



## Editorial: Intergenerational encounters, intersubjective age relations



### A B S T R A C T

This special issue introduces a conceptual framework of intergenerational relationality, with the purpose of drawing attention to the question, what exceeds an age's categorical features. In recent interdisciplinary scholarship, wide and diverse range of identities and experiences within different categories of age have been explored. In childhood studies, understandings of children and youth as subjects in their own rights have pushed past a reliance on their existence via their fundamental difference from adults. Another robust literature discusses the ways that categorical power relations embolden adults to exert control onto youth, and the purposes and effects of power relations on the adult and child binary. Despite the sustained and vital arguments foregrounding children and young people's agencies and subjective experiences, these debates have done little to *theorize age*. In our view, age often remains legible through the same categories that the research started with. That is, by focusing on distinctions, scholarship often renaturalizes age by assuming it as such. As one result, the naturalized position of adults as “non-aged beings” is maintained and reconstructed. To take the study of relational age a step further, this special issue sets out to deflate categorical assumptions of age, and instead proposes that increasing attention is paid to intergenerational encounters and intersubjective age relations.

### 1. Editorial

Age is a changing and relative marker of passing time and understandable within a framing of life bordered between birth and death. Everyone alive has an age, with difference between ages being the defining feature of how they come to be imbued with influence and impact over others. While categories of child and adult seem natural descriptors of a person's passing time within the life course, like all categories the meanings of these are just as fraught with an assumed hierarchy of power and knowledge as are other social categories that receive far greater attention and theorization. Our goal in this special issue seeks, therefore, to disturb the staid and normative difference between “child” or “youth” and “adult” and to upend easy assumptions about what makes the distinction sustainable. We seek instead to emphasize the *processes* through which age differences are felt and then defined, rather than assuming that a subject experiences something or other because of the age they “have” or enact.

Too often age as an experience and identity follows from descriptive assumptions masking as much as they denote. As such, the influence and control that adults have over children follow from categorical differentiation and the power to put those categories into performative circulation, despite the capacity of children to act against these norms and use power from their own social positions that vary notably between societies. What remains vital to consider regardless of how we measure interactions between “adults” and “children” is how the emphasis about their differences do the work of justifying the power imbalance between them categorically; the categories do their work by making invisible, and restricting attention on, the many commonalities shared across them or the contradictions pressuring them from within. Starting from commonality or contradiction would, of course, threaten the very structure of many of the world's social, cultural, and political-economic institutions and identities which perform a fundamental age difference and result in everyday power relations between people in different generational positions.

In this issue, we start with a conceptual framework of intergenerational relationality to think more intently about what exceeds an age's categorical features even as we pay close analytic attention to the work categories do – both on research subjects and on scholarship's practices of thinking about these subjects. Indeed, one only has an age through a relation with others. Intergenerational relationality therefore notes the process of age differentiation while questioning what commonalities or nuances might be brought into our analyses and conclusions to allow a retheorization of age.

While the meanings ascribed to different categories of age have gone through dramatic resignification over the centuries, with modernity came a predominant association of age placed within a developmental model of life stages over the course of time. One's age, in other words, has come to indicate temporal *progress* in life, which is underlined by the very idea of aging that involves connotations of losing the gained social position. Categorized ages only exist as such because they are assumed to differ from one another through time and in relation, and are socially-culturally evaluated through expectant hierarchies of behavior, achievement, progress, and improvement. These hierarchies are not just expectant but enforced, with real impacts on those failing to achieve milestones in time. Today in most places age therefore indicates a person's trajectory on developmental paths determined by social and cultural norms of maturation and behavior, such that change through time is assumed, charted, and described through categories (child, youth, adult, senior) and/or transitions (sexual maturity, for example) (also see [Punch and Vanderbeck, 2018](#), p. 5). What remains constant despite the varied, changing, and diverse ways that age is felt, described, and charted across geographical contexts, is that everyone is assumed to be on the way to another stage until one dies; the temporality of life supposedly gains cumulative meaning through change and contrast with what came before and where one should be on the path to the future.

For over a decade now, scholars have done diligence to evidencing the wide and diverse range of identities and experiences within any

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category of age. In childhood studies, understandings of youth as subjects in their own rights have pushed past a reliance on their existence via their fundamental difference from adults. For instance, an interdisciplinary network of scholars has long critiqued the assumption that children and adolescents are processes of “becoming” adult; instead, young persons are seen to have a subjectivity status as “being”, which positions them as subjects in their own rights, without the sole recourse to comparison with adults (e.g. Kjørholt, 2002; Skelton, 2007; Blazek and Windram-Geddes, 2013, also Kallio, 2016). We also have a robust literature on the ways that categorical power relations embolden adults to exert control onto youth, and the purposes and effects of power relations on the adult and child binary (e.g. Katz, 2004; Gallagher, 2008). In turn, scholars insist that young people’s agencies persist within adultist contexts that often seek to determine meaning for them; subjectivities of children and adolescents exceed quotidian spatialities of adult privatization, social control, and political privilege (we have worked to show this argument in our own research, e.g., Kallio and Häkli, 2011; Thomas, 2011; Brown and Thomas, 2014).

However, despite such sustained and vital arguments foregrounding young people’s agencies and subjective experiences, we hold that these debates have done little to *theorize age*; too often, age remains legible through the same categories we started with. We suggest that by focusing on the distinctions of age, scholarship often renaturalizes age by assuming it as such. In other words, while the social and cultural attachments to categories of age remain important to consider and interrogate, they have somewhat grown into idealized norms masked as naturalized or descriptive identities. Thus, our goal is to deflate the categorical assumptions of developmental life stages; in fact, punitive impact proceeds from a lack of attention on alternative knowledges about young people. For example, because adults become imbued with authority for their ages, often scholarly analyses highlight the effects of adultist power structures on youth. Less attention goes to theorizing how these powerful processes are structured by assumed knowledge about young people and how we as scholars can deflate the normative power of that knowledge.

While social and cultural geographers have vibrant and critical theories about how race, gender, class, and sexuality create damage through unequal power relations and knowledge production, a similar treatment has not been placed on age, perhaps because of the naturalized assumptions about the vulnerability of children, or the immaturity of youth, or the dependency of very young people. But we contend that a focus on relationality – especially across generations – belie the ease with which we as scholars make about age difference. As articles in this special issue illustrate, by attending to the relative differentiation of aged subjects, we can begin to upend the child-adult binary and expose the infiltration of developmentalist thinking into our theories of intersubjective relations. Among other things, this allows us to deconstruct the being-becoming distinction, by showing that through the perpetual processes of intersubjective socialization and subject formation people are always both (Kallio, 2017). The articles likewise contend with why youth themselves sometimes capitulate to developmentalist reductions of their feelings and experiences; our goal therefore remains consistent in showing the persistent effects of adultist viewpoints on “youth.” Our argument therefore advocates for new thinking about young people’s experiences especially.

Age is also an identity and like all identities, gains sensibility through performative experiences, struggles, and intersections through a range of social meanings. A person’s experience of age is not only constantly in flux, age is only experienced in relation to others and made specific and contingent through contexts of encounter. The papers closely examine race-ethnicity, location, class, the effects of poverty and relative wealth, migration, family context, and political status. The intersectional experiences of youth help scholarship push both for a broader concept than adult/child allows, while also positing the theoretical importance of youth’s institutional, economic, and social vulnerabilities and their impact on children’s, adolescents’, and young

adults’ subjectivities. After all, we must remain vigilant to the ways that power relations work on and through differently aged people even as we continually seek new theories to understand those power effects and agencies. Whether or not one achieves the social expectations of her or his age is, as we know, a normative and abelist evaluation, accompanied by consequences for failure (and those whom are designated as having a developmental disability are infantilized, see Kafer, 2013).

Consequences are specifically enacted through intersectional differentiation of young people, and prioritizing age over other social differences negates the argument of relationality. We see this silencing of intersectionality in operation when, for example, aged identities are used as labels to justify protection for some, punishment for other. Often a victim is listed as a “child” to emphasize protection, but a “youth” is cited when improper behavior needs correction, and a “young adult” comes to the fore when punishment ensues. Just apply these categories to the case of prevalent strategies invoked in criminal justice narratives to see the effect: reformers insist societies should not incarcerate “children”, “youth” commit status offenses for which adults cannot be charged (like underage drinking), and law and order positions insist that “young adults” need to be locked away when they are violent. The foregrounded use of age categories mask how these are gendered, sexualized, racial, classed and ethnic adjudications, among other contextual situations like location, migrant status, dis/ability, and embodiment. Shifting analysis onto the dynamic processes of intersectionality might, we suggest, allow for more innovative thinking about how and why age comes to matter and *in relation to whom*.

In this special issue, we place an emphasis on the emotions of intergenerational encounters to address “in relation to whom.” Intergenerational relationality provides a fruitful lens for highlighting the overreliance on the binary of child/adult while theorizing the vital effects of being differently aged people (also Kallio, 2017; Evans, 2014). People develop an understanding that they belong to certain generational groupings, be these experientially established or predefined by others, only through norms and discourses which frame these understandings into descriptive categories. Generational grouping are therefore both normative and felt, in other words, performative in that they enact what they describe rather than enacting a so-called natural ontological state. Lived experiences, embodiments, and communities might constantly fluctuate and flow, making the social constitution of age tangible and contestable (Blazek, 2015), but generational difference remains a fact of life through social acceptance and even resistance. People at any age may feel inappropriately treated due to their age, further solidifying age as an identity through an emphasized experience. People also often know that age stereotypes veil their other characteristics and intersectional identities, and they may feel out of place in their age group while finding themselves belonging with other people. The seemingly fixed relations between people of different ages thus become negotiable or trenchant – and yes, even mundanely lived – in their emotionally charged encounters of interrelation (on emotional encounters, see Kallio et al., 2019). But emotions provide the clues of how to notice the process of relationality, since this process of relation is what triggers emotional responses or forms the context for emotional relations to begin with.

In people’s experiential worlds, age relations are constituted through affective encounters including various emotional elements (cf. Gagen, 2015; Ahmed, 2015; Kraftl and Blazek, 2015). Unlike other socially constituted identity categories, the different subject positions associated with age and their relationalities are rarely pulled together in current interdisciplinary literature. Shifting power relations and struggles, involving experiences of justice and injustice or just through mundane spatial and temporal encounters, are not only aspects of, but also produce, contextual meanings and emotional experiences of age. Further, we agree on a lack of scholarly attention to intergenerationality as an approach that acknowledges all people as *relationally aged*, instead of emphasizing the specific meaning of age to people in certain generational positions (children, youth, the elderly)

(e.g. Valentine, 2008; Vanderbeck and Worth, 2014). Specifically, with this focus we place critique on the naturalized position of adults as “non-aged beings” who have “become” selves after the tumultuous passage through adolescence.

The papers reveal affective relations – often caring but sometimes less so – that people actively create, to maintain, continue, repair, challenge and change their shared worlds (cf. Tronto, 1993). We also explore the forms of agencies that these relations afford or make possible. Agencies related to age may aim at enhancing one's positions or those of others in people's intergenerational lives. Our focus is specifically on challenging situations where social routines are disturbed, pushing those involved into new positions and to taking active roles. These agencies include negotiating and challenging prevailing norms, finding creative ways to perform individual and collective identities, and other active ways of affectively relating to other people.

Like the other social categories that it intersects with, age is thoroughly contested. Intergenerational encounters are traversed by power relations that play out differently in distinct geographical contexts, cultural and political institutions, and social situations. To develop a better understanding of both mundane and institutional politics of age, the papers explore how subject formation unfolds through powerful intergenerational relations and contestations. Papers also approach the power relations embedded in intergenerationality through generational orderings and explore the ways in which age contributes to the structuring of society and hierarchizing power relations.

The special issue begins with papers by Hanne Warming and Mary Thomas that focus on intergenerational encounters and relations in two extreme yet very different institutional contexts. Warming's article *Messing with the emotions of the other: Exploring ambiguous youth-adult relations in a residential care institution* presents results from a study conducted in a residence for youth suffering from social and mental distress, a place known for its good reputation among both professionals and residents, in the welfare society of Denmark. Thomas's article “*Y'all trying to make a mockery out of me.*” *The confined sexualities of girls in a US juvenile detention facility* draws from research in a state juvenile detention facility in the United States. Both papers are based on ethnographic research and rich empirical analysis, portraying intergenerational relations between adult staff and youth (teenage girls and young adult women) resident under their care and supervision. Both papers illustrate how the girls' and young women's emotional agencies and personal responsibilities are constantly assessed by the adult staff from the perspective of certain extremes: manipulation vs. empowerment in Warming's study, and misconduct vs. rehabilitation in Thomas's case. The staff in both cases perform institutional and “professional” stances, yet Warming and Thomas illustrate that staff enact too- neat distinctions between adult rationality and youth emotionality, and often fail to see their own emotions impacting the youth in their care, creating confusion, pain, and stark disempowerment messages among the girls with sometimes tragic outcomes.

Warming pays specific attention to the ‘hungry hearts’ that some of the girls in the residence are portrayed having, referring to their extensive psychological need or personal desire for care and closeness. Staff evaluate the merits of girls' requests for care, legitimizing some while eliminating others. They ask, do the youth *need* caring relationships for *empowerment* that helps them to build independent lives elsewhere? Or are they *manipulating* the staff to fulfil their wrongful *desires* that took them to the facility in the first place? From an intergenerational analytical perspective this dilemma can be portrayed also in other words: Who pulls the strings in the discussed power relations, the social workers entitled to intervene with the girls' private lives (and therefore to mess with their emotions) or the youth whose access to the private lives of the staff is explicitly forbidden (thus emotions ought to remain beyond the relationship)? Yet from another perspective, these needs/desires can be considered in terms of familial agency (cf. Kallio and Lind in this issue). What kinds of emotional needs and desires teenage girls and young women *should* have, to be normal, in their

homes, towards the people who come closest to their adult family members?

Thomas's analysis also strongly involves questions around normality. She focuses on how sexuality is (and is not) felt, expressed, enacted, shared, hidden, assessed, debated, negotiated, denied, and challenged in the studied juvenile detention facility. Through participant observation and the participants' narrations she found this basic element of humanity to be a key contested aspect, to these girls between 16 and 21 years of age, who are supposed to lead desexualized lives during their detention yet at the same time rehabilitate into a normal life of a young woman through concentrated attention on sexual identity and behavior. Thomas shows how girls, especially African-American and queer girls, contend with the ways that their sexual subjectivities are contested, contradicted, ridiculed, racialized, and demonized by some of the staff, at the same time as reformed identities based on heteronormative monogamy are proposed instead. Girls' capacities for sexual expression are always contained within the evaluative framing of adult staff, therefore, leading the girls to wonder how or whether they can even achieve the goals of rehabilitation mandated to them.

Jacob Lind's and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio's papers introduce challenging migration contexts where intergenerational relations and familial agencies often become emphasized. In his article *Sacrificing parents on the altar of children's rights: Intergenerational struggles and rights in deportability*, Lind explores how undocumented migrants act together to protect the life of the family, in Birmingham, United Kingdom, and Malmö, Sweden. Lind argues that each state portends children's rights as endangered by the status of their undocumented migrant parents, as such distinguishing the child from the parent and essentially decontextualizing familial life. However, members of families refuse these terms laid out by the states, and instead work together to persist under precarious conditions. Lind applies the concept of ‘motherwork’ to all members of the families he studied, showing how family members from different generational and gendered positions actively care for one another under intense stress and scrutiny. The general emotional labor that familial subjects engage with also turns particularly political given the denunciation of undocumented parents. Motherwork, Lind suggests, provides a humanitarian alternative to the states' simplistic purview of children and parents as binary. The concept recognizes the intergenerational caring work all family members do as they move between vulnerable and competent roles, depending on the situation and their personal capacities to act in time and space.

Kallio's article, *Leading refugee lives together: Familial agency as a political capacity*, also questions the limits the state places on how we can conceptualize who the family is. Similar to Lind is her critique of the state's emphasis on individuals in migration and refugee policy, rather than on families. Kallio, however, extends the familial relation to reflect the diversity of ways that people relate, live, and form identities based on what and who is important to them over time and in space. She puts to use the concept of “familiality” to allow for the affective imprint of past relations (for instance, with a parent who is now deceased), sibling relations that are distant, community alliances and friendships, and fraught or painful relations that effect how one lives as a refugee or asylum seeker. This argument is especially important for refugees, whose status is determined by policies emphasizing the autonomous individual, yet whose political agencies are forged and expressed through familial relations. By focusing specifically on young men in her paper, Kallio challenges the dominant framing of them as independent individuals rather than as emotionally connected and socialized through intimacy, non-hierarchical intergenerational relations and struggles, and political capacity-building.

The complexity of how people live in familiality is a shared theme in the paper by Katie McQuaid, Robert Vanderbeck, Gill Valentine, Kristina Diprose and Chen Liu, *‘An elephant cannot fail to carry its own ivory’: Transgenerational ambivalence, infrastructure and sibling support practices in urban Uganda*. Sibling and extended family relations take on

urgent responsibility in rearranged family support systems upon a death or other crisis. Their article introduces the concepts of ‘transgenerational infrastructure’ and ‘transgenerational ambivalence’ to discuss how socio-economic caring relations currently take place and are changing in a sub-Saharan context that, in this regard, is not unique in the geographical region. They set out to argue that while people’s dependencies of each other are transgenerational, they are not evenly formed, which creates both subjective and social ambivalences. Coincidental events, such as illness or death of a family member, may dramatically alter one’s position and lead to reassembled responsibilities and a “chaos” of competing ethics of care. By highlighting the specificities of gender, birth order, and social standing, the authors show that families and caregivers cope through ambivalent attachment to normative obligation or care of oneself.

The last paper in the collection by Päivi Honkatukia and Arseniy Svyrenko analyzes intergenerational relations in public space from the perspective of Finnish youth, in the mobile space of public transportation and more specifically the Helsinki metro. Their article, *Intergenerational encounters on the metro: Young people’s perspectives on social control in the media city*, focuses on experiences of safety with regard to (adult-enacted) social control. They first argue that spatial norms of quiet transit on the metro deemphasize distinctions between young people and adults – rather, all people are typically expected to conform to “good” travelers no matter their age, and “bad” travelers can be of any age (e.g., noisy teenagers or drunk adults both sort into the “bad” metro grouping). Similarly to McQuaid et al., they emphasize both intra- and intergenerational relations throughout their article, yet their focus differs significantly through an examination of digital technological mediation of relations in the Helsinki city-region. The young people described using technology and communication through smartphones as a way to connect to others and buffer the need to interact with those sharing transportation spaces. These interactions made the youth feel safer in the public sphere. On the other hand, youth describe painful encounters with adults, for example when girls detail experiences of sexist commentary, harassment, and physical assault. Avoidance of interaction with all adults often follow, and technology provides useful strategies for blocking noise, speaking with others over the phone to feel safe, and using each other to “shield” against the gaze of adults. These behaviors may seem rude to adults less inclined to be attached to digital devices, but for youth the technology is a mechanism for public and urban spatial inclusion – especially for girls.

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