

ORAL PRESENTATION

Imprints of the past in childhood – Two different approaches, one outcome: *Past and context matters*

Authors:

Johanna Wilmes, Goethe University of Frankfurt, wilmes@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Tatjana Dietz, Goethe University of Frankfurt, t.dietz@em.uni-frankfurt.de

One plea in childhood research and practice is to consider children in the *here and now*. Authors in the new social childhood studies also framed it as acknowledging children as *beings* rather than *becomings*. This goes along with the understanding that childhood is neither just a transition period into adulthood nor should children be seen as future ‘productive’ adults.

With this presentation, we want to present ideas based on two research projects. Working with two different methodological approaches and contexts, we found an important theoretical intersection: Focusing children’s past, while addressing them as agents. We discuss that without considering their *past*, there is a tendency to have an isolated understanding of children’s lives. Being aware of a child’s past, is the only way to take important experiences, contexts in a sense of origin, culture or family imprints and its effects on the present into account.

With (1) a mixed-method survey of children living in “orphanages” in Nepal and (2) a historical project on infants in Germany, we want to discuss the approach of taking *children’s past* and *contexts* into focus.

(1) An important finding of the survey conducted in childcare homes in Nepal is, that existing tools to study the multidimensional well-being of children blank out one of the most important topics of their lives – their past, the family they come from. Because most of them are not orphans but are told not to talk about their origin. Additionally, they are in an emotional dilemma, being given the opportunity of education for the price of not being or only little in contact with their family members. We argue that in this case, *context* matters as much as a look into the *past*.

(2) Historically in the German discourse, coming from the idea of children being a ‘tabula rasa’ or a ‘blanc sheet’, which needs to be imprinted, research with new-borns and infants increasingly reveals the great potential to grow and thrive from early on. Nevertheless, new-borns and infants are especially vulnerable and need responsive environments and caring adults. Noticeable research on child maltreatment in early childhood also unfolds in a two-folded perspective: focusing on a lifetime with a great potential to flourish and prevent; and as a vulnerable period, in which deficiencies in the surrounding can have lifelong negative impacts. So, even in the very beginning of life the *past*, e.g. family history and *context* matters.

These two different studies show and elaborate the importance of one’s past, regardless of age. Albeit, this does not play a significant role in prominent childhood research approaches. Additionally, it is not only essential for getting a holistic idea of childhoods, considering the past is an important part of meeting the rights of the child. Taking children’s rights seriously also implies to see them as full members in a specific context, with their unique (family) history.