Over the past thirty or forty years, a number of flourishing, and very influential, fields have emerged that present themselves as interdisciplinary, or even as transdisciplinary, in character. These include Women’s Studies (or Gender Studies), Cultural Studies, and Childhood Studies. At the very least, they claim to overcome substantive blindspots on the part of the longer established social science disciplines – identifying important topics that have been neglected. But they often go beyond this to challenge the basic assumptions of these disciplines, in terms of theory, methodology, ethics and/or politics. At the same time, representatives of these fields sometimes declare resistance against any tendency for them to become new disciplines in their own right: in other words, they deny the need for strong internal coherence and well-polic ed boundaries. It is often argued, instead, that researchers should look outward towards lay audiences, and address topics and issues of practical or political importance rather than being preoccupied with building a body of esoteric knowledge. Nevertheless, representatives of these fields do, necessarily, draw boundaries by making judgments about what are and are not relevant and worthwhile contributions, and by distinguishing more from less important ones.

In this paper I want to consider the case of Childhood Studies – or what is sometimes referred to as ‘the new social studies of childhood’ (James 1998) – as a transdisciplinary field. There are references within its literature to a sociology or anthropology of childhood, so that the field could be regarded simply as a topical terrain in which social science sub-disciplines meet: what has been referred to, in the case of criminology, as a ‘rendezvous subject’ (Holdaway and Rock 1998:4).

However, not only does Childhood Studies now increasingly operate as a field that is distinct from the older disciplines (for example, in terms of courses taught in universities, and journals where research is published – see Thorne 2007), but even when the work is presented as belonging to one or other of these sub-disciplines there is usually a clear indication that what is involved is not simply applying the established disciplinary framework. Instead, it is usually argued that understanding

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1 A shorter version of this paper has been published online in *Childhood*, and will appear in print in 2017. I am grateful to Heather Montgomery and Chae-Young Kim for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to my other colleagues at the Open University, for what I have learned from them about Childhood Studies. They are, of course, not to blame for whatever failings remain.

2 I am assuming that a multidisciplinary field brings knowledge from several disciplines together, without seeking to integrate the knowledge produced into a single body; that an interdisciplinary field involves attempts to integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines; while a transdisciplinary field aims at blending or transcending the modes of knowledge production characteristic of other disciplines in a particular field so as to replace them with a new approach or paradigm.

3 Characteristic of such a challenge are the critiques of sociology put forward by proponents of Cultural Studies. For an interesting discussion of these, see McLennan 2006:28-30 and *passim*.

4 For example, James et al (1998:3) claim to put forward a paradigm that forbids ‘closure’. There has been considerable debate about this within Cultural Studies. Gray and McGuigan (1993:xiii) write that ‘Unlike older disciplines, and some of the newer ones, proponents of cultural studies are reluctant to enclose their terms of reference with definitional precision: everything remains up for grabs. There is also an enormous resistance to the very idea of disciplinarity and its connotations of policing the borders of knowledge’. For other discussions of the non-disciplinary, or anti-disciplinary, character of Cultural Studies, see Johnson 1986/7, Grossberg et al 1992:2, and Hall 1992:278-9. By contrast, McLennan (2006) has argued in *favour of disciplinarity, in fact for ‘sociological cultural studies’, in the spirit of a new ‘positivity’.*
children’s lives requires a transformation of that framework, or that the study of childhood is part of a disciplinary transformation that is already taking place. Thus, in an early landmark text, Jenks (1982: Intro) presents the sociology of childhood as part of a broader challenge to the basic assumptions of dominant sociological approaches (and those of the philosophy and psychology of learning and education as well), involving a phenomenological orientation that focuses on the socio-cultural practices that constitute childhood. In much the same way, James and Prout (1990/1997) refer to an ‘emergent paradigm’, one that is at odds, in important respects, with previous approaches. And, much more recently, Kehily (2009:1) has also suggested that Childhood Studies is the site of an emergent paradigm ‘wherein new ways of looking at children can be researched and theorized’. 5

In this paper I want to examine the constitutive commitments that are taken to be central to this new approach or paradigm, with a view to determining how far they provide a sustainable claim to transdisciplinary status, and what the implications of this might be. 6

**The rationale for Childhood Studies**

In arguing for their new field, advocates of Childhood Studies have frequently claimed that childhood and children were previously marginalized by conventional disciplinary research. While they recognize that developmental psychologists had carried out a considerable amount of research on children, and that the socialization of children had been given some attention by anthropologists and sociologists, they argue that, generally speaking, both these sorts of research are inadequate in theoretical and/or methodological terms. They also frequently suggest that such research is unethical and/or politically unacceptable in important respects.

Proponents of Childhood Studies have criticized developmental psychology both for how it studies children and for its assumptions and conclusions. They argue that the dominant method employed by psychologists – the experiment – assumes, and effectively ensures within its own practice, that children respond passively to interventions, and that it thereby fails to capture children’s agency in the ordinary contexts in which they live, where they shape their environments rather than simply responding to the behaviour of adults. Relatedly, developmental psychology is criticised for what is taken to be its conclusion, or perhaps assumption, that young children are incompetent – in other words cognitively, emotionally and morally

5 This argument draws on the meaning of the word ‘paradigm’ that is derived from the work of the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1970). Kuhn’s writings became very influential among social scientists in the second half of the twentieth century. He portrayed the development of the physical sciences as punctuated by ‘scientific revolutions’, in which the fundamental assumptions on which research had previously been carried out were overthrown. Between such revolutions however, he argued, research operates within a framework of assumptions (a ‘paradigm’) embodied in key studies in the field, one that is largely taken for granted, providing the basis for what he calls ‘normal science’. It is worth remembering that Kuhn specifically excluded the social sciences from his analysis, on the grounds that they are pre- or non-paradigmatic. On Kuhn’s work, see Bird 2001. Ryan (2008) denies the claim that the New Childhood Studies represented a paradigm shift, arguing from the perspective of a historian.

6 There have been a number of other assessments of several of these commitments, see for example Prout 2005, Lee 2005, Tisdall and Punch 2012; Tisdall 2012.
deficient by comparison with adults. It is sometimes argued that this implies that they only become human in the later stages of their development, so that they are incapable of making sound decisions on their own behalf. Here we can see how points about methodological and substantive failings are closely related to ethical and political concerns.

There was also criticism of mainstream anthropological research for focusing primarily on how children come to be socialized into (adult) cultures, rather than on children’s particular experiences and position in society, and on the ways in which they generate their own distinctive cultural patterns. And much the same criticism has been made of sociological research on socialization.\(^7\) It is argued that this has relied on adult views and practices, and has generally failed to examine seriously the experiences and perspectives of children. For example, a great deal of it has studied children in institutional settings, such as schools, and addressed issues relevant from an institutional perspective. Similarly, the huge body of research on the causes of delinquency among children and young people has stemmed largely from a criminological interest in how and why some people become criminals, and what can be done to discourage this. As a result, it is suggested, the focus has been on background factors and personality characteristics, social processes and structural determinants, often with little attempt to understand the viewpoints and activities of the children labeled ‘delinquent’.

So, the central complaint is that previous research has been framed by adult concerns, and has been carried out on the basis of adult assumptions; in effect adopting a deficit conception of children as ‘not-yet-adults’, or employing other categories – such as ‘delinquent’ – that reflect adult perspectives. As with many of the arguments used to support and justify new disciplines or fields, these criticisms contain important truths, but they are also exaggerated or misleading in some respects. For example, it is ironic that developmental psychology is criticized for adopting a passive view of children when, in fact, to a large extent it has been dominated by constructivist accounts of human learning that treat this as an active process rather than merely the establishment of stimulus-response patterns through contact with the external environment (Woodhead 2009). Of course, part of what is at stake here is what the term ‘active’ means, and I will discuss this later.

A similar partial defence could be mounted for anthropology and sociology. While there has certainly been work in these disciplines which has portrayed socialization as a matter of internalization, a more interactionist view has often prevailed, in which people not only take on social roles but necessarily interpret and remake them (Turner 1962). And, even before the rise of Childhood Studies, this perspective had been applied to relationships between adults and children by a few sociologists (see, for example, Dreitzel 1972 and Denzin 1977). Furthermore, a pioneering text on the sociology of childhood by Shipman (1972:31), while relatively

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\(^7\) Jenks (1982:19) portrays socialization theory as dehumanizing children, for example. Most anthropological research on socialization was carried out by US anthropologists: British social anthropology tended to resist any focus on what was taken to be a psychological issue (see Mayer 1970). Lancy (2008) shows that there has been a great deal of anthropological research focusing on children (see also LeVine 2003), but he acknowledges that it has been fragmented, concerned with diverse topics, with little intercommunication amongst those involved. Montgomery 2015 demonstrates the complexities of any judgment about whether or not anthropologists have ‘neglected childhood’.
traditional in its sociological orientation, nevertheless treated socialisation as a two-way process, so that children are portrayed as active agents, to some degree at least. There were also, around this time, a small number of studies that involved attempts to understand children’s perspectives, including those who had been labeled as ‘delinquent’ (see, for example, Goodman 1957; Speier 1963, Werthman 1963, Hargreaves 1967, Silvers 1977, Willis 1977, Woods 1979, Davies 1982, Turner 1983, and Davies 1984).

In the remainder of this paper I want to examine the positive commitments of Childhood Studies that lie behind the criticisms its proponents make of other approaches. These include the following:

1. Children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independently of the concerns and perspectives of adults;
2. Childhood is a social construction: it is neither a natural nor a universally standard feature of human societies. Therefore, attention must be given to the ways in which it is historically and cross-culturally variable; to how it is shaped by social class, gender, and ethnicity; and to how it is constituted in and through social practices;
3. Children are, and must be treated as, active in the construction of their own social lives, legitimately shaping local contexts and the societies in which they live;
4. Qualitative methods, and in particular participatory forms of inquiry, represent the most appropriate means for conducting research concerned with children and childhood in contemporary societies. In what has become a very common phrasing: research should not be done on children but must be carried out with, or led by, them.

Of course, proponents of Childhood Studies vary in the relative emphasis they give to these assumptions, and in how they interpret them. But, taken together, such commitments are frequently treated as defining the field.

**Children as worthy of study in their own right**

At face value, it might seem that this first commitment merely points to a set of topics that have not previously been given the attention they deserve. These include: what it means to be a child in different societies, how life is experienced by children, how they develop their own patterns of social activity, how they relate to one another, etc. However, usage of the phrase ‘in their own right’ hints that the meaning of this

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8 James and Prout (1990:2) note some of this work, alongside developments in psychology and history, but suggest that ‘only gradually has the need for [the synthesis of these ‘innovative initiatives’] become apparent’. They do not, however, make explicit what distinctive need this proposed synthesis is intended to serve.

9 Various similar lists have been provided, see for example James and Prout (2006:ch1) and Kehily (2009:8). Here I have focused on what seem to me to be currently the most central and distinctive commitments. Many of the chapters in a recent contribution to the field, in which I had a role, exemplify these commitments: see Clark et al 2014. Given that the arguments I am examining here are pervasive features of the field (Tisdall and Punch 2012:251 call them ‘mantras’), I have not sought to provide chapter-and-verse references for them: examples can be found easily.
commitment goes further, implying that in the past their identity as children has not been respected by researchers. In this way, a claim to establish a new academic field is linked in the writings of some commentators to support for a form of identity politics, in much the same manner as in some other transdisciplinary fields, notably Women’s Studies.  

Underpinning this first commitment, then, is the complaint, noted earlier, that children had previously been studied from an adult point of view: that the focus was on the processes by which they become adults, on the roles they play in the contexts and institutions that are central to adults’ lives, and/or on aspects of childhood that adults believe are important. One influential formulation of this is that the emphasis has been on becoming rather than on being, on what children are to grow up into rather than on their lives as children (James et al 1998). In opposition to this, it is argued that children and adults occupy quite different positions in society, and therefore have very different experiences and perspectives, so that those of children should not be assumed to be the same as, nor to be deficient versions of, those of adults.

The underlying implication is that adult perspectives on children and their worlds must not be treated as authoritative, in the way that is common in society at large. This is in line with the general proposal, promoted strongly within sociology from the 1960s onwards (see, for example, Becker 1967), that social scientists must not simply accept the dominant hierarchy of credibility within a society: they must adopt a more detached, perhaps even critical, point of view. Subsequently, there have been claims to the effect that subordinated or marginalized groups have perspectives that provide more genuine insight into social reality than those of dominant groups, or at least that they offer accounts that can open up the prospect of new and different forms of social life (Smith 1987; Harding 1993). In the case of children this links to a theme that can be traced back at least to Rousseau. He believed that if children were allowed to develop naturally they could to some extent overcome the corruption and degeneration brought about by civilization, in which most adults (at least those in the urban middle and upper classes) are hopelessly embroiled.

Much the same opposition to treating adults as authoritative can be reached via the principle of cultural relativism that was enshrined in a great deal of twentieth century anthropology, and persists today. From this point of view, it can be argued that the distinctive cultures to be found amongst children must be treated as valid in their own terms. Also relevant here is that there has been increasing recognition, on the part of both anthropologists and sociologists, that there are diverse local cultures within large complex societies, and that these need to be investigated via an ‘appreciative’ (Matza 1969) stance. One aspect of this has been the study of youth subcultures in ways that, among other things, celebrate their cultural significance (see Gelder and Thornton 2005). Thus, a key feature of Childhood Studies has been an extension of this general approach to the study of younger children (see, for example, Corsaro 2003).

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10 I will explore this parallel below. It is worth noting here that, as with Women’s Studies, the academic struggle to establish the field is frequently presented as working in support of the broader political concern with promoting children’s rights. However, in the context of feminism there are those who have questioned this synergy – see, for example, Mies 1991 – and the same issue may arise in the case of Childhood Studies.
It is important to recognize, however, that several rather different orientations on the part of researchers are being run together here. Contrary to the way in which it has often been interpreted, and the apparent implication of the title of his article, Becker’s (1967) ‘Whose side are we on?’ did not suggest that researchers should side with subordinates, only that they ought to give at least as much attention to their perspectives as to official points of view (Hammersley 2000:ch3). Indeed, Becker explicitly recognised that inverting the established hierarchy of credibility threatens the likely validity of research findings just as much as taking official accounts at face value: he dismissed it as ‘sentimentality’ (Becker 1967:246). Similarly, Matza’s (1969) contrast between an ‘appreciative’ and a ‘correctionalist’ stance did not entail treating the perspectives of those labeled deviant as of superior validity. Nor does anthropological cultural relativism carry the implication that non-Western cultures are superior, even if it has sometimes been treated as doing so.

There are also questions to be asked about the focus of Childhood Studies on the distinctive experiences and perspectives of children. There is an instructive parallel here with Women’s Studies, where the significance of the fact that there are important differences amongst women soon came to be recognized: between those belonging to different racial/ethnic and social class categories, those with different sexual orientations, and those with and without disabilities. Moreover, the implication of the intersectional character of identity in the case of children is not only that their experiences and perspectives are likely to vary considerably but also that most of this variation will reflect characteristics that they share with adults. This represents a challenge to the idea that childhood can be studied ‘in its own right’.

An associated problem that arose in Women’s Studies came from the post-structuralist attack on ‘essentialism’, and was subsequently reinforced by the transgender movement and by arguments for post-humanism (see, for instance, Ferrando 2013). Involved here is a challenge to the idea that being a woman has any stable meaning at all, independent of multiple discursive constructions of femininity. This seemed potentially to undermine the idea that womanhood could form a legitimate basis for a field of study; or, for that matter, for a political movement (Nicolson 1990). And parallel problems arise with the category of ‘child’ and its role in relation to Children’s Studies. Paradoxically, given the strong emphasis on socio-cultural variation that is built into this field, and the downplaying of cultural universals, it might be concluded that the only stable content that can be given to the category ‘child’ is biological. Yet, just as proponents of Women’s Studies generally challenged arguments that women are biologically distinctive in socially relevant respects (because these arguments had been used to bolster inequality and oppression), so too have proponents of Childhood Studies usually rejected, or at least de-emphasised, arguments drawing on biology.\footnote{There have, of course, been exceptions amongst feminists to this denial of the significance of biological differences, see for instance Firestone 1970. Prout 2005 has argued that this is a feature of Childhood Studies that needs to be corrected.}

The result in both these fields is that the central concepts on which they rely tend to be undermined. Feminists have been caught between an inclination to deny that there are inherent differences between men and women, on the one hand, and an insistence on the distinctiveness and value of women’s experiences, on the other. The
same sort of tension seems to operate within Childhood Studies: in some respects differences between children and adults are played down, denying deficit views and promoting children’s right to adults’ rights; but on other occasions the differences between children and adults are emphasized, this being essential to the rationale for Childhood Studies as a distinct field. Furthermore, in the case of children, even more than that of women, treating ‘child’ as the key identity of those being studied appears to locate them firmly in the subordinate status that is assigned to being a child in most societies, and this is of particular significance when ‘child’ is defined, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as anyone up to the age of 18 – since it includes many ‘children’ who would regard themselves as adults.

It might be argued that a strategy for avoiding these problems is offered by the social model of disability (Oliver 1990, 1996; Barnes 2000). This reformulates disability as difference, and then presents the disadvantages experienced in current society by those with physical and other impairments as a product of that society’s failure to respect the differences involved: both by stereotyping those who are different as disabled, and therefore as incompetent in various ways, and by failing to provide those adjustments to social arrangements and the social landscape that would enable people with specific impairments to participate on the same terms as anyone else. Applying this model to the case of children would imply that they must be seen as different from adults but not deficient; and that they should be treated as having a right to equal participation (compared with adults) in decisions affecting them. They must not be stereotyped as incompetent, and arrangements must be made to enable them to exercise agency despite their differences from adults.

However, there are questions about how effective this argumentative strategy is even in relation to disability (see, for example, Shakespeare and Watson 2001). The concept of disability picks out precisely those differences that prevent one doing, or that make it difficult to do, some of what most people can do. It is hard to see what else the term ‘disability’ could mean. Equally, to turn disability into differences that must, as a matter of principle, be respected as legitimate variation, perhaps even as desirable, raises questions about why these differences should be remedied by compensatory measures. It is not that these questions are unanswerable, only that addressing them requires engagement with considerable complexities that qualify and thereby blunt the challenge that disability activism poses.

Much the same problems arise with the adult/child divide. But, aside from this, what is involved here is different from the disabled/non-disabled distinction because most children subsequently become adults, whereas those who have a disability do not usually become ‘able’ again in the relevant respect. Given this, attempting to deny the developmental character of the category ‘child’ seems futile. So, here, difference is necessarily reduced to ‘not yet adult’: it is difficult to formulate childhood in any other terms than degrees of competence or ability in relation to adult activities. Even more than in the case of disability, it is hard to see how the differences involved can be nullified, or why they should be. That these differences are matters of degree, that some adults are less competent in relevant respects than some children, is important to recognize – but it does not undercut the main point that ‘not yet adult’ is all that the term ‘child’ can mean. The upshot of this, as many representatives of Childhood Studies recognize at least in practice, is that if the problems associated with treating ‘child’ as a homogeneous category are to be overcome, contentious judgments have to
be made about the degree of relevant competence of particular children. But who should make these, on what grounds, and by what authority? These are questions which, I suggest, it is hard to find a basis for answering within the current framework of Childhood Studies.\textsuperscript{12}

**Childhood as socially constructed**

Turning to the second central commitment of the field of Childhood Studies, we should note that constructionism is an approach to be found across many areas in social science today, and that what it is taken to entail can vary considerably (Weinberg 2014; Burr 2015). As already noted, one core element of the idea that childhood is socially constructed seems to be that what it is to be a child differs quite dramatically across societies. Rejected here, then, is the idea that ‘child’ is a universal category, in the sense that what is most distinctive about children is what they all share: in short, the argument is that the character of childhood is socio-culturally variable rather than biologically fixed. As I noted earlier, while it is usually acknowledged that children are somewhat biologically different from adults, the implications of this are downplayed in order to counter the tendency to view children as distinctive entirely or primarily in terms of biological immaturity.\textsuperscript{13}

While this idea marks Childhood Studies off from much developmental psychology, with its attempt to identify universal patterns of development, there is clearly an overlap with Anthropology, and also with History.\textsuperscript{14} In these latter disciplines sociocultural variation in views about, and treatment of, children has been emphasized. At the same time, as I suggested in the previous section, the way this idea operates in these disciplines poses a threat to the first commitment of Childhood Studies, since it suggests that the lives of children must always be investigated in the context of the wider societies or historical periods in which they live; in other words, to a large extent in the context of adult cultural practices and forms of social organisation.

A second aspect of constructionism in the field of Childhood Studies is a tendency to regard any alleged deficiency on the part of children as being itself the product of adult stereotypes, either directly in simply misrepresenting the actual capabilities and motivations of children or indirectly through action based on these stereotypes which prevents them from exercising or developing the relevant capabilities. As I indicated earlier, this parallels arguments in the field of disability studies, but this kind of

\textsuperscript{12} By contrast, this can be and has long been done within developmental psychology, though of course in ways that are open to dispute: see for example Chandler and Chapman 1991. For other approaches to the issue of competence, see Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998).

\textsuperscript{13} The major motive behind this version of constructionism seems to be the idea that if childhood is socially constructed any impediments which the identity carries are changeable, by contrast with the fixity that it is assumed biology implies. However, this is a fundamental mistake: social arrangements can be very recalcitrant to change, and some biological characteristics are in fact changeable. Moreover, as noted earlier, children do typically turn into adults.

\textsuperscript{14} It is also important to recognize that some psychologists have been interested in cross-cultural variations, and that this has developed into what has come to be referred to as cultural psychology. See, for example, Kitayama, and Cohen 2010, and Serpell and Marfo 2015. As Prout (2005:51-2) reminds us, in the 1970s and 80s there were many psychologists who emphasized the importance of sociocultural variability, including those adopting ecological and Vygotskian perspectives.
constructionist argument also occurs in other fields, for example in the sociology of deviance and in the study of gender and ethnic differences in educational performance. It is a line of argument which certainly picks out social processes that may well take place and be of importance. However, when treated as a basic commitment that defines the field of Childhood Studies, there is a danger that the extent and effects of these processes will be exaggerated. Indeed, any call for evidence about the operation of such processes may come to be treated simply as itself at odds with commitment to the field. Yet, at the same time, few would deny that young children lack some of the capabilities that most adults have. The difficulty that arises is determining which ones and to what degree, as well as the causes of these differences. But the importance of this is obscured by arguments suggesting that the differences are socially constructed. The tendency is to assume that any suggestion of lack of capability or motivation on the part of children is not only false but also politically conservative.

A further problem is that, here, constructionism is being applied selectively: only to those phenomena that are regarded as undesirable. Yet the logic of the constructionist argument applies to all social phenomena. Thus it is not just childhood that must be seen as socially constructed but also, for example, children’s voices, their rights, etc. In fact, a constructionist approach could be applied to Childhood Studies itself, in the manner of those versions of the study of social problems that focus on how moral entrepreneurs identify particular issues as problematic, how they promote them up the public agenda, and so on (Holstein and Miller 1993). From this point of view, Childhood Studies comes to be seen as just such a social movement, concerned with constructing the current treatment of children as frequently unfair, abusive, etc, rather than simply documenting an already existing problem. An even more challenging constructionist move would be to apply the labeling theory of deviance, one of the earliest sociological forms of constructionism, to paedophilia. It is not hard to understand why there would be reluctance to push constructionism this far, but it is necessary to address the question of on what grounds its selective application can be justified (Foster et al 1996:ch1).

In some other fields, constructionism has sometimes gone beyond recognition of sociocultural variation and of the effects of stereotyping and differential treatment. At an ontological level, this involves rejection of any tendency to treat the perspectives, experiences, and actions of people as if they were phenomena existing in the world that are subject to the causal effects of social, cultural, and economic conditions, or the distorting effects of stereotypes and discriminatory practices. Instead, it is argued that actors contingently construct all social phenomena in and through their actions, or that phenomena are constituted by discursive processes, so that the focus

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15 This is common in Disability Studies, see Shakespeare and Watson 2001.
16 Selective application of constructionism is very common across many fields, see Woolgar and Pawluch 1985. A partial exception to this criticism in the Childhood Studies field is Jenks’ (2005) discussion of child abuse, in which he focuses on changes which have led to what was not previously treated as abuse being labeled as a major problem. However, he is keen to insist that his treatment of the ‘myth’ of child abuse is not intended to ‘prejudge or diminish the phenomenon’ or to ‘trivialise’ it (p88). While in ethical and political terms this may be all to the good, it raises questions about the status of his constructionist argument. See also Meyer 2007 and 2010.
17 For an excellent discussion of the distinctions that need to be made here, see Searle 1995.
of analysis must shift to those processes of constitution or construction by which phenomena come to be what they are taken to be.\textsuperscript{18}

While this radical kind of constructionism has not had much influence in Childhood Studies,\textsuperscript{19} it \textit{has} had a significant impact on the study of a context that is closely related to childhood: the family. Whereas at one time sociological research treated the family as a distinctive social form, or at least as a set of related forms – for example with a distinction being drawn between nuclear and extended families, or between traditional, modern and postmodern families – constructionism has challenged this whole approach. There has been a tendency to re-specify the focus of inquiry so that the primary concern is with how the concept of ‘family’ and its cognates (‘relative’, ‘kin’, etc) are used, along with the constitutive role that these concepts, and the discursive practices underpinning them, play in social life (Gubrium and Lynott 1985; Gubrium and Holstein 1990, Morgan 2011). If this more radical version of constructionism were to be applied in Childhood Studies, it would presumably require the focus of investigation to be shifted towards a concern with who is identified as a child in what interactional contexts, and how this is done. This would result in very different kinds of work from most of what currently makes up the field.\textsuperscript{20} It might include, for example, study of how those routinely categorized as children themselves deploy this and related categories in relation to themselves and others.

All this raises questions about the significance and effects of the commitment to social constructionism within the field of Childhood Studies, and why the form it takes here is less radical than in some other areas. It is also important to recognize that if a more comprehensive version of constructionism were adopted this would perhaps involve Childhood Studies being replaced by a more general discipline concerned with how social categories are applied and their constitutive role in social life, along the lines of ethnomethodology or some version of discourse analysis; or, alternatively, by a focus on the rhetoric employed in social science. Either way, this would represent a potential challenge to the existence of the field.

\textsuperscript{18} Some constructionist work is also concerned with the \textit{effects} of particular constructions, but a consistent constructionism would require effects also to be treated as constituted through action and/or discourse, rather than as causal products.

\textsuperscript{19} There have been some attempts to apply it in the study of youth groups, see for example Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995. However, these have not been the predominant approach even in that field.

\textsuperscript{20} Prout 2005:144 seems to suggest something like this, but without recognizing that it undermines the existence of Childhood Studies. Along the same lines, Oswell (2013:16) draws attention to the fact that the category ‘childhood’ constitutes a point of reference, mobilization and contestation and is only mobilised in particular situations’. Much of the work in the new approach to ‘family’ can itself be seen as a way-stage on the road to more radical forms of constructionism adopted by some ethnomethodologists or by those influenced by post-structuralism. The first would treat family simply as a ‘membership categorization device’ that people employ in talk-in-interaction. The second, in its full-blown form, would involve reflexive attention to how the analyst her or himself identifies ‘family practices’ or constitutes ‘family’ through discursive strategies. As already noted, there are important issues to be addressed here about how, or whether, stopping at way-stations on the constructionist road can be justified, as well as about what are the implications and costs of travelling all the way along it, or indeed of starting on it in the first place.
Children as active

The idea that children have agency – that they play an ‘active’ role in social life, or can exercise autonomy – has been a central theme in Childhood Studies. However, while agency has generally been treated as a positive feature, there has rarely been much clarity as to what it involves.21 Furthermore, agency is a complex concept, not least because it can be interpreted in both factual and normative terms; with the latter necessarily dependent on the former.

In factual terms, at a minimum what is involved is rejection of those models of human behavior that treat it as taking the form of fixed reactions to internal or external stimuli, whether theories appealing to instinct or those of a more behaviourist or socially determinist kind.22 As already noted, rejection of these models is characteristic of much developmental psychology, but Childhood Studies researchers view children’s behavior as primarily socio-cultural rather than psychological. And, while to some degree they share this with Anthropology and Sociology, as noted earlier they reject what they regard as the tendency for these disciplines to treat socialization as involving the internalization of norms or patterns of behavior: a form of socio-cultural determinism that they believe denies agency.

Yet there is a danger here of treating agency in a misleadingly dichotomous fashion: simply opposing a passive model of children in favour of one where they are wholly unconstrained or undetermined in their behaviour, and therefore can exercise autonomous will. The history of social science generally has witnessed frequent oscillation between these two poles, in various forms. A famous quotation from Marx – to the effect that people make history, but not in conditions of their own choosing – encapsulates recognition that neither extreme is satisfactory. And we might add that while people also make themselves to an important degree – this is, of course, a crucial part of Marx’s thesis – they also inherit a great deal. We can only make history, and ourselves, by drawing on the resources we have inherited, and by using these in the particular material circumstances that we face. This sophisticated middle position demands judgments about degrees of autonomy. So, in factual terms, children, like adults, must be seen as active in some respects and to some extent, but not in any absolute sense.

Some work in the field of Childhood Studies has recognised this, for example Robson et al. (2007a, 2007b) treat agency as a continuum, while Klocker (2007) has proposed a distinction between thin and thick agency, the former referring to situations where choice is limited to only two or three predefined options, the latter to decisions where a broad range of options is available. However, this seems to assume that agency is a property that varies along a single dimension, whereas there are good reasons for arguing that it is necessarily relational in character (Jamieson and Milne

21 Not all researchers concerned with children view the emphasis on agency in a positive light. For example Lancy (2012a:13) comments: ‘I find the child agency literature almost useless in terms of advancing understanding and, ultimately, improving the lives of children’. See also Lancy 2012b. It is worth noting that one aspect of agency is the idea of competence: part of the argument is that children are as competent as adults and therefore should not be barred from activities or subjected to provision or protection simply because of their status as children.

22 The distinction here is between theories that deal with reaction patterns that are fixed and unchanging and those that explain reactions to stimuli as the product of past patterns of reinforcement.
In judging whether or not children, or adults, are or should be autonomous, we must specify from what they are to be free and/or what they should be free to do: freedom in abstract is meaningless. The philosopher Immanuel Kant’s argument demonstrates this, since the whole point of ethical rationality, in his terms, is to free us from what we might naturally will as a result of instinct, socialization, etc; yet, at the same time, it involves subjugating ourselves to ‘rationality’. So, judgments about whether or not we are, or should be, free are always relative to what we want to do, might want to do, or ought to want to do. Given this, it is necessary to be explicit, in any particular case, about to what types of restriction, and/or to what possible courses of action, any particular claim to, or ascription of, freedom, autonomy, or agency relates; and what judgments underpin it about what would and would not be desirable goals or modes of choice-making.

Equally important in factual terms is to recognise that the freedom to engage in effective action of some kind often depends not just on opportunities but also on having the required cultural resources (Lancy 2012b). There are enabling conditions for the pursuit of many lines of action, for the exercise of freedom to engage in them. Yet, at the same time, the need to acquire resources, or even the possession of them, may operate as a constraint in relation to other goals, closing down other possibilities of action, because of scarcity of time and energy but also because some lines of action are incompatible.

Turning to the normative aspect of the idea that children are active not passive, this appeals to a powerful stream of modern Western thought that treats autonomy as a supreme value, perhaps even as the defining characteristic of human beings. Kant is representative of this position, albeit in a form in which autonomy is treated as isomorphic with rationality: for him, to be free is to act rationally. He argued that, while we usually regard the physical world as controlled by the operation of deterministic laws, this results from the perspective we adopt (and cannot avoid adopting) towards it, rather than from the nature of that world in itself (which we cannot know). By contrast, the ways we have of understanding human beings necessarily treat them as capable of exercising free will, indeed as able to govern their own behaviour on the basis of rational principles, thereby transcending the causal nexus in which physical science suggests they are enmeshed. This idea of autonomy as a defining feature of humanity has led, amongst other things, to later injunctions to resist the ways in which science has come to colonise the lifeworld, because it imports determinism. In his version of this argument Habermas (1987) appeals to a wider and more social conception of Reason than Kant, but it is even more common today for opposition to scientific determinism to be framed in terms of a notion of freedom that is closer to the Fichtean idea of creative self-determination or self-realisation. And it is ideas of this kind (typical of Romanticism – see Cranston 1994:29 and passim) which, I suggest, inform much discussion within Childhood Studies.

And subsequent criticism of Kant’s position, from Hegel onwards, has pointed out that any conception of rationality is socio-historically constituted.

For excellent discussions of the philosophical background to the concept of autonomy, see Farrell 1994 and Pippin 1999.
If autonomy is treated as involving the transcendence of all external, and indeed internal, constraints then any actual constraint must be regarded as restricting what it is to be human, and therefore as undesirable. In other words, this principle of autonomy prompts the immediate judgment that any identified or purported constraint is unnecessary and unacceptable. As a result, views that portray children as ‘passively responding’ to biological, psychological, and/or social determinants may be treated not only as factually inaccurate but also as politically or ethically unacceptable, on the grounds that policies and practices based upon them place constraints on the active potential that children have. Indeed it may be suggested that the promotion and prevalence of such views serves as a functional ideology that reinforces the subjugated position of children within society. So what is taken to be the core meaning of the principle of autonomy is that children not only have active potential to shape their own and others’ lives, but also that they have a right to exercise this, a right that must be respected.

That there are problems with the ideal of children’s (or, indeed, adult’s) autonomy, interpreted as freedom from all constraints, should be obvious. One of these is highlighted by what I referred to earlier as the sophisticated middle position on this issue, characteristic of Marx and others. From this point of view, as a matter of fact, the behaviour of children, like that of adults, will always be at least partly determined (by biology, social circumstances, local culture, etc), so that the ideal is unrealizable in anything approximating to a full sense. For example, the ‘voices’ of children, rather than being autonomous expressions of their authentic individual being, or even of their distinctive cultures, very often consist of the recycling and reworking of adult talk (see Maybin 2006).

Another problem is that, if we recognize children’s agency, then we must also recognize their responsibility: to the extent that they have agency they are potentially subject to blame as well as praise for their actions. Much discussion of children’s agency seems to neglect the fact that responsibility is the other side of this coin. Relatedly, the principle of respecting autonomy comes into conflict with other ideals, such as the avoidance of harm. And the latter takes on particular significance in the case of children because there are respects in which they may be more vulnerable than most adults. The case of children being ‘groomed’ into sexual relations by adults raises this issue in particularly sharp form, since the children involved often become strongly attached to these adults. So, in seeking to counter paedophile activity it is often necessary to deny the wishes of children (sometimes 16 or 17 year-olds) to make choices for themselves, on the grounds that these choices are not an expression of autonomy but of malign influence. But how is this to be decided and by whom?

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25 There are also problems with the way that the concept of children’s rights is employed, see Hammersley 2014.
Once again, these are questions that the field of Childhood Studies, as currently constituted, may not have the resources to answer.27

Even aside from conflict between autonomy and protection from harm, there is also the potential for conflict in applying the principle of autonomy on its own, since one person’s exercise of freedom almost always places limits on that of others. Hence, assertions of the rights of children have often prompted complaints that these infringe the rights of parents to make decisions in the best interests of their children, in the communal interest, or for that matter in their own interests (see, for example, Twum-Danso, 2009). There are genuine difficulties here that cannot be resolved solely through appeals to agency or autonomy, or even to some notion of equality. Instead, attention has to be given to what are and are not legitimate forms of autonomy (and responsibility); and this must be done in relation to both children and adults.

As all this makes clear, in the case of children, no less than with adults, there are issues about what people actually want to be free to do and what it is legitimate or desirable for them to be free to do. There are also questions about whether judgments about these matters should vary systematically according to whether the people concerned are children or adults, and how the boundaries of childhood ought to be defined. Declarations about the agency of children, of the kind to be found in the Childhood Studies literature, tend to obscure these issues, not least by reducing normative judgments to an apparently factual matter – the claim that children are ‘active’ or ‘agentic’.

Research methods

While a variety of methods of data collection and analysis have been employed in the field of Childhood Studies, these have been predominantly qualitative in character. One basic commitment here has been to the principle that the methods employed must allow the voices of children to be heard, whether this is through ethnography, open-ended interviewing, or asking them to make drawings, photographs or videos. Even putting aside the issue of whether children, as children, have distinctive, authentic voices, there are some problems with this, and especially with the more radical versions of the argument.

As I noted earlier, one of the criticisms made of psychologists’ use of the experimental method has been that it treats children as ‘subjects’, as if they were passive responders: it involves manipulating stimuli and observing what effect this has on their behavior. In other words, children are being treated as if they were similar to animals, or even to the sort of physical phenomena investigated by physicists and chemists.28 Similar criticisms have also been made of survey research, where responses are collected to highly structured and standardized questionnaires, again

27 For an attempt to address a similar issue in the context of women’s role in social and economic development, see Nussbaum 2001. However, it is significant that she draws on essentialist (rather than constructionist) ideas (see Nussbaum 1992). In my view no academic discipline can claim to answer the evaluative questions involved here with any distinctive authority. But, of course, many proponents of Childhood Studies do not fight shy of taking political or ethical stances.

28 Of course, in experimental research in psychology and other disciplines in this respect children are treated in more or less the same way as adults participating as subjects in such research.
relying upon some sort of stimulus-response model. It is such ideas that led many of those involved in Childhood Studies to adopt qualitative research methods.29

However, the idea that children have an active potential that is suppressed in the wider society, and that this should be respected, also led to modification of the usual forms of qualitative research. In particular, there has been an increasing trend towards privileging the use of participatory inquiry among an influential segment of those working in the field (Nind 2014). This requires children to be directly involved in making research decisions, perhaps even taking the lead or carrying out the research themselves (Kellett 2005). There is of course considerable scope for variation in what this amounts to in practice (Hart 2008; Nind 2011), and in most studies I suspect that adult researchers have played a supervisory role at the very least (see Kim 2015). Nevertheless, such participatory modes of inquiry are not only frequently seen as ethically preferable but also as performing an important political role by demonstrating that children have the competence to make important decisions. In addition, it is frequently assumed that through giving children a role in the research process this will lead to their interests being served, or at least protected.

As with feminism, this often reflects an insistence that relations between researcher and researched should be equalized. But there is also, of course, sometimes an emphasis on the need for children to be protected, on the grounds that they are more vulnerable than adults, not least because of their subjugated position within society. Moreover, much more strongly than in the case of most research with adults, this has sometimes been seen as extending to a responsibility on the part of researchers to protect children from threats coming from outside of the research process. However, it should be clear that there is a significant tension between these two commitments.

Often the proposal has been that the research itself should be designed to support children against the oppression they suffer, and to promote a transformation of society that would increase respect for their rights. On occasion, this has amounted to a kind of partisan inquiry similar to that which developed in the context of feminist research, and more widely in critical modes of social inquiry (see, for example, Bertram and Pascal 2012). However, generally speaking in Childhood Studies the politically directed character of the research is rarely linked to any explicit political strategy for mobilizing children in a campaign to demand their rights.30 Instead, it usually entails efforts to influence the various sorts of adult practitioner responsible for working with children – to try to ensure that they and others respect children’s rights.

While this could be interpreted as involving a performative contradiction – with adults acting on behalf of children rather than the latter claiming rights for themselves – participatory modes of inquiry clearly are in line with the commitment to respect children’s autonomy. Several justifications are offered for this kind of research, methodological as well as ethical and political. The methodological justification relates primarily to what is seen as the incapacity of adults to understand children, or

29 A similar predominant methodological preference is to be found in Women’s Studies. Of course, at the time when Childhood Studies arose, qualitative methods were already becoming the dominant approach in many fields of social research, in the UK at least.
30 Interestingly a campaign of this kind did occur in the late 1960s and early 70s in the UK, in close association with the radical student movement at this time.
at least their considerable difficulties in doing this: child participation is believed to increase the likely validity of the findings. It may also be argued that equalised relations between researcher and researched produce richer and more illuminating data. In addition, various political justifications are put forward: participation in research may be presented as a right, often through appeal to the UNCRC (see Hammersley 2015); or it may be argued that research must be ‘democratised’, and that participation of children in research decisions is an essential part of this. More specifically, as we have seen, it may be claimed that children must be in control of research in order to ensure that it serves their interests, and does not reproduce wider inequalities. Finally, the ethical justification for privileging participation seems to treat it as an extension of informed consent, being designed to realise the ideal of autonomy more closely. In these terms, participatory inquiry may be regarded as ‘ethically superior’ (Nind 2014:29).

In my view, none of these arguments is convincing.\(^{31}\) Indeed, I question whether participatory inquiry, especially where it is child-led, is a research method at all, though it may well have value as a pedagogic and/or as a political strategy. In methodological terms, I think it is important to recognise that social research is a specialised activity that demands knowledge and skills that a very small proportion of adults – and hardly any children – have; and ones that cannot be acquired quickly. Much depends here, of course, on how we define ‘social research’ and by what criteria we assess its products. But, at the very least, in terms of how it has come to be institutionally defined, whether in practical forms such as the work of polling organisations or applied research agencies, or in academic terms as judged for example in the UK’s Research Excellence Framework or through PhD examinations, it requires a high level of expertise. To ignore this threatens the quality of research. Research involves responsibilities, both as regards seeking to ensure the validity of the findings and respecting ethical considerations – and researchers must be in control of research decisions if they are to live up to these responsibilities (Dyson and Meagher 2001).

Focusing specifically on the methodological rationale for participatory inquiry, it is certainly the case that adults may face challenges in understanding children and their lives, because children do often have different perspectives and experiences from adults. However, I think it is a mistake to assume that adults cannot gain any understanding of children’s lives, or indeed to assume that children find it any easier to understand one another (Tisdall 2012; Kim 2015). There are no good reasons for assuming that there are insurmountable barriers to understanding other people. If we were to do this it would undercut not only the whole of social science, but also social life itself. After all, if we believe that different categories of person cannot understand one another, the intersectionality of identities effectively implies that only each individual can understand her or himself. And there are even questions about whether such self-knowledge is possible, or at least whether it carries any epistemic privilege.\(^{32}\)


\(^{32}\) See Gallacher and Gallagher 2008. There is a further issue here: the notion of ‘understanding others’ implies some sort of comprehensive grasp of their lives and experience. Yet, all attention is selective, even that of people reflecting on their own lives and experience. In line with this, research is necessarily a matter of answering particular research questions, never of understanding others in some total or absolutely comprehensive sense.
The political rationales for the superiority of participatory inquiry seem to assume that the rights of children extend unproblematically to include participation in controlling research about themselves. However, the appeal to the UNCRC here is very questionable (Hammersley 2014). Furthermore, in my view, adults no more have a right to participate in research than do children. To believe that they do would imply that, to take extreme examples, if one were studying child abusers or members of racist political parties they would have a right to control any research concerned with them. If it is said that this right only applies to oppressed groups, or to those judged worthy in some other way, how is it to be determined who comes into this category; and who is to decide this? Both paedophiles and racists may well see themselves as marginalised and oppressed. And we can hardly appeal to a consensus about who is and is not oppressed, because there is unlikely to be general agreement in most societies that children are an oppressed group.

Similarly, as regards the appeal to democracy, it seems to be assumed that what this term means is obvious and that democracy is always desirable. Yet, there are many different interpretations of what democracy entails, and much dispute about the advantages and disadvantages of its various forms (Held 1996; Saward 2003; Brennan 2016). Often the ideal assumed by advocates of participatory inquiry seems to be equal participation in decision-making. But this is a feature of hardly any extant form of political democracy, which raises questions about its viability. Moreover, there are also doubts about its desirability: it is likely to produce inconsistency in policies over time and across cases, and it involves a diffusion of responsibility for decisions that can lead to a lack of accountability. This is another reason why participation, of the kinds advocated, may not lead to good research.

Equally problematic is the idea that children must participate in research decisions in order to ensure that these serve their interests, and do not reinforce existing inequalities. There are questions here about whether all children (or most people) know best what is in their own interests, and whether all inequalities are inequities. But, even aside from this, I want to challenge the idea that research can be done ‘for’ someone, in other words ‘in the interests’ of a ‘beneficiary’. The distinctive purpose of research is to produce knowledge. It may well be that some kinds of knowledge will be of more benefit to some groups or categories of people, rather than to others, in some circumstances. But since we do not know what the findings of any research project are going to be in advance, or about the circumstances of their dissemination, it will always be uncertain whom they are likely to favour. There are no fixed relationships here: it is not uncommon for researchers to discover that their findings have been used to serve quite different purposes from those they anticipated, and perhaps ones of which they disapprove. Unfortunately, it is a feature of research that we cannot know who will or will not benefit from any particular study, or even from research in a whole field, however much we may claim to be offering particular sorts of practical or political benefit.

Finally, the ethical justification for participatory inquiry also faces problems. One is that it treats respect for others’ autonomy as the primary ethical principle, when there are other important principles underpinning research ethics; and, taken together, these can have conflicting implications in particular situations (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). Moreover, if any one of them is to be prioritised, surely it should
be the minimising of harm. Nor does respecting individual autonomy necessarily achieve this – indeed, it can have the effect of shifting responsibility for harm away from the researcher on to participants. There is also the problematic character of the principle of autonomy itself, as noted earlier: indeed, it is often criticised for being a western liberal ideal, or as masculinist – it has little place, for example, in feminist relational ethics.\textsuperscript{33} This should not lead us to dismiss it, but it does indicate that it is not all-important, and that it needs careful interpretation.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have examined the central themes constituting the paradigm that forms the basis for treating Childhood Studies as an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary field. These included: the idea that children should be studied ‘in their own right’; that a constructionist approach ought to be adopted in studying childhood; that children must be seen as agents rather than as passively responding to internal or external factors; and that participatory forms of inquiry are the gold standard in studying children. While some of these assumptions can undoubtedly be very fruitful, I have argued that they involve inconsistencies and tensions that vitiate their capacity to form a coherent and effective approach. In other words, this ‘new paradigm’ is subject to fundamental antinomies that threaten its integrity.\textsuperscript{34}

Aside from this, however, we should also consider how far this paradigm is in fact interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in character. Writing in the context of legal studies, Balkin (1996:952) claims that ‘interdisciplinarity results when different disciplines try to colonize each other’, and that it lasts only as long as stalemate continues or until colonization succeeds. Certainly, it seems that, in large part, the establishment of Childhood Studies entailed an attempted colonization, by newer anthropological and sociological approaches, of a field previously dominated by psychological, biological, and medical forms of inquiry. Indeed, as we have seen, its constitutive assumptions are directly opposed to key commitments of these other disciplines.

So, while it is true that the establishment of Childhood Studies facilitated interchange among anthropology, sociology, history, cultural studies, and human geography, this was based on the erection of clearly marked and strongly defended boundaries against the disciplines that already dominated the area to be colonised.\textsuperscript{35} This tends to confirm Fish’s (1994) argument that interdisciplinary claims always result in the establishing of a new set of boundaries, that they are quixotic. He writes:

> In short, if we take seriously the epistemological argument in the context of which the gospel of interdisciplinary study is so often preached, we will come

\textsuperscript{33} See Boyden 1997; Stainton Rogers 2009; and Lancy 2012a. On feminist relational ethics, see for example Bowden 1997
\textsuperscript{34} Lee 2001:ch3 has identified some other tensions within the paradigm.
\textsuperscript{35} Prout (2005:84) notes that the new studies of childhood – of which he was one of the pioneers – shifted the emphasis entirely from the biological to the social. Thorne (2007) claims that there has been a wall of silence between Childhood Studies and Developmental Psychology; though, while it is certainly true that there is a significant barrier here, it is not the case that there have been no fruitful contacts at all. See, for example, Jessor et al 1996.
to the conclusion that being interdisciplinary – breaking out of the prison houses of our various specialities to the open range first of a general human knowledge and then of the employment of that knowledge in the great struggles of social and political life – is not a possible human achievement. (Fish 1994:237)

One reason why interdisciplinarity may not be possible is that different disciplines necessarily adopt perspectives that foreground some matters and background others (Gluckman and Devons 1964). However, in the promotion of Childhood Studies and other transdisciplinary movements, what is also involved is a conflict in political and ethical value commitments, and this may be even more intractable.

Interestingly, a recent ‘new wave’ (Ryan 2011) within the field of Childhood Studies claims to be erasing the boundary with psychology and biology, in other words abandoning the ‘bio-social dualism’ upon which even the new social studies of childhood had relied (see Prout 2005 and Lee and Motzkau 2011). However, if we look more closely we find that the terms in which this is to be done are drawn largely from only one side of the divide, indeed from yet another ‘new approach’ within social science: what has been referred to as the ‘new vitalism’ or ‘new materialism’ (see Fraser et al 2006; Olma and Koukouzelis 2007; Fox and Alldred 2015). In my view, there is little sign here of proper engagement with current psychological or biological work, on its own terms. While a few Childhood Studies writers have given psychology and biology sympathetic attention, this has typically been done from the perspective of social theory. Thus, Lee (2005) discusses the writings of some past psychologists – Freud, Piaget, Gilligan, Winnicot, and Vygotsky – and his primary concern is with their role in the rise of developmentalism and the separation of adults from children, and above all with how their work can be used to develop a theory about secular change in the valuation of children. And in this project he relies heavily on actor network theory and the work of Deleuze. Along the same lines, Lee and Motzkau (2011) adopt a Foucauldian approach to biopolitics and a Deleuzian interest in ‘multiplicities’ in their attempt to find an alternative to biosocial dualism and thereby to overcome disciplinary boundaries in the study of childhood. Much the same is true of Oswell’s (2013:ch2 and passim) discussion of the agency of children. Prout (2005:4) is unusual among Childhood Studies writers in discussing theories in social biology, notably work in primatology. However, his attempt to integrate this into an ecological model seems little more than a mapping exercise in that it fails to deal with the problem of competing disciplinary perspectives. Moreover, much of his discussion is framed within an epistemological perspective that is currently influential in the humanities and some parts of social science, but is not common amongst natural scientists. Indeed, they are accused of retaining ‘faith in science as a neutral, objective and fact-producing process’, believing that it is able to ‘“chip away” at problems until they are solved’ (p92). Yet what form of empirical inquiry would not have the aim of producing facts, and would not assume that progress towards this is possible? Following Latour (1993), Prout also dismisses the conception of nature underpinning biology as ‘modernist’ (pp42-3).37

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36 There is a contrast in this respect with, for example, the work of Lancy 2008 and Hrdy 2009.

37 While berating modernism for relying on dichotomies, he relies heavily on the misleading binary traditional/modern.
As I argued in the Introduction, social science disciplines are partial perspectives framed in terms of distinctive sets of values. This is because they are idiographic rather than nomothetic in character, and therefore rely upon value-relevance frameworks to select and formulate the phenomena they study. Moreover, since the multiple values that inform Western societies carry potentially conflicting implications, these frameworks are at odds with one another. As we have seen, the Childhood Studies paradigm is in conflict with both developmental psychology and anthropological or sociological investigations of socialization. 38

Because no single, internally consistent, set of practical value principles is available, these three disciplinary perspectives (and others) can only operate as lenses that anyone with an interest in children or childhood can adopt. Moreover, in dealing with policies and practices relating to children it will probably be necessary to adopt several perspectives, differentially, to deal with particular issues. The task of researchers working in each of these disciplines is to show what these perspectives can reveal about the nature of children’s lives, not to proselytize, as if their own perspective represented the only true one. Each perspective will obscure as much as it reveals, so that proselytising can be no more than an attempt to promote the interests of a particular discipline at the expense of the others. And in practical terms this will be counterproductive, since it privileges one set of values over others that will usually also need to be taken into account.

In light of all this, I suggest that there needs to be rather more clarity about the character and purpose of Childhood Studies, and about its relationship to the whole range of disciplines concerned with children’s lives, as well as to the diverse forms of practice that deal with children. Many researchers engaged in this field are committed to bringing about policies and practices that are of practical benefit to children; indeed, for some this may be its entire rationale. Ironically, in this respect there is continuity with much psychological and medical work in the area. But the values involved on the two sides are very different. Indeed, proponents of Childhood Studies often seem to assume that psychological, biological, and medical approaches necessarily have regressive political and practical effects, and a similar accusation sometimes comes from the other side.

There are clearly questions about how well-founded the practical, ethical, and political commitments being relied upon here are, as well as about what role they should play in academic research and teaching (LeVine 2003:5). Unfortunately, rather than being subject to explicit examination, these commitments tend either to be treated as matters of fact or to be proffered in polemical terms that neglect the problems associated with concepts that are central to them, such as ‘agency’, ‘social construction’, or ‘participation’. A more cautious and reflective approach is required.

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38 Developmentalism is concerned with the features of human nature and how they develop, whereas socialisation theory is concerned with how particular cultures are reproduced, generating diversity in belief, attitude, and practice among human beings.


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