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A Critical Conversation on Agency

By Stephanie Olsen, Kristine Alexander, Sarah Emily Duff, Mischa Honeck, Susan Miller, Simon Sleight, Karen Vallgårda, and Ville Vuolanto

Stephanie Olsen

It is no surprise that debates about agency play out in the history of childhood and youth. Children and youth are among the most marginalized actors because of their minority and because of various intersecting categories—class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, disability—that often leave them without a strong say in their own lives. Yet historians of childhood and youth have been some of the most vocal in articulating a discomfort with the concept of agency. Recent scholarly debates over the usefulness of agency as a tool for understanding change over time have pointed to its limitations: it tends to privilege certain kinds of resistance over more complex analyses of people's responses to change; in doing so, it leaves out certain categories of people unable to participate in resistance narrowly defined. Key interventions by historians of childhood have suggested that the conventional formulation of agency needs replacing or at least redefining.[1] This work builds on seminal interventions by historians of race, slavery, and gender.[2]

The focus has mainly been on the limits of the concept, with calls for its fine-tuning or even for its complete rejection. Agency has demonstrated itself to be a resilient and appealing concept, though, despite the continued negative attention. In part, I surmise, this is because there has not been a case made for other concepts that can replace it or fulfill its analytical role with a similar convenience but with fewer criticisms. Ishita Pande's provocative question in response to Sarah Maza resonates loudly here: “Does the child vanish

with the onset of agency?"[3] Our fundamental question as historians of childhood and youth, about age as a contingent but meaningful category itself, seems to be tied up with the problematic search for agency.

This article features in conversation leading scholars in the field, all of whom have pondered and problematized agency in different national and colonial contexts, each with something distinctive to say from various subdisciplinary and geographical perspectives. Our discussion stems from a roundtable, part of the Academy of Finland Centre for the History of Experiences conference on The History of Experience and Agency: A Critical Intervention (HEX 2021).[4] We point to potential pitfalls of agency from various theoretical, methodological, and political perspectives and, in an attempt to move away from or at least to rethink agency, discuss potential alternative routes out of the "agency trap." A novel reformulation of the category of experience figures prominently in theorizing these alternatives.[5] Recent trends in this new history of experience seem to be entwined with the critical discussion on agency, to the point of letting it go. With this and other potential paths away from a focus on agency, historians of childhood and youth might retool to get the analytical results for which we strive from our archives and historical actors.

Our conversation here draws out the various ways that we have problematized agency, the various reservations we have about the concept and the various solutions we have thought through. For some of us, "agency" does not simply need to be replaced as a concept with another similar one, but rather we need to reframe how we approach the history of children's voices and power, as well as how "the child" is historically constructed and shaped. Is there a clear distinction, theoretically or methodologically, between agency and "children's voices?"[6] We ask what it is that we are trying to "get at" with agency and how we can reformulate these goals with a refined understanding of agency or with other tools entirely. We ask why this is a particularly pressing issue for historians of childhood and

youth, but we also probe the extent to which this should be an issue for all historians, suggesting that new insights from our field can contribute to historical methodology more widely. We explore what a new analytical framework without agency might mean for the history of childhood and youth and how we might begin to rethink other critical analytical categories within the field. How might the categories of emotion, sensation, and experience push us to reconsider questions of power, structures of authority, and social categorizations such as gender, class, age, and race?

To riff on Mona Gleason's question in her HEX 2021 keynote address, in what ways were/are young people in the past historically significant (with or without agency)?[7] No human of any age is fully agentic or independent, or static at any point in their lives. The new history of experience tries to get at this changeability and interdependence of individual and collective selves historically.[8] It is a call for the meticulous understanding of particular contexts and their actors and for renewed attention to the empirical handling of archival material, to provide a more complete picture of collective and individual experience, always keeping in mind the question of power. By changing the questions we ask of our sources, we might acquire more complete and satisfying stories to tell.

The leading historians here showcased seek out new approaches either to critically hone or else depart from agency. This conversation has helped us to think productively about the concepts of agency and experience. We hope it will stimulate debate and novel approaches to inform our own work and that it will prove useful to other historians of childhood and youth as well.

Kristine Alexander

My relationship to the concept of agency has changed over the past several decades, moving from fascination to frustration and—most recently—to the realization that, as a scholar

interested in young people, gender, and colonialism, I need to employ other analytical tools to do justice to my subjects. My thinking owes much to the work of Mary Jo Maynes and Lynn M. Thomas. Writing girls' history, Maynes argues, forces us to reckon with the limits of agency and its implicit, generally unquestioned reliance on modern, Western, enlightenment-based understandings of selfhood, action, autonomy, and rational choice.[9] Thomas, meanwhile, emphasizes the limits of what she calls "agency as argument": the tendency to frame the demonstration of a subaltern group's agency as the "defining contribution" or central thesis of a piece of scholarship.[10] While describing agency as an inspiration, a bugbear, and a "conceptual lynchpin" in her own research fields, Thomas laments the ubiquity of agency as argument—which she characterizes as "evidence of a limited intellectual imagination."[11]

Agency as argument is a central tenet of the historiography of young people in a range of national contexts. In Canada, the settler-colonial state where I live and work, this fact is inseparable from the history and ongoing legacy of Indian residential schools, the genocidal church-run and government-funded institutions that took an estimated 150,000 Indigenous children from their families between the mid-nineteenth and late twentieth centuries.[12] In these carceral spaces, Indigenous children encountered racist policies, hunger, abuse, disease, and death. Residential schools caused immeasurable intergenerational suffering, but they also ultimately failed in their mission to obliterate Indigenous languages, cultures, and family ties.

In Canada, the historiography of childhood and youth evolved largely separately from scholarship about Indigenous history and residential schools, with the result that much of the field still remains—in Mary Jane McCallum's words—"isolated from Indigenous scholarly critique."[13] While some historians of childhood began to express discomfort with the concept of agency in the early twenty-first century, a foundational critique of its effects on Indigenous history was made in the 1990s by Canadian settler historians Robin Brownlie and Mary Ellen

Kelm. Historical scholarship that focuses on Indigenous agency, they argued, risks "us[ing] evidence of Native resilience and strength to soften, and at times to deny, the impact of colonialism, and thus, implicitly, to absolve its perpetrators."[14]

More recently, Indigenous historian Crystal Gail Fraser has emphasized the limits of conventional applications of "agency" in her award-winning study of residential schools and Indigenous communities in the Canadian arctic. Focusing on the actions, choices, and responses of Indigenous youngsters and their families, Fraser uses the work of Eve Tuck, Avery Gordon, and Michel Foucault in combination with Dinjii Zhuh concepts of strength in an analysis that foregrounds northern Indigenous voices and perspectives. She writes that Tuck's determination to "to explore the 'complexity, contradiction, and self-determination of lived lives' inspired me to reject tiresome arguments about the 'agency' (or lack thereof) of my ancestors and relatives."[15]

Scholars, in other words, need to think carefully about the political and ethical stakes involved in applying conventional understandings of agency to contexts like these. Fraser's work does exactly this: writing about Grollier and Stringer Halls, two residential schools in the Canadian Arctic that were only closed in the late 1990s, she notes that few scholars have thought to investigate the agency of settlers in these carceral colonial contexts. In Canada, additionally, historians of young people have generally neglected to explain their (often white) subjects as the products and beneficiaries of settler colonialism.[16]

I have found the work of Holocaust historian Michael Rothberg to be extremely useful as I—a white scholar who continues to benefit from settler colonialism—grapple with the active not-knowing about residential schools and genocide (another type of agency?) that characterizes much Canadian social history as well as Canadian society more broadly.[17] Rothberg suggests that implication is a useful way to understand "the manifold indirect, structural, and collective forms of agency that enable injury, exploitation, and domination but

that frequently remain in the shadows."[18] Implication, in other words, is a collective and not necessarily conscious form of agency through which some people—including white settlers of all ages—"contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination" without originating or controlling these regimes.[19] It offers enormous potential for historians of young people and colonialism to understand the people we study—and our own lives—in more nuanced and accurate ways.

Susan Miller

Like several other colleagues here, I grappled with the concept of agency in the context of researching children who were members of voluntary youth organizations. To say that neither the young members nor the adult leadership were monolithic does not begin to tell the story. Children flouted and followed rules. Some adults enforced institutional norms; others behaved as if they had never read a mission statement in their lives. I do believe that it can be productive to consider all of those varied reactions as a form of agency, as people expressing their ideas and opinions, giving vent to feelings and emotions, and in doing so, leaving a trace of themselves behind. As all of us who research youth can attest, many of these inclinations created only the faintest of reverberations in the historical record. Indeed, most of us leave a mere shimmer of ourselves behind. Yet these past lives can be felt and affirmed. Studied, and in one small sense, reclaimed. It's why many of us chose to become historians, to seek out those glimmers. I do think about this shimmer of life—fixed like some fragile flower pressed between worn pages—as the stirrings of agency.

As is so clear from this conversation and the previous work of my colleagues here, as well as the scholarship of so many others, agency has drawn intense scrutiny in the past few years. This intensive examination is well deserved. We have been warned of "traps," cautioned about agency's historical roots, asked to view the concept on a continuum,

admonished to take care in defining exactly what we mean by the term, and urged to never see the identification of agency as an end in itself. After all these warnings, I can also appreciate why some colleagues have turned away from the concept altogether. But I am reluctant to throw away a tool, just as it is being so carefully honed.

In mulling over the questions that animated this conversation, I was reflecting on how often I reach into my former life in the history of science for parallels to think about agency itself as well as how to search for it in archives. I believe we can productively think about agency as a force. Perhaps what works for planets can work for people if we continue to develop ingenious methods of indirect observation. Most exoplanets cannot be directly observed, so faint is the light they reflect. But their presence is detectable by observing their ability to interact with other objects—we "see" them when they interfere with orbits and tug, ever so slightly, on other, larger bodies. The task of finding and understanding these very real bodies requires a focus on subtle gravitational forces. I don't find it too much of a stretch to equate the search for children in archival sources to this astronomical exploration.

Contemplating agency as akin to gravitational force helps to answer some of the charges leveled against the utility of the concept. The force of agency is inherently relational, and it need not be generated as an expression of individualism or autonomy. As I've written about previously, agency certainly doesn't necessarily equate to rebellion. When exerted by historical figures that have been marginalized and disenfranchised, the force may be ephemeral, yet it still changed something and was felt by those in proximity. In the archives of youth organizations, I've found the letters, diaries, and scrapbooks of girls who clearly believed that they occupied an interconnected world that they shared with peers and adults—some like-minded, some they disliked. Sources such as these do call out to us to broaden our theoretical perspective and to apply insights from the history of emotions, and the history of experience. But within these sources I have also seen a force of will.

Recently, I visited the Opie Collection at Oxford University. It is a vast compendium of children's folklore, mainly though not exclusively from post–World War II British youth. What struck me most in browsing the collection of songs, slogans, and slang was the display of children's assertions of relational power. They came up with dozens of names for peers they disliked, and "yells" to honor those they admired. They created rituals to celebrate small victories over teachers, truant officers and bullies. And they repeated, or coined, slang to describe their world and police the people—adults and other children—who occupied it. They created and enforced rules around truth-telling, property rights, the telling and keeping of secrets, and the intricacies of teams and truces. Their rhythms and rules enforced racial, class, religious, and gender stereotypes and occasionally subverted them. I cannot imagine writing about the sources in this collection without invoking the concept of agency.

What I have taken away from myriad discussions of agency over the past few years, and what I believe this conversation further proves, is that the concept of agency is in good hands. It would be sheer hubris to suggest that we can no longer fall into traps, but the careful reflexivity that many historians of youth deploy when invoking the concept is heartening. We question our own backgrounds and biases as carefully as we pour over archival records. What we find in those records is that children and young people act and assert their wills. Their actions as they move through the world affect those around them, knocking adults slightly out of their established orbits, if only fleetingly.

Ville Vuolanto

Around fifteen years ago, "agency" emerged as a slippery but useful concept that guided me to see how little the research on premodern childhood had been interested *in* children, instead of *views* on children. Agency offered a dynamic alternative to "socialization," itself a new concept in the research of ancient children at that time.

However, with the "agentic turn," the concept was interpreted in perplexingly different ways. This led to a common but misleading idea(l) that agency should imply significant actions, even "historical change," where, in turn, *historical* meant an impact on the progress of (liberal) society and culture. To protest and to rebel would always be more positive and more agential than reproducing social norms and life. Complying or acting in the interests of continuity are seldom understood as agential, as historians easily slip a priori into looking for promoters of change and deviations from social norms. Can there be agency in obeying parents to go to bed on time, to work in the family field, or to study as instructed?

"Agency" is often seen to equal autonomous will and action, social capital, and an individualistic worldview—thus, an unsuitable concept for understanding childhood in the remote past. Here we encounter a basic dilemma of social history and social sciences: the question of the primacy of (individual) agency or of (social) structures. Recognizing this when discussing children and youth agency would lead to a more relaxed stance toward agency in general: the lack of capacity of "autonomy" in children is only marginally different than for any (adult) individual. Without doubt, actors in the past have had many restraints—no individual is impervious to the dominant culture and its discourses. Our experiences, actions and reactions, beliefs and memory, strategies and hopes inevitably depend on many layers of cultural, bodily, and discursive factors in a particular historical setting. Would it not be exactly because of this interplay among individuals, structures, and constraints that agency should be studied in the first place?

In thinking about limits for agency in children and youth, we are dealing with differences in degree, not in kind—we may never know how well internalized an individual's acceptance of cultural conventions is, and historians' lack of "authentic voice" for children is qualitatively no different than that of adults. Rather than seeking individual competence or strategic planning in agency, a more fruitful—and equal—viewpoint to understand agency

would be to place it in social networks and in structures of power. Agency is not individual, but shared, "in-between and interstitial" as David Oswell has stated.

What is relevant for agency is not change, but choice. Change would again marginalize the everyday lives and experiences of (most) children. For there to be the possibility of choice, individuals need to reflect on their situation consciously, with an intention, or goal, in the subsequent (re)action—that is, there is an ability to act differently, a possibility of making a difference, as Anthony Giddens has put it.[20] If we hold agency aiming at "mere" survival, adaptation, and compliance in social interaction as secondary, we undermine the scope for social and cultural agency. Yet without linking agency to intentionality and choice as self-expression, the concept loses its interpretative power. As Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische have written, agency is always *towards* something, a means of entering into a relationship with one's context: persons, places, meanings and events. [21]

This goal-seeking should be seen as a mundane, even haphazard way of making everyday choices. It should not be confused with the gaze of the scholar, who may track patterns from such choices and see them forming a variety of social and cultural strategies—for survival, social capital and advancement, and, more generally, for continuity. Historical actors themselves may not have "felt" they had agency, even if scholars may interpret the behavior they observe as goal-oriented patterns of agency—that is, as life strategies.

Focusing on choice would allow agency to be a fruitful concept in historical studies. It would prevent us from undermining the culture of children, allowing us to take their actions (and limitations) seriously. We should accept that having significance and making a difference in one's everyday interaction is "enough" and that this significance is assessed through children's own experience and culture. Moreover, the multiplicity of childhoods due to different variables—gender, age, birth order, health, differences in socioeconomic status

and family structure, variation in religious beliefs and practices, and regional and ethnic circumstances—impacted children's lives, experiences and (limited) agency. This intersectionality needs to be taken seriously.

Agency offers a way to shift the focus from adult viewpoints and representations to the lived reality and experiences of children. It directs our gaze to children's interests, highlighting the possibility of choice and of making a difference. By searching for children's agency, we may be able to find new perspectives on power structures, life strategies, and resiliency, or, in other words, a "childist perspective," with an intersectional take on children and childhood agency. However, for ancient history, for example, this would often signify research on borderline conditions for agency rather than on agency itself. Thus, for me agency is a theoretical concept in the original sense of the term (Greek *theorein* = to look at, to view): I use it to see with new eyes. For a nuanced analysis of the sources, more subtle methodologies and concepts are certainly needed. In my case, this has led me to concepts such as social strategies and experiences. But this is not a question of choosing between agency *or* experiences: any agency begins with an experience, and any clearly defined conceptual tool can help us to understand the world around us.

Simon Sleight

Until recent years, I must confess, I did not really worry about the intellectual legitimacy of agency. I was interested in social actors as historical agents, and it followed that those agents must have had agency. But in response to mounting critiques of the term, I started to think more purposefully about how agency was deployed and about how I might seek to reframe or transcend it. It quickly emerged that agency often lacks definition and that it has tended to be conflated (as Mona Gleason and others have identified) with rebellious acts, often performed by male adolescents, and onto which have been read political motivations.

For me, however, agency was always more subtle. It was not necessarily a stone being flung through a window, but more akin to modes of self-assertion—for instance, agency as *self-presentation* (including within tight disciplinary contexts that would seem to preclude it), through forms of *movement* and the decisions entailed by that movement (such as where children chose to play, with whom, and with what), in *assent* to adult-sanctioned activities like cadetship or calisthenics, and associated with what young people chose, or were encouraged, to *write down or otherwise self-fashion*. The dynamics and constraints of power were never far away from these conceptions.

Gleason rightly criticizes scholars for seeing agency as an end in itself. Combined with the ill- or un-defined nature of agency, its tendency to pit youth against adults (while also seeking out adult-like activities), its apparently undifferentiated nature, its gendered dynamics, its valorization of rebellious rather than consensual acts, and its Western, individualistic roots, this is the heart of the case against agency so neatly outlined.

Yet there is a danger with the ongoing agency debate of churning round and round without really moving forward—of being stuck within an eddy in a river of words. It is worth remembering, too, that even in some of the most searching critiques of agency, including by David Lancy (who offers the departure point for Gleason's journal article), a *reframing* of agency rather than wholesale abandonment is proposed—"I urge readers," Lancy concluded, "to not praise children's agency nor bury it but, to tackle it with all the empirical weapons in our arsenal."[22] Further, some academic contributions—including from geographers and social studies scholars—yield potential answers to several of the conceptual problems later raised (or raised in parallel) by historians.[23] Agency, it transpires from such wider reading, can be more generous as a concept than its sharpest critics admit.

Nonetheless, agency has a rival. Experience is a blood relation of agency, but more capacious and thoroughgoing. With experience there are fewer concerns about an imbalanced

focus on youthful politicized or otherwise spectacular activity, or potential confusions about youthful self-expression as an all-or-nothing act. But what does experience really mean? And how might it help us comprehend histories of childhood and youth more deeply?

Experience is for me is the feel and the fabric of everyday life—the inhabited *texture* of the past that resides in between context (as defined by Quentin Skinner) and text (following Roland Barthes). This texture, as I wrote in a chapter on the concept of "plasticine cities," is something that we can seek to recover and analyze through drawing on a wide array of source types.[24] Far from being confined to the realm of linguistics, experience is instead sensory, subjective, temporal, spatial: a way of knowing and being in the world.

To continue to unpack experience, one can draw on informed guides. For Norman Fischer, experience is "more than the mechanical register in consciousness of a perception"; it is, rather, an evidenced activity set in a particular place and time and an inner awareness of "thoughts, feelings, sensations, moods, intentions, desires."[25] This delineation taps usefully into the "emotional turn" within historical scholarship and emphasizes the grounded nature—the spatial basis—of experience. Whatever one's age, moreover, there is no need to be "agentic" to have experiences like those noted by Fischer, albeit that such experiences are argued to accumulate across the life cycle and are not unconstrained. In an earlier framing by Yi-Fu Tuan, experience is a term for "the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality," tinted once more by emotion.[26] Again there is an emphasis on the sensory here, as well as a holistic interest in ways of being.

In any re/turn to experience within the history of children and youth and beyond, there will be works to rediscover as well as new ground to explore. Building onto earlier accounts greater appreciation of the intersectional, the sensory, the embodied and the emotional, as well, I would advocate, as retaining a focus on the spatial dimensions of life, experience can

offer a fruitful way out of the swirling agency trap. We might commence, just perhaps, by considering young people's "formative experiences."

Whatever we advocate, agency is—for good or ill—likely here to stay. So, alongside experience, we might need to learn to live with agency and to bend it into better shape. It is certainly no longer enough to treat traces of agency as an amateur archaeologist might treat fragments of china: something to dig out, collect, and display for their own sake. Instead, historians should seek to understand how it was to inhabit the past, the worldviews and domains of our historical subjects, and changes big and small. Here's where experience—our own, as well as that of our historical subjects—is again potentially useful as an organizational framework. Let's see.

Mischa Honeck

I have had three major encounters with agency so far: first as a laughingstock, then as a zombie, finally as a serious concept. When I enrolled at Heidelberg University in 1998, I was joining a fairly conservative history program. My professor, a traditional diplomatic historian, did not hide the fact that he despised social history. To him, agency was something for people who have nothing to say writing about people who had nothing to say.

Then I started hanging out with social and cultural historians, all disciples of the Bielefeld School. Avid readers of Michel Foucault, Marc Bloch, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, they viewed history as an assemblage of panoptic webs of discipline and power, not as the product of people charting their own destinies. I always found this ironic: while some historians of the West were busy declaring agency dead, non-Western scholars gave it a new lease on life. I'm speaking, of course, of the postcolonial turn and the histories of disenfranchised groups it inspired. The spillover effects of this debate were substantial. Our

reflections on agency and experience would be much impoverished today without postcolonial reframings of the past.

For me, agency was never a holy grail. I never doubted that my young people were agential beings. The questions I asked were somewhat different—how were they agential? Why does it matter? Agency debates from slavery and postcolonial studies cannot be simply superimposed on the study of children. I am a historian of organized youth, writing histories both of and through young people, to borrow Sarah Maza's phrase for a moment. The founders of this branch of historical inquiry didn't really appreciate that young people were actors. The sources, to be sure, tell a different story. My boys simply wouldn't stand still, wouldn't shut up. The Americanist Jay Mechling was on to something when he described youth organizations as syncretic cultures, which manifested themselves in the "struggle between adult intentions and youth's desire to exercise as much autonomy and agency as possible."[27] Mechling got half of it right, but the struggle part wrong.

What I found was that in scouting, boys too acted as agents of transformation: not just in relation to themselves, their own journey up the imagined ladder of masculine development. Their doings were also vital for the agency of adults, especially for men who were in the process of carving out for themselves a new kind of selfhood. The youngsters had something adults wanted, which gave them influence beyond their years. I proposed the term "boyification" to describe the organization's intergenerational dialectic.[28] Men sought to masculinize boys but also hoped to get something in return: the lost innocence and purity of boyhood, which they hoped to reclaim through performances of homosocial, cross-age solidarities.

Boyification disrupted common conceptions about the relationship of aging and time. It was not just the boys who grew into men—the men, too, sought to transform, to rejuvenate themselves. Their performance depended on the kids' participation to work; it needed their

"approval" to acquire credibility. This made me think of age and childhood less in terms of fixed stages on a linear trajectory of aging. More than just constructs, both need to be understood as social performances as well.

Performances, however, go awry, and they rarely yield the results intended by those in charge. Is this agency? Is this experience? Or is this something else entirely? Let me propose a concept that is still underutilized in childhood studies—*Eigen-Sinn*! My guess is that few English-language scholars have encountered the term before, let alone in the context of childhood studies. There are understandable reasons for that. The concept is notoriously German. It is hard to define and even harder to translate. Some liken *Eigen-Sinn* to a planet in the solar system of agency, but it rather resembles a comet streaking right through it. In a rare English-language glossary entry, Lüdtke described *Eigen-Sinn* as "a kind of self-affirmation, an act of (re)appropriating alienated social relations . . . by self-assertive prankishness, demarcating a space of one's own."[29]

At best, *Eigen-Sinn* can teach us to appreciate modes of action and reaction that may seem trivial because they spring from impulses that are different from the dictates of group loyalty but also diverge from the logic of permanent separation. These impulses carry important lessons: that there are realms of ungovernability in institutions, no matter how tightly regulated or "total" their rule; that the *Eigen-Sinn* of even their smallest members can (de)stabilize existing power relations; and that straying from the script is not tantamount to abandoning it.

Looking back at my work on the Boy Scouts, *Eigen-Sinn* turned out to be a much more effective instrument for getting a grip on my young actors than any holistic concept of agency. I just wish I had applied it more thoroughly. This is not to say that the approach is without blind spots or limitations. Buying into *Eigen-Sinn* means buying into microhistory, with all its pros and cons. Still, I believe that *Eigen-Sinn*'s assets far outweigh its liabilities. It

accommodates the kind of spontaneity, impulsivity, ambiguity, and fleeting anarchy that flourishes outside rigid conceptions of individual and collective identity. Boy Scouts saluted, cheered, and embraced their elders as "brothers." But they just as often snickered, yawned, burped, messed around, and, much to the men's irritation, flirted with girls. More often than not, I found them darting sideways, lingering in the rear, or racing ahead—only to fall back in line. They did all this and still did not vanish into something else. Perhaps the child is the father of man after all.

Sarah Emily Duff

The concept of agency is where my two fields of scholarly research coincide. It is agency defined as resistance to authority that links scholars interested in Africa and in children and young people. For historians of Africa, this project of seeking out agency-as-resistance in the archive is linked to the emergence of the field in the 1950s and 1960s, as graduate students and early career academics allied their work to the decolonial movements sweeping the continent during these decades. But especially since the early 1990s, historians have reflected seriously on this emphasis on histories of resistance—and on the implications of defining agency *only* as resistance. Drawing on scholarship produced by the Subaltern School, anthropologists, as well as with historians of enslavement, scholars of Africa like Frederick Cooper and Lynn Thomas have argued that an overemphasis on overt, violent resistance to the colonial state makes nearly every other kind of activity look like collaboration, and it does not capture the textures of everyday life under colonial rule. Indeed, agency itself has become the argument for many historians: "proving" the agency of Africans becomes the purpose of historical research.[30]

Scholars of Africa have long been attentive to age categories and for many reasons, ranging from the crucial significance of generation in structuring many societies across the

continent to the importance of youth activism in ending colonial rule and shaping postcolonial states. And yet an emphasis on agency understood only as active resistance has produced a limited definition of who constitutes the "youth." Abosede George asks: "The overwhelmingly male focus of the study of youth in the African history field raises the question: Where are the girls?"[31] In addition to this, she notes that historians should be attentive to the changing ideology of childhood. The colonial project itself was justified via the humanitarian construct of the "African child": always the victim of careless parents but also always potentially the agent of violent disorder, the "African child" needed the careful, nurturing interventions provided by the infrastructures of education, medicine, and, indeed, punishment implemented under colonial rule. Similarly, Ishita Pande describes how the establishment of normative age categories in colonial India was crucial for the making of the "empty" time of a nascent Indian nationhood. Colonial rule produced "childhood" as a category through which to govern; equally, stable chronological time was a useful tool with which to build an Indian nation.[32]

Additionally, a normative, "Western" understanding of agency as fully autonomous action, usually in aid of increasing the freedom and well-being of the subject, does not help to understand the functioning and negotiation of age and power on the continent, especially during the pre- and early colonial eras. In many societies across Africa, generation in intersection with factors like gender and free or unfree status was a crucial vector of power.[33] This generational system of ordering societies placed all people into age cohorts, meaning that everyone operated within the obligations and norms associated with being a particular age. Although children certainly constituted an important age category within African societies, they were at the bottom of a social scale that used age to apportion more power to those at its top than to those lower down. Of course, these systems varied over time and space

and were not absolutely rigid—but nobody was exempt from the meanings associated with belonging to an age group, neither adults nor children.

Historians would do well to heed Thomas's suggestion that historicizing agency is a vital task.[34] But even more than this, locating agency within precolonial generational systems is not necessarily the most interesting or revealing strategy for understanding how children and young people—and who we might mean by these categories has to be carefully defined—lived in these worlds. Colonial rule altered these age-based systems and overlaid them with Western ideas about childhood that were, too, shaped by the racial dynamics of the enforcement of colonial rule. The consequences of this enormous change were as varied. Generational conflict between younger and older people often mapped onto economic and political discontent, producing revolts against the colonial state and the patriarchal order. Less spectacularly, children moved between these worlds, often acutely aware of the different sets of expectations and the degrees of freedom applied to them in those contexts. In various contexts, they were "older" or "younger," existing in relation to adults in different ways.

What these examples attest to is the necessity of understanding how children and young people found their ways within these systems. My engagement in histories of childhood has been through the lens of Protestant evangelicalism, so I have had to redefine what counts as agency in a context where believers both seek their own submission as well as go out to encourage the conversion of others. Indeed, children were held up by evangelicals as the ideal Christians precisely because of their apparent powerlessness. But as records pertaining to children's experiences of conversion attest, they too struggled with the contradictory demands of submission and action. My answer to the question of the agency "trap" draws on Talal Asad: What does it mean to write histories of submission and willing powerlessness?[35]

Karen Vallgårda

My academic upbringing took place in the early 2000s, and this involved a poststructuralist education that insisted on our obligation to probe the politics of knowledge. We were to become aware of the political implications our own knowledge production, of the questions we asked, of our epistemological assumptions and the analytical categories we employed. While it has sometimes bothered me how the endless deconstructive efforts seemed to direct analytical attention away from other forms of critical analyses—such as studies of economic exploitation or physical violence—the insight that no category is neutral remains crucial.

In postcolonial studies—my first research field—scholars argued forcefully that we should abandon attempts to search for untainted subaltern voices.[36] By extension, "agency" was thoroughly problematized as a concept that might help us examine relationships of power in a useful way. Coming to childhood studies, I was therefore surprised to find that demonstrating children's agency still figured as a sort of gold standard of the field.

In my view, the concept of agency is fundamentally flawed, theoretically and analytically. It rests on the supposition inherited from Enlightenment thinkers that the individual is an autonomous actor: the individual's capacity to act may be constrained by outside forces, limited by lack of economic or social resources, or obstructed by an inferior position in a social hierarchy, but at least theoretically, the individual's interests, desires, and apprehensions might be identified as distinct and distinguishable from their surroundings. For the historian, to document human agency in the past means to trace how an individual or a group acted to further their own interests, however circumscribed their maneuvering space may have been.

What might be less obvious is that agency is tied to a particular liberalist understanding of the human activity and interaction. As historian of slavery Walter Johnson

argued in his seminal piece, the concept smuggles into historical studies a "liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice." It relies on "a rational choice model of human being" in which the autonomous subject is motivated by the pursuit of individual interest.[37] Agency is thus connected to a neoliberal conception of human dignity and worth; a valorization of the individual who exercises free will and who is productive, culturally, socially, and economically. But the idea that human worth hinges upon one's ability to act deliberately to optimize one's own situation is inherently hierarchical. The fact that we don't find it necessary to demonstrate the agency of socially privileged groups indicates that the quest to affirm the agency of enslaved people or other subaltern groups is a rather skewed project.

Relatively unpowerful individuals or communities will ultimately have less agency and, by implication, less humanity. We might, in other words, unintentionally end up suggesting that the free, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, wealthy, middle-aged, white man somehow had greater human worth than less privileged subjects did.

This critique is highly relevant in the context of the history of childhood and youth. The actor, as Mary Jo Maynes has noted, "is posited as everything a child, especially a girl child, is not supposed to be: autonomous, driven by the imperatives of rational choice, aware of how the world works."[38] Perhaps where agency begins conceptually is where childhood ends.[39]

There are many possible ways out of the agency trap; we need not abandon the ambition to explore the perspectives of children and youth as historical subjects. My own approach has been to historicize agency as a concept, examining how historical contingencies such as age, gender, sexuality, race, and religion helped produce or impede what was perceived to be agency in different contexts.[40] Importantly, I study how desires, apprehensions, interests, and hence subjectivities were shaped through historical processes,

keeping in mind the power dynamics that these involved. The history of emotions and experience have provided fruitful ways into this endeavor.[41] Kristine Alexander, Stephanie Olsen, and I suggested that the structural process through which emotions are shaped may be conceived of as an "emotional formation" and that the confrontation between dissimilar emotional formations constitutes an "emotional frontier."[42]

Moving away from attempts to locate authentic, untainted voices from the past or to identify agency, Katrine Rønsig Larsen and I have furthermore coined the concept of emotional echoing to identify a key aspect of emotional formation. Homing in on the ongoing human efforts to make sense of, classify, direct, anchor, and communicate experiences, we posit that to know and to enact our emotions—that is, *to feel*—humans of all ages employ the available cultural templates of emotionality. This implies citing and reiterating—or echoing—other people's body language as well as visual and verbal vocabulary. Emotional echoing is the process through which individuals employ words, images, and practices borrowed from a cultural repertoire; emotive tools that they thereby help replicate and adapt. It molds a person's emotional capacities and shapes their subjectivity. Echoing, put differently, has to do with the continuous becoming of the individual subject through exchanges with collective forms of feeling.[43]

Emotional echoes are traceable across a variety of sources—visual, textual, and even material. Hopefully, it will prove a useful tool in our quest to approximate the experiences, feelings, and interventions of young people in the past, with a systematic view to how these were conditioned by—and contributed to—variegated dynamics of power.

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[1] Mona Gleason "Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education," *History of Education* 45, no. 4 (2016): 446–59; Kristine Alexander, "Agency and Emotion Work," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 7, no. 2 (2015): 120–28; Susan A.

Miller, “Assent as Agency in the Early Years of the Children of the American Revolution,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 1 (2016): 48–65.

[2] Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003): 113–24; Lynn M. Thomas, “Historicising Agency,” *Gender & History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 324–39.

[3] Sarah Maza, “The Kids Aren’t All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1261–85; responses by several historians of childhood and youth, including Ishita Pande, “Is the History of Childhood Ready for the World? A Response to ‘The Kids Aren’t All Right,’” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1300–05, 1302.

[4] https://events.tuni.fi/historyofexperience2021/panels/theme-4-childhood-and-youth/

[5] For a recent overview of what the new history of experiences is and is not, see Josephine Hoegaerts and Stephanie Olsen, “The History of Experience: Afterword,” in *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*, eds. Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki, and Tanja Vahtikari (Cham: Palgrave, 2021), 382, and 380–82 on the specific relationship between the history of children and childhood and the history of experiences.

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[7] https://events.tuni.fi/historyofexperience/keynotes/mona-gleason-agency-experience-and-the-challenge-of-historical-significance/ Mona Gleason, "Children Obviously Don't Make History": Historical Significance and Children's Modalities of Power," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth,* 16, 3 (2023): 343-360.

[8] Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 22–23.

[9] Mary Jo Maynes, “Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 114–24.

[10] Thomas, “Historicising Agency,” 327.

[11] Thomas, “Historicising Agency,” 324, 330.

[12] See the bibliography of *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

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[14] Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm, “Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?” *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (1994): 543–56, 545.

[15] Crystal Gail Fraser, “T’aih k’ìighe’ tth’aih zhit dìidìch’ùh [By Strength, We Are Still Here]: Indigenous Northerners Confronting Hierarchies of Power at Day and Residential Schools in Nanhkak Thak (the Inuvik Region, Northwest Territories), 1959 to 1982” (PhD dissertation, University of Alberta, 2019), 417.

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