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SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF CHILDREN
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CHILDHOOD, YOUTH AND ACTIVISM

Demands for Rights and Justice from Young People and their Advocates

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CHAPTER 1

ACTIVISM, RIGHTS AND HOPE: YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR ADVOCATES MOBILISING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This opening chapter of the edited volume, Childhood, Youth and Activism: Demands for Rights and Justice from Young People and Their Advocates, *explores activism and advocacy – by and for children and young people. It begins by considering how activism has been understood in the scholarly literature, before making a case for a broad and inclusive conceptualisation of what counts as this particular form of social action. Relatedly, it examines the contours of the relationship between activism and advocacy, drawing attention to the ways in which these concepts converge, an issue that is particularly salient when applied to the categories of child and youth. Themes that emerge in research on child and youth activism are then drawn out and we identify some of the key issues that animate this work across various disciplines. These include observations that young people have long been central to social movements, the role of social media in youth activism, the nature of child and adult relationships in social movement organisations, and some of the issues that arise for young activists in relation to intersectional identities. To this we add debates regarding the politics of recognition, questions of voice and agency,*

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and responsibility and their temporal registers. This discussion also foreshadows themes that emerge in the chapters across this volume. Finally, we offer a reflection on some of the conceptual issues raised when considering the book in its entirety, including those of voice, responsibility for the future, the politics of possibility and hope, and the many different forms and practices that activism and advocacy for and by young people take.

Keywords: Activism and advocacy; child rights and the UNCRC; politics of hope; everyday activism; youth citizenship; voice and agency

INTRODUCTION

In a time of ongoing global instability and the emergence of new fault lines of social inequality generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, questions related to the rights of children and young people have become increasingly pressing (Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Khan, 2022). From uncertain futures arising from the climate crisis to concerns about regressive and reactionary politics and to widespread experiences of harassment, abuse and violence, young people and their advocates are working hard and in diverse ways to have their voices heard and to instigate change (Bessant & Lohmeyer, 2021). Across different geographical regions and historical periods, children and young people have asserted their rights and mobilised for justice (Earl et al., 2017; Stone, 2021). Such mobilisations have been fundamental to social and political initiatives aimed at improving the lives of children and young people, their communities, wider societies and the planet. Forward-looking visions for a better future, with freedom from violence, protection from harm, access to equal opportunities and environmental sustainability for the next generations have been provoked by growing recognition of inequities, past wrongs, abuses of power, indifference and, importantly, the belief that alternative futures are possible (Gieseler, 2019; Nairn, 2019; Wright & Henry, 2019).

Our focus in this edited volume is on practices of activism and advocacy and the ideals that underlie and animate them. In part, this is characterised by the politics of redress and claiming justice but also and crucially by a politics of possibility, a sustaining understanding that circumstances might be otherwise. Activism embodies an enormous sense of hope and agency, underpinned by the conviction that ordinary people can make change happen (Rigney, 2018). It is also inflected with a strong sense of responsibility – for the future, for the plight of others and for the upholding or assertion of particular values and ethical positions (Nairn et al., 2021). As the chapters in this volume illustrate, the ways in which young people and their advocates participate in change-making processes is wide-ranging. For children and youth who, due to their age, are excluded from formal political processes such as voting, other forms of political participation and social action are the only available options. Such political engagement encompasses organised forms of mobilisation typically associated with social movements, such as protests and street marches, but it can also include seemingly small, or mundane and everyday acts that might not immediately be recognisable as a form

of activism, such as support for particular causes or resistance against perceived inequities in young people's everyday lives (Horton & Kraftl, 2009).

This opening chapter begins with an overview of activism in its different forms and its relationship to advocacy and child rights, the latter being fundamental but not always theorised in relation to young people's political engagement and related forms of adult support. We then explore the scholarly field, comprising studies of child and youth activism in various disciplines, and provide a summary of some of the key areas of research interest across these fields. These include observations that young people have long been central to social movements, the role of social media in youth activism, the nature of child and adult relationships in social movement organisations and some of the issues that arise for young activists in relation to intersectional identities and structural barriers to participation. While not exhaustive, this overview is intended to highlight some of the concerns and debates that animate the wider field. It also foreshadows themes that emerge in the chapters across this volume. Finally, we offer a reflection on some of the conceptual issues raised when considering the volume in its entirety, including those of voice, responsibility for the future, the politics of possibility and hope, and the many different forms and practices that activism and advocacy for and by young people takes.

ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY, RESPONSIBILITY AND HOPE

We have adopted a broad and inclusive definition of activism that encompasses both large-scale organised forms of social action, such as protests, political lobbying and speaking out. But critically, we also include small-scale initiatives and everyday activities aimed at instigating change at local levels and which have the potential to resonate more broadly. Central to the conceptualisation of activism is political and civic participation, notably those forms which are prompted by concerns with injustice and aimed at enacting change (Cammaerts, 2007; Clark, 2017). The Oxford English Dictionary defines activism as: 'active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity' and 'the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change' (Oxford University, 2023).

Definitions of activism, as Cammaerts (2007, p. 217) suggests, centre around the intersection of 'agency and makeability of society'. Similarly, Mihailidis (2019, p. 1) notes that activism is 'closely related to concepts around voice, agency, and participation', all of which feature strongly in chapters across this volume. Activism may be confrontational or disruptive, it can take the form of public protests or civil disobedience, and it occurs across all spheres of social life, in public and in private, in physical and in online spaces. It is perhaps most readily associated with direct action, often with grassroots engagement aimed at enacting progressive reform. It can also take reactionary and conservative forms, where the aim is resisting change, rather than agitating for it. Thus activism can be aligned to both progressive and regressive forms of politics (Earl et al., 2017).

Many types of activism are clear and easily identifiable–think, for example, of mass mobilisations such as street marches and large organised protests. Yet, there are less visible forms of civic engagement that scholars also understand as activism. Bakardjieva (2009, p. 92) uses the term *subactivism* to describe 'a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life'. This includes modest or small choices, individual decisions that people make in their everyday lives, informed by their political and/or ethical views, with an intention to make change. Such micro-forms of social action are, as Bakardjieva notes, not easily captured by conventional definitions of activism and political engagement. Subactivism, according to this definition, 'is a refraction of the public political arena in the private and personal world' (Bakardjieva, 2009, p. 92). Horton and Kraftl (2009) describe similar processes using the concept of *implicit activism*. They suggest that 'social scientists' accounts of 'activism' have too often tended to foreground and romanticise the grandiose, the iconic and the unquestionably *meaning*-ful.' (p. 14). This focus, they argue, excludes the small-scale, as well as personal and interpersonal acts that reflect political commitments to change, an idea that has been increasingly taken up in more recent scholarship, including in chapters across this volume.

Closely related to activism in its various forms is advocacy. While activism is usually defined as direct forms of action aimed at social or political change, advocacy typically involves promoting and supporting an individual, a group or a cause through speaking out, education and strategic communication (BOND, 2005). It involves using information to influence individuals, organisations or governments to bring about desired social or policy objectives, raise awareness or address specific issues. This is often done by one group on behalf of another, such as advocacy organisations pushing for the rights of their constituents, but it can also occur more informally, for example, adults advocating on behalf of children (Pithouse & Crowley, 2007). Advocacy is usually viewed as a less confrontational form of politics and less threatening than activism, insofar as the form it takes is typically support for a particular cause or social issue, undertaken, for example, via public education campaigns and political lobbying for policy reform.

Yet, as the chapters in this volume show, both activism and advocacy are significant forms of political participation and the distinctions between them are not always clear. Moreover, advocacy takes on a particular salience when it comes to children and young people, given that their voices are often not heard, and their political agency not recognised. For children in particular, the advocacy of adults can be essential to ensuring their protection and the safeguarding of their rights (Pithouse & Crowley, 2007). And this is the focus on advocacy addressed in this volume – advocacy on behalf of and in the interests of children and young people.

Activism and advocacy by and on behalf of children and youth has occurred amid growing recognition that young people are a social group with a particular set of rights that have been enshrined in legally binding international treaties and frameworks. While the child rights movement has its roots in the 19th century, linked to the introduction of policies to safeguard children and the establishment

of organisations concerned with child welfare, it was 20th century developments that saw the concept of child rights first clearly articulated through international declarations and conventions (Bendo, 2020). This began with the little known 1918 Moscow Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which was affirmed in the 1924 League of Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and pushed further in the 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which led to the most recent and influential declaration, the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Cohen, 1990). The UNCRC remains the principal framework for the articulation of children's human rights and is 'the most highly ratified of the international human rights treaties in the world' (Woodhead, 2010, p. x).

As Parkes (2013) and others have noted, the UNCRC reflected a major shift away from a primarily welfare-centred model of protection towards a more holistic child-centred approach that conceptualises children as active participants, including in relation to decisions that affect them. The core components of the UNCRC are often described as the 'three ps' – protection, provision and participation, a framework that Quennerstedt (2010) argues focusses attention and research on some areas, while obscuring others. Noting the distinction between the ways in which human rights and child rights are commonly viewed, Quennerstedt underscores the point that the 'three ps' signal a departure from terminology typically used in relation to human rights, namely civil, political and social rights. A major concern for Quennerstedt (2010) is that the terminology of protection-provision-participation lacks theoretical rigour, particularly when considered alongside those categories used to describe human rights in general, thus calling into question the extent to which child rights can be accurately understood as simply an extension of human rights. That is, the language of rights can have different political inflections, despite commonalities such as notions of universality and obligations to ensure the expression and protection of those rights.

As the chapters in this volume illustrate, the claiming of rights is central to youth activism and adult advocacy for children. In adopting a view of activism and advocacy as ranging from the highly visible and spectacular to the modest and mundane, we aim to avoid creating any (unintended) hierarchies between types of activism that matter or to valorising some and misrecognising others. Importantly, this gives attention to the diverse contexts (geographical, cultural, institutional and community) in which grassroots activism is possible and the capacities of various social actors and collectivities to effectively navigate these spaces. Even seemingly small social acts of support and resistance are strands in a highly intricate tapestry of how social change happens. In this sense, we are interested too in the ways in which the 'kindred concepts' of activism and advocacy intersect, for example, when advocacy on behalf of children in the present and the future is also a form of rights-based activism for redress of wrongs that occurred in the past.

Analysis of child and youth activism brings to the surface many political and theoretical concerns, intersecting as it does with a gamut of scholarly and social reform traditions. Many of these are explored in depth in the chapters that follow,

elaborated with reference to specific case studies and examples. We highlight three clusters of issues that are particularly critical in analyses of childhood and youth activism. First, the politics of recognition (Fraser, 2000; Taylor, 1994), which encompasses how young people's rights and activism are recognised formally and informally. It pertains as well to how young people themselves see and recognise their acts of justice claiming and, in turn, how that is recognised and made intelligible in the public sphere as a legitimate form of political expression oriented to change-making. Here, we see activism as expressed across a continuum, from everyday practice to more publicly visible protests, and recognition of this is fundamental to the efficacy of activism. That is, the politics of recognition refers not simply to a matter of seeing or noticing but speaks to the acknowledgement of legitimacy – of the action, the complaint, the right to justice – that is politically enabling.

Second, the concept of voice, which is a popular and much-debated issue in sociologies of education, youth and childhood. It has been criticised for romanticising participation, failing to acknowledge the constraints and structural barriers regulating who can speak and who is listened to, operating as another means of governing student participation, and for tendencies to confuse voice as something that is 'given by others' to otherwise disempowered peoples, rather than itself the expression of rights and agency (Fielding, 2007; Mayes, 2020; McLeod, 2011). These aspects of voice all circle around debates concerning young people's activism and political participation. While we are not proposing a consensus view, we are arguing that the discourse of voice needs to be made problematic in the manner proposed by Bacchi (2009), such that the different mobilisations of voice are made more visible. This includes attention to how voice works in youth-led activism, for example, compared to the work it does in advocacy, where advocates seek to give expression to the voice of, or act on behalf and for others.

Third, and relatedly are questions of responsibility and its temporal dimensions. By this we mean how activism and advocacy are both animated by a sense of responsibility to others but also to collective futures. This involves broad commitments to social justice through attempts to remake the world in ways that are better for those who are children today and people who are yet to be born. For example, and most immediately, climate activism in the present to protect the future of the planet and those who will inhabit it (Nairn et al., 2021). Or acting and advocating in the present fuelled by a responsibility to remedy abuse and violations in the past which continue to live on in the present – culturally, generationally and biographically (Wright, 2020). Such acts of responsibility are also infused by a politics of possibility and practices of hope for other futures, an argument we return to below. Finally, our discussion is informed by the widely held understanding that childhood and youth are historically and socially constructed categories – a position also underpinning several of the chapters. Recognising the contingency and invented-ness of these categories does not, however, diminish the imperative to recognise the specific and pressing circumstances shaping young people's lives today and how that drives the types of activism in which they are engaged.

THEMES FROM THE RESEARCH FIELD

Scholarly attention to child and youth activism has increased in parallel with the rising visibility of young people's political participation in the public sphere. Youth activism related to particular social issues has ebbed and flowed over time, rising in waves, for example, anti-war activism in the 1960s and beyond, mobilisations for Civil Rights, responses to emerging episodes of global conflict, and social tensions arising from the exposure of wrongdoing, abuses of power and shifting norms related to social and personal identities. Given the breadth of activity traversing many fields of inquiry – politics, education, youth studies, sociology and child studies – research is dispersed across disciplines and embedded in different bodies of research literature (Earl et al., 2017). While this makes characterising the field a challenge, it points to the broad scope of agendas in play and here we canvass some key themes that emerge in scholarship concerned with young people's political participation.

First, as Earl et al. (2017, p. 2) observes, social movement theorists have long noted that young people have been fundamental to social change activism and the rise and organisation of social movements. Reflecting on activism related to key social issues in the USA and beyond, they remind us that: 'Student contributions include (but are not limited to) the New Left, the Free Speech movement, lunch counter sit-ins to push for desegregation, campus campaigns for anti-apartheid divestment, anti-sweatshop activism, the DREAMers, and Black Lives Matter' (Earl et al., 2017, p. 2). University and college campuses, with their concentrations of educated young people, have been a key site historically for progressive politics, and concomitant youth mobilisations aimed at social reform. The Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam war movements of the mid- to late-20th century are just two examples of ways in which students organising for social change has been pivotal. More recently, demands to address the climate crisis and to end gendered and sexual violence have taken centre stage. Lakind (2022, p. 9) observes that youth activism, particularly that related to the School Strikes for Climate, 'has become a formidable force in the global social and political landscape'. Undeniably, the environmental crisis is one of the most pressing issues of our time and while activism related to this is especially prominent it should not eclipse other forms of activism.

Social media has brought a greater spotlight to the political mobilisation of children and young people, while itself being a key mechanism through which 21st century activism has been enacted. Velasquez and LaRose (2015) note that the links between social media use and political participation have been the subject of extensive scholarly interest, with some research findings suggesting that online social media platforms are the preferred means of youth political engagement. Perhaps not surprisingly, there appears to be a high variability in children's and young people's online political engagements (Keating & Melis, 2017). While online forms of social action have been dismissed as *clicktivism* and *slacktivism*, Piat (2019, p. 162) notes that 'it is known that small online acts of participation are strongly correlated with grander offline acts of participation'. Research has also shown that social media use can play a powerful role in the political socialisation

of young people by exposing them to political issues and opinions, and providing an outlet for related discussion (Boulianne, 2015; Xenos et al., 2014). Political socialisation itself is identified as an important domain of research on youth activism (Earl et al., 2017).

The relationships between young people and adults in social movements is another critical focus of scholarly analysis. Youth oriented social movement organisations are often viewed by young people as adult-centric and not sufficiently attuned to the needs, concerns and agency of children and youth (Taft, 2015; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Indeed, within activist and advocacy organisations, the marginalisation of young people, based on their age and relative lack of social power, has been identified as an important issue and a barrier to meaningful youth engagement. As Taft (2015) notes: 'Spaces for children's participation are embedded within a larger social context of age-based inequality in which the intergenerational habitus is one in which adults speak and children listen'. The risk of ageism and the amplification of adults' voices over those of children and young people is a constant issue in social movement organisations, even those that have an explicit youth focus (Earl et al., 2017).

Another key area of scholarly analysis is research on what Earl et al. (2017) describe as youth activism and intersectional identities. While accepting this point broadly, we believe it is important to distinguish between the idea of all identities as intersectional and identities where particular intersectionalities are socially privileged or valorised and those that are socially maligned or marginalised. Both positionings are relevant to understanding youth activism and the politics of inclusion and representation, but it is the latter which concerns us here. Building mobilisations according to age-related categories such as child or youth activism is powerful and gives voice and recognition to interests often not heard or acknowledged in the public sphere. But this does not mean that these are necessarily inclusive and welcoming spaces for all young people. Moreover, responses or resistance to youth movements can be differentiated along gender, class and race axes, among others. Girls and young women, for example, experience particularly abusive forms of backlash and resistance, especially when it relates to feminist activism (Mendes et al., 2019). In movements against racial injustice and for young people of colour, there are particular risks that arise through activism and social movement participation, including deportation for refugee and undocumented young people, as well as criminalisation and incarceration (Earl et al., 2017).

According to Elliott et al. (2017), there are barriers to participation that stem from social movement organisations not typically engaging in inclusive and intersectional recruitment strategies. As with other marginalised identities, LGBTQIA+ young people face particular challenges, especially when mobilising for social justice in educational settings (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Russell et al., 2010). Opportunities to participate in activism can thus be structurally differentiated, or even potentially reproduce broader patterns of identity/group marginalisation. In other words, simply activating the category of the 'child' or 'youth' as a site for political mobilisation/activity does not in itself solve broader