in the educational system at one time or another has had their intelligence questioned or invalidated by an adult, even in the seemingly objective process of grading. Doubts about one's own thinking count as some of the most profound barriers young people (and we as former young people) have to deal with and are a basic pillar of adultism, the mistreatment of young people. Often the doubts are instilled or enhanced right in the classroom. At the same time, the educational system can be and historically has been an arena of emancipation in which students can learn, together and across differences, to recognize inequality and to organize against it—actual democracy in action. To this emancipation, you can add the great strengths and ingenuity students have adopted to survive mistreatment, their curiosity about and interest in each other, and the ideals of fair play and equity in young people's cultures.

## Your Place as Facilitator

To prepare for facilitation first requires taking some time to think through your own experiences of injustice and how they will affect the discussions about to come up in your classroom. Then, turning to your role as an adult, ask yourself: What does an adult, acting as an ally, do to support young people? Discussions about hurt, separation, conflict, and privilege—and resilience, resistance, and alliance—among young people can become very personal; it is essential for you to examine ahead of time how particular issues might affect you or even get in your way.

As a successful adult survivor of childhood conditioning, you are modeling how adults successfully take on and address the "isms." The assumptions we make

about young people apply to you as well. Like them, you came into the world curious, intelligent, and vulnerable. Like them, you have negotiated your way through mistreatment, misinformation or no information, resistance, and alliance. And now you are an adult, with a specific relationship to young people as an adult ally.

## A Model of Power

Notice that many or most "scars" mentioned in this exercise come to us systematically, based upon our membership within various groups—the categories of race, gender, sexual identity, economic status, and the rest under which we live. That is to say, we inhabit a social structure in which people become categorized and separated into groups that are allowed either more or fewer social resources, such as wealth, housing, sustenance, education, civil rights, leisure, or political representation. The allotment of social resources is based upon existing inequalities—differences in power. Some groups are targeted for institutionalized degradation, exploitation, and violence: They are targets of oppression. What happens to people who are targeted?

- They experience oppression—exploitation and violence in routine, day-to-day, institutionalized, and systematic ways. One form of oppression is the continual dissemination of misinformation or outright lies about the targeted people's character, making them and their concerns invisible or discredited in larger society.

- One harsh effect of oppression is internalized oppression —the targeted people come to believe in the lies or misinformation about themselves or other members of their group.

- The contradiction to oppression and internalized oppression lies in the fact that people in target groups have always put up resistance—fighting back against both.

The corresponding groups on the other side of each issue are not targeted; they are nontarget groups. What happens to people who are nontargets?

- Nontarget people receive the same misinformation or lies about target groups that members of target groups receive about themselves. Often this misinformation comes from people the nontarget child or young person trusts — parents, siblings, friends at school, and teachers —in a process called conditioning. Sometimes conditioning also includes misinformation or hurtful expectations about the experience of being a nontarget (for example, training a boy to "act like a man" even though that training includes shutting down feelings and enduring physical mistreatment). Experiencing conditioning is not the same as experiencing oppression, but it is also hurtful and scarring.

- The understanding that nontarget people receive unearned benefits in society simply by being members of that group is difficult for them to face. For people with wealth and power particularly, these benefits amount to privilege. What can make this condition especially hard to recognize is that benefits may be invisible to or taken for granted by the people who have them, even if they are not invisible

to the targeted people who lack them. What can make this recognition even more difficult is that the concept of privileges, perhaps from race or gender, doesn't resonate with a lot of people who lack privilege elsewhere in their lives, such as those who are poor or working-class.

◆ Finally, it is also true that some people in nontarget groups have found ways, however local and limited, to act as allies to people in target groups, assisting them in intervening against oppression and internalized oppression —for example, by using their privilege or benefits on behalf of target groups or to make room for leadership from members of target groups.

Take a few moments to think about groups to which you belong or with whom you are identified. You will probably notice that you have experiences in both targeted and nontargeted groups. To effectively work with young people—to be an ally to them—we must do our own personal work to address the ways we have internalized and/or acted out roles based on our identities and social positioning. This work opens the door be our becoming powerful and useful allies to the young people around us.

## Your Role as an Ally: Your Freedom Is My Freedom

We employ the word ally, for the most part, to represent the person from a nontarget, "upside" group who takes a stand against the mistreatment of the target group. More generally, it can mean people in target groups who stand up for each other within the group or stand up for members of other target groups. This kind of alliance is called solidarity, and it has a powerful, longstanding, and inspiring history from political movements across the world. An ally challenges the operation of a system of oppression by interrupting mistreatment or internalized mistreatment—not by rescuing, taking care of, or taking over from, but by standing shoulder to shoulder with. You can probably picture people who acted as your allies when you were young, and you may have your own experiences of acting as an ally to targeted people. As an adult, you are now capable of being an ally to young people.

In the work of building justice, you are inviting young people to acknowledge and to make a commitment to each other across lines that separate them. In particular, you are asking for their commitment to be allies—to see violence or discrimination against target groups that are not their own as injuries to themselves. In seeing someone else's freedom as their own, they can pledge to join together as allies against the mistreatment. What does this commitment mean for you?

Consider your role as an ally to young people (or as an ally to people in other targeted groups):

**What does an ally do?**

1. Take action. Before everything else, the mark of an ally is taking action, however small or large, against inequality or mistreatment.

2. Listen/learn. A gift of alliance is finding out, from the target-group experience, how someone whose life is different from yours perceives and experiences the world, providing information that has been withheld from you by the conditioning you received. A first act of alliance is to make space for young people, with unconditioned support from you, to define the issues with which they grapple and the structure of the "ism" from their own experience. A companion act of alliance is to research and to discover in detail how the relevant "ism" works by uncovering statistics, facts, and history you can pass on to others.

3. Use your privilege. As an ally, identify the resources you have and use your resources on behalf of the target group, gaining them access and opportunity.

4. Support young people's leadership. True alliance means getting out of the way of target-group members, supporting them in taking charge of their lives and making their own decisions about what must be done. To rescue or to take over removes their power once again. Conversely, to step out of the way without offering support, resources, or tactful guidance if requested is to abandon the group.

5. Challenge and mobilize other adults. Target-group members, engaged in their own work, need you to intervene with and to educate other members of your group. Moreover, your intervention must come from the standpoint of support, not differentiating yourself as better than them. To the extent you reject or push them away, you are pushing away part of yourself.

6. Take a chance, and make mistakes. Expect to make mistakes and commit to fixing them when you do. Alliance work is built upon trying things, making mistakes, and moving forward.

7. Take care of yourself. Alliance is a lifelong activity. It can't be sustained unless you are rested, replenished, and hopeful. So in light of that:

8. Get support. Rally friends, family, colleagues, people you can trust, and like-minded members of the groups to which you belong. Talk with them about the challenges you experience, the areas where you get stuck, and your success stories. Discuss strategies for social justice education and how to establish ongoing networks of support. Alliance works best when you are not alone but rather are a member of a community of people dedicated to being allies.

Today, across the country, young people and their allies are fighting to reverse decades of slashed education budgets; resisting attacks on people who are trans; fighting for reproductive justice; spearheading movements for immigration reform; protesting the ongoing U.S. wars on terror; working for racial justice; and joining worldwide networks of people their age to confront global warming. Every one of these efforts is an emphatic refusal to accept hopelessness in the face

of seemingly intractable social ills, institutional oppression and adult irresponsibility. In every effort young people are making commitments to have each other's back. They are not waiting for us/adults to get involved.

At the same time, many other young people, beset by violence and attendant hopelessness, have also not waited on us, turning to gangs, interpersonal violence, criminal activity, substance abuse, or suicide to deal with their pain and anger.

Young people need us with them, adding our resistance and alliance to theirs as the principal tools of collective liberation. The best strategy is solidarity, combining the powers of genuine resistance and genuine alliance. Solidarity among young people and with adult allies. For us to hold up solidarity as a real possibility for young people is only to catch up with what many of them already believe in, hope for, and practice as best they can. To hold it up powerfully is to squarely face the war, exploitation, and violence that threaten it across the world. The dignity, love, and sense of power with purpose that come with solidarity, with having each other's back, is also, of course, solidarity's great joy and our only way towards an inhabitable world where all of us can thrive.

## Note

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# Intersectional Tensions in Theorizing Adultism

*Manfred Liebel & Philip Meade*

## Abstract

Adultism is a manifestation and a result of unequal power relations between older and younger people and in turn contributes to reproducing inequality between them. In this paper, we argue that adultism is more than the relationship between age groups and can only be adequately understood through a comprehensive historical materialist theory of social power relations. Only such a theory allows us to discover the material and ideological reasons that produce an unequal generational order and make it a problem. To do this, we draw in particular on contributions from intersectionality research and social reproduction theory leaning on thoughts of Karl Marx. Based on our understanding of these theoretical research perspectives, we examine the preconditions for the emergence of adultism in contemporary capitalist societies based on domination and oppression, ask about the tendencies inherent in these societies that make adultism questionable, and conclude by outlining possible paths towards countering adultism in society.

## Introduction

The term adultism was coined in order to have an appropriate word for the oppression, disadvantage and discrimination of children and youth by adults and to be able to better criticize and combat this phenomenon. It is most often under-

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stood as the abuse of older people's power over younger people (Flasher, 1978; LeFrançois, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Bell, 2018), raising the question of whether it is not the abuse but the (unequal) power itself that is the problem (Alderson, 2020; Liebel & Meade, 2023). In this paper, we want to advance the thesis why adultism can only be adequately understood within the framework of a historical materialist theory of societal power relations. This requires looking at more than just the relationship between age groups, but also exploring the material and ideological reasons that produce this generational order and make it a problem. To do this, we draw in particular on contributions from intersectionality research (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; Collins, [1990]2022; Davis, 2008; Bohrer, 2019) and social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2022) leaning on thoughts of philosopher, economist and political theorist Karl Marx.

Based on our understanding of these theoretical research perspectives, we examine the preconditions for the emergence of adultism in contemporary capitalist societies based on domination and oppression, ask about the tendencies inherent in these societies that make adultism questionable, and conclude by outlining possible paths towards countering adultism in society. First, we begin with a historical classification of the concept of adultism.

## The Historical Context

The concept of adultism is of recent origin and is closely related to today's capitalist societies.[1] We see the most important reason in the fact that it is only in these societies that a strict social and legal distinction is made between 'adults' and 'minors' and that specific phases of childhood and youth have developed. Although caution should be exercised in applying concepts that have emerged in a particular historical context to other contexts, it may be useful to look at earlier and non-capitalist cultures and societies as well. In them, we may find practices that resemble, and may even have helped produce, contemporary adultism. However, some of these societies also show that adultism is not a natural necessity and that quite differently structured age orders are possible. In such societies, we may even find intergenerational forms of relationships or conceptions of being a child and being young that serve as an example and can challenge contemporary societies to critique adultism. This double gaze can contribute to a better understanding of both the preconditions of adultism and the possibilities of overcoming it.

Practices with children that are similar to adultism have always been part of ruling orders and were intended to ensure the continuity of these orders, which, as far as we know, were always based on the domination of men, characterized by aggressiveness, and focused on military discipline (Stearns, 2006). Examples of this type of societies and cultures can be considered, on the one hand, absolutist ruled feudal systems and, on the other hand, the practices of enslavement and slave trade that accompanied colonialism. Their common feature was that

they were built on centrally conceived state structures in which the power of a ruling group (nobility, estate, caste) was embodied. They served the subjugation and exploitation of people whose labor made the reproduction and 'development' of these societies possible in the first place. Social relations similar to adultism at first sight can also be found in social orders in which (a part of) the elderly were granted special (material) authority and prerogatives due to their experience, without these being secured by aggressive violence and military discipline. We suggest to consider such structures in their respective contexts and not to categorize them sweepingly as adultist, since these authorities were often recognized by mutual group consent.

Practices of domination of the older over the younger in societies and cultures that are non-capitalist in character, sometimes referred to as 'pre-modern,' may thus be formally similar to what we now call adultist. But we propose to use the term adultism only in reference to societies in which 'being adult' is dichotomously and unequally demarcated from 'being young', and in which specific patterns of childhood and youth have emerged and become institutionalized. In this sense, philosophers Megan Lang and Becky Shelley speak of 'maturity-based dichotomy' and of children as 'potential-filled adults-in-the-making' (Lang & Shelley, 2021, p. 2).

We can use the term adultism in a critical sense only when this relationship becomes recognizable as a problem and can be questioned. This is only the case in the capitalist societies of modern times. In them, specific stages of childhood and youth have emerged that exclude children and youth from social life and turn them into 'outsiders' (Zeiher, 2009). They have produced 'child' and 'childhood' as a metaphor for 'irrationality' and 'immaturity' in contrast to the 'rationality' and 'maturity' of the adult (Mills & LeFrançois, 2018; Gheaus, 2015; Hannan, 2018; Burman, 2021). 'In any case, historically and transculturally, the sharp distinction we normally make today between adults and children seems reserved for Western societies' (Schweitzer, 2007, p. 41). Such processes of exclusion result in specific dynamics that can appear as generational conflicts or protest movements and are perceived by adults as a threat to the existing (generational) order. They result not least from the contradictions between the promises for the future associated with these phases of life and the actually limited opportunities for young people to shape their own lives and futures. In this context, adultism can be understood as an attempt by adults to ward off the emancipation efforts resulting from these contradictions and to maintain the state of a society determined solely by the elderly.

In this sense, we understand adultism as a critical concept that encompasses two basic ideas. On the one hand, it takes up emancipatory and resistant tendencies that result from the emergence of specific phases of childhood and youth that are separate from the 'seriousness of life' and the contradictions inherent in them, and makes them its own. On the other hand, it recalls certain age orders

of non-capitalist cultures that show that being young need not lead to separation from adulthood, but can be associated with shared responsibility and mutual respect and recognition. In this sense, philosopher Enrique Dussel (2002) would have spoken of a 'trans-modern' concept in order to emphasize that it is neither about a blanket rejection of European Enlightenment and 'modernity' nor about an idealization of 'traditional' and non-European societies and cultures, but about thinking together different experiences and traditions of thought.

## Intersectional and Reproduction Theory Perspectives

The analysis of adultism must always keep in mind that the unequal relations between adults and young people can never be derived from age alone. Due to the anthropologically conditioned dependence of young children in particular on adult caregivers, a 'generational asymmetry' (Alanen, 2011) does indeed result, but this is always co-determined and shaped in specific ways by the fact that young people find themselves in different life situations. They are each involved in particular ways in social circumstances or institutions that help shape their experiences, attitudes, and actions and influence the relationships between people of different ages. We therefore find it necessary to speak not only of one childhood or youth, but of many childhoods and youths.

Childhood sociologist Sebastian Barajas (2021) rightly criticizes the fact that even today, even in childhood research, age is often neglected and disregarded as a variable of the social order of power. And the authors of a recent international scoping review state: 'Unexpectedly, the effects of ageism against younger people have largely been understudied' (De la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021, p. 12). So, when we use adultism as a concept, we always have in mind that age, while an important and widely underexposed variable, is never the sole or compellingly dominant variable in the emergence of social subordination and oppression.

In order to focus on the various dimensions and causes of adultism and age-based discrimination, we find it helpful to draw on the approach of 'intersectionality', developed primarily in the United States. In its broadest understanding, intersectionality is a term that encapsulates a variety of positions on the relationships between forms of oppression and identity in the contemporary world. It was developed primarily by Black women and women of color who found previous anti-racist, feminist, and anti-capitalist theories insufficient to explain and struggle against their oppression. While there is broad consensus that the term was first used by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), the metaphor of intersections to describe the workings and experiences of various modalities of oppression had been circulating in African-American feminism for at least a decade before Crenshaw's formulation. Of particular note here is the *Combahee River Collective*—which emerged in the 1970s—whose activists felt left out of the analysis of 'white' feminists (see, e.g., Keenaga-Yamahtta, 2017). An equally

influential contribution came from civil rights activist Angela Davis, who published the seminal work *Women, Race and Class* (Davis, 1983) in the early 1980s.

Since then, various theories have been developed under the term intersectionality, which can hardly be brought to a common denominator (for an overview, see Winker & Degele, 2009; Bohrer, 2019). They are occasionally criticized by Marxist-oriented authors for being fixated on individualist, bourgeois, or postmodern identity politics, for their political perspectives being essentially reformist and/or liberal, for misunderstanding the fundamental nature of class relations, for lacking a causal explanation of oppression, or for intersectionality being an inappropriate metaphor for understanding oppression. According to philosopher Ashley Bohrer, who has written extensively on the relationship between Marxism and intersectionality, 'many of these criticisms are misplaced, generated from a failure to engage substantively with intersectionality as a vibrant body of scholarship and activism' (Bohrer, 2019, p. 101).

We do not refer here to a specific theoretical version of intersectionality, but take up only the idea that discrimination must be seen multi-dimensionally and as the result of interdependent causes. It is particularly important to us that characteristics such as disabilities, gender, skin color, social origin or class situation are not simply added up as reasons for discrimination and that the person affected experiences double or multiple discrimination as a result. The intersectional perspective, as we understand it here, instead, makes it possible to see the different mechanisms of discrimination as if through a magnifying glass. However, we also believe it is necessary to view the individual dimensions of discrimination not as predetermined and independent criteria, axes, or vectors, but as dialectical and processual in the larger social context as 'intersecting relations with a vision of interlocking ones' (McNally, 2017, p. 96). In this sense, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins had already proposed in the 1990s to think in terms of interlocking systems of oppression that form a 'matrix of domination' (Collins, [1990]2022). Psychologist Ann Phoenix summarizes this idea as follows:

> A key point is that the categories are mutually constitutive. They do not just add together but help to construct each other. They also stand in power relations to each other, with the possibility of producing contradictory and complex positioning. (Phoenix, 2022, p. 26; see also Collins & Bilge, 2020; Collins et al, 2021)

In our view, such complex analysis is performed by Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2022), which is also feminist in orientation and emerged through extending Marx's thoughts on the processes of production and reproduction in capitalist society. In contrast to dogmatic Marxist approaches, it understands capitalism not only as an economic system but as a historically changing social power structure in which not only class antagonism but also many other contradictions equally shape people's lives.

> Capitalism as a structure is highly dependent on many forms of exclusion, mar-

> ginalization, domination, and disempowerment. If we are to take one lesson from these discussions, it should be that no account of race, gender, sexuality, imperialism, or colonization could ever hope to be complete without a systematic understanding of how capitalism operates, not only as an economic system, but as a structuring field of life with ramifications far beyond the workplace. (Bohrer, 2019, p. 157)

While Bohrer admits that 'a critique of capitalism must include a political-economic critique,' she emphasizes that 'any analysis that avoids interrogating the social, cultural, familial, psychological, and intimate domains will lose the ability to track some of the most important formations of capitalist modernity' (op. cit., p. 204).

The focus of Social Reproduction Theory is on the meaning of work in its broadest sense as a basic condition of human life. Such an understanding of work goes beyond what is commonly called 'gainful employment' or, in an even narrower sense, 'wage labor.' It encompasses all types, forms and areas of activity that are in some way useful or significant for others. It can be located in one's own household as well as in other areas of society. It thus also includes activities that are commonly referred to not as work but as 'help,' 'care,' 'volunteerism,' or whatever. This understanding of work is also opposed to a view of work that sees it per se and exclusively as a burden and toil. The emphasis is rather on the fact that it is meaningful (not only productive in the classical economic sense) and that it can be shaped, i.e., it can also take on other forms and take place under humane conditions.[2]

In capitalist society, the main purpose of labor is to produce monetary values and commodities, and labor assets are not judged by their significance for life, but are measured as labor power by hours and become commodities themselves. The counter-concept to this reduced understanding of labor is referred to by Marx in the *Grundrisse* of 1843/44 (Marx, 1973) as '*lebendige Arbeit*' (living labor) and is regarded by him as a force that resists the coercive character of labor relations in which people are used and exploited by others. Marx understands living labor as the sensual-objective relation between human beings and external nature, in which neither side can exist without the other. This interdependent being is also expressed in Marx's ideas of an economy of the common.

> The exchange of human activity within production itself as well as the exchange of human products with one another is equivalent to the generic activity and generic spirit whose actual, conscious, and authentic existence is social activity and social satisfaction. As human nature is the true common life [*Gemeinwesen*] of man, men through the activation of their nature create and produce a human common life, a social essence which is no abstractly universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essence or nature of every single individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirt, his own wealth. (Marx [1844]1967, pp. 271-272; see also Saenz, 2009)

According to Marx, the worker is separated from his *true common life*, by

which he means the totality of the potentials and forms of expression of the human essence. That means, the worker is alienated from this common life, from the development of the possibilities of life, from 'life itself' by having to carry out his or her work under conditions in which he or she cannot be 'at home' (for Marx's conception of alienation, see Ollman, 1971; Jaeggi, 2014).

This idea becomes the basis of the critique of capitalism in Social Reproduction Theory. By highlighting the embodiment of labor activities in concrete socio-spatial relations, it shows how the totality of practices that reproduce social life are simultaneously organized through multiple relations of domination and power. According to philosopher Nancy Fraser,

> (o)ne essential epistemic shift is that from production to social reproduction – the forms of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and sustain human beings and social bonds. Variously called 'care', 'affective labor', or 'subjectivation', this activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the socio-ethical substance, or *Sittlichkeit,* in which they move. Central here is the work of birthing and socializing the young, building communities, producing and reproducing the shared meanings, affective dispositions, and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation (Fraser: 2022, p. 9; emphasis in orig.)

Neither in Social Reproduction Theory nor in intersectionality research have children and childhoods received significant attention. At best, as is evident in the quote from Nancy Fraser, they occurred as objects of care and affective labor by women, but age of life was not included as a possible dimension or axis of discrimination for a long time. Sociologist Doris Bühler-Niederberger (2019, p. 159), for example, criticizes that intersectionality research has so far 'not attempted a more comprehensive description of childhood(s), but has focused on specific groups of children'. Within childhood research itself, different views can be found on the attention and relevance of the concept of intersectionality. Leena Alanen (2016, p. 158), for example, laments in an editorial in the journal *Childhood* that 'in social studies of childhood, it seems, the notion has not yet taken root'. But she also reminds us that Barrie Thorne (2004) had already introduced intersectional analysis as a possible way to theorize age and other differences in an earlier editorial of *Childhood*. She suggests asking 'how new or useful "intersectionality" is as a concept, perspective ("lens"), method, or even theory for the theoretical-conceptual advancement of childhood research' (Alanen, 2016, p. 158).

Childhood geographers Kristina Konstantoni and Akwugo Emejulu (2017) explicitly emphasize that there are many similarities between Childhood Studies and the intersectionality approach: 'Childhood studies has strong connections with intersectionality, such as a focus on agency and structural implications, power relations, embodiment and emancipation' (op. cit., p. 10). They explain it this way:

> If the starting point of understanding childhood is not necessarily a homogeneous and universalising notion of 'age' but, rather, 'difference', as structured by the particular dynamics of race, class, gender, geography and other categories of difference, this creates a powerful link between intersectionality and childhood studies that does not deprioritise race but put age in the context of race and other axes of difference (op. cit., p. 11)

Phoenix (2022, p. 23) also shows how the intersectionality approach can enrich Childhood Studies. She argues 'that intersectionality enables a holistic perspective on children's lives, allowing analysis of how they are positioned and treated, the ways in which intersectional positioning is (re)produced and their agency'. Referring to recent examples such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the *Black Lives Matter* movement, she argues for the consideration—alongside age, generation, gender, social class, and racialization—of place, space and nation as important intersectional structural categories (see also Rodó-de-Zárate, 2017).

Crenshaw herself, along with female collaborators, has also shown in an empirical study (Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2015) how the repressive experiences of African American girls differ from both the repressive experiences of African American boys and the experiences of 'white' girls, and how differently they cope. Their findings suggest that adults sometimes have different expectations of Black girls and intervene on different occasions than they do with boys. Black girls are perceived as intentionally defiant and precocious, and their behaviors are interpreted as aggressive, dominant, loud, unruly, unmanageable, unfeminine, or criminal. One consequence is that teachers and police over-discipline Black girls because their behaviors do not conform to those associated with 'white,' heterosexual, middle-class femininity. For children and youth, this results in other forms of marginalization and discrimination, some of which are new, depending on affiliations and positionings, such as educational attainment, citizenship, or sexual orientation, to name just three references (see, e.g., von Benzon & Wilkinson, 2019).

One of the few reflections on Social Reproduction Theory that refers to children and childhoods comes from philosopher Susan Ferguson (2017). In it, she explains how children and childhoods are subjected to capitalist logic, but also what potentials there are in children to resist 'capitalist subjectification'. According to her,

> Capitalist children and childhoods are engaged in a constant negotiation between a playful, transformative relationship to the world and the more instrumental, disembodied state of alienation required to become laborers for capital. This negotiation occurs throughout the entirety of children's everyday lives, be they at home, at work, at school, or at the mall. (op. cit., p. 114)

Without explicitly referring to adultism, the author thus gives indications of how a tension between power-holding adults and their power-subjugated children is repeatedly built up in capitalist society. However, we see a problem in her analysis in the fact that she mystifies childhood in an ahistorical way by identifying it with

'play,' while she can only imagine 'work' as an alienated activity of adults. She thus does not do justice to the fact that the separation and opposition of play and work only emerges with capitalist society and is reproduced in it, but also increasingly problematized (Liebel, 2004, pp. 176-193).[3]

We see a challenge of Social Reproduction Theory in relating its comprehensive understanding of labor as a basic condition of human life also to children as social subjects and thus contributing to questioning childhood as a subordinate status of 'becoming' and of mere preparation for the 'seriousness of life.' This also means imagining childhoods differently than they are conceded in capitalist society and tracing corresponding tendencies in contemporary societies. In the following sections, we will explore these questions, which are equally important for the emergence and critique of adultism, in more detail.

## Preconditions and Development of Adultism

As shown above, the term adultism is used to describe an unequal power relationship between older and younger people to the disadvantage of the younger. This relationship is expressed in interpersonal relationships as well as in social structures and institutions. In our view, adultism and the debate about adultist relations are essentially characterized by three moments:

- A strict distinction is made between 'adulthood' and 'childhood/youth' in the sense of a dichotomy.
- Between age groups there is a hierarchical relationship or a relationship of unequal power (which is usually legitimized by ideologies of development, maturity, rationality and reason).
- This hierarchical/unequal power relationship becomes a problem in social reality as well as delegitimized in political and scientific discourses critical of domination.

These elements are found or emerging in most contemporary societies. They mean that the age phases we call childhood and youth have been constructed in historically specific ways and internalized by most people regardless of their age. This internalization, however, has to be constantly renewed among the younger generations, something that has become more difficult today, and increasingly problematic and uncertain, for reasons we will outline below.

Childhood and youth in the sense presented here have emerged with capitalist society in Europe since around the 17th century (Ariès, 1962; Gillis, 1981), but they are already based on concepts dating back to ancient Greece. In his most important work on State philosophy, *Politics*, for example, philosopher Aristotle asserts that

> […] almost all things rule and are ruled according to nature. But the kind of rules differs; the freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which

> the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature. (Aristotle, Politics, Book I, Part XIII, pp. 20-21)

Since then, childhood and youth have been understood as life phases that have an inferior status compared to the life phase of adulthood. The young people assigned to these life phases are considered immature and underdeveloped. Consequently, they must be subjected to a socialization process that leads them to the higher stage of a functioning adult. According to this view, which philosopher Anca Gheaus (2015) traces back to Aristotle, children are merely 'unfinished adults,' or they are ascribed—as has been critically noted in constructivist childhood research for more than three decades (e.g., James & Prout, [1990]1997)—to be in the stage of 'becoming', while adults are considered to be finished 'beings.'[4]

Adultism results from the fact that childhood is socially categorized as an age stage considered inferior and incapable. In this sense, legal scholar Gabriela Magistris and sociologist Santiago Morales (2018) refer to as *adultocentrismo* the analytical point of view from which the biological fact of being born, growing and developing is considered in a straight line (chronological time) and in ascending order. Thus, the development of the subject is hierarchized not only according to age, but also according to the characteristics and values assigned to growth. From this, they see hegemonic notions of childhood and adulthood emerging that

> […] reaffirm a natural and desirable way of being a child; as a social representation assimilated as natural for children, it is the annulment and pathologization of all other ways of being a child, adolescent and young person. Thus, children and young people from popular sectors and/or from non-Western cultures, who do not fit into this model of child, are the target of a set of policies deployed by the States aimed at their control and normalization. (Morales & Magistris, 2018, p. 27; see also Morales, 2022)

This cultural practice of assigning age as a universal and natural fact is also a practice of temporal power, which philosopher Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls 'chrononormativity'. Here, the body is bound to a socially significant embodiment through the management of time. Such binding—embodiment through time—is, in the author's view, where the process of chrononormativity is established, as 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (op. cit., p. 3). The individual body thus simultaneously becomes a collective body to which certain properties are ascribed. Chrononormativity, according to Freeman, consists in the intertwining of 'biological time', which is seen as natural, and 'national time', which is understood as a series of gears that move the nation toward progress. Biological time, as a universal and natural category, has become a key institutional category of contemporary nation-states throughout recent history.

According to the prevailing bourgeois pattern of childhood, children are dependent on adults in the sense that adults provide for them, while they do not have to worry about anything themselves. This is sometimes referred to as the 'privilege' of childhood and youth, which children and young people can enjoy before 'the serious side of life' begins. But the supposed privilege is bought—similar to women who are fixed to the role of 'housewife' or 'mother'—by the fact that they have nothing to say and are excluded from public life. Childhood and youth are privatized and infantilized. However, the bourgeois pattern of childhood has by no means fully prevailed, neither in the regions of the Global South, nor in the Global North. As intersectional analysis underlines, due to unequal living conditions and corresponding discriminations, many young people continue to have, and may even have growing reason to worry about what their future lives will be like. Their current situation between climate crisis, Covid-19 pandemic and war(s) accelerates this process worldwide.

Anthropologically, age orders are inevitable, since physical life has a beginning and an end, but they are not necessarily related to numerical age, nor are they necessarily associated with hierarchical relationships and unequal power. In some historical cultures and societies that existed until European colonization (and some of which are being revived today), there were various ways in which relationships between older and younger people were regulated. In them, special weight was usually given to the life experiences and resulting wisdom of the elders. This was expressed in the respect for the elders that was expected from those younger than them. But younger people were generally not strictly separated from older age groups, and the abilities attributed to them and the tasks assigned to them were not tied to fixed chronological ages. In today's sense, there was no such thing as 'childhood' and 'youth,' but different age phases were understood as complementary and were not necessarily organized hierarchically. Life and the abilities necessary for its preservation were not assigned linearly to progressive ages in the sense of growing maturity, but were present in them simultaneously. Younger people were sometimes ascribed skills that older people no longer had, and they took on tasks that older people could no longer perform or for which they considered themselves unsuitable. For this, in turn, the younger ones received respect and recognition.

This can be illustrated by an example from South America. In a comparative study between the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the conceptions of childhood in Andean and Amazonian cultures, for example, fundamental differences are pointed out. The preamble of the Convention emphasizes that 'the child, by reason of his lack of physical and mental maturity, needs special safeguards and care [...].' In contrast, in the lifestyles and cosmovisions of Andean and Amazonian communities, 'the child is not considered a person in evolution', but children are perceived as 'persons with attributes and responsibilities in their family as well as in their community and the natural environment' (terre des hom-

mes, 2014, p. 11). The Quechua word *wawa* is not synonymous with the term child, 'since in communities the body of an old person includes the child and the body of the child equally includes the old person' (ibid.). In festivities and rituals, childhood is not equated with a specific age:

> At the age of 7, the child already 'knows how to spend his or her life,' that is to say, he or she already knows how to make a *chacra*, how to raise livestock and as such 'already knows how to converse with the deities and nature.' So that the child at 7 years of age 'defends him/herself in life,' the parents, the *ayllu*, the community, have a vital contribution, they educate him/her not only to have 'good heart for the chacra,' 'good heart for cattle raising,' 'good heart for weaving,' 'good heart to be a leader or authority' etc., but also to 'improve the temper' or character of the children and thus contribute to the harmony of humans, nature and Andean deities (op. cit., pp. 11-12).[5]

The separation and hierarchization of the phases of life, which we trace back to Greek antiquity, was sharpened with the European Enlightenment. The now developed conception of reason led to a strict separation and hierarchization between maturity and immaturity, rationality and irrationality and their assignment to childhood and youth on the one hand and adulthood on the other.

> Reason and thought were idealized and attributed to adulthood; childhood was the antithesis and appeared primarily as a time of shortcomings and mistakes, much like 'the savages' recently 'discovered' in America. When humanism celebrated 'man,' it meant the white, male, adult human being. Children, on the other hand—along with women and the indigenous population of the Americas—formed only the foil on which this ideal was constructed: they constituted 'the Other.' (Winkler, 2017, p. 43)

Adults were juxtaposed with children and adolescents as the embodiment of perfection, while the latter were expected to first be trained to become functional adults. This process was and is still understood today as a kind of 'civilization' and emergence from the raw state of nature. It is reinforced by capitalist efficiency thinking based on absolutized and instrumental rationality. Adultism is based on the idea that children are wild, imperfect beings who must first be tamed and civilized in order to become adults. This process received a special imprint from the patriarchal structure of society, which granted special power to the father as the breadwinner and head of the family. We can also consider adultism as an intrinsic feature of a society fixated on 'productionism' in the sense of a permanent increase in the abundance of goods, whatever the cost (Weeks, 2011). In this society, only those count who are considered 'employable,' have purchasing power and fuel the consumption of goods.

Adultism is closely interwoven with what sociologist of law Matías Cordero Arce calls 'the hegemonic childhood,' in which 'the child is "the other," observed, supervised, regulated, oriented, and in sum made into the adult—as the native of

civilization—who observes, regulates, orients, and guides' (Cordero Arce, 2015, p. 128; similarly Rollo, 2020). This reflects the civilizing myths of colonization with its unequal and despotic power relations that continue to operate today under the conditions of capitalist globalization. The process of civilization between age groups corresponds to the pattern of colonization of 'foreign' territories and communities, which was understood as the civilization of 'primitive peoples' and justified as the 'white man's burden' (Kipling, 1899). For their part, the people subjected to colonization were devalued as children in the sense of the 'modern' pattern of childhood and degraded to objects of education, insofar as they were not subject to brutal violence or outright murdered (see Liebel, 2020).

Adultism is thus based on the strict separation of being child from being adult. In capitalist society, this has to do with the fact that the production and reproduction of life takes place in forms that make personal skill and capacity development for the majority of people almost impossible. The idea of the 'seriousness of life' is characterized by the fact that this is localized in the 'world of work,' which in turn is separated from the rest of life and takes place according to rules that are not based on human needs but on the exploitation of human labor power and the maximization of profit. This circumstance makes it considerably more difficult to imagine the world of work as a place where young people, too, have their place and can test and train their abilities. It suggests nailing childhood to places—mainly pedagogic institutions—where no important, life-fulfilling activities are carried out. These institutions are primarily confined to preparing young people to later become economically exploitable 'human capital' (Qvortrup, 2001) for national market competitivity. Pupils are measured by their contribution to future prosperity, which is considered necessary for the continued existence and further development of society. Children have thus been condemned to a life characterized by lack of autonomy and passivity or, at best, by a pre-limited and purposive autonomy or participation. The idea of childhood as a protected phase of life, separate from, subordinate to and in preparation for adult life, thus has not only ideological but also material-historical preconditions. The exploitation of colonized territories and communities first created the material resources to separate part of the children from the responsibility for the production and reproduction of human life and to assign them to a special social space. This social space is privatized within the framework of the bourgeois family ('family childhood'), institutionalized and pedagogized within the framework of bourgeois society ('school childhood').

School and other educational institutions are deeply embedded in capitalistically organized social formations. On the one hand, they enable parents to take on work outside the family sphere (the problematic absence of which recently attracted attention during the pandemic lockdowns). Secondly, they aim to pre-sort pupils (the future workforce) for the hierarchy of the labor market. In capitalism, only a few high school graduates are required, but enough material for the low-wage sector and the industrial reserve army. The failing of a large proportion

of pupils and their premature exclusion from higher education is a fundamental function of the education system (see Huisken, 2016). Schools achieve this selection by implementing an adultist teacher-student relationship (Liebel & Meade, 2023, pp. 76-86) and hereby organizing lessons as a competitive event. Learning performance is not measured individually, but always in comparison to other classmates, who are perceived as competitors and, to a limited extent, as potential opponents. Knowledge transfer is one-directional. The teacher sets the tone, but she or he is also subject to the directives of the Curriculum and the requirements of school authorities. School takes on the civilizing task of educating people to become well-behaved citizens that accommodate a certain economic agenda. It does not matter whether the cane, grades, time pressure, humiliation or other, seemingly more humane, means of assessment and discipline (e.g., classroom management) are applied, whether more or less ostensible freedom is granted or whether student participation models are implemented. The 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson, 1968) exerts subtle control over pupils and reinforces the fundamental purpose of the institution. Failing of students in the education system is, furthermore, attributed to alleged laziness, stupidity or immaturity and thus individualized. Ideologically, this systematic discrimination is cloaked in a specific idea of social justice: inequality between people is considered just if the better-off person has gained an advantage in a supposedly equitable competition, also a basic principle of the capitalist labor market.

The simultaneously emerging capitalist mode of production with its destructive tendencies made it necessary to separate children from detrimental factory labor with the aim to preserve and prepare them as future workers, soldiers and mothers. The prohibitions of 'child labor' introduced not least for this reason since the 19th century went hand in hand with the emergence of nation-states that regarded the following generations as national development potential and institutionalize them in the social form of *development-related childhood*, mostly mediated by the introduction of compulsory education. The ideal background for this is the notion, objectified in bourgeois law, of the self-responsible, autonomous, rational individual who controls and dominates himself (Foucault, 1980). This thinking is fundamentally different from the notion that all individuals are social beings from birth, interdependent and interrelated (Vygotsky, [1934]1986).

The connections between adultism and the treatment of children's work have been little studied. In her now classic theoretical study of the 'differentiation of child labor in the capitalist labor market', feminist economist Diane Elson (1982) had traced the 'dominant' forms of work that disadvantage children to three 'authority sources' which, according to her, mark the 'seniority system' of contemporary capitalist societies: (1) the authority of the adults in the family; (2) the requirements of the educational system, which is also governed by adults; and (3) the 'needs' of capitalism for the easy and profitable utilisation of labour power.

> The seniority system obviously encompasses a range of gradations, not simply the division between children and adults, but children are at the bottom of it. And this means it is extremely difficult for them to secure full recognition in monetary terms for the skills they possess and for the contribution they make to family income. Only when they have passed over to adult status can they be recognised as 'skilled' or 'breadwinners'—or rather, only when the boys have passed over to adult status, for the girls the problem remains. (op. cit., p. 493)

The low status of children has the result that (a) the children's abilities are poorly regarded; (b) children are primarily given tasks that are considered economically less valuable, especially so-called 'reproductive' jobs; and (c) despite the large quantity of work that they do, children are not recognized as workers with their own rights (op. cit., p. 491; see also Nieuwenhuys, 2000, p. 287). However, it is also questionable whether the prohibition of child labor, which became the prevailing legal norm in capitalist societies from the mid-19th century onward, in turn reinforced adultism. In any case, Cordero Arce (2022) puts forward the noteworthy thesis that it was not hegemonic adultism that promoted the exclusion of children from work, but rather the opposite: this exclusion paved the way for adultism, since the prohibitions on child labor, which were quite profitable for adult workers and rulers, required moral justification.

However, even in capitalist societies, these exclusions are again in question, and there is an increasing search for possible ways to connect abstract learning in educational institutions separate from life with the real world or with vital tasks. Here lies an opportunity to learn from the way the lives of young people are shaped in some non-capitalist societies, rather than continuing to make the childhood pattern that has dominated the Global North absolute and imposing it on societies of the Global South.

Certainly, it must be kept in mind that life in such cultures and societies is itself affected by the postcolonial constellation. This constellation not only leads to the fact that the childhoods there are disdained and invisible, but are also damaged and impaired in a material sense. This is expressed, for example, in the increasingly precarious living conditions and lower life chances of children of the Global South. In order to put an end to the colonization of childhood, which could also be called *postcolonial paternalism*, it is therefore particularly urgent to continue the decolonization of postcolonial societies (Liebel, 2020; 2023).

## Adultism Under Pressure of Justification

Adultism tends to lose ground as the power that older people have over younger people loses credibility. This is a process that began at the latest in the 1960s, when young people in many parts of the world rebelled against the authoritarian dominance of adults and began to dream of a world in which power over others would come to an end. But this process is full of contradictions, does not proceed in a straight line and is far from having reached its end. In this section,

we will show why and in what ways adultism has been delegitimized and shown to be inconclusive, outdated, inappropriate, or even harmful. In doing so, we will draw on a variety of readings.

One interpretation comes from anthropologist Margaret Mead, who published a book in the early 1970s in which she diagnosed a fundamental cultural shift that she believed was sweeping the world (Mead, 1970). Central to her thinking is the question of who has what knowledge and who can learn from whom. For this purpose, she distinguishes three categories of cultures that existed simultaneously in the world at her time, i.e., about 50 years ago, but to which she attests different prospects of success. Mead calls these cultures postfigurative, cofigurative, and prefigurative. She calls postfigurative a culture 'in which children learn primarily from their forebears,' cofigurative a culture 'in which both children and adults learn from peers,' and prefigurative a culture 'in which adults also learn from their children' (op. cit., p. 1) and in which 'it will be the child—and not the parent and grandparent—that represents what is to come' (op. cit., p. 68). She sees the world in her time entering a 'period, new in history' (op. cit., p. 1)—in which 'the secure belief that those who knew had authority over those who did not had been shaken' (op. cit., pp. XVI-XVII).

> Today, nowhere in the world are there elders who know what the children know, no matter how remote and simple the societies are in which the children live. In the past there were always some elders who knew more than any children in terms of their experience of having grown up in a cultural system. Today there are none. It is not only that parents are no longer guides, whether one seeks them in one's own country or abroad. There are no elders who know what those who have been reared within the last twenty years [from today's point of view, that would be seventy years; ML/PM] know about the world into which they were born. (op. cit., pp. 60-61)

Mead is obviously still under the impression of the 'anti-authoritarian' protest movements of the late 1960s, which were driven by young people, and tries to derive prognoses for the future from them. Applied to the question of adultism, it would no longer have a future, because 'as long as any adult thinks that he, like the parents and teachers of old, can become introspective, invoke his own youth to understand the youth before him, then he is lost' (op. cit., p. 63). But, as we know from today's perspective, adultism is far from gone. The confidence that speaks from Mead's words is based not only on the fact that the author formulated her prognosis more than 50 years ago, but also on the fact that she understood the relationship between older and younger people as a matter of knowledge and learning (from each other). But the mechanisms that keep adultism alive are not limited to knowledge and learning; they are also a matter of access to power. Mead had an inkling of this when she saw 'the freeing of men's imagination' as depending on 'the direct participation of those who, up to now, have not had access to power, and whose nature those in power cannot fully imagine' (op. cit., p. 73). Therefore,

the young must have more opportunities to gain influence in society, i.e., to have corresponding means of power.

Another interpretation of the dwindling moral legitimacy of adultism comes from sociologist and media researcher Neil Postman. Unlike Mead, however, he does not see a problem with children not having the influence they deserve; rather, he laments that childhood as a whole is 'disappearing' (Postman, 1982). In this, he, like Mead, has in mind the growing importance of audiovisual media, but he does not see them, as she does, as an indication of the knowledge advantage of younger generations, but as a danger to childhood because the dwindling importance of acquiring literacy skills is eroding the threshold to adulthood. Postman's view of childhood itself springs from an adultist motif: a special sphere of protection should be preserved for children that does not expose them to the 'seriousness of life' understood as a danger. Read against the grain, Postman's fear shows that adultism as a manifestation of adult power and prerogatives is indeed losing its ground. Again, however, it would be rash to infer from this diagnosis that adultism is already a thing of the past. Moreover, current interpretations show that Postman's thesis that young people acquire more power than older people due to their increased media use in digital worlds is not correct (see Jørgensen & Wyness, 2021, pp. 69-72).

The moral legitimacy of adultism is also undermined by recent research in neuroscience. It shows that children have different cognitive and moral capacities than adults, not inferior ones. Psychologist Alison Gopnik points out that in recent decades there has been a major shift in scientific knowledge about the abilities of very young children:

> We used to think that babies and young children were irrational, egocentric, and amoral. Their thinking and experience were concrete, immediate, and limited. In fact, psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered that babies not only learn more, but imagine more, care more, and experience more than we would have ever thought possible. In some ways, young children are actually smarter, more imaginative, more caring, and even more conscious than adults are. (Gopnik, 2009, p. 5)

Not only are children spontaneously able to formulate (basic) philosophical questions, but according to Gopnik and co-authors, they can also spontaneously adopt a scientific way of thinking when they look at the world. Babies and young children 'think, draw conclusions, make predictions, look for explanations, and even do experiments' (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 2008, p. viii). It is generally known that mental plasticity is much higher in childhood than in adulthood, meaning that children are particularly capable of learning in the face of new experiences. Obviously, children almost always enter uncharted territory, since they still lack necessary experience to do so. They have not yet had time to learn how to build on the acquired knowledge of previous generations. According to Gopnik et al., however, children proceed more comprehensively and creatively in their thinking experiments than adults. They investigate causal relationships, make predictions

and generally search for explanations if they find opportunities to do so and are supported in doing so if necessary.

Gopnik and her co-authors explain the outstanding cognitive abilities of children with the special characteristics of their brains. The prefrontal cortexes of children are not yet fully developed, and therefore they lack strong prefrontal control. This is necessary, they say, to block out information that is not essential for performing a particular task, which is especially useful when trying to accomplish such a task. At the same time, however, prefrontal control limits focus and makes it difficult to use the imagination freely. The absence of prefrontal control explains why children learn quickly and have greater mental flexibility, adaptability, and creativity—necessary for philosophical and scientific inquiry—than adults. According to these authors, we as a species owe our evolutionary success precisely to this mental flexibility, adaptability and creativity, which enable us to constantly improve our environment.

Following Gopnik and co-authors, children generally have cognitive and creative abilities that have been lost or significantly diminished in most adults. These skills are not trivial: they give young people access to important assets, such as philosophical and exploratory thinking. Being such a person can be valuable even if one does not have much use of these skills, such as when, as a child, one does not find many adults willing to engage in philosophical discussions or attempts to explore the causal explanation of the world. The mere intellectual curiosity of young people seems valuable, regardless of how it contributes to knowledge. It would be especially valuable in a world that allows children to live out the potentials that are inherent in them at a very young age: curiosity, ease of learning, and a propensity to ask existential questions. In such a world, adultism would no longer have a place.

Contrary to previous conceptions of children as immoral and self-centered beings, psychologist Paul Bloom (2013) and his team at Yale University's Department of Infant Research have shown that infants have a rudimentary sense of justice from about three months of age. Bloom demonstrates how infants, even before they can talk or walk, judge the 'good' and 'bad' in actions of others, feel empathy and compassion, and act to calm people in distress. He thus contradicts earlier theories of developmental psychology, which assumed that children cannot acquire these qualities until they are about 10 years old. Nevertheless, Bloom points out that other (external) influences play a role in whether children actually act empathically or morally. Since this is equally true of adults, this research also points to the de-legitimization of adultism, which sweepingly attributes a lack of moral competence to young people. Similarly, family therapist Jesper Juul (2011) taught a new generation of parents how children cooperate with adults on a practical level from an early age. He was thus able to encourage many parents to trust their children more.

Those empathic and cooperative skills are of particular importance when it

comes to the question of equal participation and involvement of young people. This is because participation is usually associated only with older children or adolescents. In order to strengthen self-esteem, improve self-protection and achieve a self-determined life, a participatory approach that sees participation as a right and not a concession should be self-evident in all communication and community with young people. The theory of 'salutogenesis' by health sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1979) provides a psychological underpinning for this thesis. Antonovsky, beginning in the 1960s, conducted the first large-scale research on what keeps people healthy (instead of asking what makes them sick—pathogenesis—, as in traditional medical approaches). The results of his research indicated that childhood experiences have a significant impact on the development and maintenance of health, well beyond childhood. A central aspect of the theory of salutogenesis is the *sense of coherence*, for the emergence of which, in addition to the comprehensibility and meaningfulness of one's own life, the development of 'control beliefs' is also necessary. Again, experiences of *self-efficacy*—i.e., when one's own commitment to a cause actually leads to the fulfillment of desires or the satisfaction of needs—represent an essential resource for this. However, self-efficacy is also important in stressful situations and after setbacks in order to counteract learned helplessness (usually a generalized loss of control). Theories of salutogenesis underline the need for active, comprehensive and sustainable child and youth participation and empowerment of young people.

However, psychological research and theoretical developments that question centuries of negative and deficient knowledge about 'infants,' 'toddlers,' 'children,' and 'adolescents,' can also stumble into adultist pitfalls. This is the case when they attribute exclusively positive characteristics to children in an essentialist manner, thus encouraging stereotyping of childhood images. Study findings and theories that attribute certain skills, knowledge, qualities or performance to young persons never apply equally to all children. In order to avoid adultism in research, cautious restraint in generalization is required, and individual young people must be considered in their respective specific social and cultural contexts, as it is emphasized by the intersectional approach. This is also valid for all research mentioned above.

From a sociological point of view, other social trends in today's world make adultism obsolete and deprive it of legitimacy. Among these, we count that the adolescent phase as a 'psychosocial moratorium'—according to psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (1994) a phase in the human life cycle—is in question. For many young people, the transitions into adulthood have become not only longer, more unstructured, and more uncertain, but also more individually consequential. 'The previously narrowly time-limited free space in which one could let off steam before entering the working world is dissolving' (Kirchhöfer & Merkens, 2004, p. 17). Thus, 'the relationship between education, work and leisure, as defined by the youth moratorium, is losing its power to shape life phases' and must be replaced

by a different 'youth model' (Schröer & Böhnisch, 2006, p. 46). The moratorium previously attested to this age phase no longer corresponds to reality, since the development of young people today is fraught with biographical risk that exposes them to economic competition at an early age. Educational scientist Heinz Reinders (2016) sums up that the 'educational moratorium' has turned into an 'optimization moratorium' since the turn of the millennium. Under the pressure to optimize one's own educational acquisition at school in the most (time-)economical way possible, the 'free spaces of the moratorium' for children and young people have been considerably restricted. This raises the question of whether it still makes any sense at all to hold on to the figure of thought of the moratorium.[6]

For partly similar reasons, other authors preferred years ago to speak of the adolescent phase as a 'psychosocial laboratory' (Eisenbürger & Vogelsang, 2002). According to them, it is (also) in the affluent societies of the Global North 'no longer a question of being allowed to be a youth in order to be able to grow up. Rather, the general problem seems to lie in [...] wanting to "grow up" and having to remain "youthful" (i.e. dependent)' (Schneider, 2003, p. 56). With the de-standardization and flexibilization of normal biographies, the 'social constants' of the youth moratorium are 'evaporating' (Zinnecker, 2003, p. 17) and it is increasingly losing 'the identity-forming and meaning-securing reference pillars of adult society' (Schneider, 2003, p. 57).

Such 'normal biographies' have never existed in societies of the Global South in the same way and to the same extent as in the economically prosperous Global North, and they could therefore not become the yardstick of a successful life. The lives of most children and young people here have always been 'de-standardized', and they have been dependent on being able to adapt flexibly to changing life situations and necessities in order not to perish prematurely. This circumstance is perceived by young people as anything but satisfying and does not give any reason to be idealized. But it does make the assumption, also widespread in youth research, that young people are primarily concerned with setting themselves apart from adults and stylizing their own triviality seem absurd or at least marginal.

It remains to be seen whether a new type of childhood and youth is emerging in the societies of the Global South that will also spread to young people in currently privileged regions. But there is no doubt that with the growing uncertainties and risks, promoted by migration movements, new life constellations are also emerging in the Global North, which are even more difficult to grasp with the figure of thought of the moratorium than before. This also includes the consideration that, at the latest with the rapid progress of globalization processes and the spread of electronic media, young people in different parts of the world no longer live isolated from one another, but can or must come to terms with standards, expectations, threats and promises from other regions of the world.

Nor can it be overlooked that within societies 'the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are becoming blurred and de-differentiated' (Jostock, 1999, p.

88). Children's spheres of life and experience are no longer continuously demarcated from those of adults, but are intermingled. Pedagogical institutions geared to children have long since lost their monopoly claim on shaping, molding and planning children's lives and are in—often helpless—competition with the worlds of experience of the media, consumption and even, increasingly, work. It is no coincidence that children today are granted a 'right to participation', and countless models are being designed and tested to give children the feeling that they can 'have a say' and 'help shape' their lives. The child's world, sealed off from adult life, which until now served as a model for a 'happy childhood' in bourgeois European societies, seems to be a thing of the past. In the recent sociology of childhood, this is addressed as a conflicting tendency between 'caring access' to children and their 'social participation' (Bühler-Niederberger, Mierendorff & Lange, 2010).

At the beginning of the 21st century, children's work in particular is 'more suitable than any other topic for sensitizing people to the changed relationship between childhood and adulthood' (Hengst, 2000, p. 73), and the question arises as to what place young people will occupy in the future social and generational division of labor. Certainly, it is not to be expected that a social condition will be established quasi automatically in which children can act and find recognition as independent shapers of their present and future lives with equal rights vis-à-vis adults. In order to achieve and secure this, it will be necessary that neither the lives of children nor those of adults remain fixed on and dominated by gainful employment, which is under the dictates of capitalist exploitation interests. One possible way could be to intertwine 'gainful employment, education, subsistence, domestic work and civil society' (Böhnisch & Schröer, 2001, p. 190) and to integrate educational institutions into 'social and economic networks of new work' (op. cit., p. 191). This cannot be imposed solely on working and job-seeking children and young people, but remains a task for all those who hold the lives of the coming generations as dear as their own.

These changes go hand in hand with the fact that young people have become more aware of their generational interests. They are no longer easily fobbed off with the idea that they have 'a future' if only they work hard enough and acquire the necessary frustration tolerance, or that they are even the 'future of society'. On the contrary, a growing number of young people blame the functional elites of the older generations for stealing their future. The destruction of the foundations of human life by the overexploitation of non-human nature, which is becoming clearer year by year, is perceived by many members of the younger generation in particular as a threat to their own future and that of future generations. The criticism of the powerful from the older generation expressed in it goes beyond the 'anti-authoritarian' criticism of the 1960s and following years. It is not only a critique of authoritarian practices, but fundamentally questions the domination of adults as a threat and negation of one's own existence. Thus, adultism is more clearly on the brink than ever before.

## Paths Towards Countering Adultism in Society

An adultism-free society is difficult to imagine for most people. It is not easy for us either, but we are convinced that such a society is possible. Liberation from adultism is not about replacing the power of adults over children with the power of children over adults. Instead, it is about a relationship between different age groups and generations that is free of domination, equal, and respectful. However, here an intersectional perspective is mandatory. This egalitarian relationship will only be achievable if all other hierarchies, unequal power relations, and practices of domination are also overcome at interpersonal as well as institutional and structural levels. Thus, an adultism- and hierarchy-free society cannot be achieved overnight, but requires patience and great perseverance. What is needed are more intensive theoretical reflections and research that are not limited in a positivist sense to depicting the ways in which today's domination-based societies function; rather, what is needed are theories and research that reveal fractures and contradictions in the current hierarchies and thus reveal starting points for emancipation processes.

In view of the obstacles and difficulties that must be overcome anew from generation to generation, it would be presumptuous and unhelpful to imagine the adultism-free society in the usual sense of utopia as a perfect final state. Instead, we understand it as a possible perspective that points beyond the present reality and can be developed out of it. In their 'Invitation to rethink utopia and transformation,' sociologist Simon Sutterlütti and information scientist Stefan Meretz refer to such a concept as 'possibility utopia' (Sutterlütti & Meretz, 2018, p. 99) and emphasize that it must be justifiable. It does not simply result from fantasy and wishful dreaming, but from an analysis of the deficits of the given state of society and their connection with images of a better future. We always have such images in our minds when we are dissatisfied with an experienced situation and want to change it. To do without them (or even to have them forbidden to us) would mean to hand over our human imagination at the checkroom. Images give impulses to our thoughts and actions, indicate the direction in which we want to go. But, as we said, we cannot do without naming the preconditions that must be given or fought for in order to make the utopia imagined as possible a reality.

Accordingly, we understand utopian thinking as an attempt to imagine the possible, which points beyond the existing, and to find images and examples as well as reasons for this. In doing so, it can be helpful to look for inspiration in the past as well, without wanting to repeat or even idealize the past. But it is no less important to analyze the present in detail and to ask oneself why it is the way it is, why it is not better, and what can be done to make it better. Perhaps it helps to distinguish between small and large utopias, i.e., those that can be realized in the near future and those that require greater changes and need more perseverance.

An adultism-free society is not to be understood as a society in which everyone is kind to each other and (wants to) 'get along' better. It requires not only

egalitarian and respectful relations between young and older people and present and future generations, but also a minimum of social justice. For adults who are themselves affected by unequal power relations, especially of a socioeconomic nature, it is difficult to allow children more freedoms and provide resources than they themselves have. How are parents who work extremely long hours or pursue multiple jobs daily to make a makeshift living supposed to respond to their children's wishes without stress and allow them to negotiate their (free) time? How are they supposed to provide them with money and other resources that they themselves do not have in order to promote activities, mobility or independence for their children? Especially single parents, people with disabilities, or parents with many children experience these barriers. It is not surprising that historically the rise of child abandonment in a society usually correlates with the rise of poverty (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020, p. 95). Thus, in order to break the cycle of adultist practice, the current extreme social inequality must be ended and living conditions must be established that provide all people, regardless of their social background, personal characteristics, and age, with the necessary material and time resources for a dignified and satisfying life. Young people must also be enabled to dispose of their own resources, and the family model that makes children materially dependent on their parents must be replaced by forms of coexistence that make intergenerational considerateness and assistance the norm.

Adultism can only be effectively countered and an adultism-free society can only be achieved if the critique of unequal power relations includes all axes of discrimination in an intersectional way. We need to pursue the conditions that challenge young people and suggest them to question the unequal power relations between them and adults. In this practice of young people, what we could call the *small utopia* of an adultism-free society happens every day: taking the steps that make breaches in the daily experienced adultism, without being able to abolish it once and for all. The same applies to the actions of adults, for which we have resorted to the concept of 'critical adulthood' (ManuEla Ritz). We see the *great utopia* of an adultism-free society at work when it is possible, through fundamental changes in the structures and mechanisms of domination, to cut off the water from the continuous reproduction of adultism and thus also to dissolve the hierarchical dichotomy of adulthood and childhood. We do not see this as a perfect final state, but as a permanent challenge to concretely imagine the goal of an adultism-free society and to make one's own contribution to making this goal a reality.

## Notes

[1] To critique adultism, the term *childism* is also used, analogous to the term feminism, but in different ways (e.g., Young-Bruehl, 2013; Wall, 2022). In Latin America, it is common to speak of *adultocentrismo* (e.g., Duarte, 2012; Morales & Magistris, 2018; Morales, 2022). We adhere here to the term adultism, analogous to the terms racism or colonialism, in the sense that it denotes both the social phenomenon and the critique of it.

[2] This comprehensive understanding of work is found in many cultures. In non-Western cultures, it is usually not common to subsume all these significant activities under one overarching concept such as work. The various activities are each designated by special words that express their diverse contents, purposes, and contexts.

[3] Other examples of how Social Reproduction Theory is or can be applied in Childhood Studies can be found in Rosen (2023).

[4] In past centuries, this view was occasionally opposed by the 'romantic' view according to which becoming an adult represents a loss of abilities (e.g., imagination, curiosity, mental plasticity, synesthetic perception). According to this view, adults were perceived as 'defective children' (Gheaus, 2015; on this tradition of thought, see Dwyer, 2011).

[5] It should also be noted that the presence of ancestors imagined in Andean as well as other indigenous cultures of the Americas, Africa and Asia suggests a different relationship of generations than in cultures where the world of the living is strictly separated from the afterlife of the dead. This is vividly expressed in the novel *The Fanished Road* by writer Ben Okri (1993), in which a Nigerian child returns from the spirit realm of the dead to the world of the living and observes the actions of adults in wonder.

[6] Several of the anti-'adultification' initiatives in the U.S., which seek to counter the repressive treatment of Black children and youth by claiming for them the 'privilege of an innocent childhood' as supposedly accorded to 'white' children, tend to perpetuate adultism (for critique, Meiners, 2016; Gilmore & Bettis, 2021; Patton, 2022).

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# Critical and Intersectional Childhood Studies

## A New Theoretical Framework of Adultism From Transdisciplinary Fields of Critical Age, Gender, Race, and Disability: Studies Based on a Hawaiian Case Study of Reframing Self and Group Identity in Age-Different Learning Environments

*Verena Marke*


### Abstract

The article focuses on the re-constructions of power-securing structures behind social inequalities. This conceptual study aims to synthesize different transdisciplinary studies from critical age, gender, race, and disability studies to gain an intersectional view of the power effects of discriminatory social habits, practices, and structures. The results show an intersectional synthesis regarding the phenomenon of adultism. A typical definition of adultism is the abuse of power by adults towards children while adulthood/childhood are socially constructed. Adultism can be seen as the discriminatory axis of social positioning according to age or generation, consisting of subordinating social practices and attitudes that subsume into social norms and structures. The theoretical concept of adultism contains various methodological approaches and paradigms. Different fields according to social constructivism like ethnomethodology, poststructuralism, linguistics, and symbolic interactionism emerge into a new theoretical framework. Their offered terms like Doing Difference or Age, Subjectivation, and Generationing, are contrasted and brought together into a new theoretical framework and a Theory of Childilization. This theory shows a necessary shift of perspectives to the approach of critical adulthood and the question of how child-


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hood is performed by adulthood regarding generationing practices, structures, and privileged adult acting. The new theory reveals recurring patterns, discriminatory structures, and dominating practices based on the example of adultistic narratives. These narratives combine the mentioned disciplines around the subject related to structures, interactions, and cultures. Here, using a relational perspective, unseen, unspoken, and unheard practices by adults are uncovered, and can be applied to a reframing of education and learning environments, or of negative power effects on the lower-status group of children. The theory of Childilization is enfolded in a triad of mature-normative framing, re-framings, and counter-framings to new perspectives on adultism.

With empirical evidence, the article shows a re-framing of learning and identity-building on a community-based level and examples of counter-framings by young actors. In the context of a Hawaiian case study, age-different learning environments of progressive education at six schools in Oahu ($n$=6) can be shown. The case study illustrates examples of critical adulthood in contrast to common adultistic narratives like pathologizing, or educative ordering and the realization of some counter-framings of children. And finally, it emphasizes the necessity of conceptualizing adultism on the part of those affected—accompanied by the demand to equalize children's rights and to deconstruct adultistic concepts of "being a minor child" vs. "being a mature adult". The article is therefore challenging "good" norms and orders of adult societies, citizenship, education, and even research and sciences.

*Key words:* adultism; intersectionality; mature-adult framing; adultistic narratives; critical adulthood; counter framing; age-different identities

## Introduction

### *The Concept of Childhood*

*A dualistic generational view on the binary premise of differentiating between childhood and adulthood requires a relational approach to highlight the shades of being age-different in between. (see Butler, 2001)*

*The concepts you create about something are very important. They are the handles with which you can move the real world. (Bertolt Brecht, 1995)*

The concept of adultism refers to the psychologist Flasher in 1978 and is prominently promoted by Ritz (2013), Liebel (2023), and Meade (2020) in the academic field of Germany and by Fletcher (2015) in the USA. Books on critical adulthood are also available in accessible language and written by young co-authors (Ritz/Schwarzer, 2022). Here, children are to be understood as novices in society who, as newcomers, have to deal with the existing structures to survive in their doubly vulnerable position (inherently and structurally). Adultism as a socio-political phenomenon is established in everyday interactions, norms, and civil rights, and firmly anchored in cultural habits of thought. Adultism is still largely unpopular in the range of intersectional considerations of other structural forms of

discrimination such as sexism, racism, classism, ableism, or even ageism. Adultism is not yet systematically analyzed in the mainstream of age and childhood studies. To conceptualize adultism in a new holistic perspective, it is obligatory to define different concepts and terms. There are terms like childism, adultism, ageism, ableism, infantilization, childizing, generationing, and un/doing age which refer to different disciplines and theoretical paradigms. They focus on studying childhood or older ages regarding social inequalities (Falkenstein/Gajewski, 2015; Schröter, 2018; Wanka/Höppner, 2021). Furthermore, these approaches deal with discriminatory practices and structures that represent an obstacle or disadvantage for the marginalized actors, while adulthood as a normative ideal remains an underexplored territory (Fangmeyer/Mierendorff, 2017). Here, focusing on adultism, the privileged position of mature adulthood will be deconstructed.

The terms child/childhood and adult/adulthood can be understood as social and binary constructs (Alanen, 2005, p. 68 f.), which are culturally established, structurally framed, socially negotiated, and normatively re-produced in symbolic interactions. Structurally, the binarity of age status within the generational order is defined as socially constructed power relations of higher-positioned adulthood versus less-positioned childhood in terms of age status (Alanen, 2005; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Liebel, 2014). Adultism is detectable in discursive, institutional, and personal practices (Wanks/Hoppner, 2021). In Alanen's words, "children's agency is inextricably linked to the (absence) power that those positioned as children have to influence and dominate events in their everyday world" (2005, p. 80). On the agency level, Alanen speaks of the constant production of the two generational categories of children and adults in "generationing" practices" (Ibid., p. 79). The binary status groups of children and adults reveal themselves to each other in generational interpellation (e.g.. 'My child, I forbid/allow you...!' or 'Mom, may I please...?') and recognitions in a shared construction of the world in which irritation and (de-)stabilization can occur. Overall, age is a procedural social differentiator and contains opportunities for social participation and the availability of socially relevant resources (Höppner/Wanka, 2021, p. 43). The category also indicates age-specific discrimination if subjects do something for which they are culturally and socially defined as too young or already too old (ibid., p. 53). The archetypal form of adultism is oppression due to the binary structural ordering of underage children and full-age adults. This oppressive generational arrangement is legally framed by the concept of children as minors until the mature age of 18 (UN-CRC, 1989).

## Social Functions of the Power-Securing Concept of Adult Maturity

Childhood is politically defined as not fully developed, immature, and a-rational and constructed as pre-political and not yet human (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 371). The circularity of the dilemma of pre-constructed abilities that are supposed

to define legal membership and participation and the simultaneity of the constructed lack of these abilities becomes apparent: the education and instruction of 'children' to become mature-adult citizens seems logical or necessary for taking part in society, and receiving legal membership. In political arenas, age is considered a primary exclusionary characteristic and an axis of social and political inequality and injustice (Liebel, 2014, p. 81). The age category is a relevant and necessary political characteristic for the creation of citizenship through the indicator of adulthood and the maturity norm implied by it. The consistent exclusion of young people from positions of power, which are necessary to change and define rights and norms, hinders young people circularly from accessing education, politics, and science to contribute to self-empowerment and social change. The childhood-adulthood construction has various political relevance (e.g., Socialization see Luhmann, 1991, p. 19 ff.; Nation-Building see Zajda, 2009, p. 3 ff.). The indeterminacy and ambiguity of childhood-adulthood is part of its essential characteristics. Precisely in its contradiction, the concept of childhood and adulthood plays a central role in the representation and structuring of the social world in which, with reference to the ideal adulthood, childhood becomes controllable. Ageism and adultism transform the materials body into a field of political debate by subjecting the body determined by childhood to state control and surveillance, e.g. through parental authority, and guardianship (Fangmeyer/Mierendorff, 2017). In its physicality and visibility, childhood is also based on an obviousness that is a central component of social perception, identity, and socialization as common sense. The supposedly immediate perception of bodies determined by childhood, which is also reflected in state classification, is not an objectively given phenomenon, but remains, just like the construction of childhood itself, framed and characterized by cultural and social conventions (Foucault, 1994). Childhood is neither an illusion nor is it something biologically given. Childhood is a central element of social structures and influences the idea and representation of human bodies; as a situated, social phenomenon, it is changeable both in its connotations of meaning and in the way in which it shapes society. The concept of childhood is deeply anchored to the universal law of nature of being vulnerable and dependent on the natural state of birth and being in need of nutrition and care by capable persons. Due to this image, generational binarity promotes solidified discriminatory structures of the supposedly perceived inherent origin of Doing Difference (West/Fenstermaker, 1995) and Doing Vulnerability.

## Conceptualizing of a New Theoretical Framework

For previous research about social inequalities, age exists as a social category of difference alongside other categories of difference (Falkenstein/Gajewski, 2015; Schröter, 2018; Höppner/Wanka, 2021). Dualistic perspectives explain adultism as a consequence of a social difference, which is created by the category

of childhood as an age phase. Contrastingly, relational perspectives assume that childhood is an ideological construct that is produced through adultistic discrimination (Ritz, 2013; Liebel/Meade, 2023). Although individual options for action can certainly be characterized by prejudice, adultism is a socio-political order determined by childhood and adulthood. In this perspective, adultism is not an opinion of individuals based on irrational prejudices, but a rational social order resulting from concrete, strategic decisions within a generational order of a mature adult elite.

Therefore, the article resolves the structure-agency dualism as a separate analysis of structure and agents, but ultimately in a fusion of relational interdependent perspectives of explanatory patterns. Here, a relational approach helps to synthesize the contradictory perspectives on adultism on the one hand as a socio-political phenomenon on the structural level, and on the other hand as a re-product of symbolic interacting subjects on the individual level of inter-agency. The ethnomethodological approach focuses on the micro level and shows the absurdities and paradoxes of social interactions and individual agency. Without a poststructural view of underlying power structures and orders, the agents appear incompetent, deficient, disturbed or evil, and manipulative (Foucault 1994). Even more, from a structural perspective, relational interactionist definitions fall too short. Adultistic practices are not individual options for action but result from structural relationships. Microsociological approaches within Doing Age/Difference complement (post)structuralist theoretical approaches to extend the focus on practices, routines, and interactionist negotiations of different actors (Höppner/Wanka, 2021; West/Fenstermaker, 1995). With an explicit focus on the effectiveness of adultistic structures, exclusively structural perspectives on adultism can not recognize changes or emphasize the evaluative and projective agency of the actors (Emirbayer/Mische,1998). A combination of these approaches generates interrelated subjects as actors with a choice, free will, and possible opportunities as capabilities depending on more or less restricting power structures (Sen, 2007). The poststructural concept of age (Höppner/Wanka, 2021; Schröter, 2018; see Butler, 2001) is combined with a sociological approach of aged-agency (Alanen, 2005). This opens up the possibility of interweaving both approaches to examine firstly, the social functioning and its influence on the construction of difference, and secondly, the interweaving of generational age status with the power-securing structures of age maturity.

## Unknown, Unspoken, and Unseen Practices

Due to the construct of minors or underage, children have been consistently excluded from science, research, and politics which leads to epistemic injustice (Foucault, 1994). Young people lack the opportunity to research their age group and the possibility of conceptualizing adultism or their age identity (Marke, 2021). As a strategy of resistance to discriminatory power structures, those oppressed need spaces and audiences to voice their counter-framings from their culture to

cope with the dominant frame (Feagin, 2006/2020). Young people require environments and structures that allow their expression and constructions of an ethical and epistemic counter-frame that resisted the dominant 'mature adult frame' and in which an alternative and resistant space of thought and experience is estimated. Therefore, it is necessary to involve children's views in the definition of adultism. So far, researchers from different fields have primarily looked at the production of childhood by children themselves (e.g., König/Böttner, 2015; Drake et al., 2021; Ruppin, 2018; Cassidy/Christie, 2014). The overall mechanism from these studies can be reframed as an identity act of subjectification through subjugation due to oppressive adult-centered power structures. In sociological studies, the focus is on structural and social frameworks that create age differences and generational order (Höppner/Wanka, 2021; Alanen, 2005). However, unsurprisingly, adult-led research concentrates less on their practices regarding their "privileges" or the deconstruction of their normative ideal of mature adulthood. Current research projects are less about the demonstrations of power by adults themselves, adultistic narratives, or framings (see Meade, 2020; Prengel, 2013). This approach shifts the prevailing analytical focus away from the marginalized and oppressed subjects and towards the adult actors who benefit directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, from the reproduction of adultistic social structures.

## Intersectional Perspectives From Transdisciplinary Studies

A radical contextualization allows a transdisciplinary knowledge synthesis. The master category of age (here) is thus expanded to include intersectional and other dimensions of inequality such as gender, class, race, and ability, which reinforce marginalization and discrimination. The concept of intersectionality expands the view of the overlaps, interconnections, and superimpositions of this category with other categories which leads to the phenomenon of Othering.[1] Adultism is closely linked to ableism, where discrimination is based on physical disabilities or biological dysfunctions compared to an ideal norm (Kaiser/Pfahl, 2020). Between the two binary poles of socially constructed childhood referring to childishness and adulthood referring to adultishness, other people find themselves differentially positioned.[2] Despite this differential positioning, the binary social structuring between subordination and subjugation persists, and the political and economic interests of the dominant mature-adult group and the various subordinate groups are diametrically opposed (West/Fenstermaker, 1995).

Some integrated transdisciplinary views refer to critical race studies of Feagin (2020), age studies of Höppner and Wanka (2021), and disability studies of Kaiser and Pfahl (2020) and are also based on Butler's (2001) gender studies. Feagin (2006/2020) argues within his systematic race studies to uncover the normative concept of being white to detect the norm behind the exclusive mecha-

nism of doing difference (West/Fenstermaker, 1995). Critical race studies open up strong demands to ban the structural phenomenon of racism and criticize the concept of ethnicity and terms of race. In comparison critical disability studies argue for the recognition of diverse bodies, abilities, and capacities in society (Kaiser/Pfahl, 2020). Contrastingly, they promote the concept of abilities as long as it is not normative or achievement-oriented. Likewise, critical adulthood does not want to ban the state of growth and developing capacities of young persons. They criticize the structures and interactions regarding an exclusive mature-adult framing (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). A person's individual biographical state of growth or the concept of diverse bodies and capacities should be respected in every age-hood. Furthermore, aging and growth could be seen in the light of Butler's (2001) claim for gender diversity, and therefore calling for the respect of age-different identities. Butler conceptualizes gender as the triad of biological sex, social gender, and sexual desire aligned with heteronormativity. Equivalently, age studies (Höppner/Wanka, 2021) differ between calendrical age, social age(hood) or life stage, and age abilities aligned with mature-normativity, and competency-orientation (Marke, 2023a/b). Social chrononorms define specific achievements regarding the calendrical and social age (Wanka/Höppner, 2021). These social concepts of age form one's age identity, well-being, and status. As explained above, the material-bodily appearance of age contributes decisively to the perception and evaluation of age abilities and age status. The ideal age identity is constructed as mature-adulthood with fully and healthy developed physical emotional and social abilities, capacities, and competencies. The granting of maturity appears to be an intangible, constructed, and empirically thin concept that is worth deconstructing in light of the paradoxes of human strength(s) and competencies (Schröter, 2018). For the reason of a 'mature-adult-frame,' a conceptualization of maturity from a hegemonic adult perspective is elementary to be able to understand adultism in a new theoretical frame. In the analysis and conceptualization of the empirically thin concept of maturity or mature adulthood (Fangmeyer/Mierendorff, 2017), there is potential for further research and systematic examination of adultism to define its social influence and function in society like adult privileges and dominance. Thus, new perspectives from gender studies according to Butler (2001), or racial studies according to Feagin (2020) are used for focusing on the power practices of adults like adultistic narratives/mature-adult framings, and integrate them into the collective consciousness. A new conceptualized Theory of Childilization is developed to make adultistic narratives, speech-acts, and framings visible. Childilization uncovers acts and discursive patterns by those (more) privileged of generational ordering as low-positioning, belittling, silencing, and holding down of people categorized within an 'under-age status' of being 'immature'. The decoupling of the terms child/childhood from its ontological, generational, psychological, and biologistic definition would leave behind a meaningless conceptual shell that is neither methodologically reliable nor empirically substantiat-

ed. Despite its lack of significance, being a child remains an influential, normative idea that is considered real by many and as such produces real social effects and consequences. In a theory of Childilization, the concept of childhood is not replaced, but expanded to include the subjective appropriation of this category to describe the dynamics and flexibility of the relationships between the category of difference and the subject as well as the interplay between social structures and individual-based agency. This conceptual extension is an essential aspect for visualizing the social processes between state institutions and civil society actors in the attribution, resistance, and appropriation of the temporary fixation of the meaning of childhood. The New Theoretical Framework includes the deconstruction of concepts supporting adultism such as learning, competencies, and maturity.

## Adultistic Structure Analysis

Structures are hierarchical orders and social trials formed over decades through habits of thoughts and interactions, transformed into shared values and social norms, and visible through public institutions and organizations (West/Fenstermaker, 1995). An adult-centered structure appears to be one of the oldest and most natural in the world. No historical decade can be identified in which children have been in charge (apart from a few underage kings in Ancient Egypt, who were more of a decorative token and were guided by adult interests). Children as "minors" (still) have no civic rights (Gran, 2021). They have historically been defined as private property and means of production (see Aries, 1975) and continue to fulfill this status in functional childhoods, for example in agrarian nations without social security systems. Since the 19th century in industrialized nations and welfare states, the so-called socialization childhoods have developed, which prepare children for their future role as ideal-typical obedient and capable employees and citizens through provision and compulsory education (Bühler-Niederberger et al., 2014). At present, a transition to participatory childhoods is emerging as the norm, where children are encouraged in early daycare and challenged with participatory pedagogy to secure state democracies through values and commitment. In child-centered societies, much attention and social responsibility has recently been placed on children's shoulders as *the* future (Chung/Walsh, 2000).

Aries (1975) discovers the historical trace of the constructions of childhood and speaks of an individually and collectively significant transmission of intellectual concepts for the formation of age identities. In his analysis of medieval writings, he illustrates a division into conceptual phases of life concerning age and its immense importance for people. He describes the historically developed phases of life as "childhood and adolescence, youth and adolescence, old age and senility" (ibid. p. 73) and this also means social expectations and age attributions of vulnerability and carefreeness in childhood, as well as strength and freedom in adulthood. The construct of a child's immaturity, for example, is physically based

on the lack of teeth, which makes it impossible to form words and communicate (ibid., p. 76). In addition to a physical deficit, mental abilities that have not yet been developed or experiences that have not yet been made were also considered as natural social limitations. The first three phases of life are described as phases of playing, exploring, learning, and unraveling before one, as a fully grown but still young person, was able to harvest or pass on this maturity and exploit it economically (ibid., p. 80 ff.). The different years of life are accompanied by different standardized phases of life based on biological, natural, or physical attributions that have been collected over centuries in experiences, abstracted into ideas, transmitted in summary, and anchored in the intellectual concepts of people and society as "mental habits" (ibid., p. 74). These established social constructs have served as frames of reference for generations, which are interactively negotiated and recreated. According to Aries, the attributions and divisions of life phases change depending on the social or economic demands on social subjects and show the political functionality of age constructions for the reproduction of a social, economic or political system.

## Adultistic Narratives and (Counter-)Framings

One focus of the conceptual study is on reconstructing and analyzing recurring patterns of socially and culturally shared argumentation and discourses to map a kind of topography of the dominant stereotypes and topoi (see Keller, 2019). Narratives are meaningful because they offer explanations for an event or an action in the sense of a cause-and-effect relationship, which is woven into a narrative chain of evidence, where contradictory assumprions are also chcracteristic. If the individual topic of a discourse comes together to form a narratable structure, it is called narrative or narrative structure. A narrative is a culturally shared discursive speech act that includes more than sequencing motives or events; rather, these must be in a causal relationship or emerge from one another. Argumentation chains that are woven into such an explanatory context can be traced by analyzing narratives, as they are meaningful stories that assign certain roles to social actors and offer interpretations of cause-effect relationships. By resorting to a storyline, actors can actualize discursive categories of very heterogeneous origin in a more or less coherent cultural context. Some adultistic narratives that appear in the mainstream and topologies of childhood merge into a mature adult framing (Bühler-Niederberger et al., 2014; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Meade, 2020): The narrative of childhood as a phase of development emphasizes that children and young people are not yet fully developed and therefore need to be guided and protected by adults. The narrative of childlike innocence idealizes children as innocent and naive beings. Another narrative constructs children in need of care and protection and emphasizes the responsibility of adults to protect children and young people from negative influences.

The concept of frames was mainly used in cognitive and neurological Sciences

developed to describe perceptual structures. These structures are both in the individual, synaptic connections, and in the collective memory and are inscribed in historical narratives. The concept bridges the contrast between individual and collective as well as between material biological and discursive phenomena to show how people often unconsciously attach meaning to everyday situations. These beliefs are simultaneously incorporated into socio-political ideas and translated into action structures (see Feagin, 2020). This frame, as a socially dominant interpretation pattern, determines ideas of mature adulthood, and rationalizes and legitimizes its social respective generational order. This methodological approach examines adultism both as a material reality and as a symbolic frame of reference. The frame at the macro level stables structural relationships on the micro level, where dynamic individual spaces of interactions are intertwined. This framing permeates all social structures of society and has a concrete material and psychological influence on social reality. The concept therefore fulfills a descriptive and analytical dual function: on the one hand, this frame describes the prerequisites for systemic adultism, on the other hand, it also explains its central reproductive mechanisms.

The 'mature-adult frame' represents the central theoretical hinge with which both the continuity of adultistic oppression and the reproduction of the various social institutions and their routines are analyzed and explained. The frame links seemingly disparate social phenomena and at the same time visualizes a system of adultistic oppression that has been elaborated over centuries and operates on different levels. Mature-adult framing is evident in adultistic narratives, particularly in educational and socialization contexts, but also at a political level (exclusion of minor's rights from National Law, e.g. German Constitutions). Whereas children are portrayed as less than the adult ideal and deficient in terms of their abilities, maturity, and rationality, this becomes visible for example in adults' paternalistic argumentation states—"children can't do that yet," or "You can't expect children to do that." If these adultistic narratives were replaced with other marginalized difference categories such as "women," or "people of color," the irritation and outrage would be more obvious. More subtly and framed with biological, psychological, and ontological assumptions, adultistic narratives seem to be plausible: "I wouldn't let a 5-year-old operate on me" (whereas absurdly, the worldwide structurally forced child labor shows what children are "capable of doing" in the war, sex trade, or industry). These framings of the incompetent/immature child and the mature adult are specific perspectives on how a topic is viewed or presented, while counter-framings offer alternative perspectives to challenge common narratives. A current counter-framing by adults is, for example, the empowerment of children. Children are viewed as competent and active actors who can understand and express their rights and needs. This counter-framing calls for children to be actively involved in decision-making processes and for their abilities and opinions to be recognized. It focuses on the voices and rights of children. It is argued that children should be viewed as equal partners in research and that their experiences

and opinions should be taken into account when developing findings (Esser/Sitter, 2018; Bessell et al., 2017). These framings and counter-framings demonstrate a recent shift toward greater recognition of the rights and capabilities of children and to greater diversity and participation (Feldhaus, 2019). Various adultistic framings and counter-framings can currently be identified in adult professions and arenas of childhood which serve different social functions. The empirical focus lies on the counter-framings by young actors themselves at the end of the paper (Miller, 2013; Marke, 2023a/b).

## Reframed Adultistic Effects

Children also deal with the chrononormative demands and expectations of childhood life phase in external and self attributions: Learning and performance expectations, as well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, are in the foreground for 106 Australian schoolchildren interviewed about identity formation (Drake et al. 2021, p. 107) and also constitute the value of childhood for the children involved in another study from 6 countries (mostly global North) (Cassidy et al. 2017, p. 709 f.). A look at the empirical field of the age status group of children shows that the children surveyed orientate their age identity towards norms such as education, skills, and abilities, which they try to acquire and internalize or fulfill personally. Children actively adopt the prevailing performance orientation and competence normativity into their self-concept and also integrate the negatively experienced adultistic pressure (Drake et al. 2021, p. 105). Concerning a study of the political agency of 70 German daycare children, complicity, rule orientation, and competent compliance appears to be the action strategies of choice over less attractive strategies such as resistance or rebellion in generational arrangements (Ruppin, 2018, p. 29). The fact that the critical questioning of generational order or authorities is not desirable concerning the attainment of citizenship is also recognized and adopted by 133 Scottish students asked about their concepts (Cassidy/Christie, 2014, p. 50 ff.).The impacts and effects of generational ordering practices can be seen in linguistically and physically orchestrated incorporated behavioral dispositions (habitus; Bourdieu, 2005, p. 78) and adapted age identities (Ruppin, 2018; Drake et al., 2021).

The causal conditions of an age-related denial of young persons' agency for the hierarchical devaluation of the age status group of children have the consequences of a disregard for their dignity and identities. Empirical findings underpin the phenomenon and, as a consequence, point to the existential suffering of defamed subjects concerning their inferior ability and being. The generational valorization or devaluation of the self becomes relevant in the creation of social inequalities and in the formation of identity. The concepts of agency, voice, dignity, and identity merge in the context of difference- and status-related citizenship and generational attributions of others and self. Generational forms of adaptation and resistance, as well as

change and crises of children and young people, can be emphasized as a transcendence of agency, voice, dignity, and identity and examined based on a reframing model or counter-framings in the identity-forming evaluation of others and self. As a marker of difference, age permeates all forms of social and societal relationships and shapes both social structures and collective and individual identities. On the other hand, the groups defined by these practices determine their own embodied identification in appropriation, distance, and contradiction to it. Therefore, age is not only state and social attribution but also appropriated self-attribution and identity construction. Age is a category of difference, but at the same time, it is also part of a subjectivation that organizes and enables appropriation, empowerment, and resistance. Resistance is the ability to act against dominant social structures and this is articulated in resistant narratives and epistemic, activist counter-framings which can be underlined by empirical evidence of an international case study.

## Case Study: Counter Framings by Young Actors

### *Results of Observations and Interviews: Adult Teachers' Narratives*

The empirical data within this synthesis is illustrated by a Hawaiian ethnographical case study "A Philosophy of Children's Voices" (Marke, 2023a/b). The study has been conducted since 2022 with the cooperation of Leuphana University of Lüneburg and the University of Hawaii at Manoa. It contains participatory observation at six model schools ($n$=6) at Oahu over one summer semester in 2022. The qualitative research[3] design and ethnography include indigenous and immigrant teacher interviews ($n$=21) and expert interviews ($n$=8) that propagate a progressive educational approach to 'philosophy for children in Hawaii' (p4cHI). There is also an evaluation from children's point of view available (Miller, 2013) which is illustrated as possible counter-framings by young actors.

The ideal goals of p4cHI mentioned by the interviewed adults (teachers, experts) have been empowering children (in their role of students) and putting power-sensible learning structures into weekly practice to cultivate single moments of humanity and equity into a habit and community culture. They expressed the aim for a reframing of learning, like being dependent upon a context in which learners can explore their wonders, needs, and interests rather than conforming to a standardized educational norm. Teachers' community- orientation is based on their assumption that all are capable agents and practicing this through inclusive instruments such as sitting in a circle (Circular arrangement), using a woolen ball (Community Ball) for ordering different statements, voting democratically on children's own questions (Plain Vanilla), or using philosophical rules to reflect on assumptions (Good Thinker's Toolkit). Teachers express new dimensions of a political agency and membership in a mature community that is not based on age or mature-adult framing (e.g., primal wondering, authenticity, true self, speaking from the gut). Teachers explain that they are learning from the students, and they

are learners themselves (e.g., "I learned a lot from you, folks"). There are also some age biases observable around the topic of philosophy, its standards, and criteria about 'what is a juicy or "good" philosophical question' (one expert was questioning if a child's question is philosophical enough, e.g., 'What is your favorite animal and how is it linked to your personality?'). In sum, it was observable among the teachers that they are reframing learning in age-different environments and undoing age differences through thinking together philosophically on shared foci and engaging personally in a shared space and dialogue with personal facets (e.g., one teacher was talking seriously about the daily life of her cat in order to answer the child's philosophical question 'would pets like to be free?'). Their philosophical communication pattern has re-framed educative ordering in an age-different way due to promoting the norm of participation multidimensionally like active listening, being a safe participant, creating new spaces, thinking together, and sharing of ideas as a reconnecting group activity. The Hawaiian case study "Philosophy of Children's Voices" (Marke, 2023a/b) has shown re-framed learning environments and age-different interactions, but also common "generationing" adult-child or teacher-student interactions. The generational guidance of some adults (experts, teachers) in a classroom has been centered around the community-based goal of how to think deeper and better together, and more hidden about what to think. Therefore, Undoing Age was not observable in total, because the adult teacher is still at the center of communication, leadership, responsibility, initiative, and action, explaining the rules and watching and assessing minor students, but the way of interaction and communication in generational arrangements changed. The assessment is a shared process with evaluation criteria from the students and the dialogues are to some extent driven by the children, furthermore, the selection of the topic and questions is in the children's hands. The implemented learning structures and environments have been age-different within this progressive educational approach, but not within a non-progressive school system with no access to equal resources or rights for children. Students are dependent on the goodwill and practice of the teacher. From a short-term perspective, projects or approaches do not change school structures, selective grading, generational order, or adultism, but they help the participants to reject the oppressional interactions and narratives.

## Conclusive Discussion Based on Young Actors' Counter Framings

Backed by an evaluative research study on p4cHI (Miller 2013), the minor participants ($n$=13) expressed that they could build up a re-framed self and group identity in age-different learning environments. They mentioned concerning the experience with p4c "It is a place to be myself," "The teacher is one of us" (ibid., p. 71), and that they liked the peers spurs inquiry, and the pursuit of an examined life. According to Miller (2013), the students re-framed learning similarly to the

teachers' narratives (Marke, 2023a/b) and have been talking about the transformation of knowing and the cultivation of a safe learning environment, the different roles of a teacher as a participant, and the new meaning of learning from each other. Their evaluation appears as possible counter-framings to adultistic narratives and generational ordering in education. "Yeah…there's that stress level of school that does not exist in this class" (ibid., p. 73). "We're a community and I'm not above you, I'm not below you, I'm with you at your level" (ibid., p. 73) "You were so confused as we were too, and we could tell that you weren't lying about it." (ibid., p. 95). The circular seating arrangement and the community ball reframe the situation and power hierarchy symbolically and structure their interactions without having an omniscient adult teacher in the center of power and attention. The p4c experience was linked to feelings and emotions like joy, fun, connection, equality, vibration, and being free from fear and stress. Comparatively, the qualitative research project about the Scottish COOL music project reconceptualizes adultism similarly (Sutherland et al., 2023). They concluded that community-based ethical performances, in-group-interdependency, and a reframing of learning are key elements for breaking up with adultistic narratives, practices, and framings.

Regarding children's rights, Lundy's (2007) conceptualization of article 12 of the UN-CRC and 'children's right to be heard' shows the dimensions of space, audience, voice, and influence to fulfill the UN norm of participating or taking part. The agency-based research design could detect the emotional importance of being part of a maturing community and an intellectual debate, and having their various voices and ideas respectfully taken into account. The observation category of being emotionally and intellectually connected, 'shared vibe,' was one impact of p4c lessons, and for these moments meaningful enough for the children. Nevertheless, it could be dangerous and harmful for those oppressed to take part in an emotionalized educational environment and asymmetric generational arrangements (compulsory schooling) where adult teachers are occurring as equal friends while gaining all of the power and benefits in the background while children are still in a vulnerable, exploited position until they reach 18. Even within existing age-different learning environments and enabling of children's counter-framings, in the end within unequal legal power structures, education has the same goal to socialize children in adults' interest.

Socio-political power structures prevent actor-centered anti-adultism projects like progressive education (p4cHI) from becoming overall effective. However, research shows that these projects enable their participants to resist adultistic narratives and performances by refusing its language and practices. As an effort, research gains ideas of age-different environments and structures, and ideas of relational thinking, and counter-framings within generational arrangements. To analyze the inertia and reproduction of adult domination, interactions at the actor level are of interest to record alternative action strategies and possible counter-framings by the young actors themselves.

## Notes

[1] For example, white Christian native children from the middle class experience adultism, but in comparison they enjoy a higher social status due to their construction of an ideal childhood and receive more benefits and resources than the 'others' like poor children with a history of migration, different religions, sexual orientations, or of different colors (West/Fenstermaker).

[2] The social concepts of ages are also paradigmatic for the oppression and infantilization of >>"immature/"maldeveloped" people<< who therefore appear small or childlike. For example, people with handicaps or diagnoses of personality disorders like emotional dysregulation (BPD), dependency (DPD), voice dysfunction, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), senility, or dwarfism a short body height.

[3] The data analysis which is shown here comes from the first wave analysis. There are currently more participants taking part in the research with the focus on teacher's narratives and framings.

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# Protection Is Insufficient

*J. Cynthia McDermott*

## Abstract

What are the rights for children, when did they move to a formal perspective and who was responsible? Eglantyne Jebb, her sister Dorothy Buxton and Janusz Korczak each at different times began to recognize the need to articulate a universal platform which eventually led to the creation of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Jebb and Buxton co-founded the Save the Children Fund in 1919, and they worked together on early initiatives to address the needs of children affected by the aftermath of World War I. Today Jebb is best known for her role in founding that organization and for drafting the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. This declaration written by Jebb laid the foundation for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was later adopted in 1989. The CRC outlines a comprehensive set of rights for children. Establishing children's rights goes beyond mere protection and involves recognizing and affirming that children, like adults, have inherent rights. These rights encompass various aspects of a child's life, including the right to life, health, education, play, expression, and protection from discrimination. The concept of children's rights asserts that children are individuals with their own needs, perspectives, and entitlements. Children are not private property but a public responsibility. To expand our democratic project to children is to grant them the security the right seeks

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to deny them: education, health care, shelter, food. A better America begins with the child and protecting them is not sufficient to empower them.

*I should want to make clear to them only this - that the road is theirs to choose, freely.*

— Janusz Korczak, July 1942

It is curious to imagine adults believing that children and young people have worth. Not too long ago, at least in the western world, a child was seen as a possession, the responsibility of the father and his property. Children were expected to follow the expectations of the family or the community and often lived difficult lives. Today things are different and perhaps better in some parts of the world and for the purpose of the conversation about adultism, two individuals come to mind as provocateurs who challenged this status quo. There are others of course, but looking back to the beginning of a movement to create support for children's rights as formalized action we need to look at Eglantyne Jebb, her sister and a Polish doctor, Henrick Goldsmitz (aka Korzcak).

The history of the development of children's rights begins with the charity work of many women who came from well-to-do families. Picture the life of a woman in pre-World War I living at home in very comfortable means. This is a period of history that begins a feminist perspective allowing women to step out of the home to demonstrate their administrator and organizing skills. One half a million British women by the turn of the century felt the pull of what was variously called philanthropy, voluntarism, social work and public works and in the most extreme case slumming, which involved putting on a disguise and living amongst the poor. Why do this? Hundreds of women and some men committed to working with the poor and children in order to create better living conditions both in Europe and the United States. After World War I there was much poverty and disease across Europe. Many women were horrified by the conditions they saw particularly for children and women.

Eglantyne Jebb was born in 1876 in Ellesmere, Shropshire, daughter of Arthur Jebb and his wife and cousin, Eglantyne Louisa Jebb, and grew up at "The Lyth," her family's estate. The Jebbs were a well-off family with a strong social conscience and commitment to public service. Their commitment had more to do with philanthropy and social work similar to the universal actions of the settlement house movement. In some cases, these actions indeed had an influence on social reform but in the main, many of the efforts of these organizations were designed to alleviate the immediate results of poverty such as a lack of safe housing, food and education.

Linda Mahood's treatise is a most complete account of her life. Jebb had the opportunity to leave her home and attend school, choosing at one point to become a teacher. She found that work to be unsatisfactory so moved forward into the reform/social work realm. What is most important in looking at her life and her

trajectory toward supporting children is simply her actions to create a precursor to the children's rights statements. How did that happen and why is Jebb given credit for its development?

Jebb is an unlikely candidate to challenge the adultism of her day. As Mahood states, historians of late-Victorian women and girls have shown that it was from within the confines of the largely female-dominated sphere of literary societies, at-home teas and charity bazaars that many remarkable women emerged as pioneers in the new female professions of education, medicine, social work and politics. Eglantyne and her sisters were among such women (55).

One key collaborator was her sister, Dorothy Buxton. Together they eventually co-founded the Save the Children Fund in 1919, and they worked together on early initiatives to address the needs of children affected by the aftermath of World War I. Their efforts to provide humanitarian aid to children in distress eventually evolved into a broader advocacy for children's rights but began as protection for children. More than 100 years later this organization is still at the forefront of advocating for children.

Nina Boyle was also important collaborator and supporter of Jebb in the early days of the Save the Children Fund. While Jebb and Buxton co-founded the organization in 1919, Boyle played a significant role in shaping its policies and activities and was a co-founder of Save the Children and served on its executive committee.

Boyle was a social reformer and activist, and she shared Eglantyne Jebb's passion for improving the welfare of children. Together with Jebb, Boyle worked to address the immediate needs of children affected by the devastating consequences of World War I. Save the Children was initially established to provide emergency relief to children in war-torn Europe, focusing on nutrition, healthcare, and education.

In addition to Jebb, Buxton, and Boyle, there were other early supporters and collaborators who played key roles in the establishment and growth of the Save the Children Fund. Some notable figures include:

**Mabel Marie Stock:** Mabel Stock was another co-founder of Save the Children and served on its executive committee. She contributed to the organization's early efforts to provide relief to children affected by the aftermath of World War I.

**Dorothy Hutchinson:** Dorothy Hutchinson was involved in the early days of Save the Children and served on its executive committee. She, along with other members, worked on implementing the organization's initiatives to alleviate the suffering of children in post-war Europe.

**Gladys Buxton:** Another sister of Eglantyne Jebb and Dorothy Buxton, Gladys Buxton, supported the work of Save the Children and was engaged in the organization's activities.

While Jebb is often credited as the driving force behind the drafting of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the establishment of Save the Children,

it's important to recognize the collective efforts of these early supporters. They worked together to address the immediate needs of children in crisis and laid the groundwork for the organization's broader mission to advocate for the rights and well-being of children worldwide.

Lady Ishbel Aberdeen (née Ishbel Maria Marjoribanks), also known as Lady Aberdeen, was a prominent social reformer and philanthropist who played a significant role in various charitable and humanitarian causes, including the welfare of children. While Lady Aberdeen was not directly involved in the drafting of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, her work aligns with the broader efforts to improve the lives of children during the early 20th century.

Here are some aspects of Lady Ishbel Aberdeen's contributions:

**International Council of Women (ICW):** Lady Aberdeen served as the president of the International Council of Women (ICW) from 1893 to 1899. The ICW is an organization that advocates for women's rights and social reform. While her leadership in the ICW predates the specific work on the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the ICW has historically been involved in issues related to the welfare of children.

**Advocacy for Children's Welfare:** Lady Aberdeen was known for her advocacy on behalf of children. Her work included efforts to improve child welfare, education, and health. Her commitment to social reform and her involvement in various organizations placed her in circles where discussions about the well-being of children were taking place.

**Influence on Social Policies:** Lady Aberdeen's influence extended to her role as the Viceregal Consort of Canada when her husband, Lord Aberdeen, served as Governor General of Canada from 1893 to 1898. During this time, she was active in social reform initiatives and advocated for policies that aimed to improve the conditions of women and children.

While Aberdeen may not have played a direct role in the specific events surrounding the drafting of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, her broader contributions to social reform and her advocacy for the welfare of children align with the concerns and values shared by those who worked towards the rights and well-being of children during that era.

Aberdeen, as the president of the International Council of Women (ICW) from 1893 to 1899, was instrumental in the creation of the "Preamble and Charter" during the second quinquennial meeting of the ICW held in London in 1899. The document is often referred to as the "London Preamble and Charter."

The Preamble and Charter represented a significant statement of principles and goals for the International Council of Women. It outlined the organization's commitment to promoting the well-being and rights of women and children. While the charter primarily focused on women's rights, it also recognized the interconnectedness of women's and children's welfare.

Key principles and objectives outlined in the Preamble and Charter included:

**Equal Rights:** The document affirmed the principle of equal rights for women and recognized the importance of securing for women "the highest opportunities and privileges."

**Social and Economic Justice:** It emphasized the importance of social and economic justice for women, acknowledging that these principles were essential for the general well-being of society.

**Educational Opportunities:** The charter advocated for improved educational opportunities for women, recognizing education as a crucial factor in promoting their welfare and advancement.

**Protection of Children:** While the focus was primarily on women, the charter also acknowledged the importance of protecting and nurturing children, highlighting the interdependence of women's and children's well-being.

The London Preamble and Charter served as a foundational document for the International Council of Women, guiding its activities and advocacy efforts. It reflected the progressive social values of the time and contributed to the broader movements for women's rights and social reform. While it may not be as well-known as some other historical documents, the charter played a role in shaping the agenda of the International Council of Women and, by extension, contributed to discussions on women's and children's rights.

While the London Preamble and Charter, created by Aberdeen during the second quinquennial meeting of the International Council of Women (ICW) in 1899, was primarily focused on women's rights, its influence on children's rights can be seen in the broader context of social reform and advocacy for the well-being of both women and children.

**Recognition of Interconnected Rights:** The charter recognized the interconnectedness of women's and children's rights. By emphasizing the importance of social and economic justice for women and the need for protection and nurturing of children, it implicitly acknowledged that the well-being of women and children was linked. This recognition laid the groundwork for later movements and documents specifically addressing children's rights.

**Early Advocacy for Child Welfare:** While not explicitly centered on children, the charter demonstrated a commitment to the welfare of families and communities. As part of the broader social reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the document contributed to a growing awareness of the need to address issues affecting children, such as education, health, and protection from exploitation.

**Influence on Subsequent Movements:** The principles espoused in the London Preamble and Charter aligned with the broader social and humanitarian movements of the time. As the 20th century progressed, the growing recognition of children's unique rights and needs became more explicit, leading to the development of specific declarations and conventions on children's rights.

While the direct impact of the London Preamble and Charter on the development of children's rights may not be as pronounced as later documents like the Declaration of the Rights of the Child or the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it contributed to a progressive and rights-oriented mindset that influenced subsequent generations of activists, reformers, and policymakers. The charter, with its emphasis on justice, education, and protection for women and children, played a part in shaping the evolving discourse on human rights and the rights of vulnerable populations (retrieved from Chat GPT, December 7, 2023).

Today Jebb is best known for her role in founding Save the Children and for drafting the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. This declaration written by Jebb laid the foundation for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was later adopted in 1989. The CRC outlines a comprehensive set of rights for children, including the following key principles:

**Right to Survival:** Every child has the inherent right to life and governments must ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of the child.

**Right to Development:** Children have the right to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development.

**Right to Protection:** Children have the right to protection from all forms of neglect, exploitation, and abuse. This includes protection from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.

**Right to Participation:** Children have the right to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and should be encouraged to express their opinions and to have those opinions taken into account in matters that affect them.

**Right to Respect:** The child, for the full and harmonious development of their personality, deserves respect for their dignity and should be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship, and universal brotherhood.

These principles reflect the fundamental rights and protections that children around the world should be entitled to, and they serve as a guide for policymakers and advocates working on children's issues globally.

Jebb's purpose in creating the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and, later, in advocating for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was to establish a set of universal principles that would protect and promote the well-being of children worldwide. Her work was driven by a deep concern for the welfare of children, particularly those who were vulnerable and disadvantaged. Jebb drafted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1923 as a response to the harsh conditions and suffering experienced by children in the aftermath of World War I. Her intention was to raise awareness about the need for international cooperation to protect and promote the rights of children.

The principles outlined in these documents were intended to serve as a moral and legal framework, emphasizing that children have fundamental rights that should be protected and respected by society and governments. Jebb's vision was to create a world where every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, would have the opportunity to grow, develop, and thrive in a supportive and nurturing environment.

Her efforts contributed significantly to the global recognition of children's rights as a crucial aspect of human rights, and the CRC, influenced by her work, has been widely adopted and ratified by countries around the world. The CRC remains a landmark international treaty that sets standards for the protection and well-being of children, reflecting the enduring impact of Jebb's advocacy and commitment to the rights of the child.

While Jebb was the primary architect of the initial declaration, it's important to note that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which expanded and formalized the principles, was a collaborative effort involving representatives from various countries, international organizations, and child rights advocates. The CRC was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and has since become the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. A second and meaningful effort toward the rights for children effort was done my Henryk Goldszmit (Janusz Korczak, 1878-1942) who was a Polish medical doctor living in Warsaw.In Poland during the Nazi occupation, a doctor, educator and writer opened orphanages for Jewish children. His name was Henryk Goldszmit and his pen name was Janusz Korczak. With a unique view of childhood and children, he set out to define the role that children can play in the world. He believed fervently that children were not people waiting to become adults but rather had rights and privileges akin to adults. To him, young people were already citizens and social actors.

Goldszmit wrote about these ideas, but more importantly put them into action with the children. Together, the young people created a government structure, a newspaper, a juris prudence system and many other ways of self-management. This was indeed a democratic process, ironically taking place within a ghetto. As a doctor and a rebel against the German occupation, he maintained the orphanage for more than 200 children until 1942. That year, he and the children were taken to Treblinka Extermination Camp and all murdered. This hero fought for the freedom and liberty of his orphans and gave his life in protest.

Goldszmit's work is highly regarded, even if largely forgotten. UNESCO declared 1978-79 the Year of Korczak to coincide with the Year of the Child and the centenary of his birth. Today, a national organization meets yearly to discuss his work and read these writings. The most remarkable outcome of his ideas was the ongoing influence he had on the eventual creation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, or CRC. Ratified by the United Nations general assembly in 1989, Korczak's ideas remain embedded within the CRC as a reminder that children

have rights, can use those rights and can be accountable for the actions they take. The United States government played an active role in the drafting of the convention and signed it on 16 February 1995, but has not ratified it. It has been claimed that American opposition to the convention stems primarily from political and religious conservatives who are concerned about the potential loss of power of parents over their children.

***Declaration of Rights*** by Janusz Korczak

Children are not people of tomorrow; they are people today

- The child has the right to love.
- The child has the right to respect.
- The child has the right to optimal conditions in which to grow and develop.
- The child has the right to live in the present.
- The child has the right to be himself or herself.
- The child has the right to make mistakes.
- The child has the right to fail.
- The child has the right to be taken seriously.
- The child has the right to be appreciated for what he is.
- The child has the right to desire, to claim, to ask.
- The child has the right to have secrets.
- The child has the right to a lie, a deception, a theft.
- The child has the right to respect for his possessions and budget.
- The child has the right to education.
- The child has the right to resist educational influence that conflicts with his or her own beliefs.
- The child has the right to protest an injustice.
- The child has the right to a Children's Court where he can judge and be judged by his peers.
- The child has the right to be defended in the juvenile-justice court system.
- The child has the right to respect for his grief.
- The child has the right to commune with God.

It is clear that the point of view of Korczak provides a clear distinction between the protection of children and establishing their rights, although both concepts are interconnected and contribute to the overall well-being of children. For

the movement to critique adultism it is essential to think about these two concepts particularly as they relate to the on the ground interactions with youth.

Protection of children refers to safeguarding their well-being and ensuring that they are shielded from harm, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. This includes measures to provide a safe and supportive environment in which children can grow and develop. Protection efforts often involve legal, social, and institutional mechanisms aimed at preventing harm and responding to situations where children are at risk.

Examples of measures for the protection of children include child protection laws, social services intervention in cases of abuse or neglect, and efforts to create safe spaces for children in communities and institutions. Protecting children is a fundamental aspect of ensuring their safety and security.

Establishing children's rights goes beyond mere protection and involves recognizing and affirming that children, like adults, have inherent rights. These rights encompass various aspects of a child's life, including the right to life, health, education, play, expression, and protection from discrimination. The concept of children's rights asserts that children are individuals with their own needs, perspectives, and entitlements.

The establishment of children's rights often involves legal frameworks, international treaties, and conventions that explicitly outline the rights to which every child is entitled. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a comprehensive international treaty that delineates the rights of children and sets standards for their protection, development, and participation.

In summary, while the protection of children focuses on ensuring their safety and shielding them from harm, establishing children's rights goes further by affirming the entitlement of children to certain fundamental rights and recognizing them as autonomous individuals with specific needs and interests. The two concepts are complementary, and efforts to safeguard children's well-being often involve a combination of protective measures and the recognition of their rights.

But this is history when the UN and Jebbs and Korzcak came to understand that children needed to recognized. Today however a new phenomenon is occurring framed around parent's rights. As Jones (2023) reports in the Intelligencer, this latest adultist move is taking us back a hundred years. So as we argue in this journal to move children's rights further to the center, Jones reminds us to beware.

> Conservatives betray a conviction that a child is the property of parents. Because parents own their children, they can dispose of the child as they see fit. They can deny them evidence-based medical care. They can put a child to work. They can make sure a child is sheltered from the dangers of a serious education. When a child goes hungry, that's because a parent isn't caring for their property—and what a person does with their property is their right.
>
> Like any piece of property, a child has value to conservative activists. They are key to a future the conservative wants to win. Parental rights are merely one path

> to the total capture of state power and the imposition of an authoritarian hierarchy on us all. So it's no surprise that children have long been a fixation to the right wing.

Children are not dogs to train but adults in formation. They will learn, someday soon, that the future belongs to them. What they do with that knowledge matters to everyone. Children aren't private property, then, but a public responsibility. To expand our democratic project to children is to grant them the security the right seeks to deny them: education, health care, shelter, food. A better America begins with the child.

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# Adultocentrismo, adultismo y violencias contra niños y niñas: Una mirada critica sobre las relaciones de poder entre clases de edad

*Santiago Morales*

## Resumen

La necesidad de terminar con la opresión que caracteriza a las relaciones sociales entre clases de edad ha llevado a diferentes investigadores e investigadoras a esgrimir dos categorías que pretenden comprender y explicar ese fenómeno para transformarlo. Nos referimos a los conceptos adultismo y adultocentrismo. Si bien resulta alentador el hecho de que cada vez son más utilizados en el campo de los estudios sociales sobre infancia, creemos que en buena medida se los esgrime por motivos más prácticos que teóricos, haciendo de ellos un uso intuitivo. De aquí que el objetivo de este artículo sea ofrecer una posible delimitación teórico-conceptual de dichas categorías, e incorporar la noción de violencia adultista para evidenciar el carácter invisible y sistémico de la opresión adulta. Para ello, hemos intentado desplegar un abordaje crítico e interseccional.

En la introducción aclaramos sucintamente qué entendemos por adultismo y adultocentrismo e invitamos a desnaturalizar la concepción contemporánea de niñez. Luego, en la primera parte, presentamos doce tesis sobre adultocentrismo, desagregamos la noción de edad describiendo las subcategorías que la componen y ubicamos al adultocentrismo como un engranaje más del complejo sistema de opresiones múltiples que nos violenta a las mayorías. Por último, en la segunda parte del artículo, tras definir qué entendemos por adultismo y reseñar las violencias adultistas de alta intensidad, describimos analíticamente trece formas de violencia adultista de intensidad media y baja que de manera invisible y/o implícita agravian la dignidad y vulneran los derechos de los niños y niñas.

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## Introducción

*"Cuando sea grande voy a tratar de no olvidarme de que una vez fui chico"*
—Elsa Borneman

Valga como advertencia, no es nuestra intención construir una teoría general del adultocentrismo y el adultismo. De ser posible ello, para nada será el resultado de una publicación individual de quien escribe, un adulto varón cis hetero eurodescendiente, sin discapacidad y habitante de la ciudad más rica de Argentina (reparando también en las relaciones de colonialismo interno que países como Argentina mantienen con otros países de la región). Describo mi lugar de enunciación porque como viene siendo señalado tanto por los estudios decoloniales (Mignolo, 1993) como por los feminismos decoloniales (Curiel, 2014) resulta decisivo cuestionar y visibilizar los privilegios de quienes construimos conocimiento. Pero complementariamente, considerando la necesidad aún latente de descolonizar el pensamiento (Dussel, 2015) es muy probable que mi origen latinoamericano se vuelva un limitante para dialogar de igual a igual con las producciones académicas del norte global sobre el tema. Asimismo, y por último, resulta necesario advertir sobre los posibles sesgos epistémicos que se desprenden del hecho de que una persona adulta analice y escriba sobre adultocentrismo, adultismo y violencias contra los niños y niñas.

En cualquier caso, desmenuzar la constelación de poder que se encripta en la categoría adultocentrismo y que se expresa en las violencias adultistas será producto de una gran diversidad de estudios situados y elaboraciones colectivas tanto intergeneracionales como radicalmente plurales. No obstante, consideramos valioso y necesario contribuir con trabajos que sean a la vez críticos y autocríticos, pretendidamente generales pero no universalizables, y que intenten convidar el trabajo hecho sin perder la humildad.

Cabe reconocer, finalmente, que las conclusiones -parciales y abiertas- a las que arribamos en este trabajo, no son solamente el resultado de reflexiones y (re)lecturas teóricas. Son también el producto de más de quince años de acompañamiento a niños y niñas de sectores populares, en Buenos Aires, en el marco de procesos participativos y de organización colectiva. Allí, hemos buscado privilegiar la escucha y observar analíticamente—con rigurosidad y compromiso—las relaciones de poder inter e intrageneracionales. Dicha proximidad con la niñez ha tenido lugar tanto desde la militancia territorial en procesos de educación popular de inspiración freireana, como desde el trabajo de campo enmarcado en investigaciones académicas individuales y colectivas. Fue gracias a compartir la vida con niños y niñas de sectores populares que advertimos la urgencia con la que es necesario transformar el modelo hegemónico de adultez: porque la afirmación de dicho modelo trae aparejada la negación de la dignidad de los niños y niñas en general, y de sectores populares en particular.

### *Demarcación conceptual entre adultocentrismo y adultismo*

Si bien cada vez se usan más los conceptos adultismo y adultocentrismo en el campo de los estudios sociales sobre infancia, en buena medida todavía no hay consenso sobre la definición y/o diferenciación de ambas categorías. En muchos casos, como afirma Rodríguez Pascual (2023), suele hacerse un uso de tipo intuitivo de estos conceptos, es decir, se los esgrime por motivos más prácticos que teóricos.

Entre quienes sí usan dichas categorías con fines teóricos, encontramos al menos cuatro diferencias que nos parece relevante destacar. Algunos autores, para analizar las relaciones de poder intergeneracionales, prefieren la categoría adultismo (por ejemplo Flasher, 1978; Bell, 1995; Fletcher, 2015). A su vez, otros -inversamente- se dedicaron al estudio del adultocentrismo (Goode, 1986; Petr, 1992; Duarte Quapper, 2012, 2015; Vásquez, 2013; Florio, Caso y Castelli, 2020; Vásquez y Bravo, 2021) no incorporando el adultismo a su análisis (salvo, en algunos casos, mediante mínimas menciones). Por su parte, hay quienes usan indistintamente adultismo y adultocentrismo, con aproximaciones conceptuales que los ubican como sinónimos (Abood, 2009; Cussiánovich, 2009; LeFrançois, 2014; Liebel, 2022, 2023; Shabel, en prensa). Y, por último, hay quienes creemos necesario y útil diferenciar su significado en base a una sólida demarcación teórico-conceptual (Rodríguez Tramolao, 2013; Alexgaias, 2014; Morales y Magistris, 2018, 2021; Magistris, 2022; Rodríguez Pascual, 2023).

Resulta necesario, adicionalmente, diferenciar adultocentrismo y adultismo de otro concepto importante que nombra la desigualdad basada en la edad, pero que no es objeto de este artículo: nos referimos al edadismo. Suele utilizarse la categoría edadismo (Butler, 1980; Levin y Levin, 1980) para nombrar la discriminación contra las personas adultas mayores en razón de la edad, en función de la cual se las estereotipa, mitifica, desaprueba y/o evita (Butler, 1980). En otras palabras, la categoría edadismo está fuertemente asociada al prejuicio institucional e individual contra las personas adultas mayores. Por eso no la incorporamos a nuestro análisis.

La demarcación conceptual de adultocentrismo y adultismo que guía este trabajo ha sido elaborada en buena medida junto a Gabriela Magistris; y ha sido refrendada más recientemente por Marta Martínez Muñoz. Reconocerlo es justo y necesario.

Tanto la necesidad de diferenciación de cada categoría como la orientación del sentido asignado a cada una, se sostiene en tres apoyos que consideramos significativo explicitar. Un primer fundamento lo encontramos en un fanzine publicado en 2014 a manos de una distribuidora anarquista autogestiva llamada Polaris. Dicho material, titulado “El manifiesto antiadultista” fue escrito por un joven de 17 años de edad del País Vasco que firmó bajo el seudónimo Alexanthropos Alexgaias. Destaco sus 17 años porque, si bien ser legalmente

"mayor de edad" no te exime de ser objeto de limitaciones o impedimentos asociados a la subalternización en la que se encuentran las nuevas generaciones, no haber pasado el umbral-frontera de los 18 años es un condicionante simbólico muy importante. Superados los 18 años de edad, vemos las cosas (y somos vistos) de un modo muy diferente. Pero más allá de su edad, recomendamos su lectura porque se trata de un sólido trabajo de definición y delimitación del objeto de análisis que resulta por demás esclarecedor. En el Manifiesto, dicho autor explica de este modo qué es el adultismo:

> El adultismo es un tipo de discriminación por edad (llamada genéricamente "etarismo" o "edadismo") se define como la discriminación llevada a cabo por les adultes contra les jóvenes. Paraos a pensadlo unos momentos: ¿cuántas veces os han impuesto ideas, puntos de vista, maneras de ser y comportarse... simplemente por el hecho de ser niñes? ¿Cuántas veces han dado por sentado que, en igualdad de condiciones, una persona de más edad es más inteligente que vosotres? ¿Cuántas veces os han obligado y enseñado a guardar respeto o acatar la autoridad de vuestres mayores... ¡por el simple hecho de ser mayores!? Me figuro que muchas. Estos son, pues, ejemplos de comportamientos adultistas. (Alexgaias, 2014, p. 7)

Y a continuación, sostiene que:

> El adultocentrismo es el sistema en el que se encuadra la lógica del adultismo. Es decir, es la construcción jerárquica mediante la cual, les adultes (y, más en concreto, les adultes de entre 30 y 50 años) son el centro de la sociedad, la cual está construída en base a sus términos, ideas, prejuicios y tópicos. (Alexgaias, 2014, p. 7)

Hasta donde tengo conocimiento, es la única publicación en español escrita por una persona por debajo de los 18 años de edad sobre este tema. Por lo tanto, nos parece una referencia no sólo ineludible, sino que es fundamental valorar y un ejemplo claro de que el conocimiento no siempre transita de "arriba hacia abajo" sino que debemos problematizar esas lógicas. Dicho de otra forma, creemos que hay que apostar por una actitud no adultista para tomar como referencia un texto no académico de un jóven.

Un segundo esfuerzo teórico que también consideramos de referencia ineludible lo encontramos en el trabajo del sociólogo chileno Claudio Duarte Quapper, quien en 2015 publicó su tesis doctoral titulada "El adultocentrismo como paradigma y sistema de dominio". En ella ofrece una sólida elaboración de la categoría adultocentrismo desde una perspectiva sociológica crítica. Y si bien a lo largo de las 455 páginas que componen dicha tesis menciona solo dos o tres veces la categoría adultismo, deja presentada la diferencia entre ambos conceptos en el sentido que aquí le asignamos.

En la geopolítica global del conocimiento, como está ampliamente estudiado (Lander, 2016) siempre sucede que los conceptos se "inventan" y definen en

Europa o EEUU, para luego -en el mejor de los casos- ampliarse o discutirse desde América Latina y/o el sur global. Por eso nos resulta especialmente interesante defender la posibilidad de que entre un niño-joven y un latinoamericano del fin del mundo definan cómo aproximarnos a un determinado fenómeno que tiene presencia en el mundo entero.

El tercer y último apoyo nos lo brindan los estudios de género, ya que toda la teoría crítica elaborada desde enfoques feministas se ha ido constituyendo en una gran caja de herramientas que nos va permitiendo (quizás invitando a) aproximarnos con mayores facilidades al cuestionamiento tanto del adultocentrismo como de otros sistemas de dominio. De manera que la relación entre adultocentrismo y adultismo es análoga a la establecida entre patriarcado y machismo. Dicho de otra manera, *el adultismo es al adultocentrismo lo que el machismo es al patriarcado*. Y lo mismo, veremos más adelante, podemos afirmar de la relación categorial entre violencia adultista y violencia machista. (Véase la Tabla 1).

Presentadas sintéticamente tanto la necesidad de diferenciación como la orientación del sentido de cada categoría, avanzaremos argumentando sobre la necesidad de desnaturalizar la concepción de infancia para luego profundizar en una conceptualización más detallada de adultocentrismo y adultismo.

### *Desnaturalizar la niñez*

No existe una esencia o naturaleza infantil asociada a la fragilidad, la inocencia, la pureza y la dependencia. Dicha representación, nueva en términos históricos (pues tiene entre tres y cuatro siglos), contrasta con la enorme pluralidad de formas en que los niños y niñas viven su infancia hoy. Desde hace por lo menos tres décadas se viene afirmando que la niñez es una construcción socio-histórica (Ariès, 1981; Donzelot, 1990; Rodriguez y Mannarelli, 2007; Jackson Albarrán y Sosenski, 2012). Que no es posible definir de modo universal y determinante ni qué es la niñez ni qué comportamientos o características resultan a priori "normales" y cuáles "anormales" (Colángelo, 2003).

Sin embargo, para el sentido común existe un único modo de vivir la

**Tabla 1**
***Equivalencia categorial entre los estudios de género y el campo conocido como estudios sociales sobre infancia***

| *CATEGORÍA GÉNERO* | *CATEGORÍA EDAD* |
|---|---|
| PATRIARCADO | ADULTOCENTRISMO |
| MACHISMO | ADULTISMO |
| VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO / VIOLENCIA MACHISTA | VIOLENCIA ADULTISTA |

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

infancia, es decir, existe una infancia hegemónica (Cordero Arce, 2015). Está tan instalada esa idea que para referirse a quienes no se ajustan a dicho parámetro resuenan expresiones como "niños y niñas sin niñez" o "niños y niñas que han perdido su infancia". Esa definición generalizada de niñez está poco asociada a determinaciones naturales: se explica fundamentalmente en tanto resultado de procesos socio-históricos, económicos y culturales, y de disputas por imponer una visión particular que se erija como legítima y universal. Por eso afirmamos que la niñez es plural, diversa, múltiple (Szulc et al, 2023). Cambia de país en país, de región en región, de pueblo en pueblo. No es igual criarse en un departamento del centro de la Ciudad de México que en el medio de la selva amazónica. Pero tampoco es lo mismo vivir la niñez en la ruralidad andina de Bolivia o Perú que en la periferia de Montevideo; o hacerlo en un barrio rico de Santiago de Chile, o en una villa miseria en Argentina. La inmensa pluralidad de circunstancias en que los niños y niñas nacen y transcurren sus días vuelve -desde ya- inadecuado considerar que existe *una* niñez: hay niñas, niños, niñes travesti trans y no binaries, afrodecendientes, migrantes, indígenas, con discapacidad, sin cuidados parentales, en situación de calle, en contextos de encierro, campesinos, urbanos y periurbanos, ricos y pobres, maltratados y libres, felices e infelices.

Si como afirma Cordero Arce (2015) resulta al menos espurio aproximarse a una comprensión de la niñez de hoy desconociendo a las infancias de sociedades cazadoras-recolectoras (que constituyen más del 90% de la historia del homo sapiens y más del 99% de la historia filogenética de nuestra especie), es necesario indagar en torno a las claves explicativas que nos permiten comprender cómo y para qué se constituyó la representación de niñez hegemónica en nuestras sociedades. En parte eso hacemos al preguntarnos por las categorías adultocentrismo y adultismo. Porque con sólo destacar dos aspectos que han caracterizado a ese 90% de la historia de la niñez homo sapiens, se comprenderá la necesidad de analizar con mirada crítica los conocimientos y sentidos construidos sobre los niños y niñas de hoy:

> (I) que durante ese largo período los niños y niñas han participado en las actividades económicas desde los tres o cuatro años de edad;
>
> y (II) que han gozado de una autonomía e independencia tan radicalmente diferente a la de las sociedades contemporáneas que de conocerla nos costaría creer que los niños y niñas puedan vivir así sin morir en el intento. En este sentido, Liebel (2019) plantea que "el concepto de una infancia separada de la vida de los adultos, "libre" de tareas productivas, pero también marginada de la sociedad, surgió paralelamente al "descubrimiento" y a la colonización del mundo fuera de Europa" (p. 48). Es decir, la idea moderna de infancia no sólo surge y se desarrolla en paralelo con el proceso de colonización, sino que fue construida como una forma de conquista de un territorio extranjero, desconocido, vacío, natural e incivilizado. (Liebel, 2019)

Este vínculo originario entre colonización y concepción de infancia nos permite trazar un hilo explicativo entre infancia hegemónica y modo eurocentrado, patriarcal y adultocéntrico de definirla. Es decir, la infancia "normal", "sana", "sin patología" es aquella que se parece a la vida de un niño (varón cis) de clase acomodada europeo: sin autonomía, sin responsabilidades, siempre alegre, inocente, solo ocupado en jugar y estudiar, inexperimentado e incompleto (Morales y Magistris, 2018). Si bien, como decíamos, no hay una única forma de vivir la niñez, la matriz de pensamiento adultocéntrica y toda la trama de relaciones de subalternización propias de este sistema de opresiones múltiples (Lugones, 2003), logra instalar un parámetro de lo esperable, construyendo así un horizonte de posibilidad que diferencia la infancia "normal" de la patológica. Por eso, en buena medida, la niñez de América Latina y El Caribe, en tanto subalterna, se encuentra patologizada por el norte global.

Reconocer que el modo de vivir la infancia de los niños y niñas contemporáneos es un hecho social, no natural, es un punto de partida necesario para adentrarnos en la crítica al adultocentrismo, el adultismo y las violencias que padecen los niños y niñas en nuestras sociedades en razón de la edad.

## Parte I: Adultocentrismo

En lo que sigue intentaremos analizar algunas expresiones generales del dominio adultocéntrico y convidar parte del trabajo que venimos realizando. Como señalamos antes, esto no pretende iniciar la construcción de una teoría general del adultocentrismo. Ello, por superposición de sesgos, difícilmente pueda hacerlo, en soledad, quien escribe este artículo. En cualquier caso, las relaciones sociales son dinámicas y los antagonismos sumamente complejos como para -desde nuestro punto de vista- pretender encapsularlos en definiciones universalizables y pseudo ahistóricas. De manera que las personas que se encuentren con este artículo, donde sea y cuando sea que suceda, deberán pasar nuestras tesis por el matiz crítico de su contexto.

### *Doce tesis*[1]

(1) El concepto de adultocentrismo refiere al carácter estructural de la dominación social, política, económica, cultural y moral que ejercemos las personas adultas sobre las niñas, niños y jóvenes. Es decir, la crítica al adultocentrismo viene a problematizar el carácter de opresión que existe en las relaciones entre clases de edad (Martín Criado, 2009), donde la principal beneficiaria, evidentemente, es la edad adulta. Cuestionar el carácter adultocéntrico de nuestra sociedad es, entonces, reconocer y problematizar las relaciones desiguales de poder (Foucault, 1992) que existen entre las diferentes clases de edad.

(2) Problematizar las relaciones entre el mundo de la adultez y el de la niñez-juventud reconociendo la existencia de relaciones desiguales de poder y por tanto

asumiendo los vínculos conflictivos entre las diferentes clases de edad a partir de la definición de nuestra sociedad como adultocéntrica, es un hecho político y académico tan reciente como necesario. Sin embargo, aunque la categoría sea nueva, nombra viejas incomodidades y cuestionamientos que vienen siendo ampliamente denunciados -no exclusivamente- desde la tradición de pensamiento crítico latinoamericano (Ouviña, 2018).

(3) Desde una perspectiva crítica del adultocentrismo, por más de que para la ley una persona desde los 18 años de edad ya sea considerada adulta (como en la gran mayoría de países), las relaciones sociales inter-etarias (basadas en dinámicas de poder desigual) favorecen a las personas de entre 30 y 50/59 años de edad[2] (entendidas como adultas plenas), y en general a las personas que son "más grandes" que otras. De modo que las personas jóvenes, aquellas que tienen hasta 29 años de edad cronológica, no se hallan al margen de las desventajas sociales, políticas y económicas que el sistema adultocéntrico les destina. Y, como señalamos antes, las personas adultas mayores también se encuentran en desventaja por haber dejado atrás la etapa de adultez plena.

(4) El concepto de clase de edad resulta fundamental para problematizar estas dinámicas de poder-opresión. Como explica Martín Criado (2009), nos remite al

> trazado de fronteras entre distintas condiciones asociadas a la edad -"joven", "adulto", "viejo"....-, cada una con una serie de derechos, obligaciones, comportamientos, en fin, "esencias sociales" asignadas, que hay que explicar, no a partir de "naturalezas psicológicas", sino a partir de las condiciones de reproducción social de cada grupo y de las luchas que se producen en su seno a propósito del tempo de la sucesión. (pp. 346)

En otras palabras, la edad es una categoría que asigna derechos y deberes a las personas que van más allá de las leyes vigentes, pues forman representaciones sociales asociadas a la edad y la generación (Pavez Soto, 2012) que se traducen en expectativas y mandatos sociales. En este sentido, quizás la edad (cronológica), como sucede con la raza y el género, sea una categoría "inventada" para naturalizar una dominación, justificada luego científicamente. Al igual que las otras dos nombradas, está asociada a diferencias identificables a simple vista que se han ido construyendo a lo largo de la historia como argumento justificatorio de la dominación de una clase de personas sobre otras.

(5) La edad no es una categoría exacta, como nos gusta pensar a quienes hacemos sociología. Es un dato socialmente manipulado y manipulable (Bourdieu, 2002). Su polisemia radica en la existencia de diferentes tipos de edad, tal como viene señalándose desde los estudios gerontológicos. Porque no es lo mismo la edad cronológica de una persona que la edad biológica, la edad psicológica, la edad social, o la edad legal. De modo que resulta pertinente avanzar en investigaciones que logren dar cuenta de dichas diferencias, a fin de problematizar el parámetro general y universal establecido en nuestras sociedades que designa cómo deben coexistir las diferentes edades en la trayectoria de cada niño, niña y joven,

determinando que si la persona no se ajusta a ese cánon, tiene una patología. (En el próximo apartado profundizamos esta tesis).

(6) Lejos de proponer la crítica al adultocentrismo una suerte de negación de las diferencias físico-biológicas entre niños y niñas, jóvenes, adultos y adultos mayores, la cuestión es problematizar el hecho de que esas diferencias justifiquen la impugnación de los niños y niñas (y, aunque en diferente medida, de los y las jóvenes y adultos mayores también) como sujetos racionales y co-constructores de su propia historia y permitan la imposición de la violencia como fundamento de los vínculos intergeneracionales (Morales y Magistris, 2018).

(7) Junto a Duarte Quapper (2015) entendemos al adultocentrismo como una extensión del patriarcado (o bien, un subsistema de él), en tanto el monopolio del poder patriarcal se halla en manos de varones (cis) adultos. Si bien en el adultocentrismo la jerarquía va más allá de la sexual, se encuentra plenamente entrelazada con ella: así, el hombre adulto se impone sobre la mujer adulta; éstos sobre las personas jóvenes, pero a su vez los jóvenes sobre las jóvenes; repitiéndose la cadena a medida que disminuye la edad cronológica, cruzando las categorías edad y género de modo que quien es más grande se impone por sobre quien es más pequeño, y los varones (cis) o niños (cis) se impondrán sobre las mujeres (cis) o niñas (cis).

(8) En tanto categoría que nombra esta relación asimétrica de poder, el análisis de nuestras sociedades como adultocéntricas ha permitido advertir cómo las tensiones y conflictos propios de los vínculos intergeneracionales han sido resueltos desde el mundo adulto hegemónico mediante el empleo de fuerza física, cuerpos legales, normativas, políticas públicas, dispositivos educativos y discursos auto-referidos como científicos, en un proceso acumulativo de mecanismos que profundizan y garantizan las condiciones de desigualdad y dominación (Duarte Quapper, 2015).

(9) Las relaciones sociales adultocéntricas se han venido gestando a través de la historia, con raíces, mutaciones y actualizaciones económicas, culturales y políticas, y se han instalado en los imaginarios sociales incidiendo en su reproducción material y simbólica (Duarte Quapper, 2015). El patrón de poder adultocéntrico se sustenta en una serie de representaciones sociales que justifican la desigualdad en el acceso a diversos bienes (culturales, económicos, sociales, simbólicos, etc.). Dichas representaciones se expresan en una determinada manera de entender la idea de edad, y se traducen en estereotipos etarios que naturalizan roles y mandatos que a cada clase de edad se supone le corresponden, de acuerdo a una concepción cultural eurocéntrica y hetero-cis-patriarcal, propia de nuestras sociedades occidentales y capitalistas, fuertemente crononormadas (Shabel, 2022).

(10) Tal como se desprende de lo hasta aquí señalado, adultocentrismo no es un adjetivo o un simple modo de describir una conducta, lenguaje o decisión: es un régimen político basado en el gobierno de una clase de edad por sobre

otras. Sin embargo, conviene alertar sobre una tendencia a vaciar la categoría del contenido político y de crítica estructural que en sí aloja.

(11) No es posible analizar la categoría edad desvinculada de las de clase social, género y raza, entre otras. Como señalamos antes, las representaciones sobre la infancia encuentran variaciones tanto históricas como de acuerdo a qué grupo de niños y niñas se dirigen. Existe un doble estándar que contribuye a la reproducción ordenada del status quo: las representaciones sobre la niñez resultan maleables según refieran a niños o niñas del campo o de la ciudad; a niños o niñas de sectores populares o de clases acomodadas; a niños o niñas indígenas o descendientes de familias europeas; a niños, niñas o niñes travesti trans y no bineries; etcétera.

(12) Nuestras sociedades capitalistas, coloniales y hetero-cis-patriarcales transmiten toda esa trama de relaciones de subalternización a través del adultocéntrico proceso -integral- de socialización de las nuevas generaciones. Porque la modalidad capitalista de socialización, esa que resulta incuestionable por hegemónica y que se condensa materialmente tanto en prácticas cotidianas como en la racionalidad que las sostiene, se encuentra inseparablemente ligada a todos los antagonismos sociales (Morales y Retali, 2020). En otras palabras, el modo de socialización capitalista es el proceso que acuña las estructuras e instituciones sociales en las cuales se expresan y entrelazan todos los antagonismos (Hirsch, 2005). De manera que la institucionalidad estatal, al organizar y asumir la materialización del modo de socialización capitalista, no sólo garantiza la reproducción de la relación contradictoria capital-trabajo, sino también toda la trama de relaciones antagónicas de este sistema de dominación múltiple (Lugones, 2003). Ya Antonio Gramsci nos permitió advertir que toda relación de hegemonía es necesariamente un rapport pedagógico (Ouviña, 2016), pero entendiendo que "lo que resulta decisivo no es solamente el sistema consciente de ideas y creencias, sino todo el proceso social vivido, organizado prácticamente por significados y valores específicos y dominantes" (Willams, 2009, p. 143). Por eso la alumnización (Morales, 2021) de la niñez (ese sesgo adultista que nos hace ver a los niños y niñas como proyecto, confundiendo así educar con preparar) se presenta como el modo predilecto por la institucionalidad estatal para incorporar/adaptar a las nuevas generaciones a la vida, pretendiendo asegurarse (el mundo adulto dominante) que se conviertan en aquello que les está destinado en función de su origen social y cultural (en sentido amplio).

Hasta aquí, las doce tesis. Para concluir este apartado, resta decir que nuestras sociedades adultocéntricas se privan de la contribución que los niños y niñas pueden hacer en razón de lo que viven, piensan y sienten, pues no tienen en cuenta sus producciones, percepciones, juicios y acciones (Cussiánovich et al, 2001). Es decir, en ellas se descarta el enorme caudal de imaginación política, pensamiento productivo, sensibilidad artística y racionalidad otra que habita en la niñez. Las producciones culturales, sociales y materiales de los niños y niñas, nacen y mueren

en su mundo: no son tomadas por el mundo adulto -salvo singulares excepciones- más que como ensayos, pruebas, previas demostraciones de lo que podrán hacer cuando sean personas reales, completas, es decir, adultas.

La posibilidad de renovación de la sociedad que significa cada nacimiento, colisiona contra la necesidad de los poderes hegemónicos de generar estructuras institucionales permanentes y predecibles. La posible transformación del mundo que se halla potencialmente en cada nueva vida, desafía al mundo adulto a estar disponibles a la reinvención permanente de las soluciones a los problemas comunes, a hacerse preguntas constantemente y buscar crítica y creativamente modos originales de abordarlas, y a vivir con sensibilidad amplificada los sufrimientos evitables portando una actitud de máxima urgencia ante las necesidades populares, de los grupos subalternizados y del conjunto de la naturaleza (Morales y Magistris, 2023). De modo que resulta fundamental asumir una verdadera ecología de saberes, reconociendo que existen "diferentes matrices de racionalidad" (Porto-Gonçalves, 2009, p. 122). Porque el modo eurocéntrico, adulto y hetero-cis-normado de entender lo racional no es el único posible. La crítica al adultocentrismo, entonces, nos invita a ensayar formas otras de concebir la racionalidad, de modo que la vincularidad e interdependencia que nos constituye tengan lugar: para que lo racional pueda ser entendido fundamentalmente desde una lógica relacional.

### *Desparametrizar la edad*

A todos los niños y niñas no se les da la llave de su casa a la misma edad. A algunos se les da la llave a los quince años, a otros a los doce o bien a los siete. No todos los niños y niñas se quedan solos en sus casas a la misma edad: algunos desde los seis o siete años ya se quedan ciertas cantidades de tiempo solos, sin estar al cuidado de adultos; otros niños y niñas, empiezan a estar solos en sus casas recién desde los diez o doce años; ni hablemos de aquellos que no tienen casa. No todos empiezan a ir o volver solos de la escuela a la misma edad; ni cuidan de personas más pequeñas desde la misma edad; ni toman decisiones sobre el cuidado de su cuerpo desde la misma edad.

De todos modos, existen parámetros sociales que asocian edad con derechos y deberes. Es decir, en función de cuántos años tiene el niño o niña se pondrán en juego representaciones que se traducirán en expectativas sociales que le asignarán (o no) derechos y deberes, independientemente de lo establecido por los marcos legales.

Algunos investigadores de gerontología social (Izquierdo Moreno, 1994; Montalvo Toro, 1997; y Alcalde Merino y Laspeñas García, 2005) vienen argumentando sobre la importancia de diferenciar las edades existentes, reconociendo la polisemia del concepto. O, al menos, como afirmamos antes, advirtiendo que la edad es una categoría carente de la exactitud que se le asigna. De

modo que resulta necesario diferenciar entre edad cronológica, edad psicológica, edad social, edad biológica y edad legal. Si bien en el caso de las personas adultas mayores es posible distinguir con mayor facilidad esas diferentes edades, entre niños y niñas también lo es. Por eso, aunque resulte problemático para gran parte de las investigaciones de colegas sociólogos, la edad muy probablemente deba dejar de ser considerada acríticamente como una variable independiente "objetiva", "exacta", o sea, la variable estadística soñada. Como explica Martín Criado,

> la relación simple y unidireccional de esta variable con las "variables dependientes"—ideología, voto, "actitudes", etc.—identifica, sin más, la contemporaneidad cronológica—el hecho de pertenecer a la misma cohorte—con la identidad social. Esta identificación abusiva, o bien no suele explicitar sus presupuestos—funcionando así sobre una ideología implícita e incontrolada de los estadios de la vida (v.gr.: los jóvenes son impulsivos, idealistas, irreflexivos...)—, o bien justifica esta identificación recurriendo principalmente a dos argumentos: (a) una naturaleza psicológica asociada a cada estadio de la vida—así, la "psicología del joven"—; (b) una identidad de condiciones de existencia para todos los pertenecientes a la misma cohorte. (2009, p. 346)

Es decir, ni la contemporaneidad cronológica garantiza una misma identidad social; ni existe una invariable naturaleza psicológica en cada estadio de la vida. La edad no es un dato que brinde información adicional sobre el sujeto.

De manera que resulta oportuno precisar algunas de las diferencias que apuntamos respecto a las nociones de edad, a fin de realizar una contribución para complejizar el análisis sobre el tema. Como anticipamos, aquí entendemos que existen diferentes subcategorías que componen la categoría edad.

*Edad cronológica.* Es la cuantificable de todas las edades. Es el resultado de una cuenta matemática: cuántos días hace que la persona salió del útero del cuerpo que la gestó. Eso, agrupado en meses y años, da un número exacto. Es decir, es la edad relacionada con cronos, con lo cuantificable, con el número de años, meses y días transcurridos desde el momento del nacimiento de la persona. En nuestras sociedades, cuando se habla de edad, se habla en realidad de edad cronológica.

*Edad psicológica.* Tiene que ver con el comportamiento de la persona en cuanto a su competencia conductual y capacidad de adaptación a los cambios que van teniendo lugar en la vida. Es decir, está vinculada a la capacidad de aprendizaje de la persona, la inteligencia, la memoria, el manejo de los sentimientos, las motivaciones y las emociones. Se encuentra asociada, también, al autoestima, en el sentido de qué se siente capaz de hacer y qué no; así como a su registro del peligro, su capacidad de autocuidado y preservación ante los riesgos.

Es frecuente que haya personas que presenten supuestos "desfasajes" entre su edad cronológica y su edad psicológica, en el sentido de lo socialmente esperado de acuerdo a los patrones adultocéntricos. Así, en determinadas familias puede ocurrir, por ejemplo, que una niña de diez años se vuelva el sostén emocional de

su madre o de su padre, quien atraviesa un momento complejo y tiene actitudes "inmaduras". Esos casos suelen ser definidos como de "sobreadaptación". Por el contrario, si otra niña de diez años manifiesta actitudes "aniñadas" para su edad (cronológica), podría ser catalogada con algún tipo de retraso madurativo. Lejos de negar las necesarias contribuciones de la psicología, aquí lo que propongo es problematizar desde un análisis sociológico cómo los sesgos o representaciones asociados a la edad cronológica se vuelven expectativas sociales que de no alcanzarse redundan en una patologización del individuo muchas veces innecesaria o, cuanto menos, apresurada.

*Edad social.* Se relaciona con el papel que se supone que la persona debe desempeñar en la sociedad en que vive, según los mandatos de cada cultura y tiempo histórico. Es decir, refiere a los roles y hábitos sociales de las personas en función de las expectativas que la sociedad tiene de ellas de acuerdo a su edad cronológica. Así, se espera que un niño de doce años tenga preocupación por jugar fútbol o videojuegos, incluso por empezar a tener alguna "noviecita" (jamás un novio), pero no se considera adecuado para esa edad que le interese la militancia política o bien que realice (o quiera realizar) alguna actividad económica.

A este respecto, resulta interesante conocer aquello que cuenta Manfred Liebel (2006): que un niño perteneciente a alguna comunidad andina en lo que hoy es Bolivia o Perú puede llegar a convertirse en alcalde electo con tan sólo diez o doce años de edad cronológica. En estas mismas comunidades, los niños y niñas colaboran desde edades tempranas en las labores agrícolas, a tal punto que muchas veces se otorga en propiedad una pequeña parcela de tierra o un animal a los niños y niñas pequeños para que ellos mismos se hagan responsables de su cuidado.

*Edad biológica.* Tiene que ver con el desgaste real de las energías del cuerpo humano (Izquierdo Morano, 1994). Desde ya, con el paso de los años la edad biológica aumenta. Pero las distintas circunstancias en las que los niños y niñas viven también tienen consecuencias en el funcionamiento interno del cuerpo, repercutiendo en el mayor o menor desgaste de sus órganos, sistemas, tejidos y células. Es decir, las condiciones materiales en que los niños y niñas crecen pueden provocar que la edad biológica sea mayor o menor a la edad cronológica. A su vez, existen diferentes tipos de enfermedades (sean estas congénitas o adquiridas) que generan o bien deterioro en todo el organismo, o bien en algún(os) órgano(s) en particular. Esto lleva a que una persona, con la misma edad cronológica que otra, tenga una edad biológica mayor. Un ejemplo podría ser el de un niño de 8 años de edad cronológica que tiene progeria, la enfermedad genética que acelera el envejecimiento de las personas. Pero otro, más frecuente, puede ser el de niños o niñas con síndrome de Down; o, incluso, con malformaciones cardíacas que aceleran el deterioro de los órganos vitales. Desde luego, también es el caso de aquellas personas que tienen alguna discapacidad que genera el deterioro (con una temporalidad diferente a la parametral) del funcionamiento orgánico general, o de algunos órganos o sistemas del cuerpo en particular. Contrariamente, es

frecuente en niños o niñas con autismo o con alguna discapacidad motora que debido a su condición desplieguen un desarrollo físico a otro tiempo (en términos parametrales, "más lento"). Por esta razón las personas padecen distintos tipos de discriminación y sobrepatologización.

*Edad legal.* Es aquella que se desprende de las reglas gubernamentales o políticas asociadas a la institucionalidad estatal. Establece mandatos y/o marcos regulatorios sobre quiénes son considerados niños o niñas, jóvenes, adultos y adultos mayores. La edad legal es realmente muy importante considerando lo que ocurre cuando las personas cumplen 18 años de edad cronológica. Muchas veces por la definición sobre ciertas edades legales se atraviesan procesos de disputa a la hora de brindar o no acceso a derechos, o bien, de restringirlos hasta que la persona alcance determinada edad cronológica. Ejemplos de esto constituyen la discusión sobre a partir de qué edad se vota, a partir de qué edad la persona puede ser punible, a partir de qué edad puede salir del país sin autorización, a partir de qué edad puede tener una cuenta bancaria, ser empleado en un trabajo, tomar decisiones sobre intervenciones en su cuerpo, etcétera.

Repasamos sucintamente cada una de las edades para problematizar la imposición de un parámetro general y universal en nuestras sociedades que establece cómo deben coexistir las diferentes edades en la trayectoria de cada niño y niña, de modo que si no se ajusta a ese cánon, muy probablemente resulte patologizado. Dicho de otra manera: es inevitable asociar que a determinada edad cronológica lo esperable será (por no decir lo "normal") que ese niño o niña tenga determinada edad biológica, determinada edad social, determinada edad psicológica y su consecuente edad legal. Por eso no tenemos alternativa que afirmar que ante cierta edad cronológica se puede tener "más edad" social o biológica, o "menos edad" psicológica o legal. La sociedad adulta espera que la edad social, la cronológica, la psicológica, la biológica, en coherencia con la edad legal, coincidan de un único modo posible. Y eso es lo problemático, porque de esa manera se patologiza la diferencia, se universaliza un único modo válido de vivir la niñez y se estigmatiza a las familias que por razones económicas, culturales o ideológicas crían hijos o hijas que no se ajustan a dicho parámetro.

De aquí que resulte fundamental reconocer que tanto el contexto de vida y socialización del niño o niña como su historia personal y familiar constituyen dos factores clave de incidencia innegable en el modo en que coexisten las diferentes edades en el presente vital de cada niño y niña. Muy probablemente la parametrización que equipara de un único modo posible edad cronológica con las demás edades haya sido un eficaz instrumento de normalización (Canguilhem, 2005) de la infancia.

### *Enlazamiento de opresiones*

Los niños y niñas que viven en América Latina y El Caribe se encuentran

sometidos, en términos generales, a una serie de condicionantes geopolíticos y socio-históricos que nos permiten pensar a la niñez latinoamericana como una unidad plural, o bien, como un sujeto plural. Porque dichos niños y niñas se encuentran subalternizados según diferentes categorías que simultáneamente los constituyen en esa unidad plural que son: en tanto niños y niñas, por el orden adultocéntrico; en tanto parte de un sub-continente subalternizado, por periféricos y expuestos a la constelación colonial que incluye la opresión racial (Quijano, 2000); en tanto niñas (cis), por el poder patriarcal que las sojuzga (Maffía, 2016; Segato, 2018) de la mano de la hetero-cis-normatividad que agrava la violencia hacia la niñez disidente (Pavan, 2019); y en tanto pertenecientes a los sectores sociales desfavorecidos, los niños y niñas de sectores populares son oprimidos por razones de clase, tal como fue denunciado por Carlos Marx a lo largo de su obra. Si bien resulta tentador pensar en mayores grados de subalternización por superposición de opresiones, las experiencias vitales concretas de los sujetos sociales "no pueden ser comprendidas en términos de ventajas o desventajas desde una lógica aritmética de la dominación" (Viveros Vigoya, 2016, pp. 9-10). En este sentido, como los transfeminismos y las teorías de género vienen dando cuenta, la interseccionalidad constituye un abordaje imprescindible para analizar el enlazamiento de opresiones de raza, clase y género que violentan a la niñez de América Latina y El Caribe (Lugones, 2008; Viveros Vigoya, 2016). Inseparables empíricamente, las tres categorías se imbrican en lo concreto en la "producción" de la niñez, y se refuerzan o flexibilizan según el origen de clase.

René Descartes, allá por el siglo XVII, dio inicio a una ruptura ontológica fundamental para el orden capitalista colonial/moderno que se estaba gestando: la separación cuerpo-mente (Lander, 2016, p. 18). Ese naciente capitalismo colonial/moderno (Quijano, 2000) impuso -a sangre y fuego- el orden binario como nuevo paradigma ontológico y epistemológico. Dicho orden, organizado lógicamente a partir de pares conceptuales exhaustivos y mutuamente excluyentes (Maffía, 2008), es el orden del uno, de quien domina, de ese sujeto propietario, masculino, blanco y adulto al cual pasan a referirse todas las diferencias (Segato, 2018). El orden binario ha construido en torno a cada una de ellas toda una tecnología de dominio que justifica la desigualdad, erigiendo en mejor o superior el polo del par conceptual que refiere al Uno (Segato, 2018). Así, el "pienso, luego existo" de Descartes marcó todo el desarrollo posterior de la filosofía moderna occidental: comenzó desde allí a definirse la naturaleza del ser humano a partir de ese yo individual que piensa, que es propietario, masculino, blanco y adulto. Con este marcado sesgo, se fue construyendo un modelo de conocimiento hetero-cis-patriarcal (Maffía, 2016) y eurocentrado (Lander, 2016) que comenzó a pensar la naturaleza humana desde un específico, histórico y minoritario individuo aislado. Esto implicó, además, mundializar la afirmación que sostiene que la razón

(la racionalidad) es el principio básico para existir, para ser: 'soy humano porque yo, individuo, razono': y a su vez, cimentar todo un conjunto de lógicas de jerarquización-subalternización para sostener mediante ellas la constelación de poder propia del capitalismo en tanto sistema de dominación múltiple.

En América Latina y El Caribe, la colonialidad del poder/saber se expresa articulada con un modelo de conocimiento y una forma de ejercicio del poder de carácter patriarcal. Si analizamos el orden binario con lentes que busquen resquebrajar la lógica del patrón de poder moderno/colonial, veremos cómo el pensamiento occidental ha construido una matriz ontológica y epistémica que entiende que asociado a "lo europeo" se halla la civilización, la modernidad, la ciencia, la razón, la cultura y el capital; mientras que asociado a nuestra Abya Yala[3] se encuentra lo primitivo, lo tradicional, lo mágico/mítico, lo irracional, la naturaleza y el pre-capital (Quijano, 2000). Por su parte, si ahora miramos con lentes antipatriarcales, del lado masculino hegemónico (varones hetero cis) encontraremos lo objetivo, universal, racional, abstracto, público, literal y productivo; mientras que el par binario correspondiente a lo femenino alojaría lo subjetivo, particular, emocional, concreto, privado, metafórico y reproductivo (Maffía, 2016). (Ambas constelaciones de poder se encuentran descritas en la Tabla 2). Y nótese que el par binario se encuentra constituido por varones hetero cis de un lado, y mujeres hetero cis del otro, de modo que toda expresión de género, identidad disidente u orientación sexual que se corra de ese binarismo hegemónico se encuentra tan subalternizado que ni siquiera "entra" en dicho esquema.

Ahora bien, si miramos el orden binario con lentes no adultocéntricos, veremos cómo la ideología adultista configura su dominio en base a asociar "lo adulto" con el ser público, la racionalidad, la independencia, la productividad (trabajo), la madurez, la completitud, y a la niñez con sus opuestos (también, Tabla 2).

Si bien desde la fisura ontológica apuntada por Lander el orden binario ha sido dominante en el pensamiento occidental, lo cierto es que dicho orden es sumamente selectivo: su lógica responde menos a la racionalidad que pregona y más a los intereses de los sectores dominantes. De aquí que la mirada hacia los niños y niñas se manifieste en muchos casos de forma paradojal:

> Se boicotea y relativiza su status de ciudadanía, pero se los trata sin pudor como consumidores.
>
> Perduran y se refuerzan resistencias contra la educación sexual integral, pero se sexualizan obscenamente los cuerpos de -especialmente- las niñas, convirtiéndolas así en mercancías.
>
> Se romantiza a los niños y niñas, enalteciendo su ser puros e inocentes, pero se busca descargar la brutalidad del sistema penal bajando la edad de punibilidad para encerrar a aquellos que desobedecen o amenazan el orden establecido.

**Tabla 2**
***La colonialidad, el hetero-cis-patriarcado y el adultocentrismo en tanto constelaciones de poder de carácter binario***

| *COLONIALIDAD* | | *HETERO-CIS-PATRIARCADO* | | *ADULTOCENTRISMO* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Europa* | *América Latina y El Caribe* | *Varón (hetero cis)* | *Mujer (hetero cis)* | *Adultez* | *Niñez* |
| civilizado / pulcro | primitivo / hediondo | objetivo | subjetivo | independiente / experiencia | dependiente / inocencia |
| moderno | tradicional | universal | particular | sujeto social e histórico | objeto natural y biológico |
| racional | irracional | racional | emocional | racional / maduro | irracional / inmaduro |
| científico | mágico / mítico | abstracto | concreto | acabado / completo / realizado | en desarrollo / incompleto / en vías de ser |
| central | periférico | público | privado | público | privado |
| la cultura | la naturaleza | literal | metafórico | trabajo | juego |
| el capital | el pre-capital | productivo | reproductivo | productivo | improductivo |

Fuente: Elaboración propia en base a Quijano (2000), Maffía (2016), Segato (2018), Liebel y Martínez (2009) y Cordero Arce (2015).

> Se prohíbe terminantemente el trabajo de personas que aún no alcanzan la edad mínima de admisión al empleo según cada normativa nacional -y en función de los convenios de la Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT) en la materia-, pero se lo avala e incentiva si se vuelve fuente única de ganancias extraordinarias, como es el caso de los niños y niñas artistas, deportistas o gamers.

En síntesis, el sistema capitalista y colonial, adosado a una cultura fuertemente adultocéntrica y hetero-cis-patriarcal que resalta los valores que se asocian a la adultez blanca, masculina y propietaria, subalterniza la existencia de los niños y niñas de América Latina y El Caribe, sosteniendo y consolidando así el estatus oprimido y marginalizado al que vienen resultando condenados.

## Parte II: Adultiso y violencias adultistas

Entendemos al adultismo como la concretización del carácter adultocéntrico de nuestra sociedad en prácticas, espacialidades y lenguajes tanto institucionales como individuales y grupales. Asimismo, la categoría adultismo refiere también al sistema de creencias que legitiman las múltiples formas de discriminación que padecen niños, niñas y jóvenes. Como decía más atrás, la matriz adultocéntrica organiza y estructura el modo en que se dan las interacciones sociales en todas las instituciones de nuestras sociedades. Esto implica que en las escuelas, en las

familias, y en todos los ámbitos donde los niños y niñas transitan su proceso de socialización, el adultocentrismo estructura el modo en que tienen lugar los vínculos intergeneracionales. Los comportamientos y/o actitudes adultistas, así como aquellas creencias que legitiman la desigualdad entre clases de edad, en tanto reproducen relaciones sociales de opresión, son una forma de violencia.

Considero relevante nombrar a las violencias basadas en el patrón de poder adultocéntrico como violencias adultistas (Morales y Magistris, 2018; Magistris, 2022) para evidenciar su carácter sistémico y, por lo tanto, para reconocer la necesidad de abordarlas de conjunto. En lo que sigue, hablaremos de la intensidad de la violencia y no de los grados de daño, porque el alcance o profundidad del mismo tiene un alto componente subjetivo, en el sentido de lo que Sergio Moscovici expresó alguna vez: que lo importante no son los eventos vividos en sí, sino cómo vivimos los eventos que nos tocó vivir (Cussiánovich, 2007). En otras palabras, cada persona, de acuerdo a su historia y sus diferentes recursos (sociales, culturales, afectivos), puede procesar de modo singular un mismo hecho, siendo mayor o menor el daño subjetivo que ese hecho le ocasione.

Hay formas brutales de la violencia adultista: las de alta intensidad. Nos referimos al infanticidio y al filicidio, a la tortura, a la violencia física, al abuso sexual, a la utilización de niños y niñas para la prostitución o la producción de pornografía, al trabajo forzoso, la explotación laboral y la violencia institucional policial (muchas veces letal). Pero, a su vez, hay otro conjunto de violencias adultistas que, aunque de menor intensidad, también producen significativos daños e imponen barreras -más o menos- visibles para el ejercicio de vidas dignas por parte de los niños y niñas. Estas otras formas de violencia adultista podrían ser clasificadas como violencias de intensidad media y baja.

Tal como grafica la metáfora del iceberg de las violencias de género, las violencias adultistas de intensidad baja y media son el soporte que vuelve lógicas y esperables las violencias adultistas de intensidad alta. Muchas veces éstas son leídas o interpretadas como problemas específicos y aislados entre sí. Así, el maltrato infantil, el abuso sexual, la explotación, etc., parecieran ser consecuencia de la existencia de "malas personas" que son agresivas, violentas, perversas con los niños y niñas. Pero aunque exista la crueldad, desde nuestra perspectiva las violencias contra la niñez se explican -no únicamente- por el carácter adultocéntrico de nuestras sociedades. Sean estas de baja, mediana o de alta intensidad, son violencias adultistas porque su origen lo encontramos en la subalternización de las personas con menor edad, y en la creencia de que -en definitiva- son un objeto que nos pertenece al mundo adulto. Y no es sino gracias y a través de las violencias adultistas que se imprimen en el cuerpo y subjetividad de los niños y niñas las distintas lógicas de jerarquización de los saberes, de los orígenes, de las culturas, de los territorios, de las capacidades, de los trabajos, de las cosas, de las aspiraciones, de los cuerpos, de los sueños.

### *Violencias adultistas de alta intensidad*

Decíamos que tal como grafica la metáfora del iceberg de las violencias de género, existen violencias invisibles que soportan a las violencias visibles. En tal sentido, la existencia de violencias de menor intensidad son el piso que sostiene las violencias brutales, las visibles, las que horrorizan a toda persona medianamente sensible. En lo que sigue reseñaremos cinco tipos de violencias adultistas de alta intensidad: la violencia física, las violencias sexuales, la violencia institucional policial, la explotación laboral, y su expresión letal: el infanticidio y filicidio.

V*iolencia física.* Suele ser nombrada como "maltrato infantil", y todavía está absolutamente extendida entre las familias como método de educación en la crianza. Así, los pellizcos, los rasguños, los golpes, las patadas, los puñetazos, las palizas, la tortura, se descargan con más frecuencia de la que nos imaginamos sobre el cuerpo de los niños y niñas para torcerles la voluntad en pos de aquello que las personas adultas de la familia consideran mejor o más adecuado. El objetivo, en definitiva, es que "hagan caso". Si bien ciertos discursos y representaciones estigmatizantes pretenden asociar la violencia física contra los niños y niñas a los sectores populares, todas las investigaciones realizadas para relevarla demuestran que si en las clases medias y altas estas violencias son menos visibles, no es porque no existan, sino porque dichos sectores cuentan con mayores recursos económicos, simbólicos y sociales para encubrirlas y silenciarlas.

La ideología adultista justifica la violencia física contra los niños y niñas dentro de la familia. De hecho, no sólo ofrece argumentos al mundo adulto para creer que "un golpe a tiempo es bueno para la educación", sino que, al igual que ocurre con el machismo, es introyectado por las propias víctimas, de modo que a veces los niños o niñas justifican la violencia que sobre ellos se impone bajo argumentos del tipo "sólo mi mamá y mi papá me pueden pegar".

*Violencias sexuales.* En general, suele hablarse de "abuso sexual infantil". Sintéticamente, constituyen formas de violencias sexuales contra niños y niñas el abuso sexual, el embarazo forzado, la explotación sexual y/o trata con fines de explotación sexual, y la violencia sexual en entornos digitales. Desde hace unos años, como consecuencia de la lucha del movimiento de mujeres y disidencias, estas violencias vienen siendo más visibilizadas.

Es sabido que la mayoría de los abusos sexuales se dan contra las niñas, en el ámbito de la familia y por parte de sus progenitores o adultos varones (cis) del núcleo familiar. A su vez, el abuso sexual a niñas trans, travestis y varones trans, así como a niños o niñas con discapacidad, está totalmente invisibilizado y naturalizado tanto dentro como fuera del hogar.

Las redes de trata tienen entre sus víctimas recurrentes a niñas que son secuestradas y desaparecidas para ser prostituidas. Esta criminalidad organizada, además de contar con gran poder económico y logístico, traza vínculos de complicidad con personas que trabajan en la función pública, asegurándose

así protección política, jurídica y/o policial a cambio de prebendas. Por eso, la organización de la comunidad y la respuesta inmediata ante los casos de desapariciones forzadas viene siendo el modo más eficaz para rescatar a las víctimas. Mientras tanto, la violencia sexual en entornos digitales viene creciendo a pasos agigantados. Año tras año incrementan las denuncias por utilización de niños y niñas en pornografía y por ciberacoso. Teniendo en cuenta que viene siendo cada vez mayor la cantidad de horas que los niños y niñas pasan ante las pantallas, es necesario prestar especial atención a esta forma de violencia, puesto que los tipos de violencias sexuales digitales se multiplican: desde el sexting sin consentimiento hasta la exposición involuntaria a material sexual.

*Violencia institucional policial*. Además de racista y clasista, es un tipo de violencia adultista de alta intensidad. Insultos, humillación, amenazas, intimidación, requisas arbitrarias y/o vejatorias de la intimidad, arrojo de pertenencias a la vía pública o bien rotura/robo de las mismas, reducción contra la pared, e incluso apuntamiento con armas de fuego padecen cotidianamente niños y jóvenes de sectores populares en las calles. Estas prácticas constituyen la principal forma de violencia institucional perpetrada por fuerzas de seguridad contra niños y jóvenes en contextos de vulnerabilidad y exclusión social. Constituye una forma cotidiana y permanente de intervención de las fuerzas de seguridad, que permite a estas ejercer una rutina de vigilancia, control y sometimiento (Daroqui, López y Cipriano García, 2012). Estas violencias degradantes se dan, mayoritariamente, en los propios territorios donde los niños pobres habitan, emblemas de la exclusión social. Y constituyen la puerta de entrada de un proceso mayor definido por Daroqui, López y Cipriano García (2012) como cadena punitiva. Es decir, un proceso que enlaza lo policial, lo judicial y lo custodial como engranajes complementarios, mediando dinámicas de hostigamiento, acoso, prejuicios y estigmatización, que tras un recorrido por tramas discursivas y prácticas institucionales diversas atraviesan y moldean a niños y jóvenes en situación de vulnerabilidad social, acabando por constituirlos en delincuentes (Daroqui, López y Cipriano García, 2012). Este trato hostil de las fuerzas de seguridad con niños y jóvenes de sectores populares no sólo es discriminatorio, sino que evidencia su selectividad a la hora de actuar ante los ilegalismos, persiguiendo, estigmatizando y criminalizando a dichos niños con motivo del barrio donde viven, la ropa que visten y/o el color de su piel, constituyéndose, entonces, la violencia institucional adultista en un acto de racismo y clasismo explícito.

El "gatillo fácil"[4] es la expresión máxima e irreparable de la violencia institucional a manos de las fuerzas de seguridad. Esta práctica invisibilizada y sistemática en nuestras sociedades democráticas, se encuentra legitimada ideológicamente por discursos que construyen simbólicamente su necesidad. Así, para amplios sectores de la sociedad, lejos de ser una pena de muerte extrajudicial, racista y clasista, es un recurso posible de las fuerzas de seguridad, que justifica el crimen apelando a que la víctima se lo tenía merecido por delincuente, por futuro delincuente (o, en definitiva, por las dudas).

*Explotación laboral*. Si bien existe un amplio consenso tanto social como normativo en torno a la idea de que todo trabajo infantil es igual a explotación y que, por tanto, debe prohibirse y perseguirse, en el campo de los estudios sociales sobre infancia hay dos posiciones contrapuestas que se desprenden de diferentes estudios y enfoques teórico-metodológicos. Ambas posiciones se engloban (con matices) en lo que se puede llamar una posición abolicionista y otra proteccionista.[5] El pensamiento binario impuesto nos lleva a creer que si no se está "en contra" de cualquier forma de trabajo, pues entonces se está "a favor de que ingresen a una fábrica" y se promueve la explotación laboral. Sin embargo, el artículo 32 de la Convención Internacional sobre los Derechos del Niño (CDN) establece "el derecho del niño a estar protegido contra la explotación económica y contra el desempeño de cualquier trabajo que pueda ser peligroso o entorpecer su educación, o que sea nocivo para su salud o para su desarrollo físico, mental, espiritual, moral o social". De modo que de la literalidad de la CDN no se desprende necesariamente una posición erradicacionista del trabajo infantil. Esa postura fue construida fundamentalmente desde la OIT. Dicho sea de paso, resulta cuanto menos confuso el Convenio N° 182 adoptado en 1999 por la OIT, ya que en él se tipifican como "peores formas de trabajo infantil" al tráfico de niños y niñas, el trabajo forzoso, la utilización de niños y niñas en conflictos armados, el secuestro de niños y niñas para la explotación sexual o el tráfico de drogas: todos ellos, antes que "trabajos" son delitos asociados a formas de esclavitud que están prohibidas desde hace más de 150 años (Liebel y Martínez Muñoz, 2009).

Resulta preocupante cómo en muchos casos la "lucha contra el trabajo infantil" se traduce en la criminalización de la pobreza y la persecución institucional hacia los niños y niñas de sectores populares que trabajan junto a sus familias para superar los contextos críticos que no eligieron y que no generaron. Porque el trabajo infantil como enemigo al cual hay que combatir y eliminar trae aparejada la patologización de familias campesinas y de sectores populares, así como de pueblos indígenas, por no adecuarse al ideal colonial/moderno que entiende a la niñez como un período de dependencia, juego e irresponsabilidad. Teniendo en cuenta que "no todas las tareas realizadas por los niños deben clasificarse como trabajo infantil que se ha de eliminar" (ilo.org, 2021: párr. 1), tal vez tipificar cuáles son esas actividades contribuya a reducir formas de discriminación hacia niños y niñas (generalmente, integrantes de familias en situación de pobreza) que se encuentren realizando tareas que sí son compatibles con su cuidado integral.

Según datos de UNICEF, 8,2 millones de niños y niñas de entre 5 y 17 años trabajan en América Latina y el Caribe, lo que implica que están siendo sometidos a prácticas de explotación laboral de lo más abyectas. Sin duda alguna, este tipo de violencia contra los niños y niñas debe cesar. Pero para que la vocación por acabar con la explotación laboral no se vuelva un mecanismo de refuerzo de otras violencias adultistas, es necesario profundizar el estudio y definición de qué

entender por explotación laboral contra los niños y niñas. Esto implica establecer mecanismos institucionales claros para diferenciar las actividades económicas que representan un peligro para el niño o niña, entorpecen su educación, o resultan nocivas para su salud y desarrollo integral, de las que no. Asimismo, reconocer que este tipo de violencia adultista se refuerza por la desigualdad de clase, de modo que la superación del capitalismo se vuelve decisiva para ponerle un freno definitivo a esta forma brutal de explotación hacia la infancia (Iñigo Carrera, 2008). Paralelamente, sería conveniente que organismos como la OIT o UNICEF definan claramente los "trabajos ligeros", es decir, aquellos que no resultan peligrosos para la salud o desarrollo de los niños y niñas y que no interfieren en su escolarización (UNICEF, 2021); y que dicha tipificación se traduzca en políticas públicas que reduzcan la discriminación y estigmatización hacia los niños y niñas de sectores populares y sus familias que encaran estrategias de solidaridad intergeneracional para la resolución de sus necesidades.

*Infanticidio y filicidio.* Este tipo extremo de violencia adultista expresa con contundencia la idea de propiedad de los hijos e hijas que a pesar de los avances en materia de Derechos del Niño todavía sigue intacta. Es que los hijos e hijas son, para el mundo adulto, objetos que nos pertenecen, con los cuales podemos hacer cualquier cosa: incluso matarlos.

Tanto el infanticidio (asesinato de un niño o niña por su condición de tal) como el filicidio (asesinato de un hijo a manos de su madre, padre o ambos) son prácticas en buena medida invisibilizadas. Si bien pareciera tratarse de un tipo de homicidio que en las sociedades contemporáneas presenta una baja prevalencia a nivel mundial (Barón et al, 2021), es probable que se desconozca más de lo que sucede, ya que en muchos países no se encuentra tipificado como delito específico, de modo que los asesinatos de niños y niñas se encuadran en el delito de homicidio doloso con agravantes. Por eso, esta baja prevalencia estadística se asocia más a la falta de registros que a su baja existencia.

### *Renombrar para desindividualizar la violencia*

El llamado "maltrato infantil" nunca es infantil; es adulto y es contra los niños y niñas. Lo mismo el "abuso sexual infantil" y la "explotación infantil". Dicho de otra manera, como el maltrato, el abuso sexual y la explotación son perpetradas por personas adultas contra los niños y niñas, no corresponde que sea llamado "infantil".

La adjetivación "infantil" resulta evasiva e imprecisa evasiva porque no nombra con claridad lo que sucede, en tanto el maltrato, el abuso y la explotación no son "infantiles", son contra y hacia los niños y niñas. Ninguna de esas violencias son propias de la infancia, sino todo lo contrario: al ser impuestas desde el mundo adulto hacia y contra los niños y niñas no deberían adjetivarse como "infantiles". Imprecisa justamente porque confunde: al particularizar la problemática se

desdibuja su carácter sistémico, creyendo así que es posible terminar con el maltrato y el abuso hacia los niños y niñas sin acabar con el adultocentrismo. De aquí que nos parezca importante renombrar para poder llamar a las cosas por su nombre. Los mal llamados maltrato infantil, abuso sexual infantil y explotación infantil son formas brutales de violencia adultista.

Así como la búsqueda por poner un freno urgente a los femicidios y transfemicidios no sólo es un imperativo ético, es también una forma de lucha contra el patriarcado; del mismo modo, consideramos que reconocer el carácter sistémico tanto de la violencia física como de las violencias sexuales, la explotación laboral, la violencia institucional policial y el asesinato de niños y niñas es primordial para desplegar caminos de lucha contra dichas expresiones brutales del adultocentrismo de nuestra sociedad. Reconocer su carácter sistémico es un llamado a entender dichas violencias como expresiones lógicas del sistema de dominio adultocéntrico.

Creemos que poner un freno a esas formas brutales de violencia adultista constituye un modo válido y necesario de proteger los derechos de los niños y niñas y combatir al adultocentrismo. Contrariamente, poco altera al orden adultocéntrico definir como "infantiles" a dichas violencias, y -más allá de las definiciones- abordarlas como casos aislados, sin un hilo conductor estructural y estructurante que las conecta. Individualizar la violencia es poner el foco en la relación entre la persona agresora y la víctima, evadiendo las explicaciones sociológicas que están en su base.

### *Violencia adultista de intensidad media y baja: trece formas*

En lo que sigue, optamos por identificar, visibilizar y listar una serie de formas de violencia adultista. Decimos "formas" porque no responden a una clasificación ni por tipo ni por ámbito (de la violencia), ni tampoco llegan a ser indicadores. Como verán a continuación, hemos expresado las formas de la violencia adultista de baja y mediana intensidad a modo de acciones. Notarán que cada una de ellas inicia con un verbo en infinitivo. Pero, al mismo tiempo, presentan un primer nivel de generalización, puesto que cada una agrupa un conjunto de acciones concretas dentro de sí. Estas trece formas de la violencia adultista de intensidad baja y media, sin ninguna intención de exhaustividad, constituyen una inicial formulación que demanda ser complementada y combinada con otros tratamientos sobre el tema.

A su vez, el listado que presentamos, por fuera de la diferenciación general entre "intensidad media o baja", no está ordenado en base a ningún criterio de jerarquía (véase Tabla 3). La persona lectora podrá evaluar en qué medida cada una de ellas puede generar potencialmente diferentes y subjetivos grados de daño. Y si bien las presentamos por separado, muchas de estas formas se dan en simultáneo, superpuestas, combinadas en la práctica.

*Forma 1: Negar a los niños y niñas la condición de sujetos de pensamiento*

Censurar opiniones.

**Tabla 3**
***Trece formas de violencias adultistas agrupadas según intensidad.***

| | |
|---|---|
| VIOLENCIAS ADULTISTAS DE INTENSIDAD MEDIA | Negar a los niños y niñas la condición de sujetos de pensamiento. |
| | Impugnar la participación de los niños y niñas en la vida política, económica y social por no ser personas adultas. |
| | Aplicar (e incluso justificar) distintos tipos de violencias emocional/psicológica y verbal como método de educación. |
| | Disponer del cuerpo, de la voluntad, de la sexualidad de los niños y niñas |
| | Imponer roles, estereotipos y mandatos de género |
| | Desposeer a los niños, niñas y niñes de capacidad para autopercibir su identidad de género y su orientación sexual |
| VIOLENCIAS ADULTISTAS DE INTENSIDAD BAJA | Convertir la protección en mecanismo de segregación |
| | Gozar y abusar del privilegio de no hacer aquello que le decimos a los niños y niñas que deben hacer. |
| | Menospreciar o invisibilizar las contribuciones que realizan los niños y niñas en diferentes ámbitos. |
| | Naturalizar la utilización de “infantil” o “adolescente” como insultos o adjetivos despreciativos |
| | Tratar a los niños y niñas como consumidores mientras postergamos su condición de ciudadanos |
| | Considerar que la persona adulta, por el sólo hecho de ser adulta, es superior moralmente y por lo tanto tiene el derecho de juzgar a los niños y niñas |
| | Diseñar y construir los objetos de uso general adaptados al cuerpo adulto hegemónico. |

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

Excluir de conversaciones.
Ignorar preguntas o comentarios.
Subestimar y menospreciar sus iniciativas.
Responder (la persona adulta) a una pregunta que le hicieron al niño o niña.
Tomar decisiones inconsultas sobre los niños y niñas, contra su voluntad y/o en nombre de su Interés Superior.
Tildar todo pensamiento político o ideológico de los niños y niñas como resultado de una manipulación y/o adoctrinamiento.
Inventar “síndromes” sin sustento científico que anulan la voz de los niños

y niñas en procesos judiciales (tal es el caso del llamado Síndrome de Alienación Parental).

Estas son algunas de las muchas maneras en que se expresa esta forma de violencia adultista. Se manifiesta, fundamentalmente, en no reconocerlos como interlocutores válidos, lo cual nos lleva a las personas adultas a subestimar las capacidades de los niños y niñas; a no valorar la contribución que pueden hacer desde sus saberes y experiencias; y a considerarlos prescindibles a la hora de tener que tomar decisiones sobre sus vidas. De hecho, todavía es poco habitual preguntarle a los niños y niñas qué piensan de determinado tema, cómo resolverían tal conflicto, qué consideran apropiado hacer, cómo se sienten ante determinada situación, qué proponen para estar mejor, etc. Incluso en los casos en los que sí se les pregunta, es común que sus opiniones o ideas no sean consideradas seriamente, salvo—generalmente—que logren representar la voluntad del mundo adulto que los rodea.

Negar la condición de sujeto de pensamiento a los niños y niñas es una forma de excluirlos radicalmente, es mutilar su entidad de personas humanas. Más precisamente, es postergarla hasta el arribo a la adultez, considerándolos, así, "personas en vías de serlo". Como supo afirmar Cussiánovich, "el gran reto es lograr que la sociedad y el Estado aprendan a escuchar la opinión de los niños y a reconocer el peso social que tiene. No escuchar a los niños es una forma de negarles existencia" (2003, p. 4).

Esta forma de violencia adultista contribuye a que las nuevas generaciones vayan construyendo a lo largo de su proceso de socialización subjetividades infantiles autocensurantes, en el sentido de no manifestar su opinión sea por miedo a las consecuencias o sea por haberse creído que su criterio resulta inadecuado per se. Es decir, optar "voluntariamente" por el silencio. De este modo, los mismos niños y niñas van introyectando el adultismo, y por lo tanto, siendo activos en su reproducción.

*Forma 2: Impugnar la participación de los niños y niñas en la vida política, económica y social por no ser personas adultas*

Negar el uso y manejo de dinero.
Impedir la afiliación a un partido político.
Excluir de la participación en las elecciones.
Denegar un pedido explícito de cambio de escuela.
Excluirlos de la gestión de los espacios que habitan.
Inhabilitar un cambio de religión o el ejercicio del ateísmo.
Prohibir que suba al tobogán al revés "porque así no se hace".
Imposibilitar realizar un deporte o actividad artística que le guste.
Imposibilitar su presentación a elecciones para ocupar cargos en instituciones.
Argumentar "falta de experiencia" para no permitir su participación en ciertos ámbitos.
Privar del derecho de contar con un abogado que los patrocine en

procesos judiciales.

Desalentar (o bien, prohibir) la participación en organizaciones o asociaciones infantiles/juveniles.

Crear espacios infantiles/juveniles a imagen y semejanza de los del mundo adulto pero sin injerencia en él (asegurándonos así que no se afecten unos con otros).

Prohibir realizar actividades económicas no dañinas (salvo las desmesuradamente convenientes al mercado como las ligadas al deporte profesional, el arte o al universo digital rentable).

En síntesis, prohibir o restringir de modo arbitrario y sin diálogo alguno participar de determinadas actividades, acceder a ciertos bienes (sociales, culturales, económicos, simbólicos), o concretar iniciativas propias, dejándolos afuera de las decisiones que les afectan.

Entre muchas otras, estas son algunas de las maneras en que se expresa esta forma de la violencia adultista.

Señalar esto no lleva implícita la búsqueda por adultizar a los niños y niñas. Desplegar condiciones para que los niños y niñas puedan participar, a su modo, en la vida política, económica y social requiere de una férrea desadultización de los esquemas institucionales y los vínculos interpersonales e intergeneracionales. No se trata de homogeneizar, sino de igualar las posibilidades para reconocer las diferencias. Lo que pueden o no pueden los niños y niñas, es decir, aquello para lo que son competentes o no, se explica más por las particularidades de nuestra cultura y por las características del proceso integral de socialización de las nuevas generaciones, que por determinaciones biológicas o naturales.

Y que no se malinterprete lo que aquí estamos planteando: por supuesto un bebé de seis meses que asiste a un Jardín Maternal no podrá co-gestionar la institución, no estamos planteando eso. La violencia no se ejerce cuando se le prohíbe al otro no hacer algo que no puede: violento es impedirle hacer lo que sí puede y cuando dicha acción no constituye una desprotección de sus derechos. Teniendo en cuenta que ésta no es una invitación a establecer parámetros universales basados en edades cronológicas, de lo que se trata es de transformar la mirada para que las niñas y niños vayan asumiendo responsabilidades e involucrándose en la vida social, política y económica en la medida que puedan y quieran hacerlo, sin excluirlas a priori por no tener cierta edad, y -obviamente- siempre y cuando no se vulneren sus derechos al hacerlo.

Los ámbitos familiar y escolar son los primeros y principales espacios que deben democratizarse, creando nuevas formas de convivialidad que impliquen la inclusión de los niños y niñas como co-partícipes y co-constructores de la gestión cotidiana de esos espacios.

Impugnar la participación de los niños y niñas aporta a la construcción de subjetividades infantiles sin (o con poca) iniciativa. De este modo, los mismos

niños y niñas van introyectando el adultismo, y por lo tanto, siendo activos en su reproducción.

*Forma 3: Aplicar (e incluso justificar) distintos tipos de violencias emocional/ psicológica y verbal como método de educación*

Gritar.
Insultar.
Humillar.
Amenazar.
Despreciar.
Culpabilizar.
Desvalorizar.
Chantajear emocionalmente.
Apodar de modos descalificantes.
Enunciar palabras de menosprecio.
Entre otras, éstas son algunas de las muchas maneras en que se expresa esta forma de la violencia adultista.

Estos malos tratos son dirigidos hacia los niños y niñas para torcerles la voluntad en pos de aquello que las personas adultas consideramos mejor, más adecuado, o a veces simplemente más cómodo. La facultad de imponer distintos tipos de castigos y micro-penalidades evidencia la superioridad de poder que tenemos las personas adultas. Ubicadas en un lugar de dominación y autoridad, desplegamos distintos mecanismos de control que penalizan las desobediencias con violencias de distinto tipo y grado (Foucault, 1992). Aquí reparamos en las que llamamos de "mediana intensidad", pero como señalamos antes, estas violencias también se traducen en castigos físicos y torturas.

Al igual que sucede con la violencia de género, estos malos tratos se encuentran en gran medida naturalizados tanto entre quienes los ejercen como entre quienes los padecen. Estas violencias expresan, de modo sutil, un valor, una búsqueda muy presente en nuestras sociedades: la obediencia. En general, para el mundo adulto hegemónico, el "buen niño" es, fundamentalmente, el obediente. De aquí que la expresión "portate bien" (muy común en varios países de América Latina y El Caribe), en realidad quiere decir "hacé caso", "obedecé".

Esta forma de violencia adultista contribuye a la construcción de subjetividades infantiles sumisas y obedientes. Pero también, va anulando poco a poco otras cualidades muy valiosas que se portan en la niñez y que luego en la adultez van a escasear: la curiosidad, el gusto por preguntar, el cuestionamiento a lo dado, la sensibilidad ante lo injusto, la sinceridad, la exigencia de coherencia entre la palabra y la acción. De este modo, los mismos niños y niñas van introyectando el adultismo, y por lo tanto, siendo activos en su reproducción.

*Forma 4: Disponer del cuerpo, de la voluntad, de la sexualidad de los niños y niñas*

Negar su carácter deseante.
Imponer siempre la voluntad adulta.
Implantar la hetero-cis-normatividad obligatoria.
Determinar cortes de pelo o estilos de vestimenta.
Tratar a los niños y niñas como objetos que nos pertenecen.
Decidir por ellos la carrera o estudios terciarios/universitarios.
Ocultar información sensible sobre su propia historia o la de familiares directos.
Establecer dónde, cómo y cuándo ligarse sexualmente (o bien prohibirlo terminantemente).
Decidir realizar intervenciones quirúrgicas en el cuerpo del niño o niña sin consentimiento ni información alguna.
Cosificar e hipersexualizar los cuerpos de las niñas y convertirlos en objeto de deseo de adultos varones cis hétero.
Comunicar sin criterio de respeto cambios drásticos sobre su vida (mudanzas, viajes largos, enfermedades terminales de familiares).
Obligar a un cambio de escuela contra la explícita voluntad del niño o niña creyendo innecesaria ninguna forma de consenso ni consentimiento.
Prohibir o boicotear la educación sexual integral (ni hablemos de incluir en ella perspectivas de cuerpos, sexualidades e identidades que se salgan de la norma binaria hegemónica).

A los niños o niñas más pequeños es habitual que los alcemos sin que medie pregunta o anticipación (incluso aunque explícitamente nos comuniquen que no quieren), que les toquemos el cuerpo sin pedir permiso, que les exijamos que nos besen "porque sino no nos quieren", que les ordenemos cuándo hablan, cuándo se callan, cuándo van, cuándo vienen.

Entre muchas otras, éstas son algunas de las maneras en que se expresa esta forma de la violencia adultista. Y cuando se trata de niños o niñas con discapacidad, la convicción de que las personas adultas disponemos de su cuerpo, de su voluntad y de su sexualidad, se maximiza significativamente.

Se enmarca fundamentalmente en la creencia de que los niños y niñas pertenecen a sus padres, madres, cuidadores, y nadie más que ellos sabe qué necesita "su" hijo o hija. Por eso optamos por nombrar esta forma de violencia usando el verbo "disponer", que refiere a valerse de alguien o de algo, a tenerlo o utilizarlo como propio. Se encuentra tan naturalizada que resulta esperable (incluso legítimo) que las personas adultas, en nombre del amor y bienestar de los niños y niñas, impongamos nuestra voluntad como sea, aunque venga con desgarradoras demostraciones de desacuerdo por parte de los niños y niñas. Al sentir las personas adultas que somos dueñas de los niños y niñas (y verse traducido dicho sentimiento en el modo de vida que llevamos), fortalecemos su privatización, y por lo tanto, negamos su carácter público, político. La privatización de las infancias

es directamente proporcional a su despolitización. Así, se van construyendo en las nuevas generaciones subjetividades infantiles disponibles (es decir, en estado de disponibilidad para el mundo adulto). De este modo, los mismos niños y niñas van introyectando el adultismo, y por lo tanto, siendo activos en su reproducción.

*Forma 5: Imponer roles, estereotipos y mandatos de género*

Desplegar un conjunto fenomenal de estrategias institucionales e individuales, explícitas e implícitas, y voluntarias e involuntarias, para imponer roles, estereotipos y mandatos según el género asignado al nacer en función del sexo biológico. Así, dentro de ese esquema binario excluyente de otras expresiones de género u orientaciones sexuales, el mundo adulto asociará a las niñas con los colores claros y suaves (rosa y lila); les asignarán juguetes como muñecas, peluches, bebés y unicornios; las relacionará con las tareas domésticas, de cuidado, de belleza, ligándolas así al rol de madre, enfermera, cuidadora de otras personas, esteticista, peluquera. Mientras que por el contrario, a los niños se los asociará con los colores fuertes (azul, rojo, verde militar); se les asignarán juguetes de construcción, autos, muñecos que pelean y portan armas, animales agresivos; se los relacionara con las tareas de liderazgo, de fortaleza, de valentía, de heroísmo, ligándolos así al rol de militar, dirigente, empresario, bombero, etc. En definitiva, preparándolos para ser jefes en el plano laboral y/o familiar.

Decíamos antes que el adultocentrismo es una extensión del patriarcado, o bien, un subsistema de él. Si bien es el mundo adulto en general quien impone a las nuevas generaciones los modos posibles de ser y vivir de acuerdo a una binaria y única relación posible entre sexo biológico, género y orientación sexual, somos los varones adultos cis hetero quienes detentamos el monopolio del poder patriarcal. De hecho, en vínculos familiares heteronormados, es tan evidente que basta con reparar en que la insuficiente aplicación de castigos de la madre hacia los hijos o hijas se penaliza a través de la violencia del padre, quien la maltrata por no imponer su voluntad (la de él). De aquí que sea no sólo injusto, sino además, sesgado, igualar al varón hetero cis con la mujer hetero cis a la hora de intentar comprender el fenómeno de la violencia adultista. En nuestras sociedades patrarcales, somos los varones adultos cis hetero blancos, urbanos, propietarios y sin discapacidad quienes más nos beneficiamos y (por lo tanto) sostenemos la violencia por razones de género y de edad. Porque como sostiene Burman (2008) la liberación de la niñez del yugo de la violencia adultista no puede darse desvinculada de la de las mujeres y disidencias del orden hetero-cis-patriarcal.

De acuerdo a los roles, estereotipos y mandatos de género que se imponen desde pequeños, los niños varones van construyendo su autoimagen considerándose seres capaces, fuertes, inteligentes, activos, líderes, seguros, objetivos, y legitimándose como agresivos, impulsivos, desprolijos. Lo que los lleva a cargar sobre sus espaldas mandatos como ser proveedores, protectores, exitosos, prestigiosos, no mostrarse débiles ni llorar, saber siempre lo que quieren,

no expresar los sentimientos y exhibir ante otros hombres su potencia (Segato, 2018). Como contracara que le da sentido a esta autopercepción masculina, las niñas son construidas como menos capaces y más débiles que los niños varones, dependientes, influenciables, pasivas, serviciales, subjetivas, emocionales. Así a las niñas se les impone como mandatos ser madre, cuidar, estar al servicio de las demás personas y especialmente de los varones, estar siempre lindas y bien vestidas, ser prolijas, calladas, obedientes, aplicadas, ordenadas, pulcras (Maffía, 2016). En el marco de este esquema binario, las nuevas generaciones van construyendo a lo largo de su proceso de socialización subjetividades infantiles machistas y hetero-cis-normadas.

*Forma 6: Desposeer a los niños, niñas y niñes de capacidad para autopercibir su identidad de género y su orientación sexual*

Expulsarlos del hogar por no adecuarse a la hetero-cis-norma.

Prohibirles jugar con cosméticos o accesorios relacionados con el género autopercibido.

Limitar y condicionar su derecho a la salud, a la educación y a la justicia por ser como son.

Despreciar y ocultar su expresión de género. Negarles afecto como castigo por dicha expresión.

No permitir la rectificación del sexo y nombre asignado al nacer en el documento legal que acredita la identidad.

No respetar el pedido de que se refieran al niño o niña con pronombres del género contrario al asignado al nacer.

Impedir que usen juguetes, elijan colores o se vistan con ropa del género opuesto al asignado al niño o niña.

Impedirles elegir un nombre con el que sentirse a gusto. Prohibir la elección de su orientación sexual y tratarles como personas enfermas.

La transgeneridad-transexualidad ha sido catalogada como una enfermedad tanto desde la psiquiatría y la psicología como desde la medicina hasta no hace mucho más que una década (Pavan, 2019). Los discursos patologizantes, todavía muy presentes, pretenden eliminar la transgeneridad-transexualidad (y los múltiples modos no hetero-cis-normativos de experimentar la sexualidad y la identidad de género) como experiencias vitales, posibles, y dignas y colaboran así con el aumento de los dispositivos de odio.

En general, es en la niñez que las personas empiezan a manifestar su disconformidad con el género asignado al nacer.[6] El principal argumento contra la manifestación de su identidad de género y/o de su orientación sexual es la supuesta incapacidad para saber lo que sienten, sumado al argumento de su absoluta influenciabilidad y maleabilidad. Cuanta menos edad tienen, más se los desposee de capacidad para autopercibir su identidad de género.

Son formidables las resistencias y obstáculos institucionales que impiden una

vida digna y en igualdad de condiciones a niños, niñas y niñes travesti trans y no binaries (ACIL, 2021).[7] Esta forma de la violencia adultista contribuye a que los niños, niñas y niñes trans, travestis y no binaries vayan construyendo a lo largo de su proceso de socialización subjetividades enajenadas y/o de hetero-cis-sexualidad obligatoria.

A continuación, en la Tabla 4, compartimos un esquema que sintetiza un posible vínculo entre violencias adultistas de intensidad media y elementos de la subjetividad de la infancia hegemónica. Por un lado, aclaramos que se trata de tendencias y/o probabilidades, no determinaciones estructurales. Por otro lado, creemos que constituye una invitación interesante para reconocer modos posibles en los que la materialidad de la ideología adultista contribuye a la introyección por parte de los propios niños y niñas del conjunto de creencias adultistas que los lleva a reproducirlas.

*Forma 7: Convertir la protección en mecanismo de segregación*

Graciela Montes, una gran escritora argentina de literatura (para niños, niñas y para todos) nos ofrece la figura más adecuada para introducir esta forma de violencia adultista: el corral. Como ella dice: en una granja, el corral es bueno porque protege del lobo; pero también es problemático, porque encierra (Montes, 2018). Habitualmente encerramos a los niños y niñas en "el corral de la infancia":

**Tabla 4**
***Subjetividad infantil que cada tipo de violencia adultista de intensidad media tiende a forjar.***

| *Violencias adultistas de intensidad media* | *Subjetividades infantiles que tiende a forjar* |
|---|---|
| Negar a los niños y niñas la condición de sujetos de pensamiento. | Autocensurantes |
| Impugnar la participación de los niños y niñas en la vida política, económica y social por no ser personas adultas. | Con poca iniciativa |
| Aplicar (e incluso justificar) distintos tipos de violencias emocional/psicológica y verbal como método de educación. | Sumisas y obedientes |
| Disponer del cuerpo, de la voluntad, de la sexualidad de los niños y niñas | Disponibles para el mundo adulto |
| Imponer roles, estereotipos y mandatos de género | Machistas y hetero-cis-normadas |
| Desposeer a los niños, niñas y niñes de capacidad para autopercibir su identidad de género y su orientación sexual | Enajenadas y/o de hetero-cis-sexualidad obligatoria |

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

en pos de proteger o alejar a los niños y niñas de determinados riesgos, los privamos de ciertas experiencias. Sin duda alguna, los niños y niñas, en las complejas sociedades en que vivimos, necesitan del cuidado de personas adultas y de la comunidad en general. Más, aún, cuanto más pequeños son. Pero muchas veces, en pos de proteger se puede incurrir en prácticas excluyentes y discriminatorias. Por ejemplo, ¿cuántas experiencias vitales fundantes hemos pospuesto a nuestras hijas e hijos, o estudiantes, para "más adelante", para "cuando sean más grandes" porque a nosotros -repito, a nosotros- nos generaba dudas o temor? Por supuesto que, indefectiblemente, hay experiencias que mejor evitarlas en ciertos momentos de nuestras vidas (más allá de la edad que tengamos). Muchas veces el contexto, el estado anímico o de salud, nuestro poder adquisitivo, entre otras razones, pueden invitarnos a limitar ciertas vivencias. Pero en relación a la edad, muchas veces se trata más de cómo acompañar las experiencias que de privarlas. Me refiero a que muchas veces se trata de preguntarnos cómo acompañar al niño o niña para que "vea" lo que quiere ver (lo que implica reflexionar posteriormente sobre ello) que prohibirlo; o bien, cómo acompañar al niño o niña a vivir determinada experiencia que le genera deseo o curiosidad (con posterior reflexión) que impedirlo. Y ojo, "posterior reflexión" no es monólogo de la persona adulta; es diálogo, es pregunta, es escucha, es opinión de ambas partes. Ahora bien, y con esto quiero ser enfático: siempre y cuando la experiencia en cuestión no represente un daño para su salud, o bien, vulnere alguno de sus derechos.

Asimismo, es habitual que a la hora de intervenir ante situaciones de vulneración de derechos de niños o niñas, diferentes organismos de protección y sus equipos profesionales se consideren los más preparados para definir cuál es el "Interés Superior del Niño" (principio rector de la Convención de los Derechos del Niño) sin desplegar dispositivos de escucha ni diálogo intergeneracional. Es que el dilema protección-emancipación es resuelto de modo paternalista en nuestras sociedades adultocéntricas, inclinando la balanza en la protección, obstaculizando el ejercicio de la libertad a los niños y niñas en tanto sujetos sociales y políticos (Liebel, 2006), lo cual nos ubica ante el desafío de despaternalizar la idea de protección (Liebel, 2006).

De aquí que en nuestras complejas ciudades el espacio público es cada vez más adultocéntrico. El adultocentrismo de la calle se confirma con un observable evidente: por fuera del horario de ingreso o egreso de la escuela, la calle está -cada vez más- vacía de niños y niñas. Sin embargo, es notable cómo en los barrios periféricos, populares, este observable muta: un poco por falta de espacio dentro de las casas, y otro poco porque perdura una matriz comunitaria de acuerdo a la cual se comparte tanto lo que se tiene como lo que no, las calles son patios a cielo abierto de los niños y niñas, con lo potente y lo riesgoso que trae aparejado. No casualmente los niños y niñas de sectores populares suelen ser significativamente más autónomos que los de las clases medias y altas.

*Forma 8: Gozar y abusar del privilegio de no hacer aquello que le decimos a los niños y niñas que deben hacer.*

Este privilegio es notablemente evidente en dos sentidos. Por un lado, porque las personas adultas nos la pasamos diciéndole a los niños y niñas que hagan cosas que no hacemos (en la escuela, en la casa, en el barrio, etc.); y porque los niños y niñas rápidamente lo notan, habitualmente lo señalan, pero escasos resultados favorables obtienen. Asimismo, es usual que determinadas conductas o comportamientos sean reprobados y/o prohibidos entre niños y niñas, pero tolerados e incluso promovidos entre personas adultas. Esto no sólo es percibido por ellos como una injusticia, sino que refuerza cierta desautorización y descrédito hacia el mundo adulto, que pareciera ir en aumento. No por nada muchos niños y niñas no encuentran con facilidad personas adultas en quienes confiar.

Al decir de Paulo Freire, resulta decisivo que las personas adultas busquemos corporificar las palabras en el ejemplo (Freire, 2008), es decir, reconocer el carácter de "discurso" que tienen nuestras acciones: "Considero el testimonio como un "discurso" coherente y permanente de la educadora progresista. (...) Los niños tienen una sensibilidad enorme para percibir que la maestra hace exactamente lo opuesto a lo que dice" (Freire, 2009, pp. 97-98). Ese testimonio es realmente importante si reconocemos que los niños y niñas observan constante y minuciosamente la coherencia/incoherencia entre la palabra y el obrar de las personas adultas. Así, van aprendiendo desde muy pequeños que el mundo adulto goza del privilegio (entre muchos otros) popularmente conocido como "haz lo que yo digo, pero no lo que yo hago". Y no sólo eso: aprenden también a replicar dinámicas adultistas con personas de menos edad. De acá que sea fundamental entender que las niñeces no sólo son violentadas por el adultismo, sino que también lo aprenden y reproducen.

*Forma 9: Menospreciar o invisibilizar las contribuciones que realizan los niños y niñas en diferentes ámbitos.*

En el ámbito artístico suelen ser menospreciadas las novedades provenientes de las nuevas generaciones. Por ejemplo, un estilo musical creado por una nueva generación, hasta que no logra imponerse masivamente (o convertirse en un negocio altamente rentable), es denostado por el mundo adulto. De este modo, las producciones culturales originales de las nuevas generaciones deben enfrentarse contra el desprecio y desprestigio que impone el mundo adulto, justificado en la vaga idea de que "todo tiempo pasado fue mejor". Un caso actual y paradigmático lo encontramos en el surgimiento del Trap argentino, rechazado por el mundo adulto contemporáneo aduciendo que "eso no es música ni arte". Pero, continuando en el caso argentino, lo mismo ocurrió cuando la generación tanguera desdeñó la música del incipiente rock nacional en la década de 1960. Y se repitió cuando esa generación creadora del rock descalificaba la música (de rock también) creada por la subsiguiente cohorte. El rock de fines de siglo u otros estilos musicales

como la cumbia "eran una vergüenza" para ese mundo adulto perteneciente a una generación que "componía la música de verdad". Y actualmente, en buena medida quienes éramos jóvenes a principios del siglo XXI y padecíamos el rechazo de nuestros padres por la música que escuchábamos, consideramos que el Trap es una falta de respeto a la música.

En el ámbito de la economía popular y las tareas de cuidado, sistemáticamente se invisibiliza la contribución que los niños y niñas realizan. Dado que cualquier forma de trabajo en la infancia está prohibida, no son reconocidos los diferentes "trabajos ligeros" que muchos niños y niñas realizan. Dicha categoría, como señalamos antes postulada por la OIT, refiere a aquellos trabajos que sin resultar contraproducentes para su bienestar ni interfiriendo con su escolaridad, aportan a la resolución de las necesidades familiares y/o comunitarias. En el mejor de los casos, cuando es reconocida dicha contribución, se enuncia de formas desjerarquizantes, es decir, que le restan valor: en lugar de hablar del "trabajo" se habla de "ayuda"; en vez de señalar lo que efectivamente "hacen" se repara en que "aprenden".

En el ámbito de la organización política (en centros de estudiantes, por ejemplo, o en los "espacios de juventud" o "frentes juveniles" de organizaciones partidarias) las nuevas generaciones encuentran, en general, monumentales resistencias adultas. Esos espacios apartados de los del mundo adulto suelen ser creados, de hecho, para que las iniciativas y construcciones políticas nazcan y mueran en ese ámbito, no incidiendo -o incidiendo del menor modo posible- en los espacios adultos. Lo problemático es que los espacios de juventud representan a la juventud (es decir, son sectoriales) mientras que los espacios de adultos representan al conjunto (o sea, son universales). Por su parte, cuando la participación política de los niños y niñas no es boicoteada o directamente prohibida, suele ser considerada por el mundo adulto como "preparación" o "aprendizajes" para la participación política verdadera, es decir, esa que tendrá lugar cuando lleguen a ser personas adultas. Lo que hacen los niños y niñas en tanto tales, pocas veces es considerado como un legítimo proceso de involucramiento político para transformar realidades presentes. Si bien en los últimos años han cobrado relevancia internacional voces de niños, niñas y personas muy jóvenes, no dejan de ser una total excepción. Me refiero a, por ejemplo, Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, Francisco Vera, Mari Copeny o Ahed Tamimi. Quizás lo que suceda es que el mundo adulto busca evitar perder poder.

*Forma 10: Naturalizar la utilización de "infantil" o "adolescente" como insultos o adjetivos despreciativos*

"No seas infantil", "no te comportes como un niño", "parecés adolescente", "no seas chiquillo", "¿acaso eres una niña?" nos decimos entre las personas adultas para definir de modo peyorativo cierta conducta o actitud. Así, la categoría "infantil", "adolescente" o cualquier modo de asociación con la niñez se vuelve sinónimo de inmadurez, de capricho, de algo absurdo, incluso de algo tonto o

irresponsable. No sólo resulta discriminatorio y estigmatizante, sino que refuerza la representación social adultista que legitima el status de inferioridad de los niños y niñas. Dicha representación está asociada a los estereotipos etarios (adultistas) de acuerdo a los cuales a las personas adultas se nos presupone racionales, maduras, autónomas, responsables, serias, conscientes, en tanto que a los niños y niñas se los considera personas irracionales, inmaduras, dependientes, irresponsables, inverosímiles, inocentes.

Recordemos que infante viene del latín in-fans y etimológicamente remite a quien no dispone de habla. Sin embargo, con el uso y el tiempo, la palabra infancia fue transformándose en otra cosa: se usa para nombrar a niños o niñas que ya han adquirido el habla y su significado mutó a "quien no tiene palabra", o en otros términos, quien no tiene nada importante que decir, a quien no vale la pena escuchar. Incluso, la palabra infante pasó a designar a muchos otros grupos subalternizados, quienes también han sido condenados al silencio social, y así expulsados de la posibilidad de participar de la vida pública-política. Por ejemplo, suele decirse que se infantiliza tanto a las personas con discapacidad como a los adultos y adultas mayores.

Resulta paradójico que se utilicen estas categorías como adjetivos despreciativos, cuando es justamente la racionalidad infantil la que más nos ayudaría a salir de la crisis civilizatoria integral en la que estamos como humanidad. Resulta sugerente en este sentido cómo Paulo Freire asocia lo infantil a todo lo contrario: a la curiosidad, a la búsqueda, a la pregunta, al deseo de saber y crear; no a lo "nuevo" o "pequeño", sino a lo inacabado, a aquello que se halla en proceso de crecimiento, desafiado a transformarse permanentemente (Freire y Faundez, 2013).

Y nótese que, a diferencia de la matriz adultista que menosprecia lo infantil definiéndolo incompleto (como algo negativo, carente), y suponiendo al mismo tiempo que la adultez representa el estadio de la completitud, para Freire el inacabamiento es constitutivo del ser persona: "Los hombres y mujeres, en cuanto seres históricos, somos seres incompletos, inacabados, inconclusos" (Freire, 2006, p. 19). De hecho, esa incompletitud es el motor del conocimiento, es condición de la educabilidad del ser (Freire, 2006). De aquí que, para Freire, calificar algo de infantil es un halago, una fuente de honra.

*Forma 11: Tratar a los niños y niñas como consumidores mientras postergamos su condición de ciudadanos*

Severos trastornos de conducta alimentaria como la obesidad, la bulimia y la anorexia; serios problemas de salud bucal por el desmedido consumo de golosinas; adicción a las pantallas y/o redes sociales (que pueden provocar problemas en el lenguaje, miopía, baja autoestima, ansiedad, depresión, poca actividad física, dificultades para la socialización); consumos problemáticos de juguetes y entretenimientos (o bien, la insaciabilidad de la necesidad de consumo), son algunas de las manifestaciones de este tipo de violencia adultista.

Un sinnúmero de estrategias de manipulación son llevadas adelante por las empresas para vender bienes o servicios a los niños y niñas, o a través de ellos a las personas adultas de sus familias. De este modo se mercantiliza a los niños y niñas tratándolos como consumidores y/o como dinamizadores del consumo de otros (Bustelo, 2007). La industria textil, del juguete, de la alimentación (golosinas, galletas, fastfood), del entretenimiento, de las redes sociales, cada vez más, crecen de la mano de los consumos infantiles. Y aunque a la vista de todos las consecuencias sean muy dañinas para los niños y niñas, todavía las normativas y/o regulaciones estatales no están a la altura. El mayor problema, desde mi mirada, es ese: la falta de regulación estatal. Su ausencia deja a los niños y niñas indefensos ante la voracidad del mercado que los trata como clientes y que despliega estrategias de todo tipo para conquistarlos.

Ahora bien, el trato hacia los niños y niñas más como clientes que como ciudadanos se evidencia en otro fenómeno creciente altamente preocupante, la llamada niñofobia. Viene creciendo velozmente una "moda" radicalmente discriminatoria hacia la niñez (y por lo tanto adultista): servicios "libres de niños". Restaurantes, hoteles, vuelos, circuitos turísticos, entre otros servicios, prohíben el ingreso de niños y niñas y publicitan sin pudor alguno esta promoción indirecta de una suerte de apartheid infantil.

Excluir a los niños y niñas de los espacios públicos implica fortalecer su ya relegada ciudadanía y reforzar su repliegue al ámbito privado. Este trato hacia la niñez pone en evidencia la doble moral de nuestras sociedades adultocéntricas, ya que se avala el trato a los niños y niñas como consumidores plenos en tanto pueden ser interpelados desde el mercado con cualquier tipo de estrategia de venta, pero se posterga su condición de ciudadanos (Baratta, 2007) y se los quiere lejos de los ámbitos públicos. Pero fundamentalmente, en lo que atañe a la violencia adultista, me interesa destacar la selectividad para nada inocente del mundo adulto dominante, que se puede simplificar en el siguiente apotegma: idóneos para el consumo libre de mercancías, ineptos para ejercer la ciudadanía.

*Forma 12: Considerar que la persona adulta, por el sólo hecho de ser adulta, es superior moralmente y por lo tanto tiene el derecho de juzgar a los niños y niñas.*

Docentes y autoridades en instituciones educativas, o miembros adultos de las familias, creemos que por el papel que allí ocupamos, o simplemente por "ser más grandes" tenemos el derecho de juzgar a los niños y niñas, a darles lecciones de moral, a establecer terminantemente qué está bien y qué está mal sin consulta ni diálogo ni escucha alguna. Por ejemplo, es frecuente que las personas adultas en el aula o en el hogar nos encontremos dando órdenes en lugar de propuestas o invitaciones a hacer determinada cosa; juzgando actitudes y comentarios entre ellos sin que nadie nos pregunte qué pensamos; opinando sobre los proyectos, sobre los miedos, sobre los intereses de los niños y niñas, sin respeto por su autonomía ni su integridad y sin que nos hayan pedido opinión; respondiendo a preguntas que

no nos hicieron, hablando desde un lugar de portadores del saber y la verdad. “Te lo digo porque yo ya la pasé”, justificamos. Y bien, ¿recordamos qué sentíamos de niños? ¿Nos acordamos de cómo nos indignaba que nos subestimen, que no confíen en nuestro criterio, que todo el tiempo los adultos se piensen portadores de la verdad? ¿Recordamos la incomodidad que sentíamos cuando éramos niños o niñas y las personas adultas nos interrogaban si decíamos algo interesante, sólo para que terminemos confirmando que ellos sabían más que nosotros?

Es decisiva la educación ética. De hecho, es la llave para preservar la vida en el planeta. Pero, ¿qué ética? ¿Esa que sostiene valores machistas, discriminatorios, competitivos, meritocráticos, racistas, mercantilistas, antropocéntricos, epistemicidas, etnocidas? No. Esa es la ética del mercado, y lamentablemente, la que tenemos internalizada. Y aunque nos peleemos contra ella, nos constituye.
“Los niños son crueles”, suele decirse entre personas adultas. ¿Y las personas adultas? ¿No somos crueles? Una sociedad que basa el desigual reparto del poder en una deshumanizante pedagogía de la crueldad (Segato, 2018), definitivamente no puede crear-criar niños y niñas aislados de esos valores. Porque, como decíamos antes, las nuevas generaciones aprenden mucho más a partir de lo que ven que hacemos que de lo que les decimos que está bien o mal. Por eso la idea de la superioridad moral del mundo adulto no es otra cosa que una expresión más de la violencia adultista.

*Forma 13: Diseñar y construir los objetos de uso general adaptados al cuerpo adulto hegemónico.*

Los interruptores de la luz, el timbre de las casas, la botonera de los ascensores de cualquier edificio, el espejo de los baños, la ventanilla de los automóviles que nos permite mirar hacia afuera, las mesas para comer, las sillas para sentarse, el retrete, son algunos de los tantos objetos de uso cotidiano que debido a su altura o tamaño no resultan funcionales para las niñas y niños pequeños (y no tan pequeños). Esto genera limitación, incomodidad y dependencia de los niños y niñas para con las personas adultas, a quienes tendrán que pedirles asistencia, de quienes tendrán que esperar colaboración y quienes muchas veces les hacemos sentir que por nuestra ayuda deberían tratarnos con agradecimiento. Estas limitaciones completamente evitables atentan, además, contra la autonomía e independencia de los niños y niñas. Pero no sólo eso. El mundo adulto esperará gratitud y reconocimiento por la ayuda brindada a los niños y niñas para que accedan al uso de los objetos que las mismas personas adultas diseñamos y construimos consciente y voluntariamente no adaptados a ellos y ellas. Lo cual confirma, de alguna manera, que vivimos en un mundo de adultos, hecho por adultos y para los adultos.

Es notable la alegría y satisfacción de los niños y niñas cuando se encuentran con lugares adaptados a su tamaño. Sean estos jardines de infantes, escuelas primarias o museos infantiles, su agrado es inmediato.

## A modo de cierre

Eduardo Galeano, el escritor uruguayo que publicó en 1970 *Las venas abiertas de América Latina*, siempre demostró sensibilidad ante los padecimientos de la infancia. En otro libro prodigioso supo denunciar que

> en América Latina, los niños y los adolescentes suman casi la mitad de la población total. (...) Y entre todos los rehenes del sistema, ellos son los que peor la pasan. La sociedad los exprime, los vigila, los castiga, a veces los mata: casi nunca los escucha, jamás los comprende. (Galeano, 2004, p. 14)

Es el dolor que nos genera esta triste realidad lo que nos provoca a trabajar en este sentido. En otras palabras, no podemos ocultar que este artículo y los que vendrán se escriben con la esperanza de poder contribuir, aunque sea *un tantito así*, a que las instituciones de nuestras sociedades en general y las personas adultas en particular podamos dejar de negar a los niños y niñas: tanto a los actuales como a los que fuimos. Creemos en las potencialidades de la condición humana y buscamos construir inéditos viables sin violencias ni contra la infancia ni contra nadie.

En este artículo nos hemos propuesto realizar una demarcación teórico conceptual de las categorías adultocentrismo, adultismo y violencias adultistas. Hemos intentado poner en juego un enfoque interseccional, decolonial y problematizador de la hetero-cis-normatividad. Hemos querido, además, dar cuenta de cómo el poder adultocéntrico que violenta a los niños y niñas es introyectado por ellas y ellos, es decir que lo aprenden, incorporan y reproducen. Deseamos que se multipliquen las voces, producciones académicas y voluntades políticas que busquen resquebrajar este sistema de dominio que tanto daño hace al conjunto de la humanidad.

"Cuando sea grande voy a tratar de no olvidarme de que una vez fui chico", afirma el protagonista de un cuento de Elsa Borneman (2000), escritora argentina de literatura para niños y niñas (y para todos). Esa es, de alguna manera, la demanda más sentida por las niñas y niños hacia el mundo adulto. Y ese es, también, el sendero antiadultista que estamos llamados a recorrer. ¿Podremos?

## Notes

[1] Estas doce tesis, publicadas en Morales (2022), fueron revisadas y enriquecidas para ser incorporadas en este artículo.

[2] Este parámetro debe ser leído con cautela. Dependiendo de las características económicas, sociales, culturales e históricas de cada país/región, dicho segmento etario se moverá: puede que en algunos lugares la adultez plena empiece antes o después de los 30 años, así como puede comenzar a terminar antes o después de los 50/59.

[3] La expresión Abya Yala viene siendo cada vez más usada por los pueblos indígenas del continente para autodesignarse, así como por muchas personas y colectivos que bregamos por una descolonización emancipadora. Surge en oposición a la expresión

"América", considerando dicho nombre una imposición de quienes nos conquistaron. En la lengua del pueblo kuna, originario de la sierra Nevada al norte de lo que hoy es Colombia, Abya Yala significa "tierra que florece" o "tierra madura".

[4] "Gatillo fácil" es una expresión utilizada en varios países de América Latina y El Caribe para denunciar asesinatos de las fuerzas de seguridad, como consecuencia de la utilización abusiva y letal de armas de fuego. Generalmente es presentada por la policía como una acción accidental o de legítima defensa.

[5] No es el objetivo de este artículo reseñar los fundamentos de cada perspectiva. Para conocer en profundidad cada enfoque, sugerimos la lectura de Rausky (2009), o bien Marales y Shabel (2020).

[6] Según un informe estadístico realizado por la Asociación Civil Infancias Libres (ACIL) de Argentina, sobre 200 experiencias de madres/padres/referentes adultos de niñeces trans y travestis, las primeras manifestaciones de les niñes de una autopercepción del género distinto al asignado al nacer se dieron en un 78% antes de que cumplan los 9 años de edad. Y el 42% de las mismas tuvieron lugar entre los 1 y 4 años de edad (ACIL, 2021).

[7] De acuerdo con los testimonios de les referentes adultes de las niñeces trans y travestis, el 80% de les profesionales de la salud a quienes acudieron para recibir orientación no supieron cómo acompañarles, y el 73% de las escuelas no se encontraron preparadas para alojarles (ACIL, 2021).

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# Reclaiming Civic Life in Schools: Lessons on Contesting Anti-Black Adultism Through Acts of Solidarity

*Ryan Oto & Amina Smaller*

## Abstract

In this article, we illustrate and address how anti-Blackness and adultism work together in an interlocking form of oppression we call anti-Black adultism. Situated in Amina's (youth author) lived experiences of school, we offer counter-stories that show the ways that educators employed anti-Black adultism to render Amina's civic life incompatible with the academic learning of school and imposed adult-framings of academic success on her as a way to control her in school. We then detail our shared experiences in an affinity group space and youth research project to offer the ways that anti-Black adultism can be disrupted through acts of solidarity. We conclude with lessons for adults to trouble anti-Black adultism to sustain intergenerational work toward racial justice in schools.

## Introduction

*In sixth grade, I asked my social studies teacher if we could learn about the history of Black people in Minnesota because I had relatives who were connected to organizing movements in Northside during the 60s and 70s. He told me that if I couldn't learn how to pay attention that I wouldn't make it through high school. We were learning local history and all I wanted was for my classmates to learn about my local history because I was so proud of it. This is the same teacher that looked my father in the eyes and lied about calling me an uncivilized monkey in class.*

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Amina, youth author to this piece whose experience in school is depicted in this vignette, was denied her right to engage her civic life in academic learning by a white teacher who located her as a problem in his classroom. Her requests are not unusual for those of us who have worked in classroom contexts; young people yearn for their lives outside of school to exist in classes so they can see their lives and academic learning woven together. However, through the anti-Black racism and adultism present in this experience, Amina was refused her right to see her learning as more than ahistorical academic exercises. It is at this intersection of multiple oppressions, of adultism and anti-Black racism, that this piece speaks back to the dominant narratives that Black youth are positioned as deficient in school contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through the construction of counter-stories that center Amina's lived experiences we illustrate how adultism and anti-Black racism rob Black youth of their right to civically engaged learning (Perry et al., 2003). Importantly, we draw on our shared labor in an affinity group and youth participatory action research (YPAR) project to show how solidarity provides a framework to move beyond the logics of adultism and anti-Black racism.

## The Problem: Adultism and Anti-Black Racism

### *Adultism*

Youths' efforts to engage in the civic life of schools are often contextualized by the power asymmetries between adults and youth, described as adultism (LeFrançois, 2014; Liou & Literat, 2020; Rombalski, 2020; Rubin & Hayes, 2010). Adultism is situated in developmentalist theories of human growth (e.g., Piaget), which presume that adults are developed, mature, and rational beings whereas youth are not (LeFrançois, 2014). Therefore, adultist renderings of youth characterize young people as the opposites of these qualities: Undeveloped, immature, and irrational, presupposing that young people need adults to grow (Bell, 2010; Bertrand et al., 2020; Bettencourt, 2020; LeFrançois, 2014; Liou & Literat, 2020; Zeldin et al., 2013). As such, the perspectives and agentic possibilities of youth are disregarded, disenfranchising youth experiences, knowledge, and action.

Adultism manifests in several forms within schooling contexts: Ideological, relational, and structural (Bertrand et al., 2020; Bettencourt, 2020; Liou & Literat, 2020; Zeldin et al., 2013). As a form of oppression, adultism interlocks with other forms of social oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, with a compounding effect on the marginalization of youth of color in low-income communities (Bertrand et al., 2017; 2020). If gone uncontested, adultism socializes youth of color to accept other forms of oppression, perpetuating the spirit murder of Black and Brown youth in schools (DeJong & Love, 2015; Gillen, 2019; Love, 2019).

### *Anti-Blackness*

Anti-blackness in schooling has been a mainstay in U.S. society since the establishment of public schooling (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Muhammad, 2010; Watkins, 2001). As Leonardo (2013) asserted, anti-Blackness in schooling dehumanizes Black youth by categorizing them as unable to learn in schooling contexts. Thus, the purpose of schooling shifts to maintain the legacies of oppressive character education that have been imposed on Black communities since the early twentieth century (Leonardo, 2013; Watkins, 2001). The evidence of this historical continuity is readily available in data on who is punished in schools, as Black youth are disproportionately represented in referrals, suspensions, expulsions, and arrests in schools leading to what is commonly called the disciplinary gap (Dumas, 2016; Khalifa, Gooden, et al., 2016). Disconcertingly, the public nature of punishment and discipline of Black youth in schooling contexts asserts the logic that education is contingent on compliance with norms that maintain white supremacy (Dumas, 2016; Love, 2019). In fact, the logic of compliance as education has become so hegemonic that teachers' pedagogies are often evaluated as effective based on their ability to maintain a docile classroom (Casey, Lozenski, et al., 2013). It is no wonder then that Black youth routinely cite a lack of belonging in school spaces as a rationale for their ambivalence toward their schooling communities (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Oto & Chikkatur, 2019).

### *Anti-Black Adultism*

Taken together, anti-Blackness and adultism function together to create a carceral logic that Black youth *need* adults to control them for their own good. Anti-Black adultism can be heard in schools through colloquialisms such as "this is for your own good" and "if you don't have consequences, you will never learn" than confine Black youths' schooling experiences within the demands of adults to sit closer to whiteness without overstepping the boundaries of adult hegemony. Hence, Black youth who attempt to play by these oppressive rules are forced to weigh their own "racial opportunity costs" (Venzant Chambers, 2022), and are forced to choose between their Black communities or abiding by rules that reify a racial caste system with the hopes of making it closer to whiteness. However, academic achievement for Black students has always been situated in the projects of racial uplift, liberation, and civil rights (Collins, 2009; Perry et al., 2003). Thus, forcing Black youth to choose between their communities and their academic achievement is a particular project of oppression that illustrates the ways anti-Black adultism looks, feels, and sounds in schools.

To illustrate the ways that anti-Black adultism functions in schools to rob Black youth of their right to an education that honors the relationship between academics and civic life, Amina lovingly shares her lived experiences in school. We begin by sharing more about our positionalities and then share counter-stories of

Amina's educational experiences to illustrate the functions of anti-Black adultism. Wanting to be more than a representation of a problem, we share our collective work in an affinity group space and a YPAR project to illustrate how solidarity between youth and adults can cultivate conditions to effectively disrupt racism and adultism.

## Who Are We?

Our positionalities are central to our abilities to work together and craft counter-stories.

### *Amina*

*I am a Black cisgender woman and the YPAR Coordinator at Racial Justice Community School. I have been doing youth work and YPAR since graduating from College Prep Academy (CPA) in 2018. I met Ryan when I was a sophomore in high school as a social studies teacher. Even though he wasn't my teacher, we asked him to be the adult facilitator for our Black and Brown girls affinity space. As I got to know him more in that space he seemed really different than the rest of the adults I knew at CPA. He took me seriously and that was new to me. Through high school, I had a really hard time managing my depression and anxiety. At the time, it was undiagnosed and I was just struggling without many coping skills. I didn't really want to talk to anyone about the things that were going on because when I had tried to speak up to adults in the past, they broke that trust my talking to my parents before I was ready, giving me unsolicited advice that I didn't ask for, or suggesting I get tested to explore medication. I really just needed to be seen and have a space to just be during the day without pressure to "get fixed" or do my school work. Ryan provided me with that space. After our YPAR work and graduation, Ryan always kept in touch and supported me in the community YPAR work I was doing and generally in life. He would bring his students to our community research events and boost our research. He also co-created workshops with some members of our CPA YPAR team to present at national education conferences. He has grown into a mentor and friend and has always worked to amplify my voice and support the work that I continue to do.*

### *Ryan*

*I am a multiracial Asian cisgender male educator. I currently work as a professor in an institution of higher education, but first met Amina working at CPA as a high school social studies teacher. While I didn't teach her until her senior year, we came to know each other through informal moments when I would pass her and her friends in the halls and say hi, ask them about music, and tell cheesy jokes. This relationship deepened when Amina and her friends asked me*

*to be one of the adult facilitators for their Black and Brown Girls (BBG) affinity group (more described in Part II of the counter-stories). Then during her senior year, we worked together on a YPAR project about racism in the school community. After Amina graduated and I took a new teaching job at Racial Justice Community School, I helped start a YPAR program and asked Amina to join the program as the facilitator and program coordinator. She has been in this role for the past three years and our collaborations and friendship have continued to strengthen.*

## Context

Amina's projects of engaging in civic life began when she was very young in her historically Black neighborhood, Northside. Her preschool and kindergarten experiences were in a predominantly Black Montessori school in Northside. As she recalled, "my teachers and peers looked like me and my school was less than a mile from home." Her earliest memory of school was being around six years old and attending a protest with her grandma, holding signs and walking on a picket line. Amina recalled vividly the importance that her grandmother impressed upon her about that moment. Hence before she even started school, Amina had already been exposed to the significance of civic life outside of school.

Amina started school at CPA when she was in first grade. Her mother had attended the school and despite not wanting her to go there because she was concerned about the teachings of the school conflicting with the values of her family, her dad viewed it as an important opportunity for Amina to avoid the negative experiences of public schools and learn important academic skills. From first grade through high school, Amina was one of only a handful of Black youth in her grade who would attend CPA.

## Counter-Stories Part I: A Life Denied

### *A Constant Struggle*

*Elementary school was a constant struggle of trying to force a square peg in a round hole and I was the square peg. My family and friends outside of school poured so much love and affirmation into me and taught me to love myself and know my history as a Black person from Northside, but when I would walk into school, I was hyper-focused on belonging that almost everything my family instilled in me went out of the window. I could always feel that my teachers treated me differently than my peers, but I wasn't able to name it until I was older. My teachers had low expectations for me and I felt that in the way that they treated me and spoke about me to my parents. My teachers all treated me like I was incapable of learning like my peers although I repeatedly demonstrated that I could.*

*My loud laugh, African American vernacular English, and silly personality were not issues of me being unable to learn but issues of me not acting the same*

*way as my peers. I could speak and write English perfectly fine, but my teachers would correct my informal language in non-learning spaces. I used "ya'll" and "ain't" frequently, but my teachers would consistently redirect me to say "you guys" or "I'm not". In elementary school, adults were focused on changing the way I showed up so that I would be more like my white peers. I would beg to learn about Black music in music class, but my teacher told me it wasn't real music. When we were asked to journal, I would write stories in my journal just like every other student but because I always told stories about my family and drew pictures it was an issue. I always completed my assignments but I was determined to tell the stories I wanted to tell. Academically, I didn't experience challenges but my unwillingness to act how my teachers wanted me to, made them focus on my academic success less and hold lower expectations of me. Even though I wasn't willing to completely conform to act like my peers, my family could see the ways I was changing who I was to fit in. My mom would get upset and consistently re-correct the way I spoke when she could tell I changed my voice and temperament during school. My parents had extra meetings with my teachers outside of routine conferences to get a better understanding of the inconsistencies between my teacher's stories and my own. My teachers were constantly advocating for me to change who I was and how I showed up in school, and my family was always fighting against it.*

The struggle that Amina describes in her memory of school is vital to understand the ways that adultism in the context of white supremacy, acts on Black youth as a policing mechanism of academic achievement. Amina and her family were well aware of the conflict between the normative lessons she was being taught at school and the affirming and racially uplifting framings of her intelligence she was exposed to at home in Northside, exacerbated in her early schooling experiences going from majority Black spaces that understood how Black achievement is tied to an historical struggle for freedom, racial uplift, and leadership in civic life (Perry et al., 2003), to a school that policed her cultural distinctiveness (e.g., language, disposition) through the guise of academic achievement. In doing so, adults at College Prep Academy were clear in their messages to Amina: You are an object of our schooling, act like it. Hence, advocating for culturally meaningful lessons, such as in her music class, or responding to classwork with her own understanding of the prompts, like drawing and writing about her family, became vehicles to police Amina as an object of schooling that needed to be molded to fit the culture of white achievement.

### *Fighting for Myself*

*Middle school was more of the same low expectations from my teachers. I developed a reputation among adults that I was bright when I "applied myself," but I was also disruptive. This was the messaging at all of my parent-teacher*

*conferences. The reputation seemed to follow me whenever I advocated for things in class. In my 7th grade math class, my teacher told my parents that I had issues with authority and that I wouldn't succeed in the future with my attitude. In a meeting with my parents, my teacher would not admit to the ways he constantly picked on me in class and that my "issues with authority" were actually me standing up for myself when I was being micro-aggressed almost every other class period by him. He was a Canadian immigrant and would say things like "Ms. Smaller, you are what's wrong with America" as a joke when I was having a hard time focusing and would be playful with my peers. In eighth grade, I was in high school Spanish and it was the only subject that I was considered "gifted" in. One day, my teacher, who was Cuban, went on an anti-communist rant and the whole class silently allowed him to do so. When I challenged him he told me that he felt sorry that I was Black in America and told me that if I didn't learn to act like the good Black people, my life would be very challenging ahead.*

*By the time I got to high school, I was tired. I was tired of fighting to make the adults at my school believe that my history, my voice, and my presence was important. Surprisingly, the level of academic challenge wasn't as big of a leap as people made it seem. What made high school more challenging was that my teachers didn't take the time to truly know me and were more intense than my middle school teachers. I was focused on getting by and staying afloat and I could never fully invest in the ways I was told I needed to "succeed". Success at CPA was getting high GPA's, excelling in academics, moving onto another elite exclusive institution, and repeating the same process. Success wasn't being well, being happy, building strong meaningful relationships, or doing work that fed a bigger purpose. I would have needed to believe and truly invest in the things the adults at school were telling me to buy the dream they were selling. I would have had to ignore who I was, turn my back on my community, and fully lose myself in order to achieve success. By CPA's metrics I was on track to fail. As I moved through my first year of high school I struggled thinking that maybe my teachers were right about me. Maybe who I am is just not enough for this school.*

Amina's narrative illustrates the insidious qualities of adultism in a culture of white schooling. Amina's teachers, unable to understand the cultural and political value of Amina's community outside of school, perpetuate the logics that she is an object of schooling to be shaped away from the cultural significance of her Black community. By policing her academic success through narratives of fear and compliance, Amina's teachers instilled in her the value of *their* notion of success, not hers. Significantly, Amina's resistance to these messages through her advocacy for her own educational experience signals her awareness that her own cultural and political learning remained valuable *in spite* of the adults of the institution trying to "remake" her. Bolstered by her family and her community *outside* of school, Amina's belief in her cultural and political identities led her to refuse in the face

of overt adult authority. Unfortunately, these acts of refusal and self-preservation were already framed in the logics of anti-Black discipline passed along by her teachers from earlier grades. Being labeled disruptive at the intersections of adultism and racism meant that Amina's demands to engage in civic issues relevant to her in the classroom were set up to be ignored.

### *Robbing Me of My Identity*

*The rest of high school is honestly a blur, I don't remember much of what teachers said to me, but I remember the way they made me feel: like shit. My life and the issues I cared about didn't matter in school. This was especially true when the murders of Black people by police happened and how stark my experiences were in and out of school. In middle school, I was a part of an after-school program in Northside that was grounded in responding to issues in the community. After Trayvon Martin was murdered, we went to marches and protests, and even created artwork that we sent to Trayvon's family. While we suspected that the art probably wouldn't get to them, the act of solidarity made me feel like I was a part of something bigger and that helped me deal with the loneliness that I felt at school.*

*But that isolation was what I kept being reminded of when I went to school. When Michael Brown was killed and I asked my history teacher if we could talk about it, she responded that "if the whole class gets their work done, then we can talk about it." It felt so shady at the time because she knew that we weren't going to finish the work we were doing in class. It felt like I really didn't matter and was being told that rather than focus on issues that I cared about, of Black people being killed by police, that it was their jobs to push me "academically." It felt like a reminder that school was the only thing that mattered, not my grief and the issues that I was processing in the world or my community outside of CPA.*

*The issues were already personal, but it felt different when Jamar Clark was killed by police in my neighborhood. I couldn't drive to school the normal way my family would go because the roads were blocked by protestors. As I would leave for school, I felt like I was betraying my community and then when I was at school, my peers treated me like I was a CNN war correspondent. At this point, I had lost complete trust in adults to support me and honor any requests I had to talk about issues that were happening in my literal backyard, so I just kept my head down and tried to be invisible.*

The distinct differences in experience between Amina's learning in her neighborhood afterschool program and her schooling experiences at CPA illustrates the possibilities and problematic limitations of learning tied to relevant civic issues of racial justice. As the after-school program illustrated, when youth are engaged in current issues that matter to them and their livelihoods, the world can feel less imposing, and they can find solidarity with one another and broader communities of justice in the world. Likewise, when the civic lives of young people are gatekept

as "irrelevant" or beyond the topics of the classroom, the civic lives of youth are stolen from them by adults who, in Amina's case, reify a system of white supremacy through "academics."

Importantly, this is more than a lost opportunity in a classroom discussion, this is the maintenance of the historical disenfranchisement of Black youth as civic actors struggling for their humanity and dignity in U.S. society (Collins, 2009; Perry et al., 2003). Hence, Amina's response to protect herself by rendering herself invisible is a rational response to the psychic and emotional harm that she was forced to navigate the disjuncture between what school was purported to be for and her own understanding of the world (Rubin & Hayes, 2010). While deeply tragic, Amina's counternarrative about her experiences in school speak back against the dominant discourse she was confronted with that she was academically inadequate for CPA. Rather, Amina's story illustrates the ways that adultism and racism worked together to deny her a foundational right to her civic life within the school.

## Part II: Solidarity and Reclaiming Civic Life

As we crafted the counter narrative of Part I, we came to understand that her story is not one of tragedy, but of resistance. Thus, in Part II, we share the ways that adults, when they work in solidarity *with* youth, can disrupt both racism and adultism in schooling contexts. Importantly, we hope to show the political commitments and ways of being that are essential to acting in solidarity with young people, particularly Black youth whose civic lives cannot be divorced from their academic labor in schools.

### *The Beginning of Solidarity: BBG*

**Amina:** *Towards the middle of high school the learning I was doing was at home was through art, music, literature, and movies about Black people. I fell in love with learning, when it was on my terms which helped my confidence come back. As my confidence shifted, my social scene also shifted. I wanted to build community with the other Black and brown girls in my grade because the relationships that I had were not serving me. I would have little informal moments with these girls but we were all in different friend groups and in our grade friend group mixing wasn't a thing until BBG made it a thing. Towards the end of our sophomore year we formed the group BBG, an affinity space for Black and Latina girls.*

*We would get together every Friday afternoon and just hang out. It was everything! Friday was always the best part of my week. We would have fun but sometimes it was a space where we could be emotionally transparent and discuss issues that came up in the school. In any student group it was required to have a staff advisor. The diversity dean, designated herself as our first staff advisor because she hosted a similar space for Black boys for a long time. She told us we had to*

*have another staff advisor because she might have meetings and things that could interfere with our time.*

*When it came time to find our other staff advisor, we felt like we didn't have any options because there were no other Black staff that we felt connected to. There were other women of color that we could have asked but we didn't think they would have been a good fit for the space. Eva and Oliva brought up Mr. Oto as an option and at first I wasn't for it because he wasn't Black and also wasn't a woman and I didn't think he would be someone I could trust. But, as I got to know him in little ways he seemed like someone I could trust. He didn't overstep and supported us in all of the different ways we showed up to that space.*

**Ryan**: *When I was approached by Amina and Eva to serve as an advisor for BBG I was humbled and surprised. As a multiracial Asian cisgender male, I didn't check any of the boxes that I perceived as needing to adequately support an intersectional affinity space. I asked them if they wanted to pick someone else, they declined and said they wanted me, noting later that they picked me because I understood that it was their space, not mine. I had reservations about what I could do or if it would be helpful to be in that space, but the ask from young people is something I took seriously and showed up.*

*Over the course of my time in their space, my role was to check in with the security guards to unlock the meeting room and ensure they had enough snacks. Throughout my time as their faculty advisor, I was consistently intentional with how I showed up in the room – ensuring that my presence was on the periphery unless they invited me into conversations. In turn, I was given an immense privilege of being invited into the room to hear these young people share their shared struggles over overt and subtle forms of racism and sexism that they faced everyday. While I knew that these young people faced racialized and gendered experiences in the school, the extent and persistence challenged my own understanding of my position as a teacher in the building. I was receiving my own political education about the ways that my preconceived notions of teaching did not align with the anti-oppressive demands they sought in their educational experiences. Consequently, I started to understand my responsibilities as an educator in ways that extended beyond the conventions of classrooms, into my own sense of self. I reflected more on the ways that I could think and act like the types of educators they yearned for in their critiques and demonstrate an ethic of care that their lives were meaningful in the wholeness they embraced when together.*

*As the year went on, the young people in the room grew more comfortable with me, evidenced by small moments like asking about my day and wanting to know more about my life away from school. This led to deeper and sustaining relationships, where I was then asked to help make sense of the power dynamics they encountered with teachers and administrators. Reflecting further, these small moments built up over time and I that sense of self that was changing through the political*

*education about racism I was gaining in the space also reflected how I was showing up relationally, grounded by the humanizing experience.*

*Toward the end of the year the energy in the group shifted toward an angst about what they could collectively do to address the racism of the school. They wanted their experiences to change, but previous efforts to transform the school through formal channels like student organizations, the student government association, and advocacy with the Diversity Dean had yielded no change. Their exhaustion was fueling a disenchantment with the school that led many of them at one point or another to wish that they could just graduate and be done with the school. It was in this context that I asked if they would be interested in a different approach that was youth-centered: Youth participatory action research (YPAR). A research method I had learned about earlier in the year in one of my graduate school courses, I found myself wondering how these young people might take their lived experiences to do a research project that made legible the need for change that they had advocated for.*

### *Resisting Anti-Black Adultism: YPAR*

**Ryan**: *I wasn't sure how they'd take my proposal to do a YPAR project, this was the first time I had suggested something that they do in the context of their affinity space. I made clear that I would act as a facilitator, but I wouldn't do more than pick out texts that I thought aligned with their research interest. I also told them that I didn't know what we were getting into, so while I would be able to teach them research skills, we would be learning this process together. They said yes with an energy and enthusiasm that I had not expected.*

*I knew that to do this work I would have to be transparent with the school's administration. In a meeting with the administrator in charge of school-based research, I explained what YPAR was and how these young people might use it as a meaningful framework for their own interests in bettering the school. While she was apprehensive, she supported it, viewing the idea of student research as a positive experience. She even noted "perhaps we'll learn what we as a school are also doing well." However, there was one significant stipulation: Only seniors could participate in the project to mitigate any chance of long-form frustration or angst toward the school that young people who weren't graduating might bring along with them. Understanding this as a means for the institution to protect itself because any dissatisfaction would leave with those young people who were graduating, I shared the condition with the group and while they didn't love the idea, anything was better than nothing. They agreed and we began setting up our calendar for our first set of meetings for the following school year.*

**Amina**: *When Ryan approached us to do this project we were really interested in the possibility of analyzing our school's environment and understanding our experiences in a scholarly way. We began by discussing our experiences in the*

*CPA community and making lists of the different types of racism and harm that we experienced. We talked about things like racial capitalism, voyeurism, and the objectification of Black and Brown bodies. Through our discussions, Ryan then helped us connect all of our personal experiences with research and theories. We were able to examine our experiences using critical language and theory that felt new. Towards the end of our first semester, we landed on exploring what racism, non-racism, and anti-racism looked like in our school so we asked the question, "What Does Non-Racism Look Like at CPA?". We decided to use recorded spectrum activities, focus groups, and participant observations as our methods. We asked questions, not only to hear the responses, but to analyze people's behavior and level of comfort in discussing conversations about race and racism in our community.*

*In December of our senior year one of the more inflammatory republican students, Mitchell, posted a letter on our community discussion board titled "Conservative Lives Matter". This letter interrupted our research preparation because our anger drove our team to take action. At this point in our project I felt a shift in the person I was becoming. My natural response to this kind of situation would have been combating this ignorance with anger and lashing out. While warranted, the support of the YPAR team and Ryan moved me to want to take action in a different way. I was excited to process with a group and come up with a collective and strategic response to the ignorance that was bubbling up in our community. We decided to take action by writing a letter to our community. Although the letter was prompted by the "conservative lives matter '' post, the contents of the letter were things that we wanted to say for a very long time. We posted this letter on the opinion board and received tons of support from our peers in addition to the thoughtless responses from students who supported Mitchell's ideas. We also hand delivered copies of the letter to every teacher in the high school.*

*Teachers responded to this letter with words even though we called them to action, and students echoed their support on the physical post. As I reflect on that letter and the impact it had, it was great timing because we unintentionally primed the folks we were asking to participate in our research. After this letter explained very clearly how we felt about our community, people were moved to accept our invitations to join our research. Unexpectedly, a group of a few white students stepped up to support our research. They let us interrupt their meetings with administrators after being denied meetings to clear our research, they facilitated spectrum activities with white teachers and students, and even tried to leverage their monetary power and resources against administrators to support our work. When our project was complete we were invited to present our work at an education conference at the University of Minnesota and again in a class on education at Carleton college. We presented our three main findings. The first focused on our concept of "the script", a dialogue that our white peers learned and practiced that help them appear to seem anti-racist but actually keep our racial dialogue*

*circular and unproductive. The second was an understanding of how critically conscious and anti-racist educators benefit all students, not just BIPOC students. Our final finding expressed how our school's lack of urgency around racial topics and language around neutrality maintained their non-racist identity. Our work was so well-received and we were celebrated and highly praised in those spaces. It was such a life giving experience to be seen as a writer and researcher after years of being denied and pushed out of academic spaces. As we got closer to the end of the school year we were told that we would not be able to present our work to the teachers, even after being reassured throughout the course of our project that we would be.*

**Ryan**: *I remain convinced that being an adult facilitator for this YPAR project was the most enriching teaching experience I have ever done in my career as an educator. I was forced to challenge my own adultist assumptions about what youth were capable of and what change was supposed to look like in schools. By investing my intellectual and emotional energy into the project of supporting their work logistically and conceptually, I found myself in deep community with this group of young people. They pushed me to see their work as more than an extra activity they did after school, but as a model of what community change can look, feel, and sound like. They demanded more from me than to just be a teacher, or advisor, or facilitator: They demanded my full humanity.*

*As a result, my sense of self was shifting and being shaped by my political commitment to their intellectual work and supporting the project that they designed from beginning to end. While I was strategizing with the group of youth researchers about how to transparently approach administrators with their research methods and approaches, I was also advocating for their project to be seen as valid knowledge production with those same administrators and teachers behind the scenes, planting seeds in their minds to trouble their anti-Black adultist interpretations of these young people. While I can't say whether that project was successful, my commitment to the labor of the YPAR project was something I would not have ever done prior to building these deep relationships with young people and divesting from my own oppressive adultist logics. In this way, my interpretations about Black youth in schools transformed dramatically from objects of schooling to human beings whose experiences in school needed to validate their humanity and brilliance.*

*Unfortunately, troubling adultism in myself was not the same as disrupting institutional anti-Black adultism. The group's goal was to present to their teachers in the school, but in the final weeks of the project, administrators refused this public presentation because they felt it was wrong to label the school racist despite the evidence that the youth researchers had gathered. Moreover, they expressed sincere skepticism that these young people had the intellectual abilities to conduct this research, implying in a number of meetings that I had "unfairly influenced"*

*the project because of the nuance and depth of their analysis. To "salvage my career" at CPA, I was informed by administrators that I needed to convince the young people to end the project. In the moments between that conversation and returning to my classroom where the youth researchers were meeting, the political education I received from these Black and Brown young people made the decision clear, though it was one that I never imagined myself making: I was prepared to give up my job. I told the young people everything I was told, which would later be used as evidence for my lack of professionalism in follow-up disciplinary conversations. To be clear, I do not see myself as a martyr for a cause, rather I made a decision commensurate with my values as an adult in solidarity with Black and Brown youth. While the weight of the institution bearing down was traumatizing in many ways, I do not regret my decision. I had been given the opportunity to shed my anti-Black adultist understanding of young people at CPA and that was something that I continue to learn and grow from.*

## The Slow Burn: Sustaining Solidarity

**Amina**: *The YPAR process made me more eager to learn about the education system. This was the kind of learning I had been begging for, and it took eleven years for me to get it. Although the project didn't end the way we wanted it to, the political education we received was very transformative. The work helped me carve out what I wanted my future to look and feel like after years of being told that it couldn't happen. The people I met and the lessons I learned put me back on track to be a community educator which is what I wanted to be. This work also taught me how important it is to build interracial and intergenerational coalitions because in my eyes it is the foundation for healing communities and true learning. For a long time I was resisting through my behavior and for the most part it wasn't intentional. The refusal of CPA's teachings were subconscious until our YPAR work taught me how to make that refusal conscious, strategic, and intentional.*

*In a journal entry my senior year, I wrote that I wanted to be an educator without having to go to college, looking at the work that I had done with YPAR. But so many people told me that I couldn't do that because I needed a degree, that I needed to be good at content, and that I would have to be more academically driven than what I was in school. Looking back five years later, I am proud to say that I work in a school and I do the work I am passionate about despite not following the path that those adults told me I had to. I am an educator in many ways, even if I'm not a classroom teacher and I have more confidence that becoming a classroom teacher is something I could do and would be great at. I was already confident in who I was as a strong Black woman, things I gained from my family, and my academic confidence was gained through YPAR. Ryan instilled in me that my lived experiences counted as knowledge and through our deep relationship building, I*

*know that I can be a teacher, even though I was told by teachers throughout my time at CPA that I couldn't.*

*I learned the model of how to be with young people in school from Ryan and now I feel more comfortable pulling those lessons from my elders like my grandma. She was the one who told me what it meant to be in an intergenerational space. While many adults tell "only speak when spoken to" or "don't talk back to your elders", my grandma was never like that. Standing on her shoulders, I continue the legacy she and others taught me how to treat young people to build solidarity. Being a YPAR facilitator, seeing the impact I was having on young people, I can see the ways that the work that I care about is the same as what my grandma and what Ryan were about. That's why I'm committed to educational justice and why the work I do* is about more than me, it's about building networks of solidarity across age and place.

## Implications

In Part I, the stories illustrate how Amina was denied her right to an education at CPA that validated her civic life. The underlying logics of anti-Black adultism provided teachers with the conceptual framework to render Amina as underperforming in her academics in spite of the fact that CPA was the only school she knew. While research shows that Black youth, specifically Black girls, are routinely pushed out of schools through expulsions, suspensions, or moving to different schools (Morris, 2016), at CPA Amina's confinement was the forcible divorce of her civic life from what educators viewed as academic learning. Yet, Amina refused to pay the racial opportunity cost the institution demanded and persevered through her own labor of solidarity with other Black and Brown peers who were navigating similar experiences and through her willingness to cultivate an intergenerational relationship with Ryan. Consequently, she was able to reclaim her civic life and while that moment was brief in the totality of her schooling experiences, it was no less significant.

Importantly, Ryan's experiences as an adult facilitator of the YPAR project along with his role as a faculty advisor for BBG pushed him to embrace the political lessons that Black and Brown youth were teaching him. As his relationality grew deeper and stronger with these young people, he started to critically reflect on the ways being a teacher required him to invest in anti-Black adultism to be seen as professional and good at teaching by other adults and administrators in the building. Revealing those harmful investments afforded him space to question the institution and divest from the fear of losing a job, which in turn freed him from the carceral logics of anti-Black adultism.

Taken together, our stories illustrate several critical lessons about the ways that anti-Black adultism can be disrupted. We offer these insights with love, knowing that all schooling spaces are different, and that this labor begins, and continues, with critical reflection.

### *Lesson One: Bind Academic Learning With Civic Life*

For adults, solidarity with youth is a political act that demands adults change both their actions and their senses of self. Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) referred to this as relational solidarity. This process of unlearning and remaking while also acting in ways that demonstrates deep relational commitments to young people is a process of unlearning anti-Black adultism that hinders the abilities of adults to recognize their own humanity. Through this process, the act of teaching becomes intimately linked to the civic lives of youth both in and outside of school. For example, in a different school I worked in after leaving CPA, I (Ryan), was teaching a high school social studies class when the young people in the room shared their frustrations with gun violence in schools. As I listened to their anger and exhaustion, I proposed to change the unit of the class to center the issue of gun violence. While they were excited, what struck me was how surprised they were that I would change the course. "You really listened to us," a native youth shared, "that doesn't ever really happen—it's usually like 'oh that's real, but we need to get back on [the existing curriculum]". While I appreciated the compliment, solidarity as a framework to think about my teaching made it clear that the civic issue at-hand, gun violence in schools, needed to be brought into the classroom. Thus, my curricular and pedagogical decision-making were tied to the issues that mattered to young people. To be clear, that work was complicated, messy, and didn't go as I intended at a number of points. Nevertheless, it exemplified the ways that my teaching changed to disrupt the hegemony of anti-Black adultism in my teaching by *embracing* the civic lives of youth as central to academic learning.

### *Lesson Two: Trust Is Earned*

Too often, we find ourselves lamenting the reality that adults presume that their positions *as* adults means they must be listened to by young people. We have each heard this in a number of ways, from teachers who are frustrated that young people won't listen to them, to the ways that adult guests (e.g., substitute teachers) speak about young people as "terrible," "rude," and "what's wrong with this country." We have deep concern over these sentiments because we know that adults use their positional status of authority in schools to deny meaningful learning experiences to young people, particularly Black youth and what scholars refer to as the opportunity gap (Levinson, 2010). Defending their actions, the common refrain we hear from adults is that "these kids don't deserve" a field trip, guest speakers, or service-learning experiences because "they haven't earned it" by listening to adults. Such compliance-contingent education is a direct violation of the right that all humans have to quality education. Moreover, research shows that Black youth are also funneled into disciplinary processes that label Black

youth as troublemakers and delinquents, leading to disproportionate suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests than any other peer group (Dumas, 2016; Khalifa, Gooden, et al., 2016). These material harms are everyday occurrences, and they must stop.

Thus, we ask that adults in schools (e.g., teachers, administrators, support staff, custodians, bus drivers, and guests) to get back to a basic truth: Trust is earned. Adults who presume to have young peoples' trust denies the realities that schools have been sites of violence for Black youth at the hands of a predominantly white teaching force (Love, 2019; 2023). Moreover, acting like trust already exists between adults and youth reflects arrogance and ignorance to the histories that many Black youth carry in their bodies. While the request may seem obvious to some, it is clear from our shared experiences in schools that this is not something adults are acting on. We know that this may be a major shift for many adults, so start small. As adrienne maree brown (2017) reminded us, small is not insignificant. Ask young people what they want and need to be themselves around you, listen to them and follow through on commitments. Importantly, be consistent with these acts. We hear adults proclaim with deep conviction that "kids crave structure," but it seems like those structures are more for adults given that adults are the ones who make them. Build those routines and habits together. These are the ways we have seen, felt, and heard trust being built.

### *Lesson Three: Young People Have Politically Meaningful Lives*

In adultist framings of youth in schools, young people are objects of schooling that need to be adults to become citizens and fully human. However, as critical scholars have argued, young people are already living lives that matter in civically relevant forms (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Gillen, 2019; Oto, 2023; Woodson & Love, 2019). Devaluing youths' lives as unimportant in the context of schools reinforces the anti-Black adultist logics that perpetuate harm. Thus, adults in schools, along with teacher-educators, *and* scholars must take seriously the issues that young people face in schools, regardless of perceived significance. Whether it is advocating for better lunches, not being policed in the halls by school resource officers, or spending so much time on standardized tests, the responsibility of taking these issues seriously is something that adults must do. While we do not have answers for *how* this might take shape across various school communities, listening, validating, and following-up on issues with youth is a place to start because it aligns adults *with* youth in the labor of educational justice. We are confident that through the fostering of these relationships of solidarity that generative thinking and action will occur.

### *Lesson Four: Scholarship Is Not More Important Than Youths' Material Needs*

This lesson is specifically for researchers and scholars. First, we acknowledge that the work of scholars is important because generating knowledge that is grounded in the material lives of youth remains deeply needed as we work toward educational justice in schools. At the same time, we are reminded from our shared experiences that this labor cannot be seen as more important than the material work that must happen on the ground to support young people advocating for their civic lives in schools. To honor this fact, we encourage scholars who are doing work in schools with young people or thinking about doing work with young people to demonstrate the reciprocity of ethical research and scholarship by showing up on the ground and supporting the explicitly stated needs of youth. That might mean using your research funds to pay youth, bring snacks, organize transportation, or talk to adults who have questions. These forms of solidarity are needed because they honor the lives of youth and show that adults care in ways that matter to young people.

## Conclusion

To end our piece, we wanted to speak directly to any young people who might come across this piece. We want to encourage you to hold onto your truths and your values in spite of the pressures you might feel to give them up to fit into school in ways adults want. Through our experiences, we are confident that staying true to your commitments for justice and solidarity will help you find people that can hold you up without having to sacrifice the things that are important to you. I (Amina) am reminded of starting BBG and the YPAR project. Everyone had days that were stressful and busy because of school and life that made going to BBG or doing YPAR one more thing on our plates. But we still showed up to be with each other and to do the work we cared about. That brought us together even more and we were able to accomplish things that many people didn't expect us to. It took intention and work to build and sustain those communities, but it was worth it. You can too.

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# Intergenerational Present: Unexpected Proximity in the Adultist Temporality

***Paülah Nurit Shabel***

## Abstract

This work fits the scope of the journal because it addresses the topic of adultism, as the special issue calls for, from an unexplored perspective. Temporality is, probable, one of the most naturalized dimensions of our daily life and it is questioned here from an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach. This conceptual exercise, rendered with some poetics, leads us to the edge of the thinkable in terms of intergenerational relationships: If time is not linear maybe you can make friend of a child.

## Introducing the Intergenerational Point of View

*The unexpected is what makes life possible.*

—Úrsula K. Le Guin

*Sitting in the neighborhood park, a woman and a little girl chat while sipping a cold drink from the bottle they just bought at the corner kiosk. They are sheltered from the sun under the shade of a tree, but the heat still hits their skin; they sweat on the sarong they are sitting on. The chatter seems to go in slow motion. They laugh for a while, they grow silent; they slowly leave to protect themselves from the heat of the burning summer.*

*A few meters away, a lady with white hair and calm movements sits on a wooden bench. She leans her walking stick to one side and adjusts her blouse, wrinkled in the hustle and bustle of bending down to the seat. She is also sweaty*

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*and looks fatigued, but her gaze remains cheerful, fixed on an adolescent who walks towards her with her arms outstretched wider and wider to give her a hug.*

Is it possible that these encounters are not familial? Can we imagine a situation in which the woman is not the little girl's mother, aunt, or older sister? Is there any chance that the adolescent is not the granddaughter of the lady with the walking stick? Can they all be friends, companions, confidants?

The forms of proximity between generations have strict scripts imposed on them that limit the ways in which persons can be with one other and push them towards the repetition of a system that prefers them to be isolated, conforming to one another. When it comes to age groups, there are certain classifications that are put into play in a hierarchical way, and so an abysmal distance is created between childhood, adulthood, and old age. It is difficult for us to think of relationships between these groups beyond kinship, not because they do not exist, but because they are silenced by the needs of familiarist capitalism (Federici, 2015; Owen, 2020).

As age studies have pointed out (Debert, 1998; Duarte Quapper, 2016), it is Western society that created discrete separations between age groups and a violent hierarchy of adulthood, as an ideal stereotype of human beings, as opposed to the subsumed childhood-youth—known as adultism or adult-centrism-, as well as the undervalued old age—which is known as ageism. This system of age oppressions, in intersection with patriarchy, colonialism and ableism, not only produce watertight (white and bourgeois) imaginaries of what each moment of the life cycle should be, but also mark what is desirable, expected, and undesirable in relations between generations, reducing the possibilities of intergenerational connection to family and educational frameworks.

In this context, this article proposes to analyze the rules that govern the intergenerational links between adulthood and childhood/adolescence in order to account for the artificial barriers produced at the service of capital accumulation and sustained by temporal mechanisms. As various authors from the field of social sciences (Fabian, 1983; Harvey, 1992; Foucault, 2001) and queer theory (Halberstam, 2005; Love, 2007; Edelman, 2014; Owen, 2020) have pointed out, the notion of Western time is one of the fundamental bases of the regimes of inequality and practices of oppression, in this case we bring this understanding to the analysis of adultism and the way in which it organizes relations between age groups.

Based on the proposal for the democratization of the present made by the anthropologist Fabian in his book *Time and the Other*, this text explores the possibility of forging bonds between age groups beyond the scripts of adultism. In a review of experiences in which children and adults produce the world together at school (*Filosofar con chicxs*, 2018) and become companions (Magistris & Morales; 2021; Shabel, 2022a; Shabel & Montenegro, 2023) and friends (Shabel, 2022b) in social organizations, we investigate on unexpected modes of intergenerational proximity, seeking to expand our political imagination to all sides of the life cycle.

## Adultism from the Root: Time and Capital

*In the park the woman twists her curls into a bun and lies down. She dozes, perhaps tired from work and the unrelenting heat. The girl stands beside her, playing with two dolls, a bucket and several stones she collected. Her gestures hint at her energy, on vacation from kindergarten. She speaks in a quiet voice, so as not to wake her companion.*

*The adolescent enters the scene, looking for the food truck where she might buy some water. She answers messages on her phone and sends an audio message: "I'll be there in an hour." She appears concerned, but the tension eases on the way back to the white-haired lady, who is looking through some papers in her wallet, the kind that arrive by letter and have instructions and deadlines. The adolescent sits on the bench, and they share the cool drink and talk about a film whose name they can't remember. They laugh at their forgetfulness, until an alarm goes off on the lady's mobile and she explains that it's time to go home.*

The way we organize time in our lives is in some ways out of our control; we maneuver freedom as best we can between calendars, agendas, and the absurd idea that our birth anniversaries are suggestive of who we are. Yet, ages function in this system to indicate what we should be: how much we should weigh and measure, how much education we should have attained and how we should spend our leisure time, what is forbidden and what is permitted, what is desired and what is disposable. These mandates are based on a notion of linear and predictable temporality that organizes the life cycle in successive, differentiated, and predetermined stages, and on which are also founded the concepts of development, evolution, progress and chrononormativity, all rooted in the principle of accumulation that governs capital and which Marx described in a book that is still contemporary.

It was a disciple of Marx, David Harvey (1992), who explained that the capitalist mode of production needed to transform the temporal experience to order the world under its service. This took place between the 16th and 18th centuries, splitting time from space and forging a narrative of universal and objective time, intelligible in its past and predictable in its future. By doing this, history can only be read in one direction, always looking for the new technology or decision that can increase productivity and solve an impending profit crisis. According to Harvey, capital develops and accumulates, or it dies; thus, everyone had to take on the commitment as their own in order for the system to work. This is something that Elias (1997) also analyzed in terms of the civilizational process as the introjection of this temporal model of calculation and production into the rhythms of each subject's everyday life.

Foucault studied this process of creation of productive bodies, disciplined in such a way that maximum profit could be extracted from them in each movement, in each serial exercise that "served to economize the time of life, to accumulate it in a useful form and to exercise power over men through the mediation of time

arranged in this way" (2001, p. 166). The development of productive forces and the accumulation of wealth are once again at the center of a temporal composition around which everything else is compulsively organized. In these new disciplinary societies, time molds bodies at the service of the capital and hierarchies over which they expand. This means that those who do not comply with such temporal patterns are severely punished: they are deemed slow, retarded, and lazy.

This same temporal scheme can be studied in the West's relationship with the other peoples of the world, whom it placed in a past time of underdevelopment in comparison to the productive Europe, as the ultimate state of developed humanity. As Fabian (1983) explains in his anthropological critique, this colonial operation made of the Others a temporal alterity, an allochronic existence form whom co-evalness is denied. With this, the cultural other became an ancestor and primitive version of the western humanity, which had to recognize the benefits of modernity, subsume itself to it and try to resemble it on a linear path towards progress. The parallel that can be drawn between this temporal hierarchy and the adultist one is evident, so much so that the conquered communities were represented as if in an infantalized stage of human development (Szulc et al., 2023).

This is something that Benjamin also criticized (in Löwy, 2003) when he proposed pulling a handbrake on the train of history, warning against the homologation of the category of time with that of progress, which reduces the relations between past, present and future to a single scheme of hierarchical continuity, in which only what already exists is reproduced and accumulated. This "homogeneous and empty time" (p. 92) has reduced human history to a civilizational teleology in which all violence is justified in order to end the barbarism of difference and, as Le Guin (2022) put it, has destroyed the versatility of narrative genres by making all stories a copy of the path of the hero - always male and individual - who dominates what he touches because he measures time in efforts and successes.

Another of the elements geared to this temporal machinery of domination is chrononormativity. It refers to the naturalization of certain schemes of rhythms of doing, as well as the obliteration of the artificiality of this chronological operative, which generates an essentialization of the passage of time under the imperative of the capitalist reproduction (Freeman, 2010). This naturalization of time produces bodies that desire certain things and are excited by others, each at a specific moment in the life cycle. As various queer writers have pointed out (Halberstam, 2005; flores, 2021), these implicit, but highly effective norms, organize the experience of life into successive, hierarchical stages that designate specific characteristics to each age, ensuring that each decision leads to the accumulation of what is considered valuable in this system: goods, knowledge, offspring. They also drive the age mandates that regulate our experience of life: giving up pacifiers and diapers before a certain age, starting to write and learning addition or subtraction in a certain grade, then finishing secondary school or college, getting married, having children and getting a job to keep capital moving.

Queer theory thus suggests that the stages of progress also produce heterosexuality to guarantee their own reproduction; those who do not identify or behave according to the parameters of the sex-gender normality of each age are accused of having poor development: an atrophied, immature, stunted, queer one. Muñoz (2020) speaks of heterolinearity to refer to a social present where only heterosexuality and reproduction are envisioned as possible horizons of human development, which, we know, has especially violent effects on infants who are hyper-monitored so that they are not detoured from a normalized growth in an alternative queer temporality (Stockton, 2009).

In this context, we arrive at a notion of individual development—physical and psychological—based on the modern matrix of progress, for which the passage of time is understood as advancement, refinement and augmentation, a repetition of selfhood increased in a single sense (Rabello de Castro, 2020). This is a conceptualization coming from biology that permeated both psychology and medicine (and all human sciences) and left subjects at the mercy of experimental measurements, quantifications, as well as social chrono-expectations. Cognition and ability adopted a Western-centered, white, male, and adult model, against which everything else was devalued and subsumed, considered late, slow, or retarded.

From this conception, life is understood as a linear process with a prefixed rhythm, where one stage of the life cycle follows the next, with watertight scripts of the correct practices for each generation and a deep yearning for the accumulation of wealth, titles, and prestige at any cost. From this conception, childhood and youth have been conceptualized as a not-yet developed stage of humanity, a period of preparation for adulthood, as the definitive state of the human because it produces more capital.

In this straight timeline in which lives and bodies are made to fit, childhood and youth have been conceptualized as an incomplete, incapable, irrational period of life, closer to nature than to culture because it is still too raw to participate in the world and is therefore confined to the private world (Zelizer, 2004). Here we find one of the roots of the historical subsumption of this age group, which was denied any kind of agency and subjectivity and removed from the processes of participation in public life, silencing their voices and ignoring their needs (Niñez Plural, 2019; Liebel, 2020). This is where childhood is transformed into a minority age that must respond to adult control − to guarantee the reproduction of the existing in the new generations- and adultism is established as the norm between the ages. How do we twist this relational linearity? What unexpected forms of proximity emerge in the interruption of cumulative time?

## Accumulative Time in Intergenerational Analysis: Those Who Own the Present Own the Ages

*The girl climbs a tree, goes up one branch and then another, then sits up above and with a deep joy, looks down on everyone. But then she falls. She cries. The woman jumps up and comes to her aid. People talking in the vicinity look annoyed; they turn away so as not to hear the crying. The white-haired woman does not manage to see the scene because she is already at the other end of the square, moving at her own rhythm and withstanding the grunts of passersby she hears, impatient with her slowness. She arrives ploddingly at the traffic lights on the avenue, the only crossroad that gives her enough time to pass without running and, thus, to avoid the shouts of drivers and cyclists for her to hurry.*

We cannot deny the effects that the passing of time has on our bodies, the marks it leaves and the marks that the experience of having a body and being alive in this world have not yet made. Precisely, what it is about is to return to these effects from a materialism of the flesh that abandons the pre-established for each moment of life and allows us to access what each one of us wants and needs beyond the chrono-mandates. Although it is evident that the process of growing up gives us and takes away possibilities of doing, there is nothing in it that obliges us to generate isolated age groupings, much less hierarchical ones.

In fact, it was not until the expansion of capitalism in its imperialist form that the degradation of childhood was installed as a model for connecting generations. Although it was Ariès (1987) who gave an account of the creation of childhood in Western society, it is Federici who provides us with valuable connections to understand how in the interplay between capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism, the process by which certain bodies have been privatized and their knowledge subsumed o the category of ignorance and blasphemy. In the author's thorough analysis of sources published under the title *Caliban and the Witch* (2015), she exposes the European imperative of separation and hierarchization of adults over children, exported from Europe to the colonies in pursuit of the civilizing process: "The Jesuits' greatest victory, however, was persuading the Naskapi to beat their children, believing that the "savages" excessive fondness for their offspring was the major obstacle to their Christianization" (p. 200).

This fact shows the violence it took to produce the Western age classification and to convince other peoples that childhood was not to be treated as an equal, but as a lower stage, like women in their relationship with men. Federici explains that the conquerors first got men to beat children in public if they did not comply with their orders and, later, did the same to women, as relational models inaugurated in this colonial process. This laid the foundations for the development of capital, which requires inequality and obedience, differentiated and confrontational population groups in juxtaposed binary systems, placed at the service of productivity. Another of the archives the author cites in the book is that of a Naskapi native

from the sub-Arctic north of America speaking to a Jesuit as follows: "You French people love only your children; but we love all the children of our tribe" (p. 199), something the Jesuit mocks him as a fool or a madman. What this exchange shows us is that for Catholic Europe there was only one correct way of organizing social relations, based on marriage and the patrimony of the head of the family, in which the children were included as property.

It is this familiarist model that became compulsory for the whole world, narrowing our horizon of possibilities for interacting between the youngest and the oldest, and producing violence on all bodies. Treating children—and elder—as human beings on an equal footing with adults became a sign of a primitive people that had to be abandoned to make room for the age subordination imposed by civilization. This is how relations between generations became pre-established and severely policed, with specific ways for age groups to talk to each other and standardized styles of proximity (Shabel & Montenegro, 2023). It is our aim to denaturalize this adultist bonding norm in order to account for its artificiality and to bring attention to those intergenerational ties that grow in the shadow of the canon.

This deep critique must, then, expose the temporal mechanisms that have separated age classes, valorizing some more than others on the scale of the human. We use the category of non-coevalness that Fabian applied to ethnic groups to a discussion of intergenerational relations. In this framework of categories that Western society spread with blood and fire through conquest and colonization, the I/we from which time is measured is conceived as the present, always adult, while the children are understood as of the future and the old of the past, unfinished, and deteriorated versions of the productive present. Because "the other is a temporal other, and in a dynamic of indefinite accumulation, the other is the one who loses time" (Dahbar, 2021, p. 64), his or her value is less and his or her group is minorized.

We live with people of the most varied ages, but the effects of the narrative are so profound that we talk about generational alterities as if they still—for children—or no longer—for the old—existed. If, as Fabian (1983) explains, Europe appropriated the present and located non-European others in the past, it also made the present an adult monopoly, relegating childhood to an earlier stage of adulthood, while locating it in the future, an allochronic otherness that must eventually become adult sameness (Stockton, 2009; Owen, 2020) and in the meantime obey it.

In queer theory, the denial of the present for childhood was pointed out by Edelman. In his book *No Future* (2014) he examines temporality and indicates that the figure of the Child, with capital C, condenses the ideology of heterosexual production and reproduction as a promise of increased sameness, as the "telos of social order" (p. 30) and, therefore, a regulatory ideal of adulthood and old age, which must guarantee the straight path towards the prefixed future of those who

have not yet incorporated the social rules. In other words, childhood has become in modern society a hologram of what will be, without any present consistency other than an empty shell in which to deposit the narrative of progress and heterosexual accumulation, something that is also expressed by Berlant (1997) in locating the Child as the ultimate neoliberal citizen.

And this is of no advantage to flesh-and-blood children, upon whom several mandates are unloaded together with a strict curricularization of their practices (Gaitán & Mongui, 2021). These mechanisms seek to guarantee a straight development from childhood to adulthood, without deviations, delays, or suspensions. In this reproductive futurism, as the author calls it, the Child is always the representation of an alien promise and is therefore worth what it will be, completely negating what it in fact is. Another queer author puts it in similar terms:

> If childhood is understood as something entirely separate from adulthood, if the idea of the child describes someone who is naive, unknowing, innocent, who is without agency or desire, then it is this construction that renders the relation between adult and child impossible-impossible because the child is so significantly emptied of anything we might recognize as being ontologically meaningful. (Owen, 2020, p. 2)

This ontological void, from which old age also suffers in our adultist societies, is reproduced in other temporal figures that in daily use, fragmenting the present and producing unease between generations. Immaturity, on the one hand, produces the effect of a fractured time, moving people from the present to the past, transforming the childish things into an insult of devaluation and a label of backwardness and delay (Halberstam, 2005; Love, 2007). An immature person is behind the Western age norm and, in its deviation, brings older people closer to younger ones, which is unacceptable for the strict adultism that governs human bonds. Immature adults should be condemned and fixed, and not permitted near children. Precocity, on the other hand, names overtaking as a rapidity that also deforms the life-cycle norm and produces social panic, especially when we speak of children doing things that are supposed to be for adults. Topics such as death and sexuality or actions such as work and politics are off-limits to children who are seen as not yet having the capacity to deal with the reality in which they participate. Thus, the notions of "children without childhood" and "lost childhoods" (Liebel, 2020) are based on those chrononormative (white and bourgeois) ideals of what this stage of life should be—aerotic, apolitical, unproductive, joyful, naïve—criminalizing other ways of living it under the accusation of anticipation.

What these historical processes and everyday social mechanisms show us is that the present is in constant dispute; those who manage to position themselves as the true protagonists of time, place themselves above others who, in turn, must submit to them because their time has either passed or not yet arrived. To get out of this logic of competition and oppression, a good strategy is the democratization

of the present for all ages, something that Fabian proposes ethnically, which he names as "The radical coevalness of humanity" (p. 11) and describes as a "shared intersubjective time" (p. 200) to which we must appeal and place in conversation with difference, but on an equal footing. This means recognizing a multiplicity of pasts (no longer a *universal* history of civilizational evolution from Mesopotamia to the Second *World* War) that give rise to a plural present, tensioned by groups that imagine divergent futures, none more advanced or progressive than another.

For the age study that brings us together in this publication, we assume that all generations make the present, therefore, they are all making history and composing the future. Many studies on childhood have been pointing towards this same conclusion, especially those dedicated to the study of children's political participation (Niñez Plural, 2019; Liebel, 2020; Rabello de Castro, 2020). What we bring with this temporal analysis is a contribution to an argument that, even in adultist contexts such as the Western one, children dispute meaning, twist norms and invent practices that forge the everyday realities of their communities, producing unexpected outcomes for all generations.

This does not mean inventing a beautiful phrase to romanticize the scene. As Fabian says in his study on otherness, assuming a coevalness with others—ethnic or age—is conflictive and requires a laborious exercise both for those who hold the monopoly of the present, and for those who have been excluded and now claim a place on it. Far from seeking homogeneity, the democratization of time is a search for proximity through difference, putting creativity and patience at the service of the project, exploring the arts of translation that forces us into an imperfect conversation with this age other. As Pescetti (2022) says, childhood is a time traveler, a newly arrived foreigner of the present with whom we must learn to bond to make the world a kind place for all generations.

## Discussion: Interrupting Adultism with Unexpected Proximity in Latin America

*More than three years ago, in another square, we all met to support the abortion law.[1] And when it was passed, the celebration was immense, with tears and hugs stretching for many blocks. We invaded the city with our bodies intertwined and there was the girl, the woman, the adolescent, and the white-haired lady. There were high school girls who were discovering for the first time the experience of doing politics on the street and those activists who criticized the idea of a revolution without gender equality in the 1970s. It was a timeless embrace of struggle and it was beautiful.*

Fabian (1983) and feminist and queer theories (Butler, 2006; flores, 2021) share an understanding that power operates by hindering the dialogue between different human groups, generating enmities, competitions and subsumptions be-

tween them. This means that meeting, listening and accompanying each other is a form of resistance, which also tends to work well, especially when we go beyond the scripts that the system has prescribed for such dialogues: "The hope of queer politics is that bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 254). In Latin America, there have been attempts at unexpected intergenerational proximity, both from practices in schools and social organizations and from theoretical production in the academy, which dismantle adultism from doing with others in a plural present. We emphasize the category of the unexpected, as the participants in the local experiences quoted here mention the fact that the proximities resulting from the practices were not planned, but were merely a question to be addressed.

On the one hand, we bring those experiences that aim to generate non-adultist links from the classroom, as the action and reflection group *Filosofar con chicos* (Philosophizing with children) has been doing. This group uses the notions of the unknown and chaos to circumvent the adultist school order and create new logics. In inventing the rules of a game, one can make desirable that which was unthinkable a moment ago: "It is chaos understood as a condition of possibility of creation (...) Chaos as a moment that gives rise to something new." (*Filosofar con chicos*, 2018, p. 25) From that disorder emerges the possibility of a horizontal practice between generations. In their publication, this group brings in the category of affective comfort as another fundamental ingredient for making the classroom a space of enjoyment in the encounter between children and adults, giving an age dimension to the thousands of reflections that have been written about pedagogical bonds, something that we have named elsewhere as betraying school time (Shabel and Montenegro, 2023).

On the other hand, the region also has a long history of social organizations in which political struggle takes place within an intergenerational alliance. In these contexts, we have been reflecting on the links between children and adults from the category of political companions in community (Magistris and Morales, 2021) and feminist (Shabel, 2022a; Shabel and Montenegro, 2023) activist experiences. In the Spanish-speaking south, the word *compañera* (companion) is used to describe a shared point of view in a commitment to a more equal world, a shared proximity to the political arena and the collective struggle: "A *compañera* is someone who dreams of something similar to what one dreams of" (Magistris and Morales, 2021, p. 74). For this reason, it is also a term that has been used exclusively by the adult world −with its monopoly on politics. We apply its English translation, "companion" here to designate what happens when adults and children take to the streets together to demand their rights, in defiance of generational norms and the norms that make the politics of the present.

Within the regional feminist movement, intergenerational encounters have become increasingly common, which has widened the possibility of forging companionship between age groups through public demonstrations that generated an

atmosphere were of joy and pleasure: "it is this amount of people occupying the streets and taking over the city that makes a feminist community, it is there where it becomes embodied, where it was possible for the younger ones to be the protagonists alongside the adults" (Shabel & Montenegro, 2023, p. 218). The models of struggle proposed by feminism connects with the process of age democratization that politics needs and opens the possibility of weaving intergenerational friendships (Shabel, 2022b) and meeting with other age groups for the simple pleasure of spending time together.

While not perfect or definitive, these experiences attempt to bring together generations and "break free from the intergenerational bonding model that assumes the conflict and anxiety of influence" governed by adultist mandates. (Halberstam, 2005, p. 180) Having friends and companions—political and pedagogical—of all ages broadens a horizon of possibilities in a world that otherwise looks to replicate itself until reaching a point of destruction. It does so by building bridges between those who hold a different relationship with that world because they have lived in it for more or less time. A gesture of xeno-chronic contact (in Greek, foreigner and time) that proposes the idea of an intergenerational present as a time of radical coevalness, is an opportunity for all ages to make decisions about their present.

This article seeks to add conceptual density to our reflections on childhoods through the study of time as a mechanism for producing distance between ages, and to have a more precise understanding of the functioning of adultism. Likewise, we reiterate Dahbar's question: "what kind of communities, and under what assumptions of proximities and distances, can be formed in these strange temporalities?" (2021, p. 219), opening a call to create temporal frameworks where it is possible to build democratic encounters between ages, making room for difference and change without violence.

## Note

[1] The Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy Law was passed in Argentina in December 2020 after years of a campaigning and demonstrations for the decriminalization of abortion in parks all over the country. Those in support of the law wore green scarves. The legislative debate that resulted in the passing of the law took place in the National Congress and lasted more than twelve hours. The park in front of the Congress and its surroundings were full of supporters who organized music shows, speeches and collective meals. The massive feminist movement waited for results into the night. In the early hours of the next morning, Congressional votes were counted and the law was approved; the thousands of people gathered outside hugged, shouted and cried with happiness; plazas and parks all over the country became a meeting point for feminist celebration.

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# Using Adultism in Conceptualizing Oppression of Children and Youth: More Than a Buzzword?

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## Abstract

Within the field of Childhood Studies and the broader field of Social Justice scholarship and activism it is increasingly recognized that child-adult relations represent a distinct axis of oppression. This has been associated with an upsurge in use of the term adultism as a tool to conceptualize and challenge oppressive child-adult relations. It remains the case that in wider academic, political, and public discourse the question of whether children and youth represent an oppressed group is still regarded with some skepticism, and the term adultism is not commonly used or understood. This paper examines whether adultism is a useful lens for conceptualizing and interrogating oppression of children and youth or merely the buzzword du jour. The paper focuses on the intellectual underpinnings of adultism, drawing on conceptual scholarship on oppression, intersectionality, and power relations from the fields of Social Justice, Black Feminism, Governmentality Studies, and Childhood Studies to inform reflection on how the concept has been defined and used. It is argued that there is scope for greater clarity and consistency in how adultism is used and a need to ground the concept more firmly in the relevant theoretical and conceptual literature if it is to be more than a buzzword. The paper contributes to theorization of adultism by taking exploitation as a starting point for examining oppression of children and young people, arguing that the instrumentalization of childhood as a technology of subjectification facilitates regulation and exploitation not just of children and young people, but of human adults and non-human entities in ways which are always and inevitably bound up with the multiplicity of interlocking oppressive relations.

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## Introduction

This paper examines whether adultism is a useful lens for conceptualizing and interrogating oppression of children and youth or merely the buzzword du jour. Viewed as analogous to 'isms' such as sexism, which have been deployed to conceptualize and challenge discriminatory treatment of oppressed groups, adultism is generally defined in terms of prejudiced assumptions which underpin and legitimize adult control over the young (Alderson, 2020; Bell, 1995).The recent upsurge in use of the concept of adultism within Childhood Studies and Youth Studies and in the fields of Social Justice education and activism reflects increased interest in issues and questions related to the oppression of children and young people. This paper focuses on the intellectual underpinnings of adultism, drawing on conceptual scholarship on oppression, intersectionality, and power relations from the fields of Social Justice, Black Feminism, Governmentality Studies, and Childhood Studies to inform reflection on how the concept has been defined and used. It is argued that there is scope for greater clarity and consistency in how adultism is used and a need to ground the concept more firmly in the relevant theoretical and conceptual literature if it is to be more than a buzzword. Providing a robust foundation for use of adultism necessitates in particular: greater attention to interlocking oppressions and intersectionality, more in-depth treatment of power relations, and more comprehensive engagement with the various dimensions of oppression, in particular economic dimensions which have been relatively neglected to date.

Within existing scholarship on adultism there is understandable concern with representing oppression of children and youth as a distinct axis of oppression. While there is recognition of, and attention to, intersectionality, with some important exceptions (e.g., DeJong & Love, 2015), there has not always been adequate attention to the complexity and historical situatedness of the interrelationship between oppression of children/youth and other axes of oppression. Relatedly, in much of the adultism literature oppression of children and youth has been conceptualized in terms of disrespect, discrimination, and denial of rights, with consequent neglect of economic relations. I argue here that before we can advance knowledge on the causes, outcomes, and effects of what is referred to as adultism, there is a need for more attention to *how* and *to what purposes* power is exercised over the young by adults. These questions must be considered within the wider context of unequal power relations historically and today. Given the significance of capitalism in the constitution of systems of oppression this demands close attention to the economic aspects of child-adult relations, which necessitates using *exploitation* as a starting point for analysis.

Given both the scope and scale of the issues which could be categorized as oppression of children and youth there is much at stake in the concepts we deploy to examine child-adult relations. It could not be said that the problems and challenges of the young do not attract political and public concern or that mistreatment

of children and young people by adults is not taken seriously as a social problem. Policy responses are, however, frequently framed in ways which are individualizing and pathologizing and thus neglectful of the structural context of interpersonal relations between adults and children/youth. Indeed it can be the case that policies framed in terms of child welfare, even those with a children's rights orientation, can potentially reinforce inequalities of power between children and adults and result in oppressive practices against parents of low-income and/or marginalized backgrounds (see e.g., Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). It remains the case that in wider academic, political, and public discourse the question of whether children and youth represent an oppressed group is still regarded with some skepticism, and the term adultism is not commonly used or understood. Complicating the picture are the various other terms such as childism and ageism which are used in similar ways and while it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the debates around the various meanings and appropriateness of these terms, it is important to note the conceptual confusion associated with the existence of so many 'isms'. What I want to do in this paper is to help cut through the confusion and provide a firmer footing for conceptualizing and theorizing oppression of the young.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four main sections. I first elaborate on the conception of structural oppression, drawing on the work of Iris Marion Young and the contributions of Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberly Crenshaw, and bell hooks to the conceptualization of the interconnectedness of oppressive structures;. The discussion in this section is also informed by insights from Baker et al (2009) on societal systems (the domains of oppression) and from the governmentality literature on oppressive power relations. I then move to the literature on adultism, examining how the concept has been defined and utilized, identifying some important contributions, and highlighting issues and themes which could be addressed more effectively or in more depth. Following from this I identify a number of issues requiring attention in order to strengthen the concept of adultism. The remaining section takes exploitation of the young as a starting point for examining oppressive child-adult relations. It draws on the Marxist-oriented work of Childhood Studies scholar David Oldman and more extensively on contributions from the governmentality literature to provide insights into the *particularity* of adult oppression of the young and its embeddedness in *mutually constitutive* oppressive structures. It is argued in the conclusion that the conceptualization of adultism needs to be broadened to take into account *the instrumental value* of adult control over children and young people and its significance within wider relations of exploitation and control.

## Conceptualizing Oppression

According to the influential work of Iris Marion Young (1990), in the context of high income liberal democratic capitalist states, it makes sense to think of op-

pression in structural terms—the result of social and institutional arrangements, norms, customs and practices which have developed over time. These operate to produce and reproduce relations of domination/oppression between members of *social groups*, either privileged or disadvantaged on particular axes of oppression such as race, class, gender, disability, or age-position. In line with post-structuralist thought Young sees social groups as produced *through* oppressive social relations (Young, 1990). Young herself paid limited attention to children/youth in these kinds of terms but thinking about the constitution of social groups in Young's terms obliges us to question 'natural' or 'biological' distinctions and recognize the socially constructed basis of what Childhood Studies scholars Alanen and Mayall (2001) refer to as 'the generational order.' The categories of childhood, youth and adulthood are "constructed" through processes of "generationing", which, as emphasized by Alanen, should be viewed as "a practical and even material process" (2001, p. 21). What might be useful to bear in mind are insights from the poststructuralist writings of Foucault and from new materialist scholarship, that material, structural and discursive processes are inevitably and inextricably intertwined (Coole & Frost, 2010).

Although not strongly emphasized in Young's work, a long line of Black feminist scholars and activists have provided important insights into the complexities of oppressive social relations and group oppression and in particular the importance of moving away from viewing the relationship between oppressions in 'additional' or 'additive' terms (Crenshaw, 1994). Among the key lessons here is that oppressive structures are 'interlocking' and, very importantly, *mutually constituting* and therefore cannot be analyzed separately (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Hill Collins, 1990). We might usefully think of the generational order as the product of patriarchal social relations (Miller, 1998; Smith, 2014; Wall, 2022), but must bear in mind that the racist-imperialist, hetero-patriarchal and capitalist structures of oppression associated with inequalities of race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, sexuality, generational-position, class, and disability have been produced and reproduced simultaneously and in tandem (hooks, 2000a, 2000b). The mutually constitutive relationship between oppressive structures is perhaps most effectively captured by bell hooks' concept of "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2000b, p. 46). Relatedly, Black feminist writers and activists have highlighted how individual members of social groups experience oppression and/or privilege in qualitatively distinct ways due to the dynamic interaction—what Crenshaw has termed 'intersectionality'—of oppressions (Crenshaw, 1997). Accordingly analysis of oppression must *from the outset* be attentive to the interconnectedness of oppressive structures and the implications for social relations at various levels (Hill Collins, 1990; see also Carastathis, 2016). The implications are that child-adult relations and associated categories of childhood and adulthood have been produced through and with the full range of interlocking axes of oppression.

Within the social justice literature the *levels of oppression* are typically conceptualized as the individual (intrapersonal), interpersonal, institutional, and what is sometimes referred to as the societal/cultural level (Adams & Zúñiga, 2016). In conflating society with culture the latter could be said to give a misleading view of macro-level social relations. In this paper I refer instead to the 'structural-systemic level' and I will elaborate on this briefly here, drawing on the work of Baker et al (2009) who provide a useful overview of what they view as the four main systems through which social relations are structured at the macro-societal scale. These interconnected systems can be thought of as the domains of oppressive relations. The economic system comprises those relations, arrangements, practices, and institutions which have taken shape around "the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of goods and services" (2009, p. 58). The cultural system including educational, religious, artistic, and mass media institutions is oriented to the creation and dissemination of ideas and values. The political system is the set of relations and institutions "involved in making and *enforcing* collectively binding decisions" (2009, p. 59, emphasis added) including the executive, legislative and judicial institutions which make up the formal political system and the various other elements of the state apparatus involved in implementing law and policy. Given the importance of explicitly recognizing the regulatory (or *disciplinary* (Hill Collins, 1990)) role of political and legal systems, I prefer the term *politico-regulatory system*. Finally, also included in the schema of Baker et al (2009) is the affective system, which they conceptualize as the constellation of relations oriented towards love, care, and solidarity. 'The family' is generally seen as the most important affective institution and the care and socialization of children (viewed as vital for social reproduction, cultural reproduction, and civic and social order) regarded as its most significant function.

Baker et al (2009) emphasize that *all* institutions and arrangements across the four systems encompass cultural, political, economic, and affective aspects to at least some extent and that the four systems overlap considerably—"each is partly constituted by the others" (2009, p. 62). This is significant because while each is associated by Baker et al (2009) with particular structures of oppression (e.g. the economic system with capitalism and class, the affective system with patriarchy, the cultural system with racism and disablism) all four systems are viewed as important in "sustaining and reproducing … other structures of oppression" (2009: 58). Another way of looking at this is to follow hooks (2000a, 2000b) and Hill Collins (1990) in insisting on the interconnectedness of oppressive structures and viewing the four systems as constituted by and constitutive of "imperialist-white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy." It is also important to note, that, while not strongly emphasized in the work of Baker et al (2009), the human social relations which are given expression within societal systems are embedded within the wider environmental system and encompass more-than-human relations which are highly unequal and oppressive. In recognition of this, hooks' term

has been expanded to imperialist-white-supremacist-capitalist-speciesist-patriarchy by anti-racist vegan activists.[1] (I prefer the term anthropocratic rather than the more commonly used speciesist, as it encompasses human oppression of all non-human entities including—but not limited to—non-human animals.)

The dynamics of social relations within and across the various systems interact with, support, and reinforce each other but they are also continually subject to critique, contestation and change as part of what Foucault (1983) refers to the 'agonistic' dance of power relations (see also Hill Collins, 1990). For instance capitalist economic relations are buttressed by laws and policies, such as those protecting tangible and intellectual property rights; entertainment media and social media which glamourize status hierarchies and incite unnecessary consumption and compulsive online engagement; educational institutions which sort and classify the young in line with occupational hierarchies; and an unequal distribution of responsibility for care and social reproduction in the affective domain (Baker et al., 2009). At the same time possibilities for individual and collective resistance are continually being created. The factory model of production at once opened up new opportunities for oppression *and* collective action, while more recently novel types of activism—including and perhaps especially by the young—have been made possible by social media platforms even though these are heavily implicated in oppressive practices.

In conceptualizing what oppression actually looks like and how it affects people's lives, the famous five 'faces' identified by Young (1990) help strengthen understanding of how formal freedoms ostensibly available to all in rich liberal-capitalist states are undercut by various dimensions of oppression. These dimensions are identified as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism/domination, and violence (ibid.). In elaborating these dimensions Young drew on various critical perspectives including Marxist, feminist, and post-structural scholarship. My own engagement with the 'five faces' is also informed by these perspectives, but most particularly by the post-structuralist theory of governmentality, which provides essential insights into the complexity and interconnectedness of power relations. This approach throws a somewhat different light on the various dimensions of oppression than appears in other work on oppressive child-adult relations drawing on Young's framework (Dejong & Love, 2015; Medina-Minton, 2019).

Exploitation in Young's schema is conceptualized in Marxian terms as inherent in capitalist economic relations due to private control of the means of production and the associated profit motive. Exploitation is defined as the appropriation of the rewards of work/creativity of some for the benefit of others and includes the 'surplus value' extracted from paid workers. It also encompasses the benefits accrued from unpaid or poorly paid domestic and care labor which is essential for 'social reproduction' and is generally carried out by women or by those such as migrant workers who face particular barriers in accessing the labor market. It is important to remember that unpaid care and domestic work is also carried out

by children. Capitalism puts into play a particular mode of class relations based on relationship to the means of production and position within the occupational hierarchy, but as noted above, the manner in which capitalist class relations took shape is recognized as being closely intertwined with distinct modes of imperialist, racialized and gendered exploitation, including slavery and other forms of bonded servitude (hooks, 2000b; Williams, 2022/1944).

The governmentality literature provides insights into the technologies of power which shaped and supported exploitative imperialist capitalist patriarchal relations. Disciplinary technologies (such as those given form through the factory model of production and most especially schools) target individuals, inculcating values and dispositions associated with a positive work ethic and civic responsibility (Foucault, 1977). Discipline produces *responsibilized* subjects (Rose, 1999a). Biopolitical technologies are oriented towards population-level outcomes such as enhancing fertility and reducing morbidity and excess mortality—the emergence of biopolitical programs from the late nineteenth century aimed to boost the fitness of the future workers and soldiers required to build and defend empires and —very importantly—of the mothers who would bear and rear them (Rose, 1999b). Discipline and biopolitics represent the two poles of *biopower* (Foucault, 1978). Biopower signifies an approach to exercising power guided by the imperative to 'foster life' (ibid.). This term was used by Foucault to conceptualize the transformation in practices of government associated with the emergence of the liberal capitalist state, in which the health and productivity of the population became viewed as the source of wealth (ibid.; Foucault, 2007). The emergence of the state as instrument of biopower thus went hand in hand with new forms of regulation over the care and socialization of the young, increasingly viewed as national *resources* (Hendrick, 2003; Rose, 1999b; Smith, 2014).

Young uses the term 'marginalization' in reference to another aspect of capitalist economic relations—exclusion from economic and social participation of those positioned as surplus to requirements in capitalist economies. Marginalization—in states with welfare systems—is associated with *enforced dependency*. Welfare recipients must typically comply with restrictive conditions and the level of benefits are not usually sufficient to support a standard of living equivalent to the norm in the societies in which they live. Young refers to marginalization as "the most dangerous form of oppression" (1990, p. 53) because of the dehumanization involved. From a governmentality perspective it can be seen as the underside of 'biopolitics' which while oriented to fostering life may 'disallow it' if deemed necessary to safeguard the integrity of the population as a whole (Foucault, 1978; 2007). In various direct and indirect ways the wellbeing, autonomy and very survival of those perceived as deficient or dangerous are threatened by what Foucault (2003) referred to as the 'internal racism' of liberal states—forced sterilization policies (in place until the 1970s in some U.S. states) represent a particularly striking example, but in more subtle ways marginalized groups are

denied access to the social determinants of health or to adequate healthcare (Sandset, 2021), while the 'external racism' (Rose, 1999a) of the rich liberal capitalist states restricts entry to the particularly 'useful' or 'deserving' few, resulting in vast numbers residing in marginal spaces such as refugee camps or detention centers or living a shadow life without legal status.

Children/youth as a group are sometimes represented as marginalized by those applying Young's framework to child/youth oppression (Medina-Minton, 2018; DeJong & Love, 2015). Certainly children could be said to be marginalized politically, but it is important also to consider the economic position of children as a group. Exclusion from the labor market and enforced economic dependency are structural features of childhood/youth—explicitly set out in law and policy and a central plank of 'children's rights.' Nevertheless, as I elaborate further below, the temporariness of exclusion of the young from labor market participation and, more importantly, the purpose of exclusion—the production of human capital - means that *exploitation* could be said to be the more relevant concept in thinking about those positioned as children in the context of capitalist economic systems (Oldman, 1994), which can usefully be examined from the vantage of biopolitics/ governmentality. Furthermore, young people over a certain age are typically allowed to participate in labor markets in limited ways, but employers may not be required to pay young workers the full minimum wage. Additionally the intersection of child status with other axes of oppression can result in highly exploitative—and illegal—forms of child labor.

The concept of powerlessness relates to social relations in which some have the authority to command others. Young (1990) here again focuses on economic relations, drawing on the example of low-level employees denied opportunities to exercise control or creativity in their working lives, but the concept applies to constrained opportunities for autonomy and participation in decision-making more generally, including in the formal political domain, and thus is of particular significance to children and youth. Powerlessness in Young's framework could be said to be based on a conception of power broadly in line with what is referred to by Foucault (1977; 2003; 2007) as 'sovereign power'—the form of power exercised through juridical mechanisms of law, contract, and rights which sanction (and de-limit) authority over subjects. Foucault's (2007) contribution to governmentality theory make clear that the exercise of sovereign power in liberal capitalist regimes is bound up with disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms. Discipline and biopolitics are constitutive of freedom—of populations, of markets and of individual, sovereign, subjects. The rights-bearing subject of liberal government is both target and *product* of power (Rose, 1999a). The rights which protect personal and political freedoms make it possible to exercise power over agentive subjects. For this reason I prefer the Foucauldian term *subjectification* to powerlessness. In pointing to how human agency is shaped and channeled through practices of government, the concept of subjectification captures the interconnection between

'power over' and 'power to' in liberal capitalist regimes (Smith, 2023). This is of huge significance to child/youth oppression in that in liberal thought, 'despotism' over the child has been deemed necessary in the interests of promoting the self-governing capacities of the future adult (Valverde, 1996). The advent of participatory rights for the young in recent decades has taken place in the context of forms of governmentality associated with neoliberalism predicated on the agentic capacities of the child/youth in the here and now (Smith, 2014). Therefore, while children's participatory rights can offer possibilities for resistance to oppression, they can also be viewed as instruments for exercising (bio)power over the young.

The face of cultural imperialism/domination refers to relations of oppression through which the values, beliefs and traditions of the dominant group are the taken-for-granted norm leading to misrecognition of so-called 'minority groups' and/or appropriation of 'exoticized' elements of 'minority cultures' (Young, 1990). Of course the cultural system and the various sub-systems and institutions within it are sites of intense contestation and resistance. It is of interest that education and socialization of the young—viewed as vital to cultural reproduction—represents an important focus of struggle historically and today between dominant/dominated groups. Thinking specifically about child-adult relations cultural imperialism/domination finds expression in the privileging of the ideas and perspectives of adults and neglect or disregard of those of children and young people; in the devaluing of and/or adult control over and/or appropriation of the cultural activities of the young; and in treating adulthood as the default state of humanness with the corresponding assumption that children and young people are somehow 'incomplete' (DeJong & Love, 2015, p. 493). We can say that countering cultural domination over the young was a foundational focus of the field of Childhood Studies, central to which has been the insistence on children as full members of society with the capacity to express their views and experiences (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

Finally, conceptualizing violence as structural oppression highlights the risks of violence faced by members of oppressed groups. This means that acts of violence committed by and against individuals need to be viewed within the wider context of unequal social relations and the laws, policies and cultural norms and practices through which unequal relations are supported and sustained. Drawing again on Foucault's distinctions between different modes of exercising power, violence against persons is the fundamental instrument of sovereign power—conceptualized by Foucault as coercive and extractive – a form of power exercised simply to gain and maintain dominance over others (1977; 1978; 2003) and associated with patriarchal forms of rule (Jenks, 2005). A noted characteristic of the modern state has been the 'monopolization of violence' deployed either to defend territory against external threats or to counter threats from within, and part of a wider process of centralization of authority (Pearce, 2019). Relatedly, the rise of the modern state is associated with the internalization of control (Foucault, 2007). These changes have resulted broadly speaking in the gradual delegitimization of phys-

ical violence as a mechanism of control over subordinate groups (Ariès, 1962). Nonetheless violence on the part of private actors has not been eradicated and has for a long time even remained legally permissible in certain contexts, most notably by adults against children within families, schools, and other settings.[2]

## Conceptualizing Adultism

According to Fletcher (2015) the concept of adultism has now been in use for a century, but, as noted above, it has not entered common usage and until relatively recently was not widely used even in academic and activist circles. There is no fully agreed upon definition, but Alderson writes that the term is analogous to sexism and is generally used in reference to "prejudice against children and *excessive* respect for adults" (Alderson, 2020, n.p., emphasis added), which legitimizes *discrimination* against and adult *control* over the young (see also Fletcher, 2015). These elements are present in what is one of the most influential accounts of adultism, that of Bell (1995. pp. 1-3), which defines adultism as "systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people":

> The word adultism refers to behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement. This mistreatment is reinforced by social institutions, laws, customs, and attitudes. … except for prisoners and a few other institutionalized groups, *young people are more controlled* than any other group in society. ... *The essence of adultism is disrespect of the young*. Our society, for the most part, considers young people to be less important than and inferior to adults. It does not take young people seriously and does not include them as decision makers in the broader life of their communities. (Bell, 1995, pp. 1-2, emphasis added)

Within Bell's definition cultural beliefs ground and support oppressive control over the young at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels. Like other authors using the term adultism such as Alderson and Fletcher, Bell emphasizes that adult authority over children is not *necessarily* problematic or inherently oppressive. Adultism stems from dichotomizing, overgeneralized assumptions of adult superiority/child inferiority. It is thus seen as essentially a matter of cultural domination and misrecognition, which in legitimizing unequal treatment, results in constrained opportunities to exercise agency and weak protections against abuses of adult authority.

Bell acknowledges that "class, gender, or ethnic background" is always and inevitably a factor in how any young person is treated but is concerned to underline that "disrespect" on the basis of youth is shared regardless of other identity characteristics (Bell, 1995, p. 9). The consequence of thinking about child/youth oppression in this way is that childhood, youth, and adulthood are treated (whether intentionally or not) as pre-existing naturalized categories. This is because unequal power relations are viewed *as the result of* negative assumptions about

children and youth who are consequently restricted from exercising autonomy or participating in political decision-making. Inequalities of power between children and adults are thus viewed mainly from the vantage of sovereign power—as a matter of rights and limits—which does not fully capture how or why power is exercised over the young or the interlocking power relations within which generational categories and positionalities are produced and reproduced.

It is certainly accurate to say that mainstream liberal theories of rights take for granted that children should be subject to the authority of the adults responsible for them and excluded from the political sphere and that laws, policies, social and institutional arrangements as well as cultural values, norms and practices assume and demand adult authority over the young (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). However, I argue that viewing this as simply reflecting bias towards adults and disregard or disdain for the young is inadequate and that a more expansive account of child youth/oppression is required. Otherwise there is a danger that efforts to address oppression of children/youth will center on challenging normative assumptions. For instance, in her critique of liberal rights theories Moosa-Mitha (2005) draws on the concept of adultism, arguing that "adultist" norms embedded in liberal conceptions of citizenship "overlook children's citizenship rights due to their "construction as not "not-yet-citizens"" (similar points are made in a recent paper by Tisdall and Morrisson (2022) which draws on the concept of adultism). Moosa-Mitha (2005) sees parallels between the positioning of children and that of women and racialized groups pointing to analogous assumptions regarding 'dependence' and inferior reasoning capacities. However, it is important to make a strong distinction between denial of citizenship status, formally or in practice, to adult members of oppressed groups and the status accorded to children in liberal democracies, which might best be described as 'citizens-in- the-making.' The deficits attributed to children (for some at least) are time-bound. Denial of rights to women or racialized groups was legitimized historically (and we must make the distinction between legitimized and caused) by accusations of *ir*rationality (Rollo, 2021). Children—white male children in any case—were viewed as *pre*-rational (Arneil, 2022). In liberal thought restriction on children's liberty is to ensure that they develop the attributes to become self-governing in the future—autonomy rights for the young are viewed as a threat to the autonomy of the future adults they will become *and* a threat to the proper functioning of liberal societies (see e.g. Adams, 2008; Hafen & Hafen, 1996). 'Adultism' in the political domain is not just a matter of embedded norms and assumptions—the institutions which comprise the modern liberal state both produce and *depend upon* a binary distinction between childhood and adulthood which is instrumental not just in the exercise of control over the young, but in practices of governmental control more generally (Rose, 1999b). This is a really important point—and one of the most distinctive aspects of oppression of children and youth—which must be centered in any discussion of adultism.

There are some important contributions to the literature on adultism which are attentive to how control over the young fits within the wider context of social control and unequal power relations. This includes recent work by Hall (2022) on the relationship between adultism and regulation of gender identity. Hall's analysis highlights that regulation of trans identities is made possible by the subordinate position of youth and further highlights how social class position mediates the experience of and attitudes towards LGBTQ parents and the particular pressure faced by LGBTQ parents to conform to middle-class parenting norms. Hall's work also speaks to one of the most insightful threads among adultism-oriented scholarship in that it attends to the relationship between child/youth-adult relations and colonialism. Liebel argues that "adultism would not only have to be understood as a form of children's subjugation to adult power and the discrimination that accompanies it but would also have to be situated in its colonial and postcolonial contexts" (2023: 3). One of the more influential papers addressing this imperative is that of DeJong and Love (2015). The significant contribution of this paper is its treatment of childhood as a "*technology* of colonialism." DeJong and Love (2015) draw on the work of Burman (1994, 2007 cited in DeJong & Love, 2015) and—to a greater extent—Cannella (1997 cited in DeJong & Love, 2015) in delineating five points of "parallel" between discourses of childhood and discourses of colonialism.[3] The parallels identified include: binary divisions between child/adult and colonizer/colonized; the need to save the souls of children and colonized peoples; the idea of an "essential human nature"; the notion that children and colonized nations were "in development" along a linear trajectory towards adulthood/European civilization necessitating support from the 'developed'; and relatedly, children/colonized peoples being in a position of *dependency* on adults/colonizers (DeJong & Love, 2015, pp. 498-501). I would argue that the term "parallel" might be somewhat misleading here—as DeJong and Love (2015) acknowledge in their paper, discourses of childhood and discourses of colonialism are mutually supportive and it might be more accurate to go further and describe these discourses as mutually constitutive. These intertwined discourses have been shaped by pseudo-scientific evolutionary ideas which posited, firstly, that 'development' from birth was a series of stages which 'recapitulated' the evolution of the species, and, secondly, that different 'races' were at different stages in the evolutionary development of the species, of which white Europeans represented the most advanced products (see e.g. Lesko, 2012; Liebel, 2019). These kinds of ideas, which lingered long after they were scientifically discredited, legitimized colonial and neocolonial practices, which as DeJong and Love (2015) describe, treated colonized peoples as 'child like' and unfit to self-govern as well as 'civilizing' interventions which aimed to erase the cultural identity of colonized peoples by assimilating children into the culture of the colonizers.

The framing of childhood by DeJong and Love (2015) as a 'technology' which upholds unequal power relations resonates with insights from the govern-

mentality literature on the government of childhood. The modern Western conception of protected, dependent childhood can be said to be an invention of the bourgeoisie (Ariès, 1962; Cunningham, 1995). What has been referred to as the 'universalization of childhood' (Cunningham, 1995) within Western states in the long nineteenth century is recognized as having been largely motivated by concern to 'improve' the working-classes (see e.g., Rose, 1999b; Smith, 2014). The civilizing mission of colonial elites was not confined to their colonial possessions but was directed at the 'dangerous elements' within the borders of colonial states. Here I am thinking of how in the context of early industrialized capitalism and the emergence of the urban working classes in countries like England and the United States, there were parallels drawn between the racialized 'others' who were targets of intervention in the colonies and the classed "street Arabs" seen as running wild in the cities of colonizing and settler-colonial states (Swain & Hillel, 2017). Among the most significant of the 'civilizing' mechanisms adopted in response to the perceived threat posed by working-class children was mass and compulsory elementary schooling, but important also were institutions such as reformatories and industrial schools for those removed from 'unfit' parents, as well as interventions instructing parents in appropriate sexual, gender and generational relations (Rose, 1999b). We could say that childhood can be viewed as a technology of *capitalism* as well as of colonialism, but it is probably more useful to refer to childhood as a technology (and arguably the most important such technology) of subjectification. An important point made within the adultism literature is that it is during childhood that individuals are socialized to accept relations of subordination and privilege as 'normal' (see e.g., DeJong & Love, 2015; Fletcher 2015). Drawing on the Foucaultian idea of childhood and youth as technologies of subjectification, another way of thinking about this is that childhood and youth are key mechanisms for the production of (privileged or subordinate) classed, racialized, gendered, sexed and/or dis/abled subjects.

## (Re)considering Adultism in Examining Oppressive Child-Adult Relations

There are many useful insights within the relevant literature and the concept of adultism has been effectively deployed to signify and draw attention to *structurally oppressive* relations between children and adults and provides some insight into the relationship between oppression of the young and other axes of opppression. Nonetheless, based on the discussion above, I argue that there are some important issues to be attended to in order to strengthen the concept as a tool for examining the causes, effects, and outcomes of child/youth oppression.

Firstly, there is the issue of conceptual confusion. In addition to adultism there are several other essentially competing concepts (including 'childism' and various other 'isms' such as ageism and youthism) to conceptualize oppression of

the young. Furthermore, adultism is used in slightly different ways by different authors. This can be said to be an issue more generally in the use of 'isms' to conceptualize oppression. The meaning of much longer established terms such as sexism and racism in academic, political, or everyday discourse is by no means fixed, reflecting different disciplinary perspectives and social locations of those deploying the terms. That many of those writing on child/youth oppression refer to their preferred term, whether adultism or childism or another, as analogous to sexism, racism or ableism could therefore be said to adding to the confusion. Furthermore, contra to Alderson (2020), adultism could not accurately be said to be to children and young people "as sexism is to women" – adultism would seem to be more akin to a term like andro-ism or white supremacy rather than sexism or racism.

Secondly, following on from this I argue that the tendency to draw analogies between adultism and other isms is misguided in a more fundamental way, in that it can imply sameness in the experience of oppressions or that oppressions operate 'in parallel.' Again, I believe that this is an issue with the use of 'isms' more generally. Oppression on the basis of class, gender, race, disability, and generational position are *distinct* forms of oppression (see e.g. Kaufman, 2016) *and* these distinct oppressions have taken shape through temporally and spatially situated structural relations which are in dynamic interaction with and are co-constitutive of each other (hooks, 2000a; 2000b). The use of simple analogies between oppressions can serve to obscure these two important insights. Furthermore it inhibits analysis of how analogy is *deployed* to uphold and legitimize oppressive relations (Rollo, 2021). Thinking about the distinctiveness of oppression of children/youth there are important points to make, which, while obvious, have implications which are sometimes underexplored in the literature. Oppression of the young is distinctive in that every individual human experiences it in some way, and, most significantly, as that it is *temporary.* Childhood and youth have been *socially constructed* as temporary states of preparation for adulthood (law, policy, custom and material conditions are all significant in this regard). Within the discursive frameworks associated with the construction of modern Western childhood those assigned to this state of temporariness are viewed not simply as deficient but as *malleable*, i.e., endowed with future potential, although, significantly, not all to the same extent (Cunningham, 2005; Smith, 2014). What we might think of as the 'hegemonic adult' is White, Western, male, middle-class, abled, cis-gendered and heterosexual (on this point see e.g., Calasanti, 2007). The deployment of the analogy 'child-like' in reference to 'non-hegemonic' adults does not point to a *likeness* between oppression of children and oppression of other subordinate groups, but to the particular significance of child/youth oppression within the broader interplay and interdependence of structural oppressions.

This leads me to a third point which is that in much, although certainly not all, of the literature deploying adultism to examine child/youth oppression, the concepts of interlocking oppressions and intersectionality are used as an 'add

on'. What I mean by this is that for some authors the strong emphasis placed on establishing that child-adult relations represents a distinct mode of oppression is not accompanied by adequate recognition that relations between children and adults at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels are embedded within the wider constellation of *mutually constitutive* social relations. Accordingly there is a failure to recognize that childhood/youth and adulthood are *inherently* racialized (see Rollo, 2019 on this point) and classed, gendered, sexed, and ableized.

While again not true of all the literature, it can be said that a fourth issue relates to an inadequate conceptualisation of power relations in the conceptualisation of adultism. As discussed above the way oppression of the young is understood in at least some of the literature could be said to be based on an understanding of power as 'power over' resonant with 'sovereign power.' This I argue, following Foucault (1978; 2003; 2007), is inadequate for conceptualising *how* and *why* power is exercised in the context of modern nation states, taking into account the role of disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms in the constitution and regulation of political, economic, and social relations within and beyond nation states, and associated with this the enormous political, economic, and social significance of children and childhood. The relations of power/knowledge within which modern childhood and adulthood were constituted cannot be explained simply as denial of rights resulting from deficit 'discourses' of childhood—the construction (and reconstruction) of childhood and adulthood is bound up with wider discursive, material, and social processes and therefore cannot be reduced to cultural norms and assumptions.

Finally, is the issue of neglect of the material and economic aspects of oppressive child-adult relations. As I have discussed above, oppression of the young in much of the adultism literature is regarded as primarily 'cultural,' a matter of disrespect, with the implication that justice for children/youth is essentially a matter of recognition. The social justice theorist Nancy Fraser (2020) has famously argued that most real world forms of oppression encompass an economic as well as a cultural dimension (we might add here following Baker et al [2009] that they also involve politico-regulatory and affective dimensions). It is important to recognize that this involves forms of economic injustice that are distinct from, although closely related to, those associated with class relations. In the next section of this paper I want to briefly explore what can be gained from taking *exploitation* rather than *disrespect* as the starting point for analysis of the oppressive child-adult relations signified by adultism and how this can provide insight both into the distinctiveness of child/youth oppression and its interconnectedness with other modes of oppression within the wider context of unequal power relations.

## Taking Exploitation as the Starting Point for Examining Oppressive Child-adult Relations

In thinking about oppressive child-adult relations in terms of exploitation, one point of departure is the Marxist-inspired analysis of David Oldman, interest in whose work has undergone somewhat of a revival in the last few years in light of concerns about the neglect of political economy within Childhood Studies (see e.g., Spyrou et al, 2018). Oldman's contribution explicitly responds to a question posed by Jens Qvortrup as to whether there are "objective, socio-economic grounds for the general attitude of adult society towards the young" (Qvortrup, 1987 quoted in Oldman, 1994, p. 154). Responding in the affirmative, Oldman argues that "children constitute rather more than a minority group defined by an absence of rights" but instead can be viewed as akin to a class with *economic interests* which conflict with those of adults as a group (Oldman, 1994, p. 154). Taking this point seriously would require that the use of adultism to examine oppressive child-adult relations must attend to the material benefits to adults from control over the young within the broader context of unequal structural relations (ibid.).

For Oldman, writing from a British perspective, roughly three decades ago, child-adult relations are conceptualized in terms of adult control over the maturation process, which in the context of 'advanced' capitalist societies generates employment for a significant proportion of the adult population (ibid., p. 155). Drawing on a Marxist political economy lens he provides an innovative analysis of child-adult relations using the concept of 'childwork'. This he defines as work performed *on* children by adults, but which also necessitates work by children. It is labor performed upon the labor of children (ibid.), a point which resonates with Foucault's conceptualization of power as "an action upon an action" (1983, p. 220). While children are therefore "active subjects" in the production of "human capital" they are positioned as "in development" (Oldman, 1994, p. 155) and this Oldman sees as a defining aspect of the relations put into play through childwork. Notable examples of childwork identified are the tasks carried out by schoolteachers and early years educators aimed at promoting academic and social development of the young. Childwork is seen as exploitation by Oldman if and to the extent that the benefits derived by adults as a group from it being carried out are greater than those gained by children and youth. Oldman concludes that to a large extent this is in fact the case. He is, however, careful to represent this in the wider context of capitalist structural relations, arguing that the limited resources allocated to education and care of the young means that the material interests of childworkers such as teachers can generally only be promoted at the expense of the young. A key example provided is how ensuring adequate remuneration for teachers necessitates large class sizes, seen as inimical to ensuring that the educational needs of individual children are met.

Oldman's account could be said to be attentive to the interlocking oppressions

shaping the organization of childwork in that it is concerned with how unequal class and gender relations are implicated in the distribution of the benefits and burdens of childwork. He makes important points about the professionalization of certain forms of childwork which have a high status and are well remunerated. These forms of childwork are viewed as the most exploitative of children in that the benefits accruing to the adult childworkers are that much greater. On the other hand it is recognized that much childwork is low status and poorly paid—childcare is the main example provided here—and mainly carried out by women (we might add by women from low-income backgrounds, a category shaped by the intersection of class, race, and migration status). These childworkers can be regarded as highly exploited in many countries and Oldman argues that advancing their material interests would likely result in less resources accruing to children placed in childcare services. This is contra to arguments commonly advanced to support professionalization of childcare which positively associate 'quality' with staff qualifications and remuneration. While it might be argued that there is no necessary conflict between the interests of childcare workers and the children they care for, it could also be said that this only holds if childcare is provided other than on a commercial basis and there is political commitment to high levels of funding to support provision which *genuinely* meets the needs of children.

Related to these issues, an important point made by Oldman is that childwork is predominantly of benefit to the middle classes.

> It is the middle-class's own attempts to reproduce its advantages for itself through the generations that produces much of the childwork that allows the exploitation of children's self capitalization. Childwork is predominantly middle-class work and, at the same time, its benefits are expropriated disproportionately by middle-class families. (Oldman, 1994, p. 165)

What I would like to add to this is that much childwork is carried out not to support human capital development of middle-class children, but to *regulate* less privileged children and their parents in accordance with middle-class norms. Childwork performed for the purposes of regulation and social control has tended to be more professionalized and more highly rewarded (e.g., social work and child psychiatry) than childwork carried out to support parental employment. The middle-classes—and it is important to recognize the intersection between economic and racial privilege in the category middle class—thus benefit disproportionately from the hierarchical occupational structure in which childwork is situated. It is possible for the economically and educationally privileged middle classes to outsource responsibility for caring for their own children at low cost to those less privileged, while members of the middle classes also capture the most lucrative and esteemed 'childwork' roles—those involving the guidance and regulation of "troubled" or "deviant" children and parents.

I believe that further insight into these issues can be obtained through the

application of a governmentality lens. As touched on in the preceding sections, the concept of governmentality has been deployed fruitfully to examine how transformations in child-adult relations were instrumental to and shaped by the changes associated with the gradual emergence of liberal capitalist political economies. A key observation from Foucault (2007, p. 105) in this regard relates to the shift from the family as the *model* for government under the explicitly patriarchal early modern European regimes to an *instrument* for government under liberal democratic capitalist regimes. In the former the authority of the political sovereign was viewed as analogous to that of the father, who as head of household had the right *and responsibility* to rule over women, children, servants, apprentices/workers, and slaves—- all those who had not or could not attain the status of 'master' and therefore were deemed unfit to govern themselves (Miller, 1998). In the latter the exercise of power has become more depersonalized and diffuse (Foucault, 1977; 2007; 2008; Rose 1999a), and all those who have attained the status of adulthood are formally at least regarded as autonomous "subjects of freedom" (Rose, 1999b). This transformation occurred in the context of the reconceptualization of the purpose of governmental authority—now vested in the abstract entity referred to as 'the state' (Foucault, 2007). Foucault (1983) writes that the authority of the state must be seen as "superstructural"—reliant on institutions such as the family. Unlike the early modern patriarchal family, the modern family—privatized, nuclear, and centered on child-rearing functions (Ariès, 1962)—is called upon to inculcate *self*-mastery rather than to simply exert mastery over its members (Miller, 1998).

Building on the theoretical insights of feminist scholars such as Carol Pateman and drawing on an extensive body of empirical literature, Pavla Miller (1998) insists that these changes in political, economic, and family organization in Western states should be viewed not in terms of the elimination, but of the *transformation of patriarchy*. Key developments examined by Miller include the creation of the private domestic sphere, the rise of the "male breadwinner" family, and the introduction of mass compulsory schooling. These developments were linked to the interrelated goals of "civilizing the poor," "making women more womanly" and "making children more child-like" (Miller, 1998, pp. 261-264). Imposing the norms of the bourgeois family on to the laboring classes would promote prudence and 'responsibility,' inculcate a strong work ethic in the men who would serve as foot soldiers of industry, while sanctification of women's role within the home legitimized exploitation of a different kind. Ensuring that all children conformed to *a version* of the bourgeois model—dependent and innocent was a key aspect of the work of pioneering child welfare activists (Cunningham, 2005; Hendrick, 2003) and this was essential to the deployment of childhood as a technology to produce 'governable subjects' and to the development of professional 'childwork.' In the European context the 'universalization of childhood' through the passage of protective laws and compulsory schooling did not only formalize the boundaries

between adulthood and childhood (Cunningham, 2005), but was implemented in ways which supported and maintained hierarchies of class, race, and gender. In colonial contexts, schooling and 'welfare' interventions were used to facilitate control over colonized peoples, such as the residential institutions aimed at forcibly assimilating First Nations children in settler-colonial states (DeJong & Love, 2015).

No longer confined to the 'sovereign' objective of control over territory, as discussed above, the emergence of the modern state came about in the context of a reorientation of governmental power towards the 'biopolitical' goal of "the administration of life" (Foucault, 2007; 2008). Represented as the 'future,' children and childhood were key targets—and products—of biopolitical regulation (Rose, 1999b). As national security and prosperity came to be viewed in terms of the 'fitness' and productivity of the population, the young came to be viewed as "raw materials," "resources," and "national assets" in the political discourses of European states at the turn of the twentieth century (Hendrick, 2003). Shaped by imperialist and capitalist logic, there are early traces of the 'economization' of childhood (Millei & Joronen, 2016) associated with the notion of expenditure on the young as an 'investment' which will pay dividends in the future (Hendrick, 2003). From a public policy perspective, there was a strong emphasis on potential long-term savings (e.g. on prisons and poor relief) if children of the "dangerous classes" were properly socialized (Hendrick, 2003). Hence investment in services for children and families was mostly targeted at those who did not conform to middle-class, Western, Christian norms of family, sexuality and child-rearing including the urban working-classes, nomadics, and all those characterized as in some way deviant or deficient (Rose, 1999b).

Biopolitical government was made possible by and stimulated advances in the 'human sciences', including economics, political science, sociology, and psychology, which Foucault's work suggests are inescapably bound up with the exercise of power. Developmental psychology had emerged as the dominant form of knowledge about children and childhood by the early decades of the twentieth century, its purpose to understand *and optimize* the transition to mature adulthood (Rose, 1999b). The rise of developmental psychology was facilitated by and in turn strengthened the model of staged progression implemented in schooling systems. Gathered in age-demarcated groupings school-children represented a convenient study population and the statistical data obtained from the multitude of individual tests and examinations was used to measure and monitor individual development (Hendrick, 2003; Rose, 1999b). Sorting and ranking the young based on conformity to 'norms' of age-appropriate development permitted separating out those who fell outside the 'normal' range (more commonly the children of the poor and/or of racialized minority/migrant background due to impaired access to resources and biases embedded within tests) (Hendrick, 2003; Au, 2013). There is thus a strong interconnection between ableism and the constitution and regu-

lation of "normal development" in childhood (Carlson, 2017; Emery et al, 2022) and this can be viewed as linked to concerns to promote greater 'efficiency' in the cultivation of governable—and productive—subjects (Rose 1999b). Also of significance is that 'the child' of developmental psychology is the Western child—developmental norms are based on study of a relatively privileged sub-group of the world's child population while claiming universal applicability (Nielsen et al, 2017; Walkerdine, 2005; Woodhead, 1999).

What we might think of as the intensified biopolitical *instrumentalization* of childhood made possible by developmental psychology went hand in hand with what various scholars have referred to as the *commodification* of childhood in emergent consumer capitalist societies (Rose, 1999a; 1999b). Two significant modes of exploitation of the young under capitalism can thus be viewed as mutually dependent. Dan Cook's work demonstrates how from the early twentieth century psychologists played an important role in the creation of a market for children's clothing and consumer goods in the United States and beyond. The deployment of increasingly refined age-differentiation to boost sales and profits involved the 'invention' of new stages of development and subjects of development (e.g., 'toddlers,' 'teenagers' and more recently 'tweens') (Cook, 2004). As the range of ready-made consumer goods expanded, parents—especially mothers—were encouraged to view expenditure on their children as an expression of 'love' (Cook, 2004). Roughly contemporaneously within the field of developmental psychology 'love'—or attachment to the primary (maternal) care—was rationalized and instrumentalized as the means to produce "well-adjusted subjects" (Rose, 1999b). As public welfare services expanded in Western states in the period following the second world war, developmental psychology provided the expertise necessary to shore up the professional standing of 'childwork.' In the context of the broader 'psychologization' of Western culture, the language of developmentalism served to buttress the authority of the 'parenting' experts dispensing guidance through commercial channels and to add credibility to the claims of those hawking 'educational' toys and services (Rose, 1999a.; Ogata, 2004).

Within the 'advanced economies' the advent of mass post-compulsory education in the latter decades of the twentieth century and in the last two decades of mass pre-compulsory education has brought about a significant increase in level of public 'investment' in the young. The category "young people" now encompasses those in their mid-twenties, while "early childhood" has been constituted as a distinct domain of biopolitical intervention within national and global policy discourse (see e.g., Millei & Joronen, 2016; Smith, 2019). State expenditure on education has come to be framed—via a lens derived from behavioral economics—as investment in "human capital" which is grounded in the assumption that the earlier the investment, the greater the returns (Foucault, 2008). The rise of the human capital paradigm has occurred in the wider context of the political, economic, and social transformations associated with the application of 'neoliberal'

policy prescriptions since the 1970s, the emergence of what has been described as 'footloose capitalism' and the rise of transnational corporations, financialization of economic systems and weakly regulated technological 'innovation' (Foucault, 2008; Peters, 2016). While creating new opportunities for employment including increased opportunities for female labor market participation, these developments have been associated with a variety of interconnected ills. These include greater concentration of wealth, more precarious labor market conditions, rising greenhouse gas emissions, species loss and environmental degradation, in particular in countries in the Global South, due to aggressive extractive policies and environmental 'dumping.' A marked feature of neoliberal inspired policies has been how intensified individualization of responsibility for navigating social, economic, and environmental challenges (Peters, 2016) has been associated with the "pedagogization of social problems" (Úcar et al, 2020), which places particular responsibility on the young. It is against this background that there has been a transformation towards more 'democratic' child-adult relations (Beck, 1998) at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels, associated with discourses and practices oriented towards recognition and support of the capacity of children—even the very youngest—to exercise agency. This has given rise to concerns about how the instrumentalization of children's agency is making possible new forms of control over and exploitation of the young (associated with new forms of 'childwork').

Within the field of Childhood Studies questions concerning the agency of children and young people have been the focus of much discussion and debate in the last decade (Spyrou et al, 2018). While the representation of children as social actors and agents can be viewed as emancipatory—and was generally framed in this way within foundational Childhood Studies and children's rights scholarship - what has been viewed as the "fetishization of agency" (Balagopalan, 2023, p. 45) has been critiqued on various grounds (Spyrou et al., 2018). Of particular relevance to this discussion is that attribution of 'agency' to children as a basis for elevating their status to 'human beings' (rather than 'human becomings') has been challenged as reproducing not just "adultist" norms of human-ness but norms which ascribe full humanity only to hegemonic adults (see in particular Rollo, 2018, but also Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Sundhall, 2017; Wall, 2008, 2022). An important point here, familiar from the feminist literature, is that the agency and autonomy of the hegemonic rights-bearing adult subject has only ever been possible on the basis of exploitation of the time, energy, and resources of subordinated others (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Related to this, within contemporary Childhood Studies there is concern to emphasize that agency is performed or practiced rather than possessed and is made possible only in the context of interdependent relations— human and more-than-human (Taylor et al, 2012; Weldemariam, K., & Wals, A., 2020). The other particularly relevant critique stems from the governmentality literature which points to the association between the discourse of the

agentive child and what Foucault (2008) has referred to as the 'entrepreneurial subject' of neoliberalism. The entrepreneurial child subject has the desire and capacity to *self-govern* and make *responsible* choices (Nadesan, 2010; Smith, 2012, 2014). From a governmentality perspective attribution of agency to the young facilitates strategies of responsibilization—that is modes of exercising power which place the burden of responsibility on the young for addressing challenges created by older generations, in itself a form of exploitation.

While, as noted above, the idea that intervention in the lives of children and young people can promote positive future outcomes is not new, the novelty of neoliberal government of childhood is seen to lie in the expectation that children and young people not just actively, but *reflexively* (Fendler, 2001), contribute to what Oldman (1994) refers to as their 'self-capitalization', but also to their 'self-mobilization' (Lessenich, 2010) as socially responsible 'agents of change.' Responsibilization of the young is evident, for example, in policies and programs as diverse as childhood obesity prevention and school recycling initiatives—which arguably obscure and reinforce the structural inequalities which underlie social and environmental challenges (e.g., the power imbalances which permits the agri-food industry to produce, sell, package and market goods which are harmful to human health, involve the gross exploitation, ill-treatment and killing of non-human animals, destroy habitats and harm the physical environment). Within the domain of international development, programs aimed at "empowerment" of adolescent girls have been subject to criticism for the manner in which the personal choices of young women have been linked to broader biopolitical goals (Potvin, 2019).

It can be said that contemporary practices of governing childhood are oriented towards cultivating and channeling the "right kind of agency" (Edmonds, 2019, p. 203). Within neoliberal governmentality the young are called upon to invest their time and energy prudently in the expectation that this will result in positive individual and social outcomes. In the context of increasingly polarized labor markets, heightened competitiveness and ever-increasing credentialism, individual investment in 'human capital' has assumed even greater importance than in the past. The children of the racially and economically privileged learn early that academic achievement is the foundation for successful adulthood and that sacrifice of present pleasure will reap future rewards. As Hall (2022, p. 290) notes, this makes their (temporary) subordination during childhood more acceptable. These of course represent only a tiny proportion of the world's children and it is an open question as to whether the work performed on and *by* this sub-group in the production of human capital can be viewed as exploitation. (We might argue that the growth globally of a highly lucrative shadow education 'industry' and the increased demands this places on the young could be viewed as highly exploitative). For those from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds competing for academic and career opportunities alongside their more privileged peers the rewards from making the 'right' choices seem much less promising and thus

the extent of exploitation is that much greater during—and after—the childhood years.

The world's most marginalized children are of course vulnerable to the most egregious forms of exploitation and there is little by way of investment in their 'capitalization.' This group includes, for instance, those engaged in what is referred to as "the worst forms of child labor" in countries of the Global North as well as the much greater numbers so employed in countries of the Global South. Debates on child labor throw up widely diverging views on how best to safeguard children against exploitation and maltreatment (see Bourdillon, 2006; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Morrow, 2010; Liebel, 2015; Liebel & Invernizzi, 2019), generally conceptualized as protection versus prohibition (Van Daalen & Hanson, 2019; White, 2005). 'Protectionists' (including representatives of working children) argue for regulation rather than abolition—fair wages and conditions of employment which are compatible with health and education. Some advocates of protection/regulation have critiqued assumptions that "school is the best place to work" which underpin advocacy and campaigning, given serious under-resourcing of education in the countries with the highest rates of child labor as well as the (neo)imperialist logic embedded in schooling policy and practice (Wells (2021) provides an overview of debates). Nonetheless, law and policy have been more greatly influenced by calls for abolition, in which can be found an echo of the imperative to make children more child-like which informed intervention in the past. The danger here is that the most exploited children are viewed either as passive victims to be rescued or if their capacity for exercising agency is recognized that it is problematized as the 'wrong' kind of agency (Moosa-Mitha 2005; Morrow, 2010). This can mean that they are viewed as not 'really' children and denied support and assistance and/or subjected to interventions aimed at controlling—or even eliminating—populations perceived as dangerous (Liebel, 2014).

The forms of exploitation discussed here are of course by no means exhaustive—there are innumerable and diverse ways in which adults benefit materially from the energy, time and capacities of children and young people to a greater extent than do children and young people themselves. Exploitation of the young is evident at the interpersonal, institutional, and structural-systemic levels of social relations, but what is important to keep in mind is that this takes place within the broader context of interlocking oppressive and exploitative relations within and beyond the borders of states. This entails recognition that some children and young people—however unwittingly—may themselves benefit from exploitation of others, including non-human others, (e.g. in the short-term through access to cheap consumer goods or from the longer-term benefits accruing from education and care services provided by low-paid workers).[4] While not possible to address in depth within the confines of this paper, child-adult relations must be examined as embedded within capitalist relations which are *inherently* heteropatriarchal, imperialist, racist, ableist *and* anthropocratic and which are supported and sustained by the 'technology' of childhood.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that inquiry into the causes, effects and outcomes of adultism necessitates grounding the concept in a comprehensive account of child/youth oppression which considers all of the systems within which oppressive relations are embedded and the mutually constitutive relationships between oppressions at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels. Adultism has emerged as the preferred 'ism' for conceptualizing oppressive child-adult relations, but it tends to be defined in terms that locate the causes of oppression in generalized assumptions of adult superiority which represent control over the young as necessary. This has resulted in inadequate attention to why and how power is exercised over the young, which inhibits analysis of the interaction between child-adult relations and other axes of oppression.

It has been argued in this paper that while child-adult relations represent a distinct axis of oppression best conceptualized as patriarchal, they cannot be understood without examination of the historically contingent relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and the broader interplay of mutually constitutive oppressions including colonialism, white supremacy, ableism and specisiesm, and anthopocracy. While it would not be possible to carry out such a task in the context of a single paper, by taking exploitation as a starting point for exploration—and framing exploitation in biopolitical terms—this paper has advanced the conceptualization of child/youth oppression beyond discrimination and denial of rights. While these are important aspects of oppressive child/adult relations, we need to also think about adultism as a form of oppression in which the interests of those positioned as children/youth are subservient to the interests of those positioned as adults and how this has been associated with the instrumentalization of childhood. Of importance here is that the instrumental value of childhood as a technology of subjectification facilitates control over and exploitation of not just children and young people, but of human adults and non-human entities in ways which are always and inevitably bound up with the multiplicity of interlocking oppressive relations.

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## Notes

[1] The term is used by activist Omawale Adwele. (Mercy for Animals, n.d.).

[2] As of November 2023 65 states worldwide had banned physical violence against children in all settings. (End Corporal Punishment, n.d.).

[3] It is worth noting that these discourses emerged in the context of the later more

"enlightened" phase of colonialism in which the logics of extraction, appropriation and annexation were supplemented and legitimized by a "civilizing" mission (Scott, 1995).

[4] While it is not possible to explore these issues here, some very interesting and important points have been made by the German-based I.L.A. Kollektiv (Kopp et al., 2019) about the role of schooling in rich capitalist societies in socializing children into high consumption lifestyles.

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# Exploring and Combating Adultism in Early Childhood Education and Beyond

*Aikaterini Varella*

## Abstract

Let's explore adultism (in early childhood education)! The first part of the article answers seven questions frequently posed by adults who first come in contact with adultism, involving concepts of adult power, children's dependence and protection, limits, guilt, the intersectionality of discrimination, and the internalization of adultism. It explains how adultism constitutes fertile ground for the cultivation of every form of discrimination. The second part of the article focuses on remedies for adultism, specifically looking at some of the practices that we implemented in our multicultural pedagogical community with children of early childhood age. We look at basic pedagogical choices, matters of organization of time and space, and details of interactions of adults and children. The article concludes that there is no given recipe against adultism, and invites adults to discover the immense, barely charted terrain of anti-adultist action.

## Introduction: The Frame

Let's talk about adultism (in early childhood education)!

First, we need to understand how adultism works. After years of exchanging ideas about the concept, I have distilled seven questions that adults who first come in contact with adultism often pose, expressing their resistance. In trying to respond to these FAQs, notions such as adult power, children's dependence and protection, personal and collective limits, and the trap of guilt show up. Deeper analysis brings us to the intersectionality of discrimination, the internalization of

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adultism and the acceptance that adultism constitutes fertile ground for the cultivation of every form of discrimination.

The second part of the article focuses on remedies for adultism, namely some specific practices that our self-organized pedagogical community on the Greek border island of Lesvos implemented. From 2017 to 2020, Mikros Dounias hosted eighteen local and thirty-one asylum-seeking children, aged 2.5 to 6 years, in a small forest inside PIKPA Open Refugee Camp. An initiative of local parents and educators, Mikros Dounias functioned on a daily basis according to the values of free experiential, intercultural, and outdoor education. I was fortunate to be a member of the pedagogical team from its founding, until the violent evacuation of PIKPA Camp by the greek state three years later.

Attention to adultism was central to our pedagogical concept since the first day of preparations. As explained below, we considered it impossible to address racism without simultaneously working against adultism. Every day, we had the chance to try things out, reflect upon them in short team meetings, and document them. Throughout this process, our personal and collective adultism-related behaviors evolved, and none of us felt lonely in our efforts.

Communicating our practices and exchanging with the wider educational community are of great importance for us. Our team is a member of the Network for Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning in the greek region. This network's pedagogical teams share common concerns about adultist society and daily try to combat adultism. Thanks to the existence of this network, I describe our pedagogical practices in the present tense, despite the fact that Mikros Dounias no longer operates as a kindergarten setting.

All aspects of adultism merit further research and broad dissemination. One specific field would be the study of expressions of adultism towards infants and toddlers, and how to practice anti-adultism in their company.

## Theoretical Quest: Seven FAQs

Adult-ism is the discrimination against children on the grounds of their young age. Whereas various "-isms" have been the subject of social movements, political organizations, rich literature, and media productions, adultism is neither well known nor widely accepted as a social reality (Bell, 1995).

In 1978, the psychologist Jack Flasher defined adultism as "the abuse by adults in general of the greater power they have over any and all children" (1978, p. 517). Adultism is a social structure of discrimination founded on the imbalance of power between children and adults (Ritz, 2009, p. 127). It ascribes to children restricted capabilities, and imposes a lower status on minors (Liebel, 2013, p. 4). The essence of adultism is the distinct treatment of minors, due to judgements based on their age rather than on their actual capabilities (Zale, 2011).

Yet, as claimed by French historian Philip Ariès as early as the 1960s, child-

hood and adulthood are socially constructed classifications (Ariès, 1965), with adulthood being the ideal against which childhood was measured. Thus, it is no surprise that the latter is considered a lack, a deviation, an imperfection (Johansson, 2012, p. 102).

"All right, but…" What frequent questions express the resistance of adults who hear about adultism for the first time?

### *1. Aren't There Inherent Differences Between Children and Adults?*

A child and an adult can have inherent differences, for example in anatomy. Age-based discrimination begins when these differences are accompanied by moral judgments against children, which lead to treating them as inferior (Murray, 2013, p. 5).

Having studied expressions of adulthood and childhood in different cultures, Benedict remarks that western culture vastly overemphasizes any observable contrasts between adults and children (as cited in Qvortrup, 2009, p. 29). According to Fletcher, adultism is a primary assumption of western society and its value system (2013).

### *2. Don't Children Depend on Adults' Care and Protection?*

Children, especially during the first years of life, do depend on adults' care and protection. Discrimination begins when this protection is used to extend children's dependency beyond what is necessary (Liebel, 2013, p. 11). This does not necessarily happen deliberately; nonetheless, it has serious consequences. Over-protective behaviors can limit children's agency to the point of rendering them helpless (Liebel, 2012, p. 45). Of course, overprotection is also unpleasant and time-consuming for adults; discrimination is strenuous for everyone involved (Ritz, 2008, p. 13). Adults can keep in mind that children are capable of, verbally or otherwise, expressing their need for safety and their opinion on the nature of their protection. Protection can be mutually shaped by children and adults (Liebel, 2012, p. 45).

As a result of children's dependance on adults, adult power over children exists and does not constitute a problem in itself; what adultism refers to is the misuse of adult power. As Fletcher puts it, bias towards adults can result in discrimination against children, but it can also help adults to keep children "fed, safe, supported, thriving, and empowered" (2022). Adults can use their power to enable children's agency and participation and become real allies for them.

### *3. Don't Children Nowadays Exercise Power Over Adults?*

In their first acquaintance with adultism, some adults object that "today's children" tend control their families and are spoiled, out of control, and bossy

towards adults. Such statements are linked to our adultist practices, and can be avoided through a less adultist overall approach towards children—for example, taking them seriously, and letting them share in responsibilities that have to do with their lives.

Children do not possess power over adults. As Jesper Juul points out, even when they feel completely powerless, parents continue to have legal, economic, physical, and psychological power over their children (2009, p. 13). Back in the 1990s, Bell remarked that—except for prisoners and other institutionalized people—children are the most controlled group within society. They are told "*what to eat, what to wear, when to go to bed, when they can talk, that they will go to school, which friends are okay, and when they are to be in the house*" (1995).

### *4. And What About Limits?*

It is important to clarify that anti-adultist approaches do not imply a lack of boundaries in intergenerational coexistence. The aim is rather an equal coexistence of adults and children, in which every person respects both their own and the other's personal limits; all together, they agree on and respect collective limits.

The handbook of the *Network for Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning* (2024) says that limits in the network's pedagogical communities exist not in order for children to learn to respect them, but rather to give children the chance to experience respect. They do not want children to fit into already existing boundaries, but instead to co-develop them, and to understand that limits derive from the need to coexist with others.

To support children in exploring limits, adults can act as role models by training themselves to recognize and express their own feelings and limits, without misusing their power.

### *5. If Adultism Mattered So Much, Wouldn't Children and Youth Themselves Protest Against It?*

First, children do self-organize themselves and protest in different ways in different parts of the world, whether or not adults recognize these protests for what they are. Second, puberty is related to the discrimination that children face since birth, and its various expressions can be seen as a form of struggle against this discrimination.

However, I want to focus on one important reason why children do not respond in mass to this injustice: namely, their own internalization of adultism.

Internalization of any form of oppression happens when the dominant group's ideology is adopted by its victims, who accept their inferior status as natural, deserved, and inevitable. Children internalize adultism in several ways: by adopting adults' opinions about them, although they themselves initially felt differently (Ritz, 2009, p. 137); by assimilating—and seeing as justified—the adultist behav-

iors they experience; by being persuaded of their low value and dependency, and viewing themselves as irresponsible, incompetent, inexperienced, foolish, mediocre (Holt, 1989, p. 82); and by not taking themselves or their peers seriously (National Coalition Building Institute—NCBI, 2004, p. 10).

That last point is critical: taking oneself seriously leads to being taken seriously by others (NCBI, 2004. p. 12). A vicious cycle arises as feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness, and lack of confidence—all derived from internalized adultism—influence children's behavior, tenacity, daring, and capabilities (Bell, 1995).

### *6. Wouldn't It Be More Thoughtful to Address Actual Discrimination Forms, Such As Racism, Instead of Constructing New Ones?*

This question is very "hot" for us, as our kindergarten setting hosted both local and asylum-seeking children inside a refugee camp, on a border island where expressions of racism and xenophobia were gradually rising. Addressing racism was one of our principal goals, as was experiencing diversity as a source of enrichment for the group, rather than as a problem to solve. We envisioned a pedagogical community that would not aim to integrate "other" children into a dominant greek culture, but rather to honor the cultural capital of each person, recognizing their complex and unique identity.

Could we do that, while disregarding other forms of discrimination? The answer is an emphatic no. The theory of intersectionality of discrimination needs to always accompany our analysis: adultism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are interconnected, work together, and constantly feed each other. An individual who is a member of multiple minority groups experiences increased discrimination, for each group they are identified with (Amoah, 2007, p. 6). As a result, less privileged members, who face multiple marginalizations, can be found within minorities (Nash, 2008, p. 4). Children who face discrimination on any other ground than their age are automatically multiply burdened members of the respective minorities; the result is a multiplied discrimination.

Moreover, the interconnection between different forms of discrimination does not end here. Why do people tend to permit, accept, and exert discrimination? Because of adultism, claims Ritz (2009, p. 127). As the following points show, adultism actually constitutes fertile ground for the cultivation of the various types of discrimination:

Firstly, adultism is the only form of discrimination that every human being experiences, no matter the degree or the cultural variety (Bell, 1995). As Alanen points out, the social world is not only gendered, classed, raced, etc., but also "generationed." We should not overlook the "generational segment" of the experiences of the "human individuals that we in everyday speech call children," because generation—as a dimension of personal and social organization—is equally

important to gender, class, and nationality (Alanen, 2009, p. 162).

Secondly, adultism is the first form of discrimination that people experience while building their identity. In the first years of their life, during which learning is mostly unconsciously absorbed, children experience the sensations of power, lack of power, and misuse of power (Ritz, 2008, p. 13; 2009, p. 141). People who love them and whom they love show them, in practice, that discrimination and oppression are acceptable (NCBI, 2004, p. 12).

Thirdly, childhood displays almost absolute mobility towards adulthood (Qvortrup, 2009, p. 28). Unlike in other forms of discrimination, every victim of adultism gets the chance, a few years later, to exercise discrimination on the same grounds (Ritz, 2009, p. 141). Also, as with all forms of discrimination, a recipient can pass the violence they experience on to weaker recipients. The principal victims of children that have experienced adultism are younger children, children that are less powerful physically or intellectually, children whose parents have a lower social status (Flasher, 1978, p. 522), and non-human animals. Miller explains that children get the chance to pass on their own humiliation by exerting power themselves: "As long as there are even weaker, more helpless creatures than they, they are not the lowest slaves" (1983, p. 147).

To sum up: adultism instills patterns of discrimination in every person, from a very young age. As new forms of discrimination are introduced in the course of one's life, chances are that they will be received as natural and "normal." According to Bell, a person might continue tolerating discrimination on different grounds, and/or reenact their experience upon less powerful creatures (1995). In essence, by introducing the experience of discrimination, adultism facilitates the tolerance and exercise of other forms of discrimination. Adultism becomes the fundamental "-ism," which sets the stable foundation for every other "-ism" (NCBI 2004: 12).

### *7. I Am a Terrible Adultist! What Do I Do Now?*

By examining the nature of these first six questions, we realize how deeply rooted adultism is in our mindsets. In order to act against it, we need to question every intergenerational experience that we have had so far. And that can be hard!

It often happens that people who come into contact with, and are persuaded by, the concept, suddenly realize how adultist they have been in their personal and/or professional lives. At this point, guilt appears. We need to understand that changing our learned behaviors requires a lot of emotional and cognitive effort, which takes time; guilt cannot help us, and might actually "freeze" us. The very act of recognizing behavior as adultist is a first step forward; after all, we can then often immediately "correct" our behavior, for example by apologizing to a child.

We suggest reconsidering the assumption that the institutionalized contexts where we meet children are incapable of change; changes are possible everywhere. What we can do is study about the topic; educate ourselves further by

being in honest contact with children; share our insights; and inform other adults. Building up trusting relationships with adults who share the same concerns helps us to be alert to adultist behaviors, to discuss them, and encourage each other to behave differently.

For better or worse, there is no recipe to fight against adultism. We can seek out and discover many innovative approaches in this almost uncharted landscape. The more we try, the closer we come to children and the more we come to understand their situation. From that point on, we might not be able to stop: adultism is everywhere and our actions count!

## Moving Towards Solutions: Our Experience in an Early Childhood Setting

Education is adultist (Fletcher, 2015 a & b; NCBI, 2004, p. 57). Adultism in education, as an expression of institutionalized adultism, has negative impacts on children's daily lives, and results in oppressive social relations (Le François, 2014, p. 47); it "leverages, perpetuates, and instills" adultism throughout society (Liebel, 2014). Some key characteristics of this dynamic include: the compulsory character of schooling; children's daily segregation from society (Fletcher, 2013); adult-designed curricula; the teacher as a symbol of authority; punishment, evaluation, and reward.

In the paragraphs to follow, I discuss anti-adultist approaches in early childhood education, drawing from our experience in the multicultural pedagogical community of Mikros Dounias.

### *On Basic Pedagogical Choices*

**Mixed Ages:** Associating a child's age with their capabilities is not inevitable or "normal" (Woodhead, 2009, p. 51). The children of Mikros Dounias, whose ages varied from 2.5 to 6 years, spent their days all together, constantly learning from one another. We observed that age did not significantly influence their interactions, and we adults tried to consciously empower peer relations. For example, when a child asks us for some help or information that another child can provide, we can encourage them to ask their peer.

**Fostering Autonomy:** We systematically support children in pursuing their autonomy, which we consider the fundamental requirement for liberation and freedom. Autonomy in early childhood is linked to basic skills: can a child get dressed and put on their shoes, can they find their water bottle and be responsible for their bag? After patiently supporting children in acquiring such skills, we abstain from assisting them. This is because when we help children do what they are themselves capable of, we are serving ourselves or the daily program rather than the children.

**Shared Responsibilities:** We share with the children responsibilities that concern the community, such as preparing our group snack, setting the table, tidying up, and cleaning. We have observed that children are not only capable of contributing, but in fact happy to take on responsibilities.

**Children's Assembly:** We stand strongly in favor of children's assemblies. We have seen that, with suitable preparation, even very young children can learn to express themselves in a circle, and participate in decisions that affect their lives *(Network for Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning,* 2024). Since our own community spoke five different languages, the closest that we got to a children's assembly was for everyone to answer "*how am I today?"* and "*what do I want to play?"* Still, in this circle, we listened to one another, looked into each other's eyes, and strengthened our sense of being a team.

**Recognition instead of Praise:** We recognize the dangers of praise, as an (often unconscious) means of latently imposing adult values and opinions upon children; motivating children is only a few steps away from manipulating them. Instead, we try not to alienate them from their intrinsic motives, and to allow them full agency for their learning. Meanwhile, we avoid publicly praising children, as it can promote competition among peers.

What can we do in order to empower children, since praising often brings the opposite result? Instead of expressing ourselves with enthusiasm (which, after all, might mean that we did not expect so much from the child in the first place), we explicitly describe what we see. We focus on the process, not the outcome, and encourage children to do the same. We support children in developing self-evaluation skills, while unconditionally recognizing the inherent value of each child and constantly expressing our love towards them.

**(Free) Play:** We believe in free play, or actually, just "play," as play by definition needs to be free in order to truly be play. Our field experience and reflection in team led us to let the children's play evolve without intervening, trusting the children to experiment, learn, and process themselves and their relationships. We do not call "play" the playful learning activities initiated by adults, so as not to fall into the trap of instrumentalizing play, i.e., turning it into an instrument to achieve certain results. As children know and adults tend to forget, play is not motivated by specific goals: it is a meaningful, valuable, self-worthy occupation, which does not need further justification.

**Conflict Resolution:** The resolution of conflict without adult intervention is more meaningful and can be less complicated. Instead of intervening in the moment, adults can—beforehand—supply children with tools that allow them to solve their conflicts on their own, such as an hourglass that facilitates taking turns, or the word "stop" that can interrupt every action.

In case the violence is escalating and we feel that we have to intervene, we do

so with respect. Only one adult approaches the children. She makes sure that she can remain calm and neutral; if she can't, it is recommended that another adult replaces her. If she needs to physically separate the children, she uses as little physical power as possible. At this point a hug can be useful, always with the children's consent, and still without taking sides. When the tension decreases, the adult and the children can talk about the incident and their motives; the adult explains that she has intervened because her own limits where crossed. She does not offer ready-made solutions, but rather discreetly supports the children in finding their own.

### *On Time and (Outdoor) Space*

**Time:** The perception, use, and management of time are directly linked to self-regulation, autonomy, and power, but unfortunately children are not often included in managing their time. A day in Mikros Dounias contains set routines, which offer a feeling of safety and connect the community more closely. That said, participation in routines and activities is optional. During organized activities, we make sure that a second adult is around and not involved, so that children can abstain or quit. Moreover, we explain to the children that we adults want to participate in the daily routines, but at the same time need to be able to see everyone, as we are responsible for their safety. This way, if a child does not want to participate, e.g., in the closing circle, they understand that they need to stay near the circle, so that they can see us and we can see them. In this case, restraining children spatially enables us to not restrain their time. As the months go by, children grow increasingly confident in managing their time.

Moreover, we warn the children in advance for any upcoming change. When a shift in the program approaches, we try to warn them twice, e.g., 15 and 5 minutes before snack. This way, they have enough time to prepare themselves and decide how to handle the change. Furthermore, before talking to a child, we take a moment to observe what they are doing; we do not interrupt their activity, which we perceive as important, unless necessary.

Last but not least, the time is now! In order to treat children fairly, a society needs to value them for who they are, not as future adults (Farson, 1974, p. 10). In Janusz Korczak's words, we need to recognize children as beings and not becomings (2004, p. 27).

**Space:** Much architecture reproduces discrimination against children; most of the constructed world is made for healthy, able adults, and inhibits children's access and free movement. The space of Mikros Dounias allows children to independently fulfill their daily needs and desires. We carefully observe children's spatial preferences and habits, ask them for their opinions, and readjust the environment together with them.

**Nature:** Heldal et al., who conducted research in Mikros Dounias, remark

that by being diverse and multifaceted, the natural environment offers challenges and possibilities for all children, irrespective of their cultural background, gender, and age (2021). Indeed, our presence in nature alleviates differences and offers tangible ways out of cultural classifications. The natural environment does not reproduce stereotypes related to…

**...culture:** Buildings, materials, and books carry cultural characteristics, whereas the stimuli and materials we encounter in nature for discovery and play are free from expressions of the dominant culture. Nature is culturally neutral.

**...gender:** In nature, there are no materials or activities intended solely for boys or girls. The branches are not pink or blue depending on whom they are addressed to. Nature is gender neutral.

**...age:** In the natural environment, children often prove to be more competent than adults—for example, in being in the here and now; noticing details; listening, smelling, and using all their senses; and approaching other living creatures. They are freer to act on their initiative than they are in a house built and decorated by adults. Moreover, the ample space enables every child to choose whether or not to interact with others; in Mikros Dounias, children often choose to walk away in order to calm down, think, or play on their own. Having to be with others throughout the school day can prove very challenging for some children.

### *On Communication and Interaction*

◆ Research shows that very young children are capable of expressing their views, when adults choose appropriate ways of communication (Murray, 2013, p. 11). It is often the manner in which adults transmit information—and not its actual complexity—that renders the communication hard (Ritz 2008, p. 8). In Mikros Dounias, we are constantly looking for apt ways to communicate with each child, verbally or otherwise. We do not forget to listen carefully, and sometimes we need to remain silent a bit longer than we expect. Every day, we experience that communication is possible beyond common linguistic codes, and that love, safety, and eye contact facilitate it.

◆ Adults often misinform children, withhold information, and manipulate them with fake justifications, which they consider easier to understand or less painful. Yet children are capable of judging on their own which information is relevant to them. In Mikros Dounias, we consistently try to accompany children in their difficult mission to understand the complex reality of adults. This helps us avoid speech which disorients, obscures, or oversimplifies, and brings us back to speaking the truth.

◆ Humor helps us form equal relationships that are free of fear and coercion. Gray (2019) sees humor and play as powers that can prevent aggression, dominance, and hierarchy; we confirm! We choose to laugh with—and not at—children.

◆ Children know best about themselves and can accurately recognize and communicate their needs since the first days of their lives. We do not anticipate or decide children's needs, but try to support them in expressing and fulfilling them. Moreover, we try not to make assumptions or interpretations about children's tastes or their present mood.

◆ We only touch a child or step into their vital space when we are sure of having their consent at that very moment, and we always try to recognize and respect the distance that children choose to keep from us (Holt, 1989, pp. 94, 99). Instead of taking a child's hand in ours, we propose our hand to them; instead of hugging a child, we open our hug.

◆ We choose to lead authentic conversations which are interesting for both sides. We avoid asking children things that we already know, e.g. "*What color is this?"*

◆ When talking with or about kids, we avoid using diminutives. Moreover, we do not use adjectives to characterize them (smart, aggressive, beautiful, etc.), in order not to trap them into adult-assigned roles.

◆ We abstain from formulations that reproduce adultism: "You're too young to understand;" "These are grownup issues;" "Your sister behaves like that because she is too young to know better;" etc.

## Conclusion

Let's talk about adultism! In the first part of the article, after giving a definition of adultism, I try to answer seven questions frequently posed by adults who first come in contact with the concept; we discuss power, dependence, protection, limits, guilt, and the intersectionality of discrimination. The article goes on to show how children internalize adultism, diminishing their actual capabilities and contributing to a vicious cycle of unequal intergenerational relationships. Moreover, we see that adultism forms a solid foundation upon which to build other forms of discrimination.

Furthermore, the article states that there is no recipe to fight against adultism. The terrain is immense and rather uncharted. It is critical both to educate ourselves on the subject, and also to learn through honest contact with children. Moreover, we need to build up trusting relationships with adults who share the same concerns, and help each other grow out of learned adultist behaviors.

Let's talk about adultism in early childhood education! In the second part of the article, I seek remedies, drawing upon our practices in a multicultural pedagogical community with children of early childhood age. I present some of the basic choices of our pedagogical team, such as mixing ages, fostering autonomy, sharing community responsibilities with children, choosing recognition instead

of praise, and allowing free play. Next, I describe how we organized our time and space in order to reduce adultism, and argue that nature can play a role to balance certain forms of discrimination. Last but not least, I detail how we communicated and interacted with children in our constantly-trying-not-to-be-adultist frame.

Let's be allies in this continuous struggle for the liberation of children—and adults—which can turn the current social reality upside down!

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# *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*
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***Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*** is an academic forum for the transdisciplinary study of the critical pedagogical implications and relationships within education. ***Taboo*** was founded on the notion of radical contextualization, encouraging students and scholars to draw from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives to question current approaches in schools, systems, and in higher education. Drawing upon a variety of contextualizing disciplines and critical theoretical ways of knowing including cultural studies, curriculum theorizing, critical race theory, political economy, feminist studies, the social foundations of education, critical pedagogy, interculturalism, queer theory, historiography, symbolic interactionism, literary theory, as examples. Beyond simply articulating critical perspectives we seek contributions willing to speak the unspoken and/or the irreconcilable. We hope to foster discussions across and through different disciplines including explorations into how dialogue and discourse operate throughout and within different educational times/spaces/places. The journal encourages a wide range of contributions from who work within these general areas, expanding methodological practices. ***Taboo*** seeks provocative and controversial submissions.

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**A Synopsis of** *Democracy Deficit Disorder: Learning Democracy with The Next Generation*
**by Adam F.C. Fletcher and J. Cynthia McDermott**

A succinct summary of the challenges facing young people and the actions they are taking to meet those challenges, this book focuses on the current erosion of democracy happening today.

In a three-part examination, this book identifies the end of the democracy deficit disorder, the battle against the disorder and learning to challenge the disorder. It positions young people as active agents of transformation throughout a society hellbent on demeaning, condemning and otherwise negating them until they are adults. In the meantime, it calls out the behaviors, attitudes and beliefs of adults of all persuasions, including teachers and parents, youth workers and counselors, as well as conservatives, liberals and others. While squarely identifying young people as targets though, it also demonstrates and advocates how children and youth are the answers to these problems.

In the first part of this book, the authors identify what democracy is, how democracy deficit disorder happens, and the symptoms of the disorder, including adultism and the youth-industrial complex, both of which rely on the pacification, oversimplification, and infantilization of young people throughout society. Calling for direct action to meet the challenges of democracy, a careful pathway towards holistic youth development is identified, and the need for democracy education is rationalized. The authors then identify how action can be taken as individuals and in the community.

In the second part, a call to action to defeat the democracy deficit disorder is made clear by identifying the issues and actions that are being taken currently by young people across the United States and around the world. The rights of young people are made central to this argument, as well as the roles of adults as equitable partners with children and youth in learning, teaching and leadership throughout democracy.

In the final part of this book, readers can find a clear pathway for learning about democracy and from action. Exploring the literal, there are activities, locations, and other possibilities for defeating democracy deficit disorder. The position of the child at home is also examined here, and the possibilities of parenting, families and living situations are made central to the democratic experiment overall. Finally, the book explores the necessity of praxis in uplifting democracy and sustaining learning about democracy into the future.

Ultimately, this book provides a summary unlike any other available today by positioning young people as the answers to the miserable condition democracy is in, and by illustrating how adults can support their active, powerful and long-lasting impact on the world we share today.