

## UNMASKING CHILDREN'S AGENCY

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*Abstract* – The goal of this paper is to identify (unmask) and critique the movement to promote children's agency as a cornerstone of research, care, education and intervention with children. The article makes a case that this movement is harmful to a scientific approach to the study of childhood, distorts or ignores key understandings of the evolution of childhood and culture. The article demonstrates that the agency movement is ethnocentric, classist and hegemonic representing the dominance of contemporary bourgeoisie child-rearing. It imposes a single, privileged ethnotheory of childhood upon the diverse societies of the world with alternative ethnotheories and practices. Lastly, the article argues that the movement is not efficacious either in advancing theory or practice.

*Keywords* – Agency, movement, critique, unscientific, cultural imperialism

*Résumé* – Le but de ce texte est d'identifier (démasquer) et de critiquer le courant qui fait de l'agencéité de l'enfant la pierre angulaire de la recherche, des soins, de l'éducation et de l'intervention avec les enfants. L'article entend démontrer que ce courant est préjudiciable à l'approche scientifique de l'étude de l'enfant, qu'il déforme ou ignore des enseignements clés dans l'évolution de l'enfance et de la culture. Le texte démontre que l'agencéité en tant que courant est ethnocentrique, classiste et hégémonique, et qu'il incarne la domination du modèle bourgeois contemporain de l'éducation de l'enfant. Il impose le modèle d'une seule ethnothéorie de l'enfance, privilégiée en l'occurrence, au détriment de ceux de diverses sociétés dans le monde, lesquelles offrent des ethnothéories et des pratiques alternatives. Pour finir, l'article se prononce sur l'inefficacité du courant, que ce soit sur le plan théorique ou sur celui de la pratique.

*Mots-clés* – Agencéité, courant, critique, non-scientificité, impérialisme culturel

### INTRODUCTION

In contrast to Hirschfeld's (2002) claim that "Anthropologists Don't Love Children", in my work (Lancy 1996, 2008, Lancy *et al.* 2010), I have found and worked with a huge corpus of material on children from the ethnographic record. This material dates from research on the Inuit carried out by Franz Boas 110 years ago (Boas 1901) to the present. Furthermore, I have found that no matter how obscure or dated (e.g. research on children inspired by Freudian theory dating from the 1930s) all of this trove of scholarship can be profitably mined in improving our understanding of childhood. The single exception – an area of research I have not

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found particularly useful – is work which wears, prominently, the “Children’s Agency” label. I will argue, in this essay, that the agency movement not only impedes scholarship but may also be problematic in terms of effective advocacy on behalf of children. In the last decade, more and more published work on children in the social sciences, including anthropology, archaeology and history begins with a declaration, in so many words: “This study is an affirmation of the child’s ‘agency’”. For example, in Margaret Trawick’s *Enemy Lines: Warfare, Childhood, and Play in Batticaloa*, She asserts: “I had no special theory in mind, except that children exercise agency – they knowingly act on their worlds to change those worlds” (Trawick 2007: 5).” Trawick does not actually test this proposition, and, in fact, I found her report singularly lacking in evidence for children’s agency. Even more striking is Eva Poluha’s (2004) study of Ethiopian students. Following Hirschfield (2002: 612), Poluha asserts that her subjects can be expected to exercise agency not only in determining the course of their own lives but to influence the behavior of adults and, ultimately, shape the culture. Poluha then proceeds, in this monograph-length report, to offer a consistent flow of evidence (mostly from lengthy, open-ended interviews with students) that is directly counter to the agency proposition (see below). Her subjects are almost fawning in their dedication to the values of their parents and they look to their teachers as moral and cultural authorities who will guide them in conforming to existing norms. In spite of this evidence, at no point does Poluha acknowledge that, in her study, the agency position is insupportable. On the other hand, she also fails to link her research to the canon of scholarship on her topics. She does have data on issues of long-standing importance in the study of schooling in non-industrialized countries, such as native language instruction but fails to review that literature or indicate how her work adds to or modifies current thinking. It is as if, by proudly displaying the “agency” label, Poluha (and many others) indemnifies herself against the need to conduct rigorous scholarship that follows accepted epistemology. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to enumerate, systematically, the manifold problems that the child agency crusade carries in its wake.

### **CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 1: CHILD ADVOCACY MASKED AS CHILD SCHOLARSHIP**

Conventionally, in the world we live in, the intelligentsia is divided among academics who carry out inquiry and political leaders, civil servants and aid providers who solve social problems. The second set of actors legitimately play the role of advocates and change agents and they depend on neutral and objective findings and theories from the first group to guide their work and increase their efficacy. As LeVine however notes, blurring this distinction can be harmful to science and intervention efforts. He laments “child development’s dual identity as an ideological advocacy movement for the humane treatment of children and a scientific research endeavor seeking knowledge and understanding” (LeVine 2004: 151). On the one hand, scientific progress is impeded by political agendas and, on

the other; policy makers lose confidence in the credibility of scientists. The promotion (and it is nothing less) by academics of children's agency clearly contributes to this deterioration as the following quotations (emphasis added) suggest:

- “Childhood as a social position... children's agency... is inherently linked to the ‘powers’ (or lack of them), of those positioned as children, to influence, organize, coordinate and control events taking place in their everyday worlds” (Alanen 2001: 21).
- “Adults’ ideas about childhood limit children's agency and actions, thereby denying them status as ‘citizens’” (James 2011: 167).
- “Childhood is a historical creation that imposes limits on children's social roles and activities. [Some] argue that we should liberate children from childhood” (Lavalette 2005: 147).
- “Exploring the ways in which children's choices work to create novel and unique worlds... that aren't necessarily related to adult ones, is one significant way we can allow children to have a voice within the adult research paradigm” (Perkins 2007: 41).
- “[The field of] Children and Childhood Studies brings to the academic community an underlying advocacy of children and the issues affecting their lives and well-being” (Bowman & Spencer 2007: 12).
- “In recognizing the agency of youth... anthropologists are engaged in an act of liberation, or restoring to those who seem powerless their individual rights to act effectively upon the world” (Durham 2008: 151).
- “Historically, Western children have been silenced through oppressive conventions... or by their voice being distorted in the mediated accounts created by historians, anthropologists...” (Kellett 2009: 241).

I would argue that there is no fundamental difference between child “liberators” trying to manipulate science to advance their cause than the pope doing the same thing on behalf of his agenda. For example, Pope Benedict XVI has called for “world leaders to show more respect for human life at its earliest stages [as] embryos are dynamic, autonomous individuals” (Anonymous 2010, see also Alderson et al 2005). Unfortunately, the agency *dogma* has become institutionalized in the processes attendant on the funding and approval of research with children. The various methods and perspectives normally within an anthropologist's arsenal are largely reduced to an applied, advocacy undertaking in which the children themselves must be accorded the authority to determine the course of the study. This pernicious effect goes largely unrecorded and unpublished. In what I think is not an isolated incident, colleague Diane Hoffman – desiring to study the role of work in a typical Haitian boy's acquisition of adult identity and standing – was turned down by grant reviewers and directed to re-focus her efforts on eradicating this self-evident exploitation of children (personal communication 20.9.11).

## CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 2: IT IS VERY HARD TO GET CHILDREN TO EXPRESS VIEWS AND OPINIONS

The call to accord agency to children is usually accompanied by the injunction to listen to their “voices” (Kellet 2009) in order to document the uniquely juvenile culture as well as the many changes children effect on the culture at large. Indeed, the thoughts and opinions of children are seen as the most critical data sources. This injunction ignores how difficult it is – outside western bourgeois society – to interview children.

- “Adolescent [Aboriginal] girls were quite happy to spend time with me, often for hours on end, as long as I did not ask them questions and as long as they did not have to talk to me” (Young 2010: 87).
- “There are many difficulties involved in working with children... It took me more than a week... before many [Asabano] children felt comfortable enough to talk with me or have me sit around with them. Some... never overcame their fear of me and there was one child that broke out into hysterics every time I walked near her... A great many times my line of questioning was derailed by a simple silence as children either did not understand or care to respond” (Little 2008: 29, 33).
- “Befragte Mädchen oder Junger reagierten auf meine Frage entweder einsilbig oder reproduzierten Phrasen von Erwachsenen.” (When questioned, Bamana girls and boys reacted either with mono-syllables or would parrot back something they’d heard an adult say) (Polak 2011: 112).

As an alternative to this frontal attack: “The ethnographer – who might have asked the mother for her views on the child’s experience – may have to wait for moments when young children reveal their culturally shaped behavioral tendencies and expectancies in naturally occurring situations: (LeVine 2011a: 459). However, even when one can elicit meaningful responses, the subjects may explicitly reject “agency.”

- “Both mothers and children stressed the importance of several qualities in children: obedience, hard work, and contribution to the household... Somali children stressed the authority of parents. The responses of mothers and children were very similar. Children, it appeared, had perceived and accepted their parents’ views nearly perfectly” (Dybdahl & Hundeide 1998: 140).
- Ethiopian secondary students claimed, in her interviews “that they should do what their parents told them to, come home on time, run errands, help in the house, get water, and fulfill whatever duties had been assigned to them. Obedience was never talked of in negative terms... According... to the children [they] were thought to be easily led astray and always take the easiest way out, like playing ball rather than doing homework. Therefore it was the parents’ duty to see that they did what was expected of them... [her] informant did not look adults in the eyes, but bowed their heads in front of them... Children used the concept respect, makber,

when they talked about adults with whom they had a close relationship. The respect implied that they would try in every way to fulfill the wishes of these adults” (Poluha 2004: 68, 73, 75).

We learn from Montgomery’s classic ethnography of a squatter village in Thailand – where the primary source of family income is the earnings of child prostitutes – that:

*“It would, perhaps, be easiest to claim that [child prostitutes] have been so abused and brutalized by their parents that they continue to prostitute themselves because they know of no other way of life. The children, however, give very different reasons for doing what they do. They claim that they become and remain prostitutes out of duty and love to their parents, that they have a moral debt to their parents for bearing and raising them; a duty known in Thai as bun khum. This is the debt of gratitude that children owe to their parents, and especially their mothers, for their existence” (Montgomery 2001: 82).*

A robust anthropology of childhood has been based on the traditional, multi-method approach employed by opportunistic fieldworkers (e.g. Montgomery 2001). It has included participant observation, key-informant interviews (with adults and children), the study of the cultural context of children’s lives, comparative analyses of childhood in other societies (ethnology), photography, oral recording and film, among others. In contrast, we see a growing number of studies that only or primarily rely on child interviews (including projective drawings) as the data source.

### **CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 3: IT DENIES THE REALITY OF CULTURE AND THE UTILITY OF ANTHROPOLOGY**

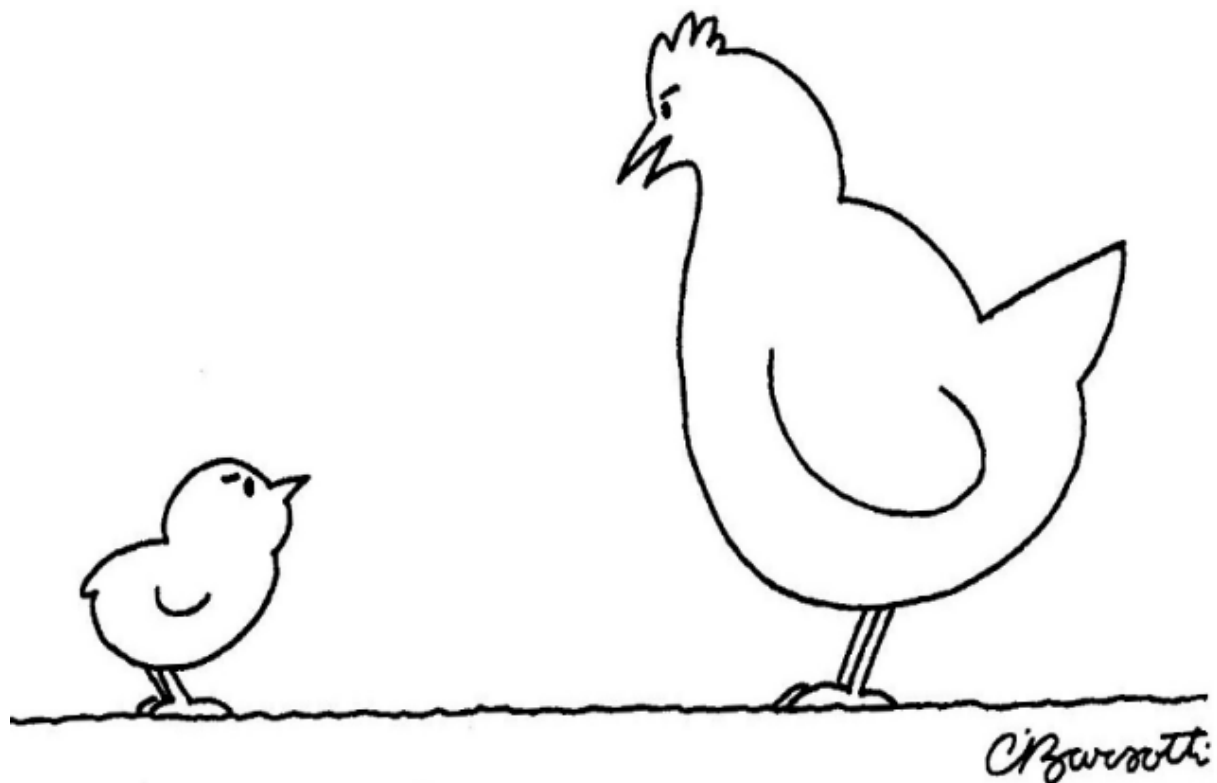
Insisting that children exercise agency in creating “cultures that in significant measure are independent of and distinct from those of the adults” (Hirschfield 2002: 612) denies the reality of culture. Culture is dismissed as a “constraint” that limits children’s authority. This stance flies in the face of our understanding of the critical role of culture in human development. “A substantial amount of empirical work from throughout the social sciences suggests that humans rely on social learning or cultural transmission to acquire the majority of their behaviors” (Henrich 2001: 997). This tendency towards social learning means that successful – and some unsuccessful – adaptations are preserved from one generation to the next. It also implies cumulation. Inventions are copied by others and the cultural repertoire expands. All of this argues very much against the notion that children are, by nature, rebellious *vis-à-vis* cultural traditions and eager to establish their own. This would not make sense in evolutionary terms (Boyd & Richerson 1996). Additionally, we can assume that parents have a genetic interest in protecting their children and insuring that they not only survive to adulthood but have the means to establish and support a family, leading to the production of grandchildren (Blurton-Jones 1993). Clearly, parents’ genetic interests are not served by children who seek to participate in or create “cultures that in significant measure are independent of and distinct from those of the adults” (Hirschfield 2002: 612).

If culture contributes to the success of the human species and I can't imagine anyone denying it, then it must do so by providing a ready-made template. This template eliminates the need for re-discovering the tools for survival in each generation. Culture is cumulative and it is transmitted down the generations. For culture to work this way, humans must be adapted for acquiring it, using it and generally cooperating in its maintenance. Insisting that children reject the culture of their elders and invent their own, or would if "liberated," effectively denies the validity of culture as a critical component of humanity. At the same time, no theorist of culture would suggest that children are behavioral clones of their parents or that they lack their own ideas and perspectives on culture.

The "agency" stance also marginalizes anthropology because it focuses attention on the traditional targets of psychology (the individual's mental state) and sociology (social position).

#### **CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 4: IT IS ETHNOCENTRIC**

In keeping with the political nature of the child agency movement, proponents spend little time in analyzing the concept itself, measuring its distribution, correlating with other aspects of children's lives, etc. As I explored the topic, I realized immediately that agency when applied to children can have at least two distinct aspects: their freedom and their efficacy. Freedom means just that, the child, from an early age, enjoys a great deal of physical autonomy, or not. Efficacy, on the other hand, means that someone older pays attention and responds to the child's needs and wishes, he has an effect on others, his social position and power is elevated, again, from an early age. In the dominant society children are granted an enormous amount of the second kind of agency but little of the first. For the village children typically studied by anthropologists, the situation is reversed (Lancy 2009).



*"You're free-range when I say you're free-range."*

*Figure 1: "You're free-range when I say you're free-range"*

When anthropologists describe childhood, they consistently describe a situation where children are granted very little efficacy, they must earn it through diligent efforts to master their culture and become "useful" (Lancy & Grove 2011a). In the ethnographic record there is much discussion of children's responsibilities and almost nothing about their rights (Twum-Danso 2009). These descriptions by anthropologists are not simply throw-away lines, they reflect incisive study of core cultural beliefs or folk theories about childhood.

- "Asking a child his opinion in Luo society is a rare event and requesting him to be a playmate with an adult is even less common" (Blount 1972: 127).
- "Ganda children over two years of age... sit politely, with their feet tucked under them out of sight, listening to the talk of their elders and speaking only when spoken to. If any young child becomes rambunctious and draws attention to himself, he is told to sit properly [and] be silent" (Ainsworth 1967: 12).
- "From weaning onwards, Kako children get used to a hierarchical relationship with their mother that disallows public expressions of mother's emotional and physical commitment... no play, no talk, no cuddle; the relationship is one of authority and obedience. In this way children learn to be emotionally independent of the mother and to fit in a wider network of kin who care for them" (Notermans 2004: 15).

- “[Mende children] who display a precocious fund of knowledge are either ignored or regarded with acute suspicion” (Bledsoe 1992: 192).
- “Lepcha childhood is a time of obscurity, of being unimportant; children are not taken notice of and their tastes are little consulted” (Gorer 1967: 314).
- “In a Mayan community... children are taught to avoid challenging an adult with a display of greater knowledge by telling them something” (Rogoff 1990: 60).
- “[Fijian] children of any age should be obedient, quiet and undemanding in the presence of adults” (Toren 1988: 240).
- “Hadza Children up until they are about 3 years old often cry for long periods when they do not get what they want... Rarely do adults intervene” (Marlowe 2010: 198).
- “[Among Mongolian nomads] very few openings for children to be boisterous or to intrude on adult occupations or conversations” (Penn 2001: 91).

By contrast, the agency folk model as a central feature of child-rearing is found almost exclusively in mid to upper-class societies in the West:

*“As a general rule, most parents in Sweden try hard to understand the needs and prerequisites of their children. They are sensitive and empathetic and try to enter and understand the child’s world. One general conclusion about childrearing which emerged... was that parents tried to ensure their children’s participation in decision making and negotiation of future activities” (Dahlberg 1992: 132-3).*

In insisting on granting all children the agency to express opinions and enable them (materially) to fulfill their own needs and desires, agency advocates are ignoring the role traditionally assigned to children and behaving in a profoundly ethnocentric fashion (Holloway & Valentine 2000: 10).

## **CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 5: IT IS CLASSIST**

The child agency dogma has its roots in the parenting folk model of the modern, well-to-do intelligencia. In Adrie Kusserow’s study of childhood in three contrasting sub-cultures in New York City, she documents three differing folk models. In the wealthy, urban elite, even very young children are given agency by their parents as the quotation shows .

*“In the upper class “Parkside” [community] it was quite evident that by age three children were already considered... small but complete “little people” with their own tastes, desires, needs, and wants... ‘Children have a very fundamental right... to be shown the same respect for their intelligence... as any other person. I try to speak to them like normal human beings, the same way I would speak to my husband’... Parents implied that it was somehow demeaning to treat the child in a childlike way... ‘We give our children the right to choose what activity they want to do... It lets them have some ownership of the situation and that’s good’” (Kusserow 2004: 105).*



Among the intelligencia, agency can be carried to ridiculous extremes such as parents who raise genderless children so that they will be unhampered in making this important life decision themselves (Blackwell 2011). Swedish parents following this course justified their behaviour: “We want Pop to grow up more freely and avoid being forced into a specific gender mold from the outset; it’s cruel to bring a child into the world with a blue or pink stamp on their forehead” (Anonymous 2009).

In contrast, Kusserow’s Working Class parents from Queens Borough “did not feel it was harming or inhibited the child’s development if they asserted their power as an adult over the child. Hierarchy was part of life, the way things were, and something the child would have to accept” (Kusserow 2004: 51). Granting children the kind of choice and freedom to indulge themselves that is characteristic of the elite comes at a price. The economist Amartya Sen, in his well-known volume *Development as Freedom*, notes “an individual’s agency... is constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available” (Sen 1999: xi-xii). The classist nature of the agency campaign is even more evident when it is exported to the less privileged “Global South.” Among village children or those dwelling in urban slums, agency means something entirely different. Their freedom to make choices about their lives is a rather hollow “right.” Boys from the village of Piéla in the province of Gnagna in Eastern Burkina Faso can exercise their agency and run away from home with a labor recruiter. Exercising this agency leads them to a year-long ordeal of hard labor in cotton fields, short rations and a bicycle (if they’re lucky). At the end of that year, they gratefully relinquish their limited agency, and return to their communities. In interviewing these returnees, de Lange found:

*“Many... had improved the relationship with their parents... they were now more obedient and respectful toward them. The experience had provided them with a rite of passage into becoming a more grown-up and responsible member of the household. Pierre (16 [years old]): ‘Since my return... I can work really hard. There are also fewer quarrels, I now respect my parents and I listen to them’” (de Lange 2007: 154).*

## **CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 6: IT IS HEGEMONIC**

In an earlier survey (Lancy 2007), I discussed the parent-child play movement. The idea that “good” parents should make themselves available as their child’s play partner and provide liberal sums to fulfill the child’s need for play resources is now widespread among the intelligentsia and there are “experts” prepared to assert that the failure to fulfill this parenting mandate reflects a deficiency in the parent and cause for concern about the child’s healthy development (Kaplan *et al.* 2008: 251). There are numerous international programs, which promote this philosophy, and it is being vigorously exported outside the dominant society. In the rest of the world, of course, parents are rarely reported as playing with children. Typically, “parents regard an interest in children’s play as beneath their dignity” (Grindal 1972: 25). I

argued (Lancy 2007: 279-280) that this movement (stemming from the same culture of parenting as the agency movement) was hegemonic as it imposed the values of the powerful on the less powerful with no solid evidence that this “treatment” was actually beneficial to children (as opposed to just letting them play). On the contrary, we have argued, in a recent paper, that NEWparent-oversight and involvement may be downright harmful to children’s development (Lancy & Grove 2011b). Uttal (2010) describes a case – one of many – of parents, families and communities actively resisting the hegemony inherent in the child agency movement (for a parallel case from Ghana, see Twum-Danso 2009). It is a study of Latina immigrants participating in a state (Wisconsin) mandated program to train them in US child-care practices so that they might legally offer child-care services to fellow Latinas. The ethnographer interviewed them as to how they viewed the program they were constrained to adopt.

*“The Latina providers are especially... critical of the concept of ‘self-esteem.’ They wonder why it so important to parents and parenting experts in the US, especially if it produces a self-centred, individualistic child. While they acknowledge the benefits of nurturing cognitive development and school readiness, they point out that what was missing from their credentialing courses was how to raise a child to be a bien de persona (‘good person’) with la educación adecuada (‘the proper education’) in how to relate to other people. They are critical of certain US middle-class parenting practices, such as recognizing children’s autonomy, cultivating friendships between parents and children, and encouraging emotional expression because they perceive this as promoting an individualistic and egocentric childrearing approach instead of the relational philosophy that they bring from their own cultural backgrounds. They see negative consequences for their family relationships and being in the world. They are critical of US child developmental ideas and their recommended practices that do not first and foremost conceive of children as part of families and communities” (Uttal 2010: 734).*



***“I don’t want to be empowered—I want to be sassy.”***

Figure 2: *“I don’t want to be empowered, I want to be sassy”*

One might feel more accepting of the child agency movement if, like campaigns to eradicate child prostitution, its benefits to children were self-evident. But that’s far from the case. As the above extended example illustrates, Latina parents are quite confident in their child-rearing philosophy of withholding agency (as efficacy) from the child for its own benefit. It turns out that this skepticism may be well-founded (see also LeVine & Norman 2001: 97).

#### **CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 7: IT IS COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE**

Researchers are just beginning to study the impact of the child agency movement – which itself is of quite recent origin (Zelizer 1985). One significant line of research has been the study (mostly *via* ethnography) of children’s assumption of responsibility and pro-social behaviour. More specifically, there has been a flood of studies recently of children’s chores or contributions to the household among highly-educated, middle-upper-class families. The findings are quite consistent:

- In West Berlin “parents alone are responsible for... the reproduction of daily life... the child is the recipient of care and services: (Zeihner 2001: 43; see also Wihstutz 2007: 80).

- In case studies from the US, “a mother empower(s) her child with agency, and creat(es) more of an egalitarian relationship between them than a hierarchical one.” However, she spends a lot of time cajoling/guiding the child into making her bed. It becomes a big dramatic production after she initially refuses, claiming incompetence. In a comparative case from Rome, the father doesn’t even bother trying to get his 8-year-old daughter to make her bed, he does it himself, while complaining that her large collection of stuffed animals and decision to move to the top bunk make his task much harder” (Fasulo *et al.* 2007: 24, 16-18).
- In a related study in Los Angeles of 30 families “no child routinely assumed responsibility for household tasks without being asked... the overall picture was one of effortful appeals by parents for help [who often] backtracked and did the task themselves... [becoming, in effect] a valet for the child” (Ochs & Izquierdo 2009: 399-400).
- Genevan children “use the vociferous defeat strategy. They comply with what is asked of them but... cry, scream, bang doors, lock themselves up in their rooms to sulk and so on... Some... agree to submit if their parents can prove their demands are well-founded... [some] agree to render a service to their parents in exchange for permission to go out... One boy mentioned employing a kind of ‘terrorism’” (Montandon 2001: 62; see also Grieshaber 1997).
- Cekaite documents the enormous lengths bourgeois Swedish parents must go to persuade/cajole/command their children’s compliance with their requests. The author refers to a complex suite of behaviors – physical handling, persuasive speech, conversation, affective displays and so on as “shepherding.” A lengthy description of “shepherding” a 4-year-old to bed at night shows this as a major undertaking taking up a great deal of the mother’s time and energy” (Cekaite 2010: 17-19).

Another disturbing trend that may well be laid at the child agency door is the rapid rise in child obesity, “learning difficulties” and medicated depression occurring in children growing up in affluence. I argued in a polemical essay that these newly proliferating child maladies may originate in a parenting philosophy that places the child’s “happiness” above all other considerations (Lancy 2010*b*). A third trend that can be attributed to the child empowerment philosophy is that it undermines the student-teacher relationship. In a study of a secondary school in a mid-upper class (US) neighborhood, “students... routinely question(ed) their teachers’ authority, critiquing how instruction was delivered, judging the utility of what they were learning, and attempting to personalize relationships with their teachers” (Demerath *et al.* 2008: 277). Teachers respond defensively, “dummying down” the curriculum while students become “confident incompetents”.



*"I feel like you're limiting me to correct answers."*

Figure 3: "I feel like you're limiting me to correct answers"

If these are the results of granting agency to children, it is hardly a policy that, as social scientists, we should be promoting. Of course, given the problems, I've enumerated earlier, it is not surprising to find little evidence that the agency movement has been a boon for children from impoverished areas. If we begin, for example, with street kids – frequent target of foreign NGO intervention efforts – an immediate paradox is apparent. Granting them "agency" means they are legally responsible for the crimes they commit, in which case, they are confined to prison, e.g. with zero agency. In Márquez' study of street kids in Caracas she found:

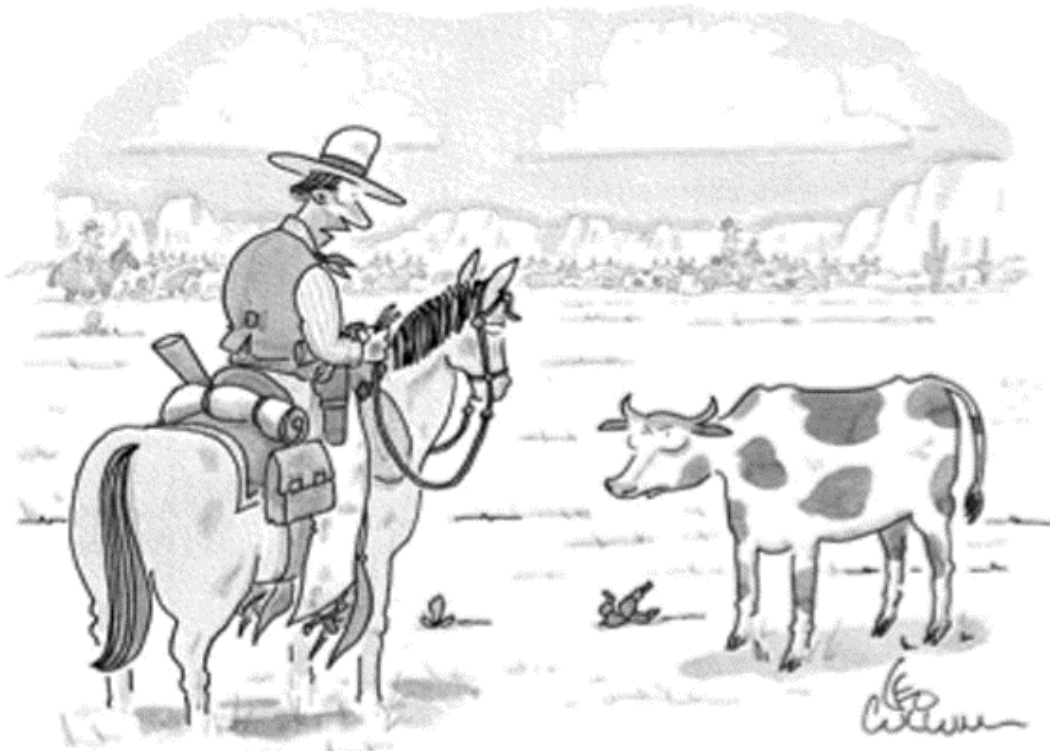
*"that the youngsters are fully aware of the sanctioned opinion that defines them as minors not entirely capable of being responsible for their actions... They know that being younger than eighteen gives them, if nothing else, a certain impunity; they know that regardless of the nature of their crime, most often they will not be treated as adult prisoners"* (Márquez 1999: 111).

She goes on to discuss the debate whether to grant agency (treat as mature individuals) to street kids and then prosecute their criminal activity rather than continuing to overlook it (Márquez 1999: 117). If the essential ingredient in a campaign to extend agency to at-risk youth is enhanced choice and respect for their decisions and views, how do we respond when they chose to use drugs, steal, prostitute themselves or join a gang (Reynolds et al 2006: 192)? Or when they reject the "healthy" choices we offer such as residence in a public orphanage in favor of the friendships, freedom and money they find in the street (Fujimura 2003, 2005)?

Educational and vocational programs are also seen as unattractive. One of Márquez' informants quit the bakery job an NGO had arranged because he could earn in a day on the street what the bakery paid per week. "He also worked with an NGO for a brief time but found the routine of picking up paper for recycling very boring and skipped work whenever he felt like it" (Márquez 1999: 56). Returning to the distinction between agency as freedom and agency as efficacy we can see that less privileged children certainly enjoy a great deal of the former – far more than our own offspring. In terms of efficacy, it's not clear how a political campaign designed to grant them greater agency (or efficacy) absent improved schools, medical care, nutrition, job prospects, etc will do much good. Indeed, in my survey of the literature on street children, I was impressed at how successful children were at adapting to the urban environment. They didn't need any helpful NGO or moral authority to grant them agency, they already had it in enjoying tremendous freedom of movement and association and in gaining the efficacy that comes with acquiring funds and other resources to support their elective life-styles (Lancy 2010c). I'm not blind to the fact that those choices undoubtedly offer them a severely truncated lifespan but, again, trying to lengthen their lives would surely involve withdrawing agency not granting it.

#### **CHILD AGENCY PROBLEM 8: ADHERENTS SEEM UNCLEAR ON THE CONCEPT**

I will conclude by briefly presenting two examples that suggest how little analysis goes into the child agency movement. At the American Anthropological Association meetings in 2008, I attended a talk entitled: "Learning to Be Social: A Study of Socializing Practices in Danish Daycare Institutions." The presenter noted that the goal of pre-school pedagogy is to foster cooperation and social relations, how to get along in a group, rather than preparation for academic instruction. She referred to this policy, without irony, as "civilizing" the child. When I asked, after the talk, how this philosophy squares with the philosophy of granting "agency" to children – a position the presenter aligned herself with at the outset – her reply was: "Yes, they are given agency but they must learn to use it in the proper way" (Gulløv 2008, personal communication) .



***"No one is making you do anything you don't want. I'm just saying we're all headed for Dodge City and we think you should come along."***

*Figure 4: "No one is making you do anything you don't want. I'm just saying we're all headed for Dodge City and we think you should come along"*

Another example is a report on middle-class children and their mothers "getting ready" for Halloween. The chapter is liberally doused with agency holy water, viz: "Newer models, influenced by the field of children's studies, assume that children actively shape their own socializing process, a process which cannot be understood apart from children's own accounts and agency" (Clark 2007: 301). But the scenario that unfolds is under the near total control of the parent. The only real freedom the children can exercise is in which among a limited array of ready-made and conventional masks/costumes they ask Mom to buy: "Even if they needed to visit several stores to find a particular costume, mothers generally sought to fulfill children's expressed role choice" (Clark 2007: 292). No mention is made of the child assembling her own costume from scraps or raiding Mom's make-up kit. The audience for the child's Halloween role is composed of adults. All of them, of course, respond predictably: "The adult role as an appreciative audience was amply noted by young informants, who 'showed off' their fictive selves and were generally praised for the display" (Clark 2007: 295). There is no mention made of children exercising their agency to "trick" the neighbors when they go on their "Trick or Treating" rounds. Indeed, in my neighborhood, going door to door in the (thoroughly white, middle-class Mormon) neighborhood is now considered too dangerous. Parents either accompany their children or participate in "Trunk or Treat" in the church parking lot. The author concludes: "Halloween masquerade

plays out a generational inversion by which children transcend to temporary power, on a day when usual social taboos are disregarded and defied” (Clark 2007: 302). I would argue that her report conveys quite the opposite message. The entire event has become totally standardized, commercialized and shaped to fit the bourgeois parenting model. Middle-class parents use the consumerism inherent in “holidays” like Halloween to give offspring a temporary and false sense of agency in return for conceding parents the power to regulate their every waking moment.

## CONCLUSION

Afterword I don’t want readers to take away the wrong impression. While I oppose the promotion of their agency as a necessary prologue to research and/or intervention with children, I am very much in favor of treating children’s agency as a phenomenon worthy of attention and study. Agency represents an excellent topic to explore the intersection of culture and ontogeny and is especially critical during a period of rapid cultural change (e.g. Katajala-Peltomaa & Vuolanto 2011, LeVine 2011*b*). For example, “The prominent role played by youth in the totalitarian movements of [the 20<sup>th</sup>] century has been widely noted” (Ryder 1965: 850). In a more recent case, Morelli (2011) reported on her fieldwork among the Matses of Peru. Aboriginally, they dwelt in the deep forests of Amazonia but gradually moved to more accessible sites along major watercourses. Matses boys were in the vanguard in exploring and exploiting riverine resources, fish, in particular. Their rapidly acquired competence lowered the barrier for adult engagement with this unfamiliar and previously avoided ecology. Orellana’s (2009) ethnography of Hispanic immigrant families in Los Angeles represents a model of sound empirical practice in the study of children’s agency. My colleagues and I have found the study of agency over the life span to be very fruitful (Lancy & Payne 2011; Lancy & Grove 2011*a*) as well. So I urge readers – with apologies to Shakespeare – to not praise children’s agency nor bury it but, to tackle it with all the empirical weapons in our arsenal.

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