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The emotional relations of children's participation rights in diverse social and spatial contexts: advancing the field

## **The emotional relations of children's participation rights in diverse social and spatial contexts: advancing the field**

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**Abstract:**

Children's participation rights, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), have been a popular area of research, policy and practice for decades. Despite a great deal of interest and activity, participation rights have posed a particular challenge to implement. In response, researchers have consistently called for more in-depth and nuanced analyses of the way participatory rights are actually lived and experienced by children and young people, within the complexity of interdependent relationships. However, there has been surprisingly little focus on the emotional relations of children's participation rights. The analytical links between emotions and participation rights are rarely the focus and, where emotions are discussed, they are rarely discussed as a central concern in their own right. This article provides a review of the field and identifies three ways in which making emotions a central concern can help to advance debates on children's participation rights: by helping to unsettle 'traditional' constructions of the child-adult binary, by increasing sensitivity to ethical and safeguarding issues, and by making visible and challenging intersectional power relations.

**Keywords:** children's participation rights, emotions, child-adult binary, intergenerational relations, ethics and safeguarding, intersectionality

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### **Introduction: exploring emotions and participation**

In this paper, we explore the role that emotional relations could play in the study and practice of children's<sup>1</sup> participation rights, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Emotion is an elusive and 'slippery concept' which is difficult to define (Lupton, 1998), and definitions vary across disciplinary lines (Boddice, 2018). In this paper, we draw on relational and political understandings of emotions; emotions as created by, and bound up with, justice and injustices (e.g. Ahmed 2014) as well as emotions shaping the power dynamics of children's many relationships (e.g. Kina 2012). A relational understanding of emotion stands in contrast to more compartmentalized and individualized definitions, in which emotions exist only in the individual psyche (e.g. Leman et al 2019). Children's rights scholarship has also grappled with a tendency to individualise and compartmentalise in terms of how 'the child' of children's rights is framed (e.g. Twum-Danso 2010; Aitken 2018). We argue that a relational understanding of emotions can facilitate a relational understanding of children's rights.

Children's participation rights, enshrined in the UNCRC (1989), have been a popular area of research, policy and practice for decades. At its core, the concept of children's participation is about children expressing their views, and having those views taken seriously in all matters that affect them (Lansdown, 2010). Posing a radical challenge to developmental perspectives that positioned children as 'becoming' adults and not full members of society (Tisdall, 2015), debates on participation rights have flourished alongside the emergence of childhood studies in the 1990s, and have benefitted from cross-disciplinary debates including sociologists, human geographers, historians, legal scholars and others. This rich area of study has closely

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<sup>1</sup> We are using the term 'children' to refer to children and young people under the age of 18, following Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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aligned with debates on children's agency, intergenerationality and children's experiences *of* and *in* diverse socio-spatial contexts (Esser et al., 2016). Although emotions are often acknowledged as an important element of children's participation rights, it is rare to find emotions being explicitly centred and theorized in dialogue with UNCRC rights.

As articulated by the UNCRC, children's participation rights have been heralded as innovative and radical, challenging adult attitudes and systems to recognise children as social actors. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) identifies Article 12 (the right to express views in all matters that affect the child, and to have those views given due weight) as one of the four general principles<sup>2</sup> of the UNCRC. While Article 12 is oft cited, the UNCRC also contains other rights grouped together as participation rights. These are Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (freedom of association and peaceful assembly) and Article 17 (access to information).

Participation itself is not mentioned in the text of Article 12. However, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child provides a definition in their General Comment on Article 12 (2009, para 3). The term participation is widely used to describe:

... ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.

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<sup>2</sup> The other general principles are Article 2 (right to non-discrimination), Article 3 (right to have a child's best interests taken as a primary consideration in all actions concerning them), and Article 6 (right to life, survival and development).

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Crucially, their definition highlights that participation is relational. Moosa-Mitha (2005, p.381) also defines participation rights in relational terms. She asks how children's voice, agency and contributions to social life are recognised—are children 'able to have a presence in the many relationships in which they participate'? As these definitions illustrate, children's participation rights are embedded in interdependent relationships and subject to the power dynamics of broader social relations. It is not enough to have a voice; presence is about being heard. To not recognise children's presence—to not hear them—is a form of silencing and oppression.

However, despite the popularity of participatory rhetoric, children's participation rights have not always lived up to their radical potential. Accordingly, the literature on children's participation tends to focus a great deal on the challenges of implementing participation rights (for a review, see McMellon and Tisdall 2020). As researchers and practitioners in the field of children's participation, the barriers to participation rights are very familiar to us. We also note the wealth of international research in which children and young people themselves describe challenges to the recognition of their participation rights (Lundy & Templeton, 2018; Gal & Duramy, 2020). However, we also approach the field with a hopeful, activist disposition and wish to explore potential solutions and ways to tear down some of those barriers. In this paper, therefore, we push on an open door, exploring how existing childhood studies/children's rights scholarship resonates with work from the sociology of emotions and emotional geographies.

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## **The emotional relations of children's participation rights: current themes and ideas**

### *Theorising emotional relations in social research*

Emotions have long been a 'sticking point' in social theory, with the study of emotions being fragmented across disciplinary lines (Ahmed, 2014; Boddice, 2018). For example, there is a long tradition of philosophical thought regarding what emotions are, who/what has emotions, and where emotions originate (Plamper, 2012). In their edited collection, Barret and others (2016) include emotional scholarship across philosophy, history, sociology, music, literature and film, economics, psychology and neuroscience. Feminist researchers have pioneered ideas of emotional labour, exploring the ways that emotions are exploited, managed, controlled and changed in workplace environments (Hochschild, 2003; Oksala, 2015). Although most of emotional scholarship deals with human emotions, there are also significant bodies of work on the emotions of animals (e.g. Watanabe & Kuczaj, 2013). As these examples suggest, emotional scholarship is characterised by divergence (Boddice, 2018).

In keeping with the tendency to individualise and compartmentalise, emotions have sometimes been defined separately from the 'affect' that creates them. Through a compartmentalised lens, a lived, bodily experience may affect us in particular ways, but we then use our cognitive powers to articulate, label and perform the 'correct' emotion publicly (Burkitt, 2014). This separation between affect and emotion is particularly relevant to childhoods in educational and therapeutic contexts when 'emotional literacy' is promoted as a path to personal growth (e.g. Camilleri et al., 2012). Emotions, already individualised, are now also framed as rational and manageable, if the person develops enough 'emotional intelligence' (Burman, 2017). When emotions are not managed 'appropriately', this is seen as a failing of the individual person. Crucially, these individual definitions of emotion fail to grapple with the political contexts and social relations in which emotions are felt. For

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example, by ignoring racialised, gendered and classed social relations (Burman, 2017), oppressed people's strong emotions are seen as 'unmanaged' or irrational rather than as legitimate responses to discrimination. Thus, in these types of policy and practices, emotions are not twinned with participation rights of children such as freedom of expression (Article 13) and freedom of thought (Article 14), but are something to be expressed only in certain approved ways.

In contrast, theorists such as Ahmed (2014) and Burkitt (2014) reject individualised theorisations of emotions, as well as the analytical separation between 'emotion' and 'affect'. Instead, bodily sensations ('affect') and thought ('emotions') are seen as relational, interactive and intertwined. As Ahmed (2014) argues, 'emotion is the feeling of bodily change'—created by the way the world impresses upon us, and the way we orient ourselves toward the world. Relational definitions of emotions, therefore, draw attention to how emotions are connected to the wider patterning of social relations including histories, memories, our habits and perceptions of self, others and the world (Ahmed, 2014; Burkitt, 2014). For example, Bartos (2013) traces how children's sensuous experiences with place created complex emotional attachments, including contradictory and conflicting feelings about place, self and identity. Bodily experiences are deeply intertwined with, rather than separate from, the feeling and naming of emotions.

Emotions can also be understood as public feelings: for example, the idea that feelings are contagious or that there are particular cultural dispositions toward emotion at different points in time (von Scheve & Salmela, 2014). The public nature of emotions plays a crucial role in how individuals and groups come to be positioned in society, and how those positionings are resisted and contested. Ahmed (2014) illustrates this idea by tracing what particular emotions



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do in texts such as websites, government reports and political speeches. For example, she examines how images of Ali Abbas, a 12-year-old Iraqi child, were circulated in British newspapers during the 2003 US coalition-led invasion of Iraq after he was injured in a missile attack. In Ahmed's analysis, she argues that the images of Ali circulated in a particular way, serving as a stand-in for a 'universal' suffering child and allowing the British public to place themselves in a position of charitable compassion for the 'other'. However, this pathway of public grief also permitted the British public to remain untouched by the pain of 'undeserving' Iraqi others and to continue supporting the war.

As this example illustrates, emotions are not only an individual concern; they also do public work. Emotions circulate and affect public imaginations. They become associated with certain signs and bodies, invested in social norms, and create social boundaries of 'I', 'we', 'us' and 'them', aligning some bodies with others (Ahmed, 2014). In terms of childhood, emotional relations have implications for constructions of childhoods and children as rights holders, and the power relations of these processes (Author). It follows that children's rights discourses, often assumed to be objective and emotionally neutral, are in fact informed by particular emotional constructions of children and childhoods.

#### *Emotions as a consideration for children's participation rights*

In the field of children's participation rights, some scholarship has focused on emotional relations. For example, Thomas (2012) highlights the importance of complex emotional interactions in relationships and the fact that for any participatory processes to be successful, children need to *feel* warmth and affection, mutual esteem, solidarity and a shared purpose. He suggests that love and friendship—between participation workers and young people, and between young people themselves—is foundational to participatory work. Similarly,

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Warming (2011) identifies trust as a key component of participatory work, which includes feeling safe and confident. She distinguishes between psychological and sociological understandings of trust (trust in relationships versus trust in systems) and highlights the need for complex and interdisciplinary understandings of emotions to capture these multiple layers.

Krafl and Horton (2007) highlight that 'affect' permeates and is constituted by relationships, encounters and spaces, and that participation facilitators need to be keenly aware of how certain affective atmospheres are created (for example, of 'fun'). They argue that there is a tendency in literature on participation to omit the 'mundane, ephemeral, material goings-on', yet it is in the everyday, 'banal' and embodied nature of participation that important and politically charged moments of participation often occur (p.1015). A number of studies have focused on adult emotions in processes of enacting (or not) children's participation rights. For example, in the realm of early years, Alderson (2008, p.141) lists some deeply but not necessarily consciously held feelings of adults, who are in favour of children's participation rights: trust and confidence in children's abilities, enjoyment and excitement about working cooperatively with children, and enthusiasm for encouraging both children's independence and interdependence. On the other hand, if adults feel convinced that their knowledge is superior, concerned about children's vulnerability and need of care and protection, or anxious about children's 'volatility' or lack of understanding, they may not act in support of participation rights. Adults may not fall neatly into either category, and their emotional awareness and balancing of potentially contradictory feelings shape how they support children's participation rights. With older children, Ruiz-Casares and colleagues (2017) have highlighted how adult concerns about children's best interests and child protection shape how their participation rights are realised or blocked.

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Kina (2012) suggests that emotions are a key element of children's participation but their connections with power dynamics remain under-researched. She calls for adults who facilitate participation "to reflect on how they are personally implicated in the participatory process" (p.202) in order to address underlying dimensions of emotions and power. For example, adult facilitators may commit to participation on a rational level, but not be fully aware of the internal processes that are required of themselves, and thus keep upholding invisible barriers such as hierarchical relationships. Adults may also be tempted to dismiss the power they hold in such processes, either because they do not feel powerful to bring about change, or because the level of power generates feelings of anxiety about the responsibilities that come with it.

The emotional relations of children's participation rights have also been considered in terms of participation-as-performance. 'Performance' modes of participation (for example, if children are invited to perform music or dance on stage during an otherwise adult-centred policy event) have been heavily criticised as being tokenistic and without tangible impact (Tisdall, 2013). However, meaningful participation-as-performance also has the potential to have a longer-term and deeper emotional impact. For example, Badham (2004) describes how videos produced by young disabled people served as a catalyst for real change because of the attitudinal change and inspiration they generated in the audience of professionals and policymakers. A distinctive trend in youth studies' literature on participation strongly advocates for recognising the empowering potential of cultural change inspired by arts, performance and creativity (Bruselius-Jensen et al., 2021), as more influential and revolutionary than conventional modes of civic or political action.

Overall, there is a growing field of scholarship on children's rights, emotions, and spatial relations. However, it remains rare for emotions to be explicitly theorised as a central concern

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in dialogue with children's rights; emotions and affect are more often dealt with implicitly or as part of a multiplicity of relations. For example, Aitken (2018) argues for a vision of rights that challenges the norms of capitalism and liberal citizenship, proceeding instead from a place of relational ethics. This is 'heart-work', in Aitken's view, in which children's rights are not monadic and universalised but instead embedded into a multiplicity of human and more-than-human relations, including relations of politics and power (see also Oswell, 2013). Moosa-Mitha (2017) exemplifies this view of rights in her study of young Canadian Muslims, who are pushed to the edges of citizenship rights. Their political activism is translated by public emotion through a lens of terrorism, interpreted and presented as a threat to the Canadian settler-colonial state, rather than recognising their acts of political and community care. As these examples illustrate, the move toward posthuman perspectives and political geographies in childhood studies opens the door for emotional relations. However, emotional relations remain undervalued as an explicit concern in the field of participation studies (Teamey and Hinton, 2014). Emotions matter in complex ways depending on the particular context of participation (for example, participation in research projects or within institutional contexts such as schools) – they shape the constructions of child- and adulthood which inform participatory methodologies, they are crucial for the relationships between those involved, and if and how outcomes of participatory processes are taken forward.

### *Emotions as a methodological dimension in participation studies*

Due to the 'emotional turn' in research agendas, an increasing number of scholars have acknowledged that both researchers and research participants are 'feeling human being[s]' (Davies, 2015, pp.57-58). This acknowledgment suggests that emotions are not only a meaningful research subject but also a methodological dimension in any research process because both researchers' and research participants' emotions shape what is being identified

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as significant for them. On the methodological level, reflexive approaches have guided researchers to do the task of considering how their own emotions and their participants' emotions impact on the research processes and outcomes. Reflexivity is an essential part in social sciences as it can contribute to the goal of rigour through reflecting on 'the intimate relationship between the researchers and their data' (Morse, 2015, p.1213). In reflexive processes, emotions are a significant dimension, contributing to 'intersubjective interpretation of one's own and others' emotions and how they are enacted' (Holmes, 2015, p.61). Emotional reflexivity has also been stressed as useful for expanding researchers' knowledge of what is happening during research (Author).

Emotions pervade the lived experiences of doing and participating in research, from data collection to data analysis and the writing of research output (Davies, 2015). In some situations, an emotional resonance between researchers and research participants can be a 'bridge' to link researchers and research participants to contribute to the richness of the research data (Davison, 2004), such as more in-depth conversations. However, in other situations, emotional moments between researcher and participants can cause a 'boundary' between them. For instance, Hubbard and colleagues (2001, pp.127-128) report how witnessing a respondent trying hard to suppress his feelings while talking about a bereavement upset the researcher. In subsequent interviews, this researcher intentionally 'tried to avoid emotionally distressing situations by deliberately failing to establish rapport and empathy' (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn & Kemmer, 2001, p.128), suggesting that the researcher's emotional experience had an impact on the data they generated (Holland, 2007).

Emotions in research can also shape the data analysis process. Feminist geographers have challenged the notion of rationality and emotional neutrality in research and highlighted the

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role of emotions for the production of knowledge(s) (e.g. Bondi, 2005). Sociologists of emotions have argued that 'understanding emotions is essential to the pursuit of knowledge' (Holland, 2007, p.196). Hubbard and others (2001, p.125) also argue that when listening to, understanding, and interpreting respondents' lives, researchers need to use their emotional functioning. Holland (2007, p.207) discusses that 'a researcher's own emotional response to a respondent's experience can be used to interpret data'. Also, emotions are implicated in researchers' representations. For example, through reflecting on her biographical study of children's personal lives and relationships, Davies (2015) indicates that emotions can shape researchers' decisions on which data are shared in research outputs (e.g. some data are selected for emotive qualities while others are discarded). In sum, emotional reflexivity on the part of researchers, with regards to relations of power, their own impact on the research context, and data generation and analysis, has become an accepted premise for research integrity and quality (Kina, 2012; Procter, 2013).

Although the importance of viewing emotions as a methodological dimension in research has been acknowledged by many scholars, research on children and their emotions is still a relatively neglected area in childhood studies, whereas it has received much attention in psychology (e.g. on children's emotion regulation). For example, emotion is 'rarely the focus of the research and often remains a taken-for-granted phenomenon rather than one that requires investigation' (Harden, 2012, p.85). Only a few studies in the field have focused on children's own emotional experiences of participatory research (Hadfield-Hill & Horton 2014; Procter, 2013), and there is thus a need for research that considers the role of emotions in participatory research more comprehensively.

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### **Advancing the field: opportunities for bringing together emotions and participation**

In the following sections, we identify three ways in which making emotions a central concern can help to advance debates on children's participation rights.

#### *Emotions that unsettle child-adult relations*

The patterning of child-adult relations is a key issue when it comes to participation rights. Some of the scholarship on children's participation has presented a dichotomised view of children and adults. For example, Mannion (2007, p.413) identified a narrative of 'adults-as-oppressors vs. children-as-resisters' in the children's participation literature. Another pattern has been to present children and young people as 'agents of their own destiny', isolating their participation rights from the wider contexts of their lives and cultures (Mannion, 2007; Wyness, 2015). In contrast, a wealth of scholarship has highlighted the more fluid interplay between sociocultural understandings of adulthood and childhood and the implications for participation rights (Twum-Danso, 2010). We argue that emotional relations are a useful way to unsettle and unpack some of the patterning of child-adult relations that may prevent children's contributions from being recognised. For example, Mannion and l'Anson (2004) conducted a case study of a participatory organisation in Scotland, including adult professionals' memories of their own childhoods. Although the emotional elements of those memories were not the focus of the research, the feelings of being a child come through in participants' quotes:

I didn't have these opportunities . . . I held back more. . . you'd be afraid to say something especially in adult company. What you had to say wasn't important, you should be seen and not heard . . . you were apprehensive because it wasn't allowed.

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Here [i.e., with the young consultants' group] they've been encouraged to speak their mind. (Lynn)

(Mannion & l'Anson, 2004, p.310)

Returning to Ahmed's (2014) view that emotions are created by the ways the world impresses upon us, the quote demonstrates some of the bodily sensations that the participant felt as a child in regards to speaking her mind. There are links here between emotional relations and children's rights to express their views (Article 12) and the freedom of that expression (Article 13). Lynn remembers feelings of fear—being 'afraid to say something' in adult company and being 'apprehensive' when speaking because it wasn't allowed. Instead of replicating those same patterns of child-adult relations, in her professional life Lynn has aligned herself differently. Tracing the emotional elements of that journey and following adults' orientation towards children in society can help unpack some of the sociocultural and individual reasons why adults may be reluctant—or eager—to facilitate children's participation rights.

Emotions can also help us understand how children and adults are already participating together in family, community and society, and to better understand the interplay of these two social categories in relation to participation rights. Open dialogue about rights and cultural positioning (a bottom-up approach) is a key element of implementation (Twum-Danso, 2010). In particular, there is the need to understand the ways that children are interwoven into intergenerational coexistence and collective, community relations, rather than assuming that children's participation rights are exercised 'in contrast' to adults (Corona, Pérez & Hernández, 2010). Critical reflections on emotional relations, the fluidity of child-adult relations and implications for children's rights require broader examination of the 'tapestry of



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self' (Arshad, 2012, p.8) and multiple political identities of children and adults. The combination of children's rights and emotional relations therefore have great potential to disrupt hegemonic visions of childhood and adulthood, trouble rigid binaries and create space for participation rights to flourish within the specificity of sociocultural contexts.

### *Emotions, ethics and safeguarding*

Emotions are intertwined into children's participation rights as they relate to safeguarding, in both research ethics and other participatory processes. In research, being aware of and responding to child participants' emotional wellbeing is a crucial ethical responsibility because children can be relatively vulnerable in a society that is dominated by adult discourses (Gaskell, 2008; Alderson & Morrow, 2011). For example, Hill and colleagues suggest that, in studies with children, adult researchers should follow a three steps rule: 'stop – and think about children's point of view; look – for their feelings; listen – to what they say' (1996, p.142).

Beyond the realms of research, educators, policymakers and practitioners need to consider children's emotions in different contexts, and safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility (Davies, 2015). Such ethical commitment converges with children's rights under the UNCRC, as articulated by Article 3 (children's best interests) and Article 19 (children's protection from abuse, violence, injury and neglect). However, as social actors (James & Prout, 2005), children are not passive receivers of safeguarding services offered by adults. Instead, children's views need to be heard and taken into account 'in all matters affecting' them (Article 12, UNCRC). In this case, the importance of increasing children's participation in issues (e.g. family decisions, state service planning, and provision) that affect their lives has been widely acknowledged on a global scale (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009).

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Through listening to children in diverse contexts, scholars notice the importance of working with diversity and complexity. For example, approaches to achieve ethical integrity in the process of advocating children's right to participation and protecting children's emotional wellbeing vary in practices with different groups of children in various contexts (Aitken, 2018). Kraftl (2013, p.15) highlights the importance of being aware that different children can have different emotional outcomes in the same participatory processes and researchers cannot simply assume that participation only brings positive benefits to children. It is not unusual that children's wishes and emotions contradict adults' needs/wishes to protect children. For example in research with children, children's right to be seen and heard is an argument for the non-anonymisation of visual data because some children have expectations of being identified (e.g., names and faces) in research materials, such as photographs (Wiles et al., 2012).

However, although some children might feel disappointed, some researchers have refused to publish non-anonymised visual data, especially for sensitive studies, because of the concern of potential harms, such as misuse of children's images (Wiles et al., 2012). In this case, it can be emotionally charged and challenging when there is a mismatch between children's desire to be seen and adults' concerns about safeguarding.

In discussions about children's participation, there is always a concern about the risk of tokenism (Lundy, 2019; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Paying attention to emotions can help us to recognise the potential risk of tokenism experienced by children in participatory processes. For example, Pinkney (2011) points out that the complexity and depth of anxieties experienced by welfare professionals sometimes make them 'reluctant listeners' (p.40) in the process of listening to children. In this case, some practices that give the impression of listening to children end with the result that 'children involved frequently report that they do not feel listened to' (Pinkney, 2011, p.41). Therefore, understanding and responding to the

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emotions experienced by welfare professionals within participatory practices with children can be essential in terms of addressing this risk of tokenism. Also, being aware of children's contextualised emotions in participatory processes, such as fear and anxiety, can help us to understand the surrounding social order and social relations within which children embody emotions in specific ways (Harden, 2012). In this case, reflecting children's emotions in a participatory process (e.g. family court) can support involved adults to reflect whether or not such a process is truly well-designed to allow children a comfortable and safe space to genuinely speak for themselves.

### *Recognizing the intersectional politics of emotions and participation*

The emotional relations of children's participation rights do not exist in a social and political vacuum, and any analysis and discussion must recognise this. At the time of writing, global Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd illustrate that the importance of emotions – outrage, sadness, hope – cannot be overstated when it comes to participating and mobilising for processes of social change (see also Goodwin and others (2009) for emotions in social movements). In childhood studies and children's geographies, numerous studies draw attention to the gendered, classed, raced and other dimensions of children's lives (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). The fact that there is not one, but 'many childhoods' (Jenks, 2004), has become part of the familiar chorus of the literature. However, the extent to which these discussions are politicised and go beyond a 'micro-orientation' on children's lives (Qvortrup, 2000, p.78) to include broader social relations and structural inequalities varies. Increasingly, writers in the field of child and youth activism have stressed the importance of emotions for building collectivity and creating change (Nicholls, 2013). For example, Aitken (2018), drawing on the work of Askins (2016), utilises the concept of emotional citizenry to highlight the importance of emotions for challenging injustice.

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Children's participation rights are equally implicated in systemic relations. Children's participation is often seen as a 'normative good' (Tisdall, 2015, p.194) and participatory processes tend to be heralded as disrupting established power imbalances. However, important debates have challenged simplistic narratives on the transformative potential of participation. Processes claiming to be participatory can obscure power relations, discipline or control children, or co-opt children into adult agendas (Mannion, 2007; Warming, 2011). The UNCRC itself has been the subject of critical debate due to its universalist principles. In particular, it has been critiqued for imposing Western values and norms on the rest of the world (Brando, 2019) and discussion in the children's rights field has focused on how it can be contextualised across culturally different settings (Twum-Danso, 2010). It is worth remembering, of course, that also within Western countries there is no agreement on cultural norms and values (Guggenheim, 2005).

We therefore suggest that any meaningful exploration of the emotional relations of children's participation rights must recognise the intersectional politics at their heart. The concept of intersectionality originates from Black Feminist thinkers in the United States: specifically Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is credited with having shaped intersectionality as a theoretical, political and analytical tool. In her popular definition, Davis (2008, p.68) describes intersectionality as 'the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power'. While emotions have not been central to theorisations of intersectionality, its emotional dimensions have been highlighted in political activism (Emejulu & Bassel, 2020), in terms of racialised dimensions of emotional labour (Moore et al., 2016), or in terms of emotional dimensions of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2007).

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We suggest that paying attention to the intersectional politics of emotions and children's participation rights should include the following steps. First, an intersectional approach requires us to critically explore emotions surrounding race, and to utilise a focus on emotions to disrupt both internalised and institutionalised dimensions of racism. Konstantoni and Emejulu (2017, p.8) call for definitions of intersectionality to go beyond viewing it solely as a framework for understanding complex interactions of categories of structural inequalities to instead recognise it as 'a counter-hegemonic praxis that seeks to challenge and displace hegemonic whiteness in the naming and legitimating of particular kinds of politics, policymaking and knowledge production'. Some scholars have critiqued the erasure of race, as intersectionality has travelled disciplines and continents, and has become subsumed into different academic and political discourses (Bilge, 2013). This resonates with the childhood studies and children's rights fields, where critical race (including critical whiteness) studies have been relatively absent (with notable exceptions e.g. Escayg et al., 2017; Pérez et al., 2017), and considerations of race are far from mainstreamed in the field. Article 2 on non-discrimination is a general principle, as well as Article 12 on participation, but realising it for children consistently, in both exceptional and 'everyday' contexts, remains a testing demand (Ruck et al., 2017).

Within the authors' own academic context of the United Kingdom, Black and minority ethnic populations continue to be underrepresented (particularly in senior positions) and the academy is characterised by a failure to recognise and challenge hegemonic whiteness (Rollock, 2012). Highlighting hegemonic whiteness to white people tends to elicit strong emotional responses, ranging from discomfort, guilt, anxiety (to say the 'wrong' thing or to be seen as 'racist'), to denial, defensiveness and aggression (Eddo-Lodge, 2018). On the other

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hand, the emotional experiences of exhaustion, exasperation and frustration by people of colour who engage in these discussions have been well documented (Emejulu & Bassel, 2020). Thus, the naming or silencing of race, including whiteness, as an element that pervades childhood studies and children's rights scholarship (whether implicitly or explicitly) is in itself a deeply emotional process, and as authors we include ourselves in the call to continue to advance our critical emotional reflexivity when it comes to addressing race inequality in the different layers of our work and relationships within academia. This includes challenging our emotional investments into the broader power relations in research contexts (for example particular funding streams) as well as in processes of knowledge production.

Second, the critical emotional reflexivity needed to disrupt racial inequalities in academia needs to be extended to the children and young people that we engage with as researchers and facilitators. This includes making visible and challenging how emotions come to construct some groups of children in deficit or prejudiced ways (for example, children that organise (i.e. participate) as street gangs as 'dangerous', or children growing up in care as 'vulnerable'). It also includes paying critical attention to *which* children are included in participatory processes, and who are the children that are routinely excluded (or included only in limited ways – for example, involving disabled children only in projects about disability). An intersectional lens on emotions has the potential to unsettle assumptions about children's rights, needs and relationships (De Graeve and Bex, 2017). An intersectional lens on emotions and participation needs to challenge the binary thinking that pervades much of the field, and which assumes an adult 'us' that *enables* children ('them') to participate. As Kina (2012, p.205) states, this involves "being prepared to include ourselves [as researchers and participation workers] within the process", to be prepared to face up to our own limits, and to interrogate our own complicity.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have sought to analyse and move forward the literature on the emotional relations of children's participation rights. While emotions feature in many studies on children's participation rights, they are rarely an explicit, central concern. There is a tendency to include reflections on emotions as an 'afterthought', when there is an element of surprise, or a negative experience involved – for example, when researchers grapple with unexpected encounters and experiences, when participatory processes are meeting obstacles or perceived to be failing. An obvious conclusion from this literature, and our own experiences as researchers and practitioners with children, is therefore that emotions *do* matter for children's participation rights, and that we should make them a central consideration of all participatory work. We have proposed three ways in which combining emotions and children's participation rights conceptually can help to advance debates in this field: by helping to unsettle 'traditional' constructions of the child-adult binary, by increasing sensitivity to ethical and safeguarding issues, and by making visible and challenging intersectional power relations.

In this article, we have argued that participatory processes can benefit from emotional awareness and critical emotional reflexivity—our own emotions as facilitators/researchers, our participants', and how they flow between us. Such emotional reflexivity inevitably involves a journey of learning about ourselves and others, and cannot happen without a reckoning with the intersectional power relations within which we are embedded. The attention to emotions should therefore not be seen as an end in itself, but as a resource for challenging ourselves and the systems in which we operate. Critical attention to emotions can help us to consider how they can be mobilised – whether 'positive' emotions such as satisfaction, joy, belonging, or

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'negative' ones such as discomfort, disgust, anxiety – to further the depth, integrity and impact of our work on children's participation rights, and to identify and navigate obstacles. Similarly, paying attention to emotional indifference or the perceived 'absence' of emotions, could tell us much about how we normalise certain types of relationships and experiences.

Emotional relations can also support an understanding of children's rights as a lived, multifaceted practice. For example, in this article we have highlighted the ways that emotions are interwoven not only with participation rights, but also with other rights, including the general principles of the UNCRC, the right to non-discrimination, and specific rights to protection. Emotions help us see these interlinkings more clearly; for example, the ways that the emotionality of child-adult relations can enhance, or limit, children's right to freedom of expression. There is a tendency in the children's participation literature to focus only on Article 12. By specifically tracing the complexity of emotional relations, the fluid interweaving of the full suite of UNCRC children's rights can come into clearer focus.



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