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INTRODUCTION



## Children, Young People and Borders: A Multidisciplinary Outlook

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The study of borders and borderlands is growing extensively, but the experiences of children and young people in the turmoil of border changes and border crossings remain under-researched. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, this special issue has a twofold objective: to increase knowledge about children and young people living in borderlands, passing through borders and (de)constructing borders; and to highlight the potential of studying how children and young people imagine, act, cross, and inhabit symbolic and material borders, with the aim of advancing the theoretical and empirical debate within border studies.

Children and young people have begun to interest researchers from various social sciences and humanities disciplines seriously over the last couple of decades. What used to be the pursuit of only a few scholars has turned into one of the most active fields in academia today, valued for offering an interesting lens through which to view societies (Saxton 2012, 103–104; Montgomery 2020). Childhood and youth studies are carried out in geography, history, psychology, law, children's rights, social policy, sociology, anthropology, and literary studies. Thus, the field is characterized by multidisciplinary and enriched by insights from a considerable number of different geographical and social settings. The interest in children and young people as “objects” of social and human science research owes much to the so-called “new” social studies of childhood (see Prout and James 1997). This approach that emerged during the last two decades of the twentieth century saw children and young people as beings in their own right and not as adults-in-waiting or receptacles of adult teaching and child policies. Inspired by social constructionism, it considered children and young people as active agents in the creation and determination of their own social lives and in the societies and social lives of those around them (Prout and James 1997; Melton et al. 2014).

Incorporating this idea and involving children and young people in border research has begun only in recent years (Spyrou and Christou 2014). Thus far, research has focused on two major themes: children and young people living in and experiencing borderlands (past and present) and children and young people encountering voluntary or forced migration. Studies in the first group have examined the cross-border practices,

perceptions, and identities of children and young people in borderlands (Jukarainen 2001; Bejarano 2010; Mendoza Inzunza and Fernandez Huerta 2010; Ongay 2010; da Silva 2014; Christou and Spyrou 2014; Sandberg 2016; Venken 2017; Kaisto and Brednikova 2019; Brambilla 2021) and at contested borders and urban spaces (Akersson 2014; Grinberg 2014; McKnight and Leonard 2014; Christou and Spyrou 2017; Lundgren 2018); the activism and political work of borderland children and young people (Bosco 2010; Burringde 2010; Fickers 2017); and ethnic minority youth's experiences and perceptions of the state and the nation in borderlands (TrầnThị and Huijsmans 2014; Wung-Sung 2017). Studies in the second group have explored how unaccompanied minors experience border crossings (Aitken, Swanson, and Kennedy 2014; Buil and Siegel 2014; Clacherty 2019); how migrant children and youth negotiate practicalities, identities and belonging in new societies (Aitken 2010; Kim and Dorner 2014; Halicka 2017; Assmuth and Siim 2018; Hakkarainen 2018); and how they and their families experience transnational life (Pratt 2010; Kutsar, Darmody, and Lahesoo 2014; Ruiz Marrujo 2014). In addition to this research, scholars have been interested in how young people understand borders conceptually and how their border-crossing experiences influence their perceptions of borders and other nations (Ahponen 2011; Nielsen 2019; Seidel and Budke 2019).

These studies have shown that, just like the lives of adults, the lives of children and young people are influenced by the institutional power of borders, and that certain experiences and practices are actually specific to children and young people. Furthermore, children and young people are not passive participants in bordering processes; they can impact borders and borderlands through their own activity and agency. This highlights the need to include children and young people in the agenda of border studies, to discover characteristics of borders and bordering processes that would otherwise be overlooked or remain invisible.

This special issue meets this challenge and broadens the emerging body of literature with seven original articles. The first three articles by Machteld Venken, Lisbeth Matzer, and Olga Gnydiuk deal with border changes that took place in Europe after the First and Second World Wars and study the experiences of borderland children during and after these historical events. In her analysis of the interwar German-Belgian borderlands, Venken examines historical “ego-documents” – texts in the form of letters, magazine articles and diaries – written by children and stored in archives and newspaper repositories as rare examples of sources left behind by children. These texts provide a glimpse into the lives of children and young people in the conflicted territory that belonged to Belgium but had previously been part of Germany. Venken investigates children's capacity to actively participate in their environment and to imagine a better world. She uses Michel Foucault's notion of a heterotopia to illustrate how at a time when categories of national belonging became more diffuse, borderland children were able to create “borderland child heterotopias” – that is, parallel material or linguistic spaces where they could express and overcome the confusion dominating their environment.

Matzer investigates Germanization practices directed at young people in the occupied border regions of Slovenia during the Second World War. Children and young people have long been a major target group of nationalization practices, especially in disputed borderlands, and the Nazi regime was no exception. It used the Hitler Youth organization

to consolidate its rule in the annexed border regions that had belonged to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia until 1941. Matzer's analysis of historical and empirical materials shows how the supposed "German" character of individuals lacked clear definition. Thus, arbitrary criteria determining the German descent of local young people were applied so that they could be included in youth organizations and, later, called to serve in the German army. Fostering the feeling of belonging to an imagined collective of "Germans" was also flexible to maximize the evocation of a "German" feeling among local youth and to exert ideological control.

Gnydiuk studies how welfare workers for the United Nations and the International Relief Organization negotiated the belonging of displaced unaccompanied minors in the American zones of occupation in Germany and Austria after the Second World War. These children originated from territories that were annexed by the Soviet Union and included in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945. By analyzing working correspondence and reports and children's personal files, Gnydiuk observes how the understanding of belonging of unaccompanied minors evolved in the minds and practices of the welfare workers. Between 1945 and 1948, their interpretation of belonging changed from being a sole matter of descent and identification to one of biopolitics at the dawn of the Cold War, with many children being "saved" from repatriation to the Soviet Union and resettled in the West.

The next two articles, by Marijana Hameršak and Iva Pleše and by Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, look at children and young people in the context of migration and mobility. These contributions shed light on contemporary processes of forced migration to Europe and discuss often controversial border and migration policies by drawing attention to the experiences of children and families. The article by Hameršak and Pleše focuses on the case of the Balkan corridor (active in 2015 and 2016) and more precisely its Croatian section where the Slavonski Brod transit refugee camp was built as a compulsory stopping point. The authors consider the camp as "a site where the concept of a 'lone child' in migration was defined and re-defined in practice" (Hameršak and Pleše this issue, 1). By conducting ethnographic research in the camp, Hameršak and Pleše offer novel insights into the complexity of lone children's experiences within the wider framework of European Union border policies. They unravel how the children turned into competent social actors who could adjust their behavior and tactics in accordance with the changing norms guiding the movement of people along the corridor. The authors point out that although the independent child migrants were able to leave the Slavonski Brod camp, it will be far more difficult for them to leave a life composed of camps, hiding and restrictions on movement.

Lemberg-Pedersen shifts the attention to the case of the Northern European policy drive to deport unaccompanied Afghan minors to so-called reception facilities in Afghanistan. His empirical material covers the period between 2006 and 2018 and focuses on the case of the European Return Platform for Unaccompanied Minors (ERPUM), coordinated by Sweden with the participation of Norway, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. Lemberg-Pedersen argues that ERPUM represents a concrete case of how border operations are framed as humanitarian interventions by portraying unaccompanied minors as being "at risk" and deportation as a way to empower child displacees and their families. This way of framing nationalistic geopolitical goals as universal human and child rights is considered extremely problematic by the author.

The last two articles, by Virpi Kaisto and Chloe Wells and by Vannessa Falcón Orta and Gerald Monk, introduce novel methodologies for studying children's and young people's perceptions of borders. The article by Kaisto and Wells discusses the method of mental mapping as a tool for analyzing how borders and bordering are related to the way in which young people identify with territories of various scales. Mental mapping is a visual method during which research participants are asked to draw on paper what they think about a particular place or space. Kaisto and Wells compare two mental mapping studies conducted in Finland and the Finnish-Russian borderland to demonstrate different ways in which the method can be used for studying borders with young people. Their study illustrates how different choices in the research design process influence mapping outcomes, determining the extent to which identification processes can be examined with mental maps.

Falcón Orta and Monk engage in an intriguing example of participatory action research. Their aim is to investigate the needs of higher education students who live a transborder lifestyle, residing and commuting between both sides of the border and attending higher education institutions in San Diego, CA. These "transfronterizx" students have special needs related to their everyday lives and development as students. During their commute they are exposed to intense policing, racism, a culture of impunity at the border, and long wait times that can hinder their on-campus engagement and academic success. At their higher education institutions, they might experience microaggressions and discrimination. Together with a group of students and higher education professionals, the authors implemented institutional change through a five-phase process and created a Transfronterizx Alliance Student Organization (TASO) at San Diego State University (SDSU) to foster the success of transfronterizx students.

The findings of these seven articles further support previous research on children, young people and borders, emphasizing the agency of children and young people in bordering processes and the social life of borderlands. Yet the authors also acknowledge the often detrimental power of the political context and border policies over children and young people. Connected with this, Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook (2018) have lately challenged researchers to revisit the idea of children as individual subjects and agents in their social surroundings. They argue that it is necessary to constantly problematize children's agency and to consider the material and social contexts (on different scales) that children live in and that determine how they construe their worlds. Recent re-bordering processes as a result of forced migration, the global rise of populism, and the COVID-19 pandemic only accentuate how essential it is to pay attention not only to children and young people as social actors but also to the contexts in which they operate.

From a practical point of view, researchers studying children and young people must be especially careful in conducting research according to ethical principles, to avoid causing risks, damage or harm to the participants and to present their views in fair and unbiased ways. Researchers must deal with ethical issues not only at the beginning of their research, checking whether they need to obtain ethics clearance before undertaking research on/with minors, but consistently during the entire research process. When doing research with children and young people, scholars will not always have a fixed ethical rule to follow in every situation. Instead, "ethics serve as a framework of principles that guide the researcher during the research process, rather than as 'laws'" (Escamilla García and Fine 2018, 377). Many issues in ethics arise in relation to the specific contexts

in which researchers work with minors. Therefore, ethics in research involving children and young people should always be “situated,” with an approach to ethical decision-making that highlights the importance of the context in developing “tactics” to solve ethical issues.

The diverse perspectives on children, young people and borders presented in this special issue contribute to the conceptual and methodological dimensions of border studies and carry important messages for researchers and policy-makers. In terms of border conceptualization, the papers produce rich empirical insights into how borders are continuously constructed, de-constructed, and re-constructed through multiple, mutually constitutive, shifting, and ambiguous processes of bordering (see van Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005; Scott 2015). This challenges the “linearity” of stable, unchanging, definite borders while acknowledging borders’ conflicting multiplicity.

The authors demonstrate this multiplicity: first, by exploring how borders and bordering processes are related to identity and belonging. With their mental mapping study, Kaisto and Wells use physical maps drawn by young people to illustrate and visualize the nuanced and complex ways in which borders and territorial identifications are intertwined, and how young people engage in the social, cultural and mental construction of borders and the negotiation of territorial identities. Matzer’s study about the Germanization practices of the Nazi regime, in turn, highlights the arbitrary nature of bordering processes, when boundaries are constructed between social and cultural groups in everyday life and especially for ideological purposes. Matzer therefore reminds researchers and policy-makers to be cautious of the ways in which “borderland ideologies” and labels of belonging can be used to promote hegemonic and territorial interests. Gnydiuk’s study into welfare workers’ decision-making processes after the Second World War further adds to the understanding of how borders and belonging are interrelated. Gnydiuk’s research illustrates how the welfare workers engaged in borderwork (see Rumford 2008) by negotiating the belonging of displaced children and eventually “establishing a border where it had ceased to exist on the political map of Europe” (Gnydiuk this issue, 15).

Second, the articles enter into a productive dialogue with emerging approaches to problematize the border-migration nexus (e.g. the “border-scaping” approach and the approach of “ethnographic border regime analysis”), highlighting borderscapes as shifting fields of claims, counter-claims, and negotiations among various actors and historically contingent interests and processes (see among others Brambilla et al. 2015; Brambilla 2015a; Hess and Kasperek 2017). From this viewpoint, borders can also be regarded as a site of alternative political subjectivities and agency (Brambilla and Jones 2020). In this regard, Lemberg-Pedersen shows how politics of deportability towards unaccompanied Afghan minors exemplify how borders can function as “places of becoming” where child migrants activate themselves and “strategize to form an existence based on their lived experience of complex struggles, identity and subjectivity formations” (Lemberg-Pedersen this issue, 6). As mentioned above, Hameršak and Pleše also present an inspiring reflection on the transformation of unaccompanied child migrants from “privileged humanitarian subjects” to children traveling alone as “competent social actors”. Hameršak and Pleše provide valuable insights into how child migrants used tactics of in/visibility “as a form of resistance against the European Union border

and migration regime” (Brambilla and Pötzsch 2017, 81; for a reflection on the tactics of in/visibility adopted by children and young people in the context of a Mediterranean borderscape, see Brambilla 2021). In so doing, both contributions claim that border studies need to engage more directly with the specific situation of unaccompanied children and examine how their rights feature in humanitarianized border politics, by moving away from an idealized monolithic figure of the child and returning agency to children. Indeed, this seems to be a core epistemological blind spot at the heart of both deportation and critical border studies, as currently configured. Both articles also shed light on bordering as a constant process of renegotiation that retains the ultimate indeterminacy and temporariness of any in/exclusion regime. Thus, both articles expose some of the ambivalences and paradoxes of border and migration politics at the external borders of the European Union and might help us reinterpret the contemporary securitarian-humanitarian management of people on the move.

Third, the authors contribute to the understanding of borderlands as specific “in-between” places between states, nations and cultures and as homes for constantly developing and shifting border cultures and identities (see Martinez 1994). In particular, the first three historical papers by Venken, Matzer and Gnydiuk and the study of transfrontier students in the San Diego-Tijuana border region by Falcón Orta and Monk present borderlands as places where power struggles over territory and people’s belonging to cultural, national and ethnic categories can occur. With her study of child writers in the interwar German-Belgian borderlands, Venken, for example, proposes a deconstructed understanding of children’s agency to decipher children’s opportunity to contribute to lives of borders and borderlands. This means that she widens the notion of political agency and investigates children’s access to politics rather than their political achievements, considers children as rational and capable of having a “mind of their own” (Archard 2014, 4) and focuses on the scale of children’s activities, bearing in mind that the local cuts across wider notions of childhood, government policies, and adult interventions. Falcón Orta and Monk, for their part, illustrate how challenging borderlands can be as living environments, while at the same time giving evidence of border-transcending revolutionary imaginations and actions that young people living in borderlands are capable of evoking and undertaking (see Aitken and Plows 2010).

Last but not least, it is worth considering how the articles contribute to border studies in methodological terms. The first three articles by Venken, Matzer and Gnydiuk discuss the complexities of understanding children’s voices of the past. They demonstrate how a close reading and interpretation of historical sources with the help of contemporary conceptual literature on borders encourage an understanding of borders and borderlands as historically contingent processes that can place current child policies and child experiences in a broader perspective. Hameršak and Pleše show how an ethnographical lens is helpful for advancing research on the border-migration nexus by providing a specific tool for investigating the social reality of the border from the perspective of border people and crossers and border sites, capturing the complex socio-cultural texture and arenas of life at, in, and across the border (Brambilla 2019). Lemberg-Pedersen adopts a multidisciplinary perspective in his analysis of Afghan unaccompanied minors and manages to pinpoint the urgency of problematizing the epistemological “centric” perspective on borders by enlightening instead the entangled nature of borders as complex multidimensional textures crisscrossed by negotiations between a



variety of different actors, and not only the state. Kaisto and Wells introduce mental mapping and Falcón Orta and Monk participatory action research as rarely used but especially fruitful methodologies for exploring borders, bordering processes, and borderlands.

Children and young people are only beginning to appear on the agenda of border studies. The articles in this special issue represent several different disciplines and work with rich, original research materials that include sources and testimonies produced by children both now and in the past. Together, they demonstrate the potential but also the extreme importance of studying borders through the eyes of children and young people, as well as through policies directed at them. Possible future directions of research include involving children and young people as researchers of borders and bordering processes (see Kaisto, Brednikova, and Malkki 2014; Brambilla 2015b; Venken 2018; Brambilla 2021).

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