

Disclosing Childhoods: Research and Knowledge Production for a Critical Childhood Studies

Spyros Spyrou (2018)

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Disclosing Childhoods by professor Spyros Spyrou from the European University of Cyprus is published as part of the Studies in Childhood and Youth series, which embraces global and multi-disciplinary scholarship on childhood and youth as social, historical, cultural and material phenomena. This important book offers a critical reflection on knowledge production in childhood studies and is extremely relevant to students and scholars across a range of disciplines, including childhood studies, anthropology, geography, sociology, psychology, politics, social work, and international development studies.

The book is pertinently named *Disclosing Childhoods*, as Spyrou describes the power of researchers to disclose particular childhoods through knowledge practices that reflect both the material and discursive conditions of their being. Spyrou calls for a more “critical childhood studies” encouraging researchers to be mindful and reflexive about the processes through which they produce knowledge, and to be ethically and politically committed to disclosing knowledge that matters, that is, knowledge with preferred material consequences on children’s lives.

Disclosing childhoods builds upon an analysis of the strengths and limitations of childhood studies, an interdisciplinary field of study, which has emerged and expanded in the past 30 years. Spyrou draws upon seminal work such as James and Prout (1990), Qvortrup (1994), Alanen (2001; 2009), and Mayall (2002), as well as work from a wide range of other scholars. Spyrou draws upon poststructuralist and posthumanist critiques, as well as feminist approaches, to inform his focus on relational ontologies and their potential for rethinking knowledge production in childhood studies.

Applying a relational ontological framework to knowledge production has crucial implications for epistemological, methodological, ethical, and political considerations. It necessitates increased transparency from researchers regarding their ontological positions, and how such positions influence their epistemological approach. It also encourages increased attention to broader socio-economic, political, historical, and institutional forces that shape both knowledge production and its application.

Spyrou suggests the “limited theoretical innovation in childhood studies may be partly attributed to the preoccupation and reproduction of foundational concepts and ideas such as those of social construction, agency, voice, and participation” (p. 27). Spyrou develops his critique in separate chapters dedicated to voice, agency, and children’s participation in research. He draws upon empirical research and theoretical insights, both from his own research, and from other scholars. In doing

so, Spyrou offers theoretical, methodological and ethical directions to support more critical approaches to knowledge production, including application of critical reflexivity.

Applying a critical reflexive approach, Spyrou questions unexamined assumptions about the authenticity of children's voices and issues of representation. The relevance of attending to silences and non-verbal forms of communication are also explored. Spyrou emphasizes the importance of analyzing "the interactional contexts in which children's voices emerge, the institutional contexts in which they are embedded, and the discursive contexts which inform them" (p. 86).

Spyrou also critiques the way that childhood researchers tend to emphasize children's agency, without adequate attention to structural factors, contexts, and power relations that shape children's lives and opportunities to exercise their agency. In many socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts, generational inequalities limit children's agency. Drawing upon the work of other critical scholars (such as Beauvais, forthcoming; Bordonaro & Payne, 2012; Cook, 2011; Leonard, 2016; Mayall, 2002; Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi, 2013; Oswell, 2013; 2016; Whyness, 2006; Valentine, 2011), Spyrou encourages more grounded and critical understandings of children's agency, exploring how agency is socially and relationally produced, rather than focusing on agency as a property of the self.

Recognizing that contextual and relational factors shape children's agency has implications for the way research knowledge is produced through children's participation in research. Increased transparency is needed about the respective roles of adult and child researchers; about who has power to make decisions about research topics, methods, analysis; and what gets included in reports. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of children's experiences means that questions concerning representation should be raised to determine which views are being heard, and which are being left out, even if the research is designed and carried out by children. As part of ongoing reflexive practice, Spyrou encourages researchers to embrace and acknowledge mess, and to be transparent about how power relations manifest themselves during the research process.

In this book, despite drawing upon feminist approaches, there is insufficient attention to gender and related power dynamics when adopting a relational ontological framework to childhood studies. Furthermore, for students, it would have been helpful for Spyrou to explain more about what he means by knowledge production at the outset of the book. Yet, overall, the depth of analysis and the range of literature drawn upon is laudable.

The literature from which Spyrou draws, including research with working children and child soldiers, clearly illustrates how researchers' knowledge practices disclose different childhoods, which have political and ethical implications, as well as material consequences on children's lives. Spyrou's ability to step back from dominant constructivist theories in childhood studies and to reflect on the benefits of meta-analysis are strategically important for advancing childhood studies. Moreover, the book's greatest strength is its critical and forward-looking focus that

will enable researchers to be more ethical in their production and use of knowledge. Thus, this book should be encouraged as essential reading for students and scholars who are engaged in childhood studies research, as well as social change processes.

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Review by Claire O’Kane

Claire O’Kane is a child rights practitioner and researcher. She has a postgraduate diploma in social research and evaluation from the University of Huddersfield, a Masters in Applied Social Studies, and a Diploma of Social Work from the University of Wales Swansea, UK. She has more than 24 years of international experience in child rights, participation, active citizenship, care and protection research and practice in development and humanitarian contexts. Claire currently works as a freelance child rights consultant and is an associate at the Centre for Children and Young People’s Participation at the University of Central Lancashire, UK.

Author’s Response

I would like to thank Claire O’Kane for her thorough review of my book and for highlighting both its potential contributions to current debates in childhood studies as well as its limits and shortcomings. The book is in many ways a loud reflection on knowledge production in childhood studies. It critiques the reproductive tendencies of the field and seeks to encourage a more critical, reflexive, and politically and ethically responsible production of knowledge. To be critical about the knowledge one produces is, I argue in the book, to reflect on the very practices through which we produce knowledge and to make the choices that disclose those childhoods we deem significant and consequential for our times.

O’ Kane is right in pointing out that the book pays insufficient attention to gender and the accompanying power dynamics at work; I appreciate and take this point seriously. Indeed, the gender question, despite the progress achieved in recent decades, remains a crucial challenge to our understanding of the everyday lives of children. As scholars, we need to keep reminding ourselves that tackling questions of gender and gender inequalities is central for knowledge production. Childhood studies must fully integrate a gender perspective in its knowledge practices if it aspires to be truly critical.

O’ Kane is also right in pointing out that a more clear exposition of what knowledge production is could have come earlier on in the book. One of the key points I make in the book is that knowledge production is both a practice and a process and not just an outcome (e.g., a research report or a publication). What happens along the

way matters! The outcomes of our knowledge practices are of course important but knowledge production as process requires that we attend to what happens (and how it happens) both before and after these outcomes. How is knowledge crafted along the way through our choices (theoretical, methodological, political and ethical)? What happens once this knowledge moves outwards? What effects might it have? All these, and not just, need to be part of our ongoing efforts to be mindful and critical of this process: knowledge production is both complex and messy and it is important to reflect on it if we are to retain a critical perspective as a field.

Since the publication of *Disclosing Childhoods*, a book I co-edited with Rachel Rosen and Dan Cook titled *Reimagining Childhood Studies* (2019, Bloomsbury Academic) was published. The book is in many ways a response to the challenge I pose in *Disclosing Childhoods* for rethinking and experimenting with the field's foundational concepts, not simply as a means of deconstructing knowledge about children and childhood but also a means of reconstructing knowledge that is critical and relevant in children's lives. The humble attempt of *Disclosing Childhoods* is to instigate a broader discussion in the field which is meant to re-energize it. Responding to such an enormous and significant task is essential in order to contribute productively towards our understanding of childhood in ways that will ultimately benefit children themselves.