

Keepin' It Plural: Children's Studies in the Academy

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ABSTRACT Childhood and Children's Studies programs are popping up in universities all over the world these days. For the most part, the impetus for these programs is coming from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, medical sciences, and law; researchers in these disciplines often choose to focus their energies on the politics and cultural practices that affect the lives of children.¹ Despite Mary Galbraith's recent calls for children's literature scholars to take the lead in developing such programs, humanities scholars specializing in children's issues are rare, and truly integrated interdisciplinary programs even rarer.² The problem lies in part, I think, in the way disciplines situate knowledge and perceive effective praxis. My own doctoral work took place in an interdisciplinary program, and it was truly revelatory for me to see the antagonisms played out in the intellectual debates within and across the disciplines of the Human Sciences. But another serious impediment to the academic study of children is precisely related to our sentimental relationship to the subject. Affect is anathema to the scientific community, but thinking about children or childhood without strong feeling seems impossible. Nonetheless, we are finding ways beyond these impasses to develop programs whose outcomes will, we hope, produce positive social change. The questions undertaken by scholars of Children's Studies are necessarily philosophical, theoretical, and pragmatic, often at one and the same time. And their answers are always provisional and experimental, hinging on an ethical and methodological pluralism that must be maintained if we are to intervene effectively in the lives of children. So what are some of the issues at stake in the development of the field of Children's Studies? And how might those of us involved in the different disciplines attempt to define the scope and the limits of our involvement in such a project?

When the study of children moves from the social sciences to the humanities, the name of the field changes. For instance, in sociologist Gertrud Lenzer's introduction to the special issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* devoted to the subject, she refers to the field as Children's Studies, but in Galbraith's lead article, the name of the enterprise is Childhood Studies. Likewise, both Thomas Travisano and Richard Flynn use the term "childhood" rather than "children" to designate the area of inquiry, and I have elsewhere seen the term Child Studies used.³ While I may seem to be splitting hairs, I think that such naming suggests an important distinction and disciplinary bias. The social sciences, along with medicine and law, tend to view children as real people or clients, whereas in the humanities, we are more likely to conceive of children as socially constructed ideological subjects. Hence, the programs started in literature departments might well focus on childhood as a sociohistorical construction, or the child as a fixed or static ideal abstraction, rather than children as actual, living, contemporary, meaning-making people. Both views are problematic by themselves. In the case of viewing children as actual people, we may ignore or discount the postmodern insights theorizing that identity is the outcome of multiple identifications, that it is performative, and that it is largely the outworking of literary and psychological representations that operate as functional realities that actually help produce the kinds of people they purport to describe. But by focusing exclusively on the theoretical construction of childhood rather than real children, we risk dealing in generalities that may or may not be valid, timely, or efficacious in real-world circumstances. And by positing something called "the child" as an entity, we set aside specific cultural, ethnic, embodied conditions that have real effects on the ways that children perceive and interact with their worlds. We ignore the material effects of historical and ideological change.

While excluding either way of conceiving the focus of study is limited, I think Children's Studies is the more inclusive term. After all, Women's Studies is never called "Womanhood Studies" or "Woman Studies," for precisely the same reason: womanhood is not an ideal, nor is woman a singular entity. Rather, the needs, desires, and life circumstances of women...

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