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Unearned advantages? Redefining privilege in light of childhood

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ABSTRACT

This article puts privilege theory in conversation with childhood studies in order to create a richer understanding of privilege. Privilege describes the unearned, largely invisible advantages that historically dominant groups enjoy at the expense of marginalized groups. The field of childhood studies was created in part as a critique of adults' positions of privilege relative to children. I argue that while the concept of privilege is a useful lens for understanding inequality, including in childhood studies, it has also been developed in a way that fails to capture certain aspects of adult hegemony. Specifically, the current understanding of privilege as 'unearned' is problematic because children as well as other marginalized groups often work without earning. This article proposes to think of privilege as automatic rather than unearned, and suggests future directions for privilege theory and childhood studies to better inform one another.

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Introduction

The concept of privilege currently used in the humanities and social sciences describes the largely invisible ways that dominant groups benefit at the expense of marginalized groups. Peggy McIntosh (1988) popularized the term to refer to an 'invisible knapsack' filled with unearned benefits that dominant groups enjoy. The term applies to 'age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion or sexual orientation' (McIntosh 1988, 11–12). However, in practice, the concept has been applied predominantly to white advantages. Consequently, it has been critiqued for not being sufficiently inclusive (Black and Stone 2005) or sufficiently intersectional (Case 2012). Most importantly for the purposes of this article, privilege theory has also been used in an adult-centric way. Despite the wide range of social and economic disparities between adults and children, age is one of its 'least written about domains' (Black and Stone 2005, 249).

The main exception to this rule has been the field of childhood studies. In part, this field was intended as a response to the privileging of adult perspectives in academic literature. Since the field began, the social sciences' approach to childhood has begun to shift away from treating children as passive, insulated adults-in-the-making, to treating them as socially constructed, active, and engaged beings in their own right. As James and Prout describe this transformation:

The traditional consignment of childhood to the margins of the social sciences or its primary location within the fields of developmental psychology and education is, then, beginning to change: it is now much more common to find acknowledgment that childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture rather than a precursor to it; and that children should be seen as already social actors not beings in the process of becoming such. (James and Prout 1998, vii)

Despite this success, explicit engagement with the problem of adult privilege – or even of age and generation in general (Punch 2019) – has been limited. Although childhood studies is assumed to be a tacit critique of adult privilege, the field primarily uses the concept of privilege to describe inequality between children, and only secondarily to describe inequality between children and adults. Infrequent explicit engagement with adult privilege is arguably one of the field's main shortcomings. Several commentaries have pointed out that its intended intervention into the humanities and social sciences remains ambiguous and undertheorized (Arce 2014; Wells 2017; Punch 2019). Childhood studies has not achieved a successful intervention into adult privilege to the same degree that, for example, women's studies intervened into male privilege, in a similar time frame (Punch 2019).

Meanwhile, scholars not focused on childhood have critiqued the concept of privilege. Some have critiqued its theoretical assumptions (Gordon 2004; Monahan 2014) whereas others have critiqued it for giving dominant groups yet another way of prioritizing their own experiences, and escaping responsibility for their role in oppression (Ahmed 2004; Applebaum 2010). Yet these critiques seem only to have had a limited influence. The vast majority of scholars who use the concept of privilege do not acknowledge it as a subject of legitimate controversy.

This article attempts to address both of these issues: childhood studies' ambiguity about how it understands adult privilege, and the frequently uncritical usage of the concept of privilege in general. With this goal in mind, I will use a theoretical analysis to put privilege theory and childhood studies in conversation. The first section gives an overview of how the concept of privilege has been developed and used outside of childhood studies. The second section discusses how it has been used in childhood studies, and makes a case for why the field should explicitly use it to critique adult privilege. Finally, the remainder of the article considers how the concept of privilege itself might have to change 'in light of childhood' – a phrase I borrow from Wall (2010). Instead of thinking of privilege as something 'unearned,' it proves more useful to think of it as 'automatic.' In general, rethinking the concept of privilege in a more child-centric way will not only make it more useful for childhood studies, but will also make it a richer and more useful lens for understanding the nature of marginalization in general.

The evolution of the concept of privilege

The term 'privilege' has gone through many iterations in its history. Monahan (2014) describes the earliest forms of privilege in the West, which he terms 'classical privilege' as being 'a legitimate entitlement of the upper caste by virtue of birth (noble blood)' (Monahan 2014, 74). Enlightenment thinkers condemned classical privilege for its non-meritocratic nature, and accused nobility of inheriting advantages rather than earning them (Black and Stone 2005; Monahan 2014). John Locke, for example, argues that people must legitimately earn property through labor, which is an extension of the 'property' they have in their own bodies, 'man, by being master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and the actions or labour of it, had still in himself the great foundations of property' (Locke 1980, 27). For him, property is ultimately legitimized through labor, and not through unearned heredity.¹

Such critiques of classical inherited privilege remained an important strand in the formation of modern Western states, and continued to appear in various social movements from the Enlightenment onwards – particularly the anti-racist movements of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Sullivan 2006; Monahan 2014; Harris 2016). W.E.B. Du Bois played a central role in shaping the foundations of critical whiteness studies and the modern concept of white privilege (Harris 2016; Myers 2019). In his famous essay, *Black Reconstruction*, he examines how the psychological features of whiteness (i.e. hatred for nonwhites, a sense of superiority) became mirrored in the structural inequality of the Reconstruction era South (Du Bois 1976).

Peggy McIntosh popularized the current usage of the term 'privilege' with her essay, 'White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work

in Women's Studies.' She defines privilege as 'an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious' (McIntosh 1988, 2). She views it as a way of understanding many different kinds of advantage, including age advantage.

As the concept of privilege increased in popularity, some scholars worked to flesh it out more. Black and Stone (2005) synthesize existing literature to provide a rigorous five-point definition:

First, privilege is a special advantage; it is neither common nor universal. Second, it is granted, not earned or brought into being by one's individual effort or talent. Third, privilege is a right or entitlement that is related to a preferred status or rank. Fourth, privilege is exercised for the benefit of the recipient and to the exclusion or detriment of others. Finally, a privileged status is often outside of the awareness of the person possessing it. (Black and Stone 2005, 244)

Along with others, Black and Stone even develop a validated measurement of racial privilege, comprised of a 54-item test, which allows this abstract concept to be quantified (Black and Stone 2005). In their analysis, Black & Stone also point out that certain domains, such as age and ability, had been neglected compared to others (Black and Stone 2005).

While the concept of privilege has proven extremely useful across a vast range of fields, from education to critical whiteness studies to bioethics, it has also experienced pushback. Much of this pushback has come from conservative commentators. Donald Trump, for example, has dismissed the concept of white privilege (Scott 2020). Likewise, some conservative scholars have argued that the concept lacks empirical rigor, and promotes a self-defeating identity politics (Peterson 2017).

More sympathetic scholars have argued that the concept of privilege creates the misimpression that oppression is primarily a set of special advantages unwittingly enjoyed by a dominant group, rather than being primarily a system of exclusion and subtle complicity (Gordon 2004; Applebaum 2010; Monahan 2014). Ahmed, too, has cautioned that focusing on privilege risks simply feeding the already inflated narcissism of dominant groups (Ahmed 2004).

However, such critiques do not seem to have attained widespread popularity. Within mainstream social justice initiatives, the concept of privilege as popularized by McIntosh remains largely uncontroversial. For example, in Michael Kimmel's touchstone edited volume, *Privilege: A Reader* (2018), none of the essays takes a critical approach to privilege as a theoretical concept, nor is there extensive discussion of any of the critiques mentioned above.

Further, of all the categories that have been analyzed through the lens of privilege, age continues to be one of the 'least written about domains' (Black and Stone 2005, 249). While Kimmel's (2018) edition of *Privilege: A Reader* has essays that focus on race, sex, class, ability, nationality, sexual orientation, and religion, it has none that focus on age. Childhood studies is therefore in a position to not only incorporate the concept of privilege into its scholarship, but also to give more consideration to adult privilege.

The concept of privilege in childhood studies

Childhood studies has an ambiguous relationship to the concept of privilege. Partly, this is because the boundary of childhood studies is itself ambiguous. Although it was conceived as an interdisciplinary field, in practice it often operates as a loose association of subfields (Punch 2019). To further complicate matters, many influential scholars who critique childhood – such as Kathryn Bond Stockton and Monique Morris – do not self-identify as childhood studies scholars. Then there is the question of whether the youth rights and children's liberation movements beginning in the 1960s–1970s, including the work of A.S. Neill, John Holt, and Shulamith Firestone, should be considered childhood studies. To limit the scope of this paper, I will use the term to refer to any work that is at least partially grounded in the new sociology of childhood that emerged in the 1980s, and is generally 'about enabling children's voices to be

heard and taken seriously; as well as ensuring that children's issues [are] on the political agenda' (Punch 2019, 3).

The unifying project of childhood studies can arguably be framed as a critique of adult privilege. One important goal of the field is 'relinquishing our own authority and privilege and our own investment in an adult-centered paradigm' (Duane 2013, 163). Just as McIntosh critiques the way that 'whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal ...' (McIntosh 1988, 4) so does childhood studies often critique the way that adults are taught to think of themselves as 'morally neutral, normative, and average,' in contrast to children, who have historically been viewed as savage, strange, and in some ways not fully human (Castañeda 2002; Wall 2010).

This framing of childhood studies is also consistent with the way McIntosh lists age alongside other vectors of privilege, such as race and sex. These systems of discrimination are analogous to one another: an observation that predates the new sociology of childhood. John Holt, for example, drew analogies between children's liberation and women's liberation, and argued that both groups should have the same rights as adult men (Holt 1974). Today's subfield of children's rights tends to be more moderate, while nevertheless maintaining (to differing degrees) the central critique of adult privilege. Matías Cordero Arce, for instance, argues that 'we can discern the axis of adultism crossing the diverse faces of oppression' (Arce 2014, 30). Other children's rights scholars have taken similar positions (Quennerstedt 2010; Wall 2017).

Of course, critiques of adult privilege continue to extend beyond childhood studies. The analogy between children and other marginalized groups has been discussed in fields such as psychology (Young-Bruehl 2009; Epstein 2011) and law (Godwin 2011). Indeed, even Peggy McIntosh explicitly mentions adultism in her later work (McIntosh 2012). Outside of academia, activist groups such as the National Youth Rights Association, and various communities such as unschooling groups (Richards 2020), recognize the central importance of critiquing adult privilege.

Wall (2019) views childhood studies as one part of this larger movement he calls 'childism,' which is fundamentally a critique of adult privilege: 'I have argued that understanding and empowering children calls for not only childhood studies but also a broader and more radical childism. Childism is analogous but not reducible to feminism. It is the critical effort to respond to ingrained historical adultism by reconstructing systemic scholarly and social norms' (Wall 2019, 11). Other childhood studies scholars have taken up the concept of childism as well (Sundhall 2017; Biswas 2019).

However, despite the fact that this critique is arguably the main thing that unifies childhood studies (without being confined to it), this very critique also paradoxically tends to be marginalized within the field (Arce 2014; Punch 2019). One example of this is in its use of the term 'privilege.' In the journal, *Childhood*, for example – a key journal for childhood scholars – out of the first 40 articles that appear under the keyword 'privilege,' the term is frequently used to refer to white, class, or other types of advantage, but not a single use of the term refers to adult privilege.

This example is part of a larger trend in which childhood studies has moved away from examining age and generational power structures. Some scholars in the field question the logic of focusing on age (Wells 2017), while others suggest that childhood may have outlived its usefulness as a category of analysis (Spyrou 2017; Eßer 2018). Punch argues that this trend is due to three main factors: academic failure to create a productive account of the child–adult dichotomy, insufficient empirical investigation, and the neglect of intra-generational relationships (Punch 2019). As a result, most analyses of systems of privilege in childhood studies tend to focus on factors other than age.

This trend also reflects an important shift among many childhood studies scholars from viewing childhood primarily as a marginal position to viewing it primarily as a privileged position. Although childhood's marginal status continues to be recognized in the field, for many, it increasingly represents the culmination of various forms of privilege (white, Western, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, etc.).

To pick one important example, the work of race scholars such as Lucia Hodgson (2013), Robin Bernstein (2011), and Monique Morris (2015) has been highly influential to the field's understanding of Black children's experiences. These scholars all propose some version of the idea that childhood is an ideal of innocence that is only the privilege of white children, and is therefore not available to all. Scholars work from the understanding that 'childhood innocence in this country was raced White. Like the law, the doctrine of innocence protected "settled expectations based on white privilege," revealing a "property interest in whiteness" (Harris 1993, 1713) that has become the foundation upon which arguments about childhood are constructed' (Garlen 2019, 63).

While full recognition as a child certainly does require a certain degree of privilege, overly conflating childhood and white privilege also forecloses many of the possible contributions that analyses of age-based hierarchies can make to analyses of racism. Rollo (2018) makes precisely this point:

Insofar as the logics of contemporary racialization and anti-Blackness are rooted in a culture of misopedy (anti-child prejudice), resistance to racism can no longer be served by the ahistorical narrative that Black children are denied the privileges of protected childhood. Although there may be short-term strategic utility in framing this issue in terms of Black youth being excluded from some idealized vision of protected childhood, the difficulty for modern emancipatory struggles will be finding a way to abjure the misopedic grammar of race and colonialism altogether. (Rollo 2018, 324)

In other words, scholars overlook crucial details when they view childhood only – or even primarily – as a position of white privilege. Focusing on children's marginality helps to reveal that it is not only racism that governs childhood, it is also ageism (or as Rollo calls it, misopedy) that governs racism.

This shift to viewing childhood as a position of privilege raises fundamental questions about the field. If for most childhood studies scholars, to 'have a childhood' is now mainly understood to be a privileged position, then what happens with the field's critique of adult privilege? Some scholars, such as John Wall, continue to make this critique central to their work. On the other hand, others renounce it explicitly. Wells (2017), for example, argues that age-based power structures are not analogous to those based on race, and therefore do not constitute a system of privilege that deserves the same kind of attention. But most scholars in childhood studies seem to fall somewhere in between. They share a general interest in making the world more inclusive for children, but are mainly interested in factors besides age.

However, there are several reasons why the field will make its greatest contribution – both to children's lives and to academic thought – by fully embracing the childist critique of adult privilege. Firstly, the most influential work on privilege clearly invites an analysis of age (McIntosh 1988; Black and Stone 2005; Kimmel 2018). As mentioned previously, McIntosh even touches on the need to engage with adultism (McIntosh 2012). Age remains undertheorized, and there seems to be no academic field that is in a better position to do this much-needed work than childhood studies.

Secondly, many of the forms of marginalization children experience can be better explained by age than by other factors. For example, Wall (2017) observes that '[a]ge is usually a greater predictor of poverty than gender, race, or ethnicity' (Wall 2017, 7). Likewise, age is the explicit reason for children's exclusion from many basic entitlements, including voting rights (Wall 2014), minimum wage requirements (US Department of Labor 2019), protection from bodily harm in school (Morris 2015), and many others (Godwin 2011; Arce 2014). More controversially, age is also the explicit reason why children are typically excluded from many of the freedoms that are important markers of social inclusion: freedoms such as signing contracts, consuming alcohol, and accessing public spaces. Child liberationists tend to argue that children should be allowed all of these freedoms. While this is certainly an important view to consider, childism goes a step further and takes a critical approach to the very notion of freedom. As podcaster and unschooling parent Akilah S. Richards pointed out to me, adult notions of freedom are in many ways not truly liberating even for adults, let alone for children. Rather, this critique of adult privilege calls upon us to radically rethink the adult-centric concept of freedom itself.

This brings me to the third point, which is that childism provides an opportunity to productively critique the concept of privilege itself. One important function of the concept of privilege is to illuminate the positions of marginalized groups such as children. Yet the fact that childhood remains in many ways more legible as a privileged position, rather than a marginalized one, suggests that there may be some inherent limitations with the existing concept of privilege. Childism provides an opportunity to productively interrogate those limitations.

Problematizing the ‘unearned’ aspect of privilege

Systems of privilege strongly influence not only who gets which advantages, but also who gets credit for having earned those advantages. Earning requires recognition of one’s work, something that is generally denied to children. Because of this, I argue that the term ‘unearned’ would be better replaced by the word ‘automatic,’ and call for greater attention to the logics of labor and exchange underlying the current concept of privilege.

Although privilege is generally agreed to be ‘unearned’ (McIntosh 1988; Black and Stone 2005), authors typically do not elaborate on what this means. Even Bailey (1998), who extensively analyzes the concept of earning as it relates to privilege, does not actually define the term – though she does comment on its ambiguity. She sets ‘earned’ legitimate advantages in opposition to ‘unearned’ privileges, but then concedes that in practice it is difficult to disentangle earned from unearned advantages:

Perhaps the point here is not that earned advantages and privilege are necessarily distinct, but rather that some advantages are more easily earned if they are accompanied by gender, heterosexual, race, or class privilege. Privilege and earned advantages are connected in the sense that privilege places one in a better position to earn more advantages. (Bailey 1998, 110)

Here, she suggests that many earned advantages are ambiguous because they are often enabled by unearned privileges. An earned paycheck, for example, may nevertheless be enabled by unearned male privilege.

This ambiguity makes it impossible to give a straightforward answer to the question: if someone enjoys privilege, is their paycheck unearned? As Bailey suggests, the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, the paycheck is earned in the sense of ‘to receive as return for effort and especially for work done or services rendered’ (Merriam-Webster n.d.). ‘Earning’ in this sense simply describes what a person receives as part of a capitalist exchange of labor for earnings. It is in this sense of the word that men ‘earn’ more than women do on average. On the other hand, this paycheck is also ‘unearned’ in the alternative sense of the word: ‘to come to be duly worthy of or entitled or suited to’ (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Men are thought to have male privilege because they earn paychecks without *rightfully* earning them.

But if privilege is defined as being a set of advantages that are not rightfully earned, then the question becomes, how does one rightfully earn an advantage? As with the critiques of classical privilege discussed earlier, most scholars still tend to suggest that privilege is not rightfully earned because it is not meritocratic. McIntosh observes that it operates on the ‘myth of meritocracy’ (McIntosh 1988). Likewise, Bailey argues that privilege legitimizes itself by ensuring that ‘a person’s individual accomplishments will be recognized more on the basis of individual merit than on the basis of group membership’ (Bailey 1998, 113). This suggests that including ‘unearned’ in the definition of privilege is meant to reflect the fact that it is not meritocratic.

But it is misleading to frame this as the central problem caused by systems of privilege. The ideal of meritocracy – as preferable as it is to the current reality – is no true antidote to inequality. For one thing, meritocracy is highly individualistic – another issue that some scholars have raised with the concept of privilege in general (Applebaum 2010). But more importantly, meritocracy ties a person’s right to possess advantages to their work. This means that those who do not work, or who

do not perform recognized or valued forms of work, would be marginalized even in an idealized meritocratic system (Littler 2018).

At a much deeper level, the struggle to overthrow systems of privilege is not just about achieving equity within established avenues for earning advantages (though of course, this kind of equity is extremely important). Rather, it's about the larger struggle to control the narrative of what it means to rightfully earn something. For example, subverting male privilege requires that feminists 'focus on the demands not simply or exclusively for more work and better work, but also for less work; we should focus not only on revaluing feminized forms of unwaged labor but also challenge the sanctification of such work that can accompany or be enabled by these efforts' (Weeks 2016, 302).

Because the definition of rightful earning is the very thing being contested, it is counterproductive to define privilege in a way that automatically assumes (or even suggests) that groups of people who are not recognized as earners are necessarily more privileged. Children, who have few opportunities to legitimately work to earn advantages, provide a stark example of this. If childhood has become more legible as a privileged position than a marginal one, it must be partly because the current way of thinking about privilege as unearned is limited and misleading.

'Normal' children are not recognized as rightful earners

The modern Western concept of childhood has rhetorically constructed children as the recipients of unearned resources handed to them by hard-working adults. Under this framework, all children are excluded from the status of earners. This exclusion holds true whether the children it regards actually have 'normal' (i.e. relatively privileged) childhoods, or whether they are 'children out of bounds' (Chin 2003), living one of the innumerable varieties of nonnormative childhood, often including wage labor. From a childist perspective, this assumption is doubly problematic. It not only fails to recognize children's diverse forms of work as earning, but also fails to recognize their exclusion from earnerhood as a sign of their marginalization.

'Normal' children are excluded from earnerhood because of their assumed dependence: they are thought to receive all of their resources (food, shelter, clothing, education, toys, etc.) as gifts from adults. While these gifts are usually given in a spirit of love and goodwill, receiving them also places children in a position of inferiority. Marcel Mauss famously observed such a dynamic in Polynesian gift-exchange economies. He argues that, 'To give is to show one's superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, *magister*. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (*minister*)' (Mauss 1990, 74). Thus, one function of adult beneficence towards children, and children's perceived lack of reciprocation, is to establish the adult as the child's superior.

However, even within the bounds of this kind of 'normal' childhood, children are in fact expected to reciprocate. Olga Nieuwenhuys has observed that adult beneficence is 'not as altruistic as portrayed. As anthropologists since Marcel Mauss have been contending, the gift inevitably carries an indefinite obligation to reciprocate with more and is the powerful generator of the logic of exchange at the heart of all social relationships' (Nieuwenhuys 2006, 147).

In the West, the most obvious example of this logic of exchange comes from the Bible. Children are told 'Honor your father and your mother' (Exodus. 20:12 New Revised Standard Version). Although this obligation may be (and has been) interpreted in numerous different ways, it clearly invokes a kind of 'logic of exchange.' Indeed, Locke argues that 'the honor due from a child, places in the parents a perpetual right to respect, reverence, support and compliance too, more or less as the father's care, cost, and kindness in his education, has been more or less' (Locke 1980, 37). According to Locke, a child's duty to honor is essentially a measured economic exchange: a child's 'respect, reverence, support, and compliance' of x value is to be exchanged for an equal value of parental 'care, cost, and kindness.' This suggests that the benefits children receive from their parents are far from 'unearned' – rather, children must do numerous forms of work in exchange for them.

In addition to the general sense of obligation attributed to children in the West, there are also numerous specific examples in which even ‘normal’ children are expected to earn particular advantages through good behavior and hard work: praise, grades, pocket money, use of parent-restricted devices, small freedoms, etc. Yet these exchanges are not generally treated as real forms of earning. For example, one in-depth study of parents’ motives for giving pocket money to their children shows that most parents feel ‘that some contribution is owed in exchange for any money that is given, but few parents consider that work in the family should operate completely on money-market principles’ (Barnet-Verzat and Wolff 2002, n.p.). While this separation is meant to protect children from the dangers of the free market, it also means that children whose earned pocket money is withheld have no legal recourse to collect it the way an adult would be entitled to collect withheld wages. Although there is some sense that children are entitled to earn pocket money from their parents, that entitlement to payment is not as strong as it would be for a wage laborer in the public sphere.

On top of the examples of reciprocity discussed so far, gifts given to children are often viewed as financial investments. For example, Johnson (2010) analyzes the language of investment that informs spending on children’s education. According to the World Bank and other international organizations, investing in children’s education is justified primarily because it is a savvy financial move that will one day pay off. In this example, the giving of resources to children is not an unearned gift, but rather is made contingent on their perceived financial viability. Similarly, Gill-Peterson (2015) discusses how Black and white children are viewed as financial investments with different values: the former as short-term, low-reward investments, and the latter as long-term, high-reward investments. These examples show that the resources children receive (even if one assumed them to be initially unearned) are rarely given unconditionally, but are rather given, like all other gifts to children, ‘to generate indefinite, long-term, generalized indebtedness’ (Nieuwenhuys 2006, 151) – in this case of a financial nature.

‘Children out of bounds’ are not recognized as rightful earners

Just as ‘normal’ children are systematically excluded from earnership despite their diverse forms of work, so too are ‘children out of bounds’ (Chin 2003). This is even true when they perform exactly the kinds of work that many adults do (wage labor, care work, domestic work, subsistence agriculture, etc.). Instead, children who work like adults are typically treated as ‘at-risk’ objects to be rescued (Hertel 2006; Woodhouse 2010; Liebel 2015). While rescue may indeed be an appropriate response to many forms of child labor, this one-dimensional response leaves little room for recognizing children’s contributions or for allowing them any moral claim to resources gained through their work.

Of course, the opposite problem sometimes occurs. Nieuwenhuys (2001) helpfully points out the harmful effects of NGOs withholding charitable assistance from poor children in order to supposedly ‘empower’ them to support themselves ‘by the sweat of their brow’ (Nieuwenhuys 2001, 539). However, while this economic liberalization of childhood does recognize children’s right to *work*, this is not the same thing as recognizing children’s right to *earn* just compensation and social legitimacy from that work. Nieuwenhuys is right to point out that it is an act of bad faith to claim that work ‘empowers’ children when in fact that work does not actually secure them any significant advantages beyond mere survival.

In terms of children’s right to earn, Consider Arce’s (2014) helpful comparison between the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The UNCRC contains several provisions restricting children’s work hours and conditions, but no provisions dictating that children’s work must be fairly compensated (United Nations 1989). CEDAW, by contrast, recognizes women’s ‘right to promotion,’ ‘equal remuneration,’ ‘job security,’ and ‘equal treatment in respect of work of equal value’ (United Nations 1979). This suggests that according to international views of

childhood, even children who work like adults are still unworthy of earning the same recognition and compensation as adults.

Many working children push back against this devaluation of their work. In Bolivia, the child workers' union called for 'Social and political recognition for working boys and girls in Bolivia,' 'Ending discrimination against, and stigmatisation of, working children (boys and girls),' and 'Recognition of the economic contribution, which working boys and girls make to the country' (UNATSBO 2010 quoted in Liebel 2015, 541). The fact that working children must make such demands, whereas working adults (*qua* adults) do not, is a clear sign of adult privilege.

Other important forms of work performed by children out of bounds have also been devalued. Care work, for example, is often either overlooked or pathologized. García Sánchez observes that child caregivers are triply marginalized because of

(a) a dominant discursive construction of children as beings in need of care and, simultaneously, developmentally unable to provide care; (b) the tendency of both laypeople and scholars to present children's care work as inappropriate or pathological, particularly in Western contexts (the second bias being a corollary of the first); and (c) the devaluing of care work more generally, whether of adults or children. (García-Sánchez 2018, 169–170)

In this example, yet again, earnership and the social legitimacy that accompanies it are made inaccessible to children through the erasure and pathologization of their work.

Ambiguity between privilege and unrecognized work

These examples all show that receiving 'unearned' advantages is not necessarily a sign of being privileged. Children's situation points to a more general truth that people from marginalized groups often work hard without ever earning recognition or just compensation from it. In her critique of patriarchy, Imani Perry observes how women and people of color have historically been relegated to working without earning: 'The labor of the slave did not grant him or her property, according to Locke. Only the labor of recognized 'men' could perform that social-contractarian alchemy' (Perry 2018, 26). People who worked without earning(s), by definition, could not earn their keep. As a result, they became the objects of what Adam Smith called 'generosity.' Capitalism has always

relied on the labor of those who resided outside or on the margins of the social contract: the spinners of cloth, the pickers of cotton, the stolen, the unpaid. What Smith fails to term 'generosity' when it comes to the unrecognized would later be compellingly described as exploitation. (Perry 2018, 34)

By referring to the work of marginalized groups as 'unrecognized,' Perry gives a useful way of understanding the gap between children's work and children's earning. This difference can be expressed by the following equation:

$$\text{earning} = \text{work} + \text{recognition}$$

Certainly, if someone's advantages are understood to be unearned, it could conceivably be because they have not worked for them. However, given that all people arguably work in circles of reciprocity, it is more likely that their work is simply going unrecognized.

Of course, sometimes there are good reasons not to recognize people's work. If that work is violent or exploitative, and harms people's relationships to the land and to one another, then it is arguably illegitimate. For example, it would be reasonable to argue that the British colonists who invaded indigenous lands – despite working very hard to do so – did not really earn the right to control those lands and their resources. In fact, complicity in systems of oppression often entails hard, grueling work, even at the highest levels. Not all work needs to be recognized and celebrated simply because it is work.

But children's work – like the work that most marginalized groups have disproportionately performed throughout history – overwhelmingly deserves to be recognized. Most of what children do

is indispensable to society: going to work, going to school, caring for siblings and friends and parents, doing chores, participating in family events, growing food, honoring parents and elderly relatives, providing emotional labor. The systemic failure to recognize or justly compensate this work cannot be attributed its lack of value. Rather, children's work is not recognized because the economy of recognition is itself heavily controlled by systems of privilege.

Because of the ambiguity of the term 'unearned' – and the fact that it has so often been weaponized to devalue the work of marginalized groups – a better alternative could be the word 'automatic.' As discussed above, it actually makes a certain perverse sense to say that marginalized groups receive 'unearned' advantages because they are marginalized – which makes this word unhelpful for defining privilege. By contrast, saying that privilege is 'automatic' is helpful, as it specifies that members of dominant groups get them *simply because* they are members of dominant groups. The word 'automatic' helps to capture the common understanding that privilege is a complex, self-perpetuating social dynamic that is capable of working without conscious input (Sullivan 2006; Applebaum 2010).

This shift is about more than wording, however. In light of children's limited access to conventional forms of merit, it becomes important to interrogate the underlying meritocratic logic of the concept of privilege. This interrogation also brings us back to the earlier question about rightful earning: if, as the concept of privilege contends, the labor of marginalized groups is being devalued, this presupposes that their labor already has some 'real' value for which they are not being adequately compensated. But then where does this 'real' value come from? Where can any value come from, save through yet another 'logic of exchange'? This is the very question that emancipatory struggles are charged with answering.

Future directions for childhood studies and privilege theory

This paper has put childhood studies in productive conversation with privilege theory. The existing concept of privilege, although it has so far neglected age advantage, is nevertheless a promising way of understanding children's experiences, and especially for understanding power structures based on age. However, a childist analysis also challenges the concept of privilege to reconsider its assumption that disadvantaged people are forced to earn their advantages, whereas privileged people are not.

Childism is only one avenue of fruitful critique. As previous critiques have observed, the concept of privilege contains other potentially problematic assumptions that must be examined. For example, Monahan questions its inherent 'appeal to scarcity': i.e. its assumption that in order for one group to enrich itself, another group must always be deprived. While it is certainly true that one group may profit by impoverishing another, it is not clear that impoverishment is always a necessary part of the equation. In a Twenty-First Century global economy that produces an abundance of resources, the persistence of wealth and poverty can no longer be adequately explained through a model of scarcity. Rather, it must be asked to what extent scarcity reflects the *mythological* and *psychological* conditions in which systems of privilege operate, rather than their actual economic conditions (Kasser 2002; Hamilton and Denniss 2005). Exploring such questions more thoroughly could be extremely fruitful for privilege theory.

Likewise, as mentioned previously, childhood studies is in an ideal position to flesh out the concept of privilege with an analysis of age advantage. For example, what is it that makes childhood both a paradigmatic case of marginalization (Nandy 1985; Castañeda 2002; Rollo 2018) and an exceptional outlier case that is excluded from the vast majority of social justice analyses and initiatives (Godwin 2011; Arce 2014; Wall 2014)? In particular, how can one make sense of the prevailing belief that ageism cannot be real because childhood is only a temporary condition? How might privilege be more fully understood as something based – not in immutable phenotype, or sexual assignment at birth, or country of origin – but in one's being and becoming in time? Queer theory

has already begun to explore this last question, with extremely promising results (Edelman 2004; Stockton 2009; Sheldon 2016).

One other interesting avenue would be to further investigate the hyper-legibility of childhood as a privileged position. Peggy McIntosh suggests that privileged people are 'infantile' (McIntosh 1988, 10). One example is the practice of depicting the hyper-privileged figure of Donald Trump as an infant for the purposes of political satire. Templeton and Moffett (2019) provide an excellent critique of the anti-child rhetoric that is central to many anti-Trump cartoons. However, it would also be fruitful to explore how portraying Trump as a privileged child makes his privileges appear more objectionable, while at the same time erasing his adult privilege. This rhetorical equation of morally repugnant privilege and childhood suggests that the great emphasis placed on 'earning' in privilege theory cannot be viewed merely as a benign oversight. Rather, it appears that this focus on earning has enabled the concept of privilege to be weaponized as part of an insidious project of stigmatizing childlike qualities in general. This analysis would help to raise awareness of some of the limitations and risks that might be posed by the concept of privilege, and enable us to produce a richer and fuller understanding of it.

Notes

1. Of course, Locke does not reject inherited wealth outright. For him, inherited wealth is a legitimate part of the parent-child relationship.

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