

Searching for the everyday in African childhoods: introduction

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Abstract: Much attention on childhoods and children's lives in sub-Saharan Africa has focused on marginalised childhoods or children living in difficult circumstances. While the focus of these studies is valid, they have arguably contributed to portraying African childhoods in a rather negative and pessimistic light. Such an overwhelming focus on the challenges that much of the continent and its peoples face is problematic not least because it becomes the focus of many of the publications that are produced about the continent which are, then, in turn, consumed not only by academic colleagues, but also by students and other members of the public. The resulting outcome, then, is that the knowledge that is produced and then consumed about childhoods in sub-Saharan Africa by those living elsewhere is one which is characterised by lacks. Therefore, this special issue on African childhoods seeks to counter such dominant narratives that exist relating to childhoods and children's lives in sub-Saharan Africa and instead, foreground the mundane and everyday existence of a range of children's lives. By adopting such an approach this special issue contributes to illustrating the multiplicity of childhoods that exist on the continent. It is our hope that this will, in turn, highlight the pluralities of contemporary African childhoods and facilitate the process of moving beyond a one-dimensional understanding of childhoods and children's lives in the region.

Keywords: childhood/children's lives, the everyday, mundanities of children's lives, Afro pessimism, sub-Saharan Africa.

Note on the authors: see end of article.

Introduction

Dominant portrayals of African childhoods: challenging a narrative of lacks

In recent decades there has been a proliferation of publications focusing on childhoods and children's lives in sub-Saharan Africa which have contributed to expanding understandings of childhoods globally. However, much of this literature on children's lives on the continent has focused on marginalised childhoods or children living in difficult circumstances (Punch 2003; Ensor 2012; Ansell 2016; Twum-Danso Imoh 2016). A review of literature focusing on children's lives in Africa reveals the extent to which the lives of street children, child workers, HIV/AIDS orphans, and child migrants, often unaccompanied, feature as key themes. Focusing on such challenges is not invalid or unwarranted. Given that Africa remains the poorest continent in the world today, it is important to interrogate, investigate and shed light on the challenges many children face in the region, the reasons behind them and possibly indicate interventions required in order to improve the outcomes for children and their families. Indeed, influencing social policy either locally or globally has to be understood as a primary motivation behind such depictions of African childhoods.

However, at the same time as recognising the need to focus on the challenges many children face on the continent, it must be acknowledged that the publications that foreground these portrayals and experiences, and the attendant studies upon which they are based, have arguably contributed to portraying African childhoods in a rather negative and pessimistic light. This is supported by others including Ensor (2012: 21) who states:

The limited corpus of reliable research on Africa's youngest citizens has tended to adopt a negative outlook. Given Africa's turbulent realities, this pessimistic viewpoint is not entirely unwarranted, but [such generalizations] fails to acknowledge encouraging current trends towards brighter possibilities.

In some instances, a pessimistic slant on Africa-centred research has been positively demanded in some circles. Punch (2015) refers to the experience of human geographer, Matthew Benwell, who undertook his PhD research on children's outdoor mobilities in a middle-class suburb in Cape Town, South Africa (see Benwell 2009). As he presented his research in various fora in the years after completing his PhD, he was frequently asked why he chose to not locate his study in a more economically deprived township in Cape Town (in Punch 2015). For those asking these questions, the fact that a Western researcher could travel to an African country and undertake research which did not involve the most deprived or in need was a real puzzle.

Such an overwhelming focus on the challenges that much of the continent and its children face is problematic, not least because they become the focus of many of the

Africa-centred publications that are produced about the continent which are, then, in turn, consumed not only by academic colleagues, but also by students and the general public in other countries, including children themselves. The resulting outcome, then, is that the knowledge that is produced, and then consumed, about childhoods in sub-Saharan Africa is one which is characterised by ‘lacks’ (Twum-Danso Imoh 2016). This leads to a situation whereby the dominant, if not the only, image, that many people living outside of the continent have about children’s lives in Africa is negative. This is something that one of the editors (Twum-Danso Imoh) who is based at an institution in the UK has observed over the years in the way both her undergraduate and postgraduate students discuss children’s lives in Africa both in class and in written assessments. The impression gleaned from these interactions and written coursework is that many students in the UK hold deep assumptions about what life is like in Africa and are clear in their minds that the lives of African children can not be at all similar to the lives of children in their own context. When Twum-Danso Imoh tries to challenge these assumptions, there remain a significant number of students who, by the end of the course, struggle to consider the existence of the pluralities of childhoods on the continent and continue to use this deficit understanding of African childhoods to generalise about the whole continent.

Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, illuminates the impact of this one-dimensional knowledge production about Africa on Africans when they venture beyond the continent and meet others from different countries. Specifically, in her Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) talk filmed in October 2009, she recollects her encounter with her American roommate when she first arrived as a student in the US at the age of 19:

What struck me was this: she had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronising, well meaning, pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her, in any way. No possibility of feelings more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals.

This is what Adichie calls the danger of the single story because it is based on stereotypes and, as she goes on to say, ‘the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story’ (Adichie 2009).

Foregrounding the everyday in African childhoods

Like Adichie we, as academics with African heritage, notably Ghanaian heritage, have also noted the damaging consequences of the single story about Africa through both our work and in our personal lives. Through our work, we have observed the limited and

partial insights this single story provides about children's lives on the continent and the exclusionary consequences it can lead to, especially for those children whose lives are not, in some way, characterised by a 'lack' of some kind. In particular, it has led to a situation whereby the mundanities of the everyday lives of many children, which consists of various forms of learning, play, religious activities, family life and friendships, are overlooked in favour of narratives that centre around 'difficulties' and the 'extremities' of existence.

The importance of the everyday, which has long been recognised in anthropology and has experienced something of a revival in sociology in recent years (Jakobsen 2009), underpins what we, as editors, sought to achieve with this special issue. Specifically, our aim was to focus on 'the pedestrian and mundane life that is so commonly recurrent that its participants scarcely notice it' (Gouldner 1975: 422). Given this objective, the proposal we produced for the special issue sought to explore the everyday life activities and interactions of children in diverse parts of the continent. We hoped that such a focus would not only provide insights into the ordinary lives of children, which go beyond a focus on extremities and difficulties, but also 'allow everyday life to question our understanding of the world' (Highmore 2002: 3). Put another way, we hoped that such a focus would lead others to question the dominant understandings they have about how children live their lives on a daily basis in sub-Saharan Africa and go further to identify new ways of conceptualising or theorising African childhoods that not only explore the difficulties of existence many children experience, but also devote attention to the everyday, mundane or ordinary aspects of children's lives on the continent regardless of their geographical location, gender and socio-economic status.

Issue aims and objectives

Therefore, this special issue on African childhoods sought to counter existing dominant narratives relating to childhoods and children's lives in sub-Saharan Africa and instead, foreground the mundane and everyday existence of a range of children's lives. In doing this we hoped that it would illuminate the multiplicity or the plurality of childhood experiences on the continent and facilitate the process of moving beyond a one-dimensional understanding of childhoods and children's lives in the region. In issuing our call for papers we encouraged all submissions to move beyond the narrative of 'lacks' and instead, explore and analyse the mundanities of the everyday lives of diverse groups of children on the continent.

The response we received following our call was tremendous. 41 abstracts highlighting different aspects of children's lives across sub-Saharan Africa were submitted. A review of these abstracts indicated the extent to which academic research, especially produced by researchers on the continent, foregrounded these everyday experiences.

Interestingly, of the 41 abstracts we received we noted that 19 of the articles were written or had been co-written by individuals based in institutions on the continent. More than half of this figure were articles written by academics based in Ghana. This may be explained by the fact that all three editors are from Ghana, with two of them (Tetteh and Oduro) currently based in academic institutions in that country. This background of the editors likely accounts for the significant number of articles received from Ghana. As a result of this and the quality of the abstracts received, we proposed to the Editors of the *Journal of the British Academy* that instead of producing one supplementary issue focusing on Africa, we would instead produce two, one focusing on Africa as per our original intention, and a second issue drawing on the same themes of everyday life, but with a much narrower focus on Ghana. Thus, following the review of abstracts, we ended up with 26 articles across the two issues. Of this 26, ten were written or co-written by Ghana-based academics, six consisted of writing teams with at least one author based at an institution in an African country other than Ghana and the remainder consisted of those who were based elsewhere even if they were of African heritage. Despite a promising start, by the time the deadline for first drafts approached, we failed to receive submissions from a number of authors, some of whom were based in African institutions. This was not the case for Ghana though as almost all of those we had selected submitted their first draft. Of the seven we received four were returned to the authors for further revisions before being sent out to review. Three of these were later resubmitted. However, as editors we decided against proceeding with two of these articles as the revisions made were not sufficient for these articles to be subjected to external review. Further non-submissions were observed following reviewers' reports. This resulted in only two submissions from academics based at institutions in Ghana (Wilson and Ennin). As only one of these was meant to be part of the Ghana-focused supplementary issue along with another article offered by a contributor based outside of Ghana, we realised that it would not be possible for us to proceed with our planned supplementary issue focusing specifically on Ghana. Therefore, we reverted to our original plan of having one single issue.

Producing a special issue on Africa with few submissions from academics based in Africa: some reflections

This initial huge response, but eventual lack of final articles from academics based in Ghana as well as elsewhere such as Nigeria and South Africa, raised some questions for us which we spent time reflecting upon and discussing as an editorial team. In particular, we were puzzled by the failure of authors to submit first drafts or to submit revised drafts given the extreme pressure that exists on academics in African

institutions and elsewhere to publish. Our informal discussions highlighted issues relating to the workload of academics in public universities in Ghana and elsewhere on the continent. In Ghana in particular, we noted that many of our colleagues, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, teach a minimum of two-four courses each semester with very large class sizes (some as large as 300 students). This situation is often compounded by administrative duties and student supervision which has also increased due to the increasing student populations at many institutions. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered academic calendars and complicated teaching and learning for academics and students respectively. This burden of work leaves many academics little room for research and publications. From our experience, we noted that female academics bore the brunt of this burden of work as they were caught in the web of a double-shift—having to navigate the academic and administrative workload as well as juggle their familial and care responsibilities, drawing on their limited time and energies. From our interactions with some of those whose articles have ended up in the final output we noted how determined they had to be to ensure that they revised and resubmitted their article. The strategies they adopted included going back to the office after close of work and staying late in the office despite the risks associated with being on campus late at night. Some also made alternative child-care arrangements in the evenings and weekends in order to be able to submit the various versions of their article.

For us this raises a bigger issue about the lack of representation of African-based academics in knowledge production processes more generally and how this can be tackled. In our discussions the opinions of the two editors based in Ghana (Tetteh and Oduro) are clear: there is need for institutions on the continent to take deliberate steps to reduce the workload of academics, especially those who are women and early career. This is particularly crucial if these institutions are going to continue foregrounding research funding and publications in their promotion processes. Such support should include a reduction in teaching loads and the number of assessments offered to students, funded writing workshops, well-structured mentoring programmes and substantial periods of research leave that individuals can apply for at regular intervals. This is key to catapulting the many ‘works-in-progress’ papers that many academics in this context have (which is, in essence, what these un-returned papers we expected to receive, have become) into fully fledged publications that are able to contribute to relevant bodies of literature in their field. In reviewing the articles that we have included in our final output, three are outcomes of collaborations between African-based researchers and those based in the UK or Canada. This may be an indication that co-authorship involving academics from multiple contexts may be a strategy that may assist authors dealing with heavy workloads or those who are in the early stages of their career and hence, less familiar with journal publishing processes.

There is also work for editorial teams to do. For some of our contributors, the feedback we provided was not only through email exchanges. In some cases, zoom calls were arranged to provide further guidance and support. Additionally, bearing in mind that some of the authors contributing to this special issue were writing in a language which was not their first and probably not their second, the process of editing this special issue involved a commitment, from the outset, to undertake close language editing once the final versions had been produced. This involved, in the early stages, focusing on the substantive arguments of the article and encouraging reviewers to do the same, with the understanding that issues of language will be addressed before submission to the copyeditor. It also involved a commitment from the *Journal of the British Academy* that they would undertake additional language editing to supplement that which the editors had committed to undertake. Hence, the process of putting together this special issue has revealed the need to build in extra time in the publication process to engage authors whose articles have been recognised as having potential in dialogue about their submission whether it is in relation to the substantive argument or whether it is about language expression. The need for extra time must be accompanied by the need to be patient, collaborative and supportive in order to help authors whose articles are recognised as having the potential to contribute to relevant bodies of literature within childhood studies, to be able to submit their articles. These behaviours were not only exhibited by us as special issue editors, but they were also demonstrated by the staff co-ordinating the articles for the *Journal of the British Academy*.

Overview of articles

As a result of these challenges the scope of the special issue has varied from what we thought it would be at the point we reviewed the numerous abstracts we received. However, the submissions we do have reveal fascinating insights into the everyday lives of children in diverse contexts on the continent. The 13 articles that have ended up in our special issue speak to a number of themes that are central to the study of childhood. These themes, which we have used to divide the articles into sub sections, can be categorised as follows:

- 1 Caring and Belonging in Everyday African Childhoods;
- 2 Children's Recreation as an Everyday Activity;
- 3 Foregrounding Indigenous and Religious Beliefs in Socialisation Practices;
- 4 Literary Depictions of Everyday African Childhoods.

The first theme of care and belonging is captured by two articles. [Thea Shahrokh \(2022\)](#) explores the ways in which young migrants navigate the everyday realities

of xenophobia in South Africa through a focus on caring relationships established by peers and siblings as a response to the precarity they face. The other article that speaks to this theme, by Nicola Jones and her colleagues ([Jones et al. 2022](#)), examines the factors that influence and shape adolescent friendship networks in an attempt to counter the dominant ‘crisis childhoods’ framing of adolescent peer networks. In this way they also show the importance of children’s cultures and how peer networks shape adolescent development and wellbeing.

The sub section of children’s recreation as an everyday activity, which consists of three articles starts off with an article by Shelene [Gentz et al. \(2022\)](#) who seek to demonstrate how children spend their free time out of school and the implications for children’s subjective wellbeing by drawing on data from Wave 3 of the International Survey of Children’s Wellbeing. Following this are two articles which are similar in a number of respects and focus specifically on children and play in Sao Tome and Principe and Mozambique respectively. The first of these articles by Marlene [Barra \(2022\)](#) centres around children living in a country which is located at latitude zero of the equator who have to navigate the challenges associated with not only being a child in an adult-centric context, but also being young African individuals in a world dominated by notions of childhood informed by Western European norms and values. The second of these play-focused articles by Marina [Pastore \(2022\)](#) aims to generate insights into children as social cultural beings who exhibit agency through the play in which they engage in three communities in Mozambique.

Another theme that emerged in this collection of articles centres around the importance of recognising indigenous belief systems or religion in understanding African socialisation practices. Evelyn [Corrado \(2022\)](#) adopts a decolonising approach and draws on the East African concept of Harambee to call for the importance of indigenous knowledges that are often transmitted in homes and wider communities in helping children to learn within the institution of the school. The importance of indigenous knowledge continues as a central feature of discussion in Bukola Onyinloye’s article ([Onyinloye 2022](#)) on children’s everyday work experiences in rural Muslim Yoruba communities in North Central Nigeria in which she explores the ethnotheories of parents in rural Northern Nigeria and their role in the organisation of children’s everyday work. In contrast, Franziska [Fay \(2022\)](#) focuses on the intersection between Islamic religion and socialisation in Zanzibar to examine how conceptions of the ordinary are reflected in early socialisation practices of Muslim children’s lives. This is followed by Alex Wilson’s contextual article ([Wilson 2022](#)) which outlines childhood constructions within the worldview of the Fantse people of Central Ghana and argues that such belief systems, although often ignored by government institutions, could facilitate the implementation of global child-focused laws due to the synergies that exist between understandings of childhood within this belief system and elements of global notions of childhood. Ruby [Quantson Davis \(2022\)](#) adopts a narrative approach and foregrounds the importance

of indigenous knowledge to illuminate the role of children as peacemakers in transforming everyday conflict in Ghana to counter the often popular and negative image of African child soldiers. The final article in this section by Emmerentia Leonard and her colleagues (Leonard *et al.* 2022) draw on the concept of Ubuntu to demonstrate how this notion informs understandings of family within the context of Namibia and how that, in turn, shapes attitudes to the practice of kinship fosterage.

While the first three sections of the special issue have drawn on perspectives from within the social sciences, the final section adopts a literary approach to generate insights about the mundanities of growing up in Africa. Theresah Patrine Ennin (2022) explores the pluralities of childhoods by providing a reflection and commentary on the autobiographical accounts of two West African novelists—Camara Laye and Wole Soyinka—and presents these in juxtaposition to the dominant narratives of lack, slavery, colonialism, and vulnerability which are often depicted in literary texts focusing on children's lives on the continent. Finally, Veronica Barnsley (2022) undertakes a survey of several novels to explore the pluralities of contemporary African childhoods which go beyond simple imageries of child victims to be rescued or 'prematurely grown-up' child workers to be pitied. Barnsley ends her article hopeful that despite the 'the paucity of happy endings in African literature,' we can look forward to a 'plenitude of new beginnings.'

This hope resonates with the aim of the editors in the sense that this special issue will contribute to 'new beginnings' through encouraging reconceptualisations of African childhoods which not only consider the precarity of life for those living in difficult circumstances, but also takes into account the mundane everyday lives of the diverse groups of children that can be identified across the continent if we care to look closely enough.

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