



Theorizing children's subjectivity: Ethnographic investigations in rural Rwanda

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Abstract

The importance of approaching the study of young people through their own experiences has been well established in the sociological and anthropological records. But less attention has been paid to how the impersonal forces of history and political economy are constituted throughout the social domain to inform those experiences. Drawing from 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Rwanda, this article elaborates upon the concept and application of “subjectivity” in the study of children's lives.

Keywords

Aspiration, childhood, conflict, education, ethnography, Rwanda, schooling, subjectivity

Subjectivities, thus, for the anthropologist, are *raucous terrae incognitae*, landscapes of explosions, noise, alienating silences, disconnects and dissociations, fears, terror machineries, pleasure principles, illusions, fantasies, displacements, and secondary revisions, mixed with reason, rationalizations, and paralogics—all of which have powerful sociopolitical dimensions and effects.

Michael MJ Fischer (2007: 442)

“Subjectivity” is a term imbued with multiple intellectual genealogies. Little cross-disciplinary consensus exists for what is to be understood through its invocation. The “inwards-looking subject” of psychology, for example, bears little resemblance to iterations of the “socially constructed subject” found in anthropology or philosophy (Henriques et al., [1984] 1998). But if there is an area of consensus, it is the notion that

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subjectivity holds a contradictory connotation—that to *be a subject* suggests an experience-informed awareness about one's situation, while to *be subject* attends to the fact that this experience is constituted through systems of dominance and subordination (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1977).

These two faces of subjectivity hold the potential to facilitate the study of subjective experiences. However, some have raised concerns about the extent to which this aim is being realized in social science scholarship (Biehl et al., 2007; Kellner, 2007; Kleinman and Fitz-Henry, 2007; Rorty, 2007; Smith, 1988). Too often the *subject* is reduced to little more than a peculiar *object* of intellectual inquiry, one which is a site for fragmented scholarly debates that have made it lose much of its practical application for understanding human experience. Theories of subjectivity are, as João Biehl et al. (2007) put it, “too often overstated, obscure, and even dehumanizing” to the degree that individuals have “been transformed into remote abstractions, discursive forms, or subjective positions” (p. 13). To be sure, nuanced studies of subjectivity must be done in ways that account for gender (Foucault, 1979), generation (Wells, 2014), ethnic identification (Mama, 1995), and so on. To then recenter an investigation into the subjectivity of individuals is not to imply a uniform or universal human nature. Rather, it is to attend to the recognition that “the subject is always social and the social, subjective” (Kleinman and Fitz-Henry, 2007: 61).

As conditions change, so too do our subjectivities. Armed conflict, sexual exploitation, or political upheavals exemplify the types of drastic alterations to the external and internal worlds of individuals (Das et al., 2000; Wells, 2014). But so might enduring endemic suffering or structural “violences” reconstitute how individuals come to terms with their situation (Bourgois, 2003; Kleinman, 2000; Kovats-Bernat, 2006; Lamar, 2015). Shifts in economic policy, gendered expectations, or religious commitments can each inform subjective experience. For young people, the experience of schooling may produce aspirations of emancipation or social mobility—or a sense of fatalism and uncertainty (Levinson and Pollock, 2011).

Children and youth offer such potentially rich generational categories of ethnographic inquiry in which to explore how broader forces shape local subjective experience. For example, Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* has been long revered by anthropologists as an exemplification for how ethnography might represent “the embedding of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy” (Marcus and Fischer, 1999: 77; see also: Ferguson, 1990: 12–13; Marcus, 1986: 173–188). Yet, anthropologists have been mostly preoccupied with Willis' analytical moves and textual considerations concerning representation. Less attention has been given to the role and significance of Willis' young interlocutors in the co-production of this rich material. In the landmark volume, *Writing Culture*, George Marcus (1986) lauds the “critical insights” offered by Willis' participants, but then immediately discounts their insights, describing them as “stunted” (p. 181) and in need of interpretation by the ethnographer. The views of young people in any context certainly operate under constraints (James, 2007). Children might offer only partial explanations for how political and economic conditions inform their own experiences (Hart, 2008). But rather than view the lads as “stunted,” I contend we would be better served to consider young people as research subjects, capable of providing distinctive insights with respect to the particular social roles and spaces they occupy (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Theorizing subjectivity of young people is thus a

way to locate and understand children's own experiences in relation to overarching and impersonal structures, systems, and relations of power (Stephens, 1994). It allows us to consider how those powerful historical and sociopolitical dimensions and effects, seemingly on the periphery of children's lives, inform that which is most intimate, personal, and significant.

The theoretical arguments made in this article constitute the conceptual and analytical heart of a larger study which ethnographically investigated children's experiences of formal education in rural Rwanda. The rest of this article is organized as follows. Part I offers brief historical and contemporary accounts of children's education in the Rwandan context. It also provides an overview of my approach to the fieldwork and gives a brief account of the broader study findings. Part II represents the core of this article. It brings together the scholarly literature along with my ethnographic material to introduce a conceptual argument to approach the study of children's subjective experiences. In the conclusion, I revisit some of the key points made in this article and offer a couple of key considerations for how subjectivity can be a useful framework.

Part I: Children's education in Rwanda

Rwanda offers a complex context in which to study children's educational experiences. Such a study must account for the interrelated and enduring legacies of colonialism, the politics of ethnicity, and the civil war and genocide that took place in the 1990s. It must also address the post-genocide government's development project, its quest for social and economic transformation, and the strong emphasis placed on children's schooling (Pells et al., 2014).

During the German (1898–1916) and Belgian (1916–1962) occupation of Rwanda, access to formal education was limited, and it was a Church-led enterprise (Newbury, 1988). But as schooling became more central to the colonial project, there was a greater need for the political elite, that is, Rwanda's monarchy, to subscribe to the importance of schooling. As the state grew in administrative power, it assumed an increasingly prominent active role in the establishment of a national education system. In 1962, Rwanda's first constitution mandated primary education be both free and compulsory.

Rwanda's post-independence education reforms focused on improving access and advancing national development. While primary school access was fairly ubiquitous, ethnic and regional identification served as trump cards for admission to secondary school that could override academic performance (King, 2014). Inequitable access, along with a racist curriculum, were among the factors that contributed to the 1994 genocide, during which an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus lost their lives (Prunier, 1995). The conflict had devastating effects on the education system. Tutsi students and teachers were targeted because they were thought to represent the educated and elite class. Many of those not killed fled the country (Obura, 2003). By the end of 1994, Rwanda was considered by many to be a failed state (Uvin, 1998).

Since coming into power after the 1994 genocide, Rwanda's ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), ushered in a series of policy reforms aimed at social and economic transformation. Through the implementation of a strategic planning document called Vision 2020, the government aims for Rwanda to become a middle-income country by

the year 2020 (MINECOFIN, 2000). The need for young people to become formally educated features prominently into the government's vision for social and economic development.

Post-genocide education policy reforms and planning documents now stress inclusion (MINEDUC, 2013). Secondary schools were once prohibitively expensive, regionalist, and driven by ethnic identification (Obura, 2003). In 2008, a 9-Year Basic Education (9YBE) policy was introduced. It aimed to expand access through lower secondary school (Senior 1–3). In 2010, 9YBE was expanded into 3 years of upper secondary school (12YBE). The policy sought to enable that all children be able to attend 6 years of primary school and 6 years of secondary school (MINEDUC, 2011). Of note, government secondary schools were historically boarding schools, many of which have strong ties to the Catholic Church (Longman, 2010). However, in order to keep costs down and make schools more accessible, schools of basic education are day schools. Like their primary school counterparts, schools of basic education are fee-free, but children are still expected to pay for a wide range of materials and expenses connected to their education (Williams et al., 2015).

Another important change in the education system is the issue of language. In 2008, the government switched from French to English as the medium of instruction in classrooms. The language change presented as a shock to the basic education system in the sense that many students and teachers were unprepared to respond (Abbott et al., 2015; Williams 2016).

Rwandan children from poor households now have more access to post-primary education. However, schools of basic education are often staffed with undertrained teachers. Materials are in short supply. Many teachers and students struggle with English, Rwanda's newly introduced language of instruction. Concerns over quality intersect with conditions outside of school, including poverty, household work, and orphanhood. It was in this context in which I sought to explore how young people understood their situation.

Fieldwork and study site

The research aims necessitated a great deal of time be spent in schools. But my analytical commitments were not restricted to the setting of the classroom. Instead, I explored how the institutional context of the school was embedded within broader systems and processes that converged to inform how young people understood their situation (Levinson and Holland, 1996). Similarly, this study centers upon the voices of young people. But it would be remiss to understand the contributions of this project as a study of "children's worlds" or "children's culture"—for to more fully understand the significance of children's subjective experiences means attending to how their experiences are woven into the broader fabric of society and polity (Stephens, 1994).

Informed by this orientation, I carried out nine consecutive months of fieldwork in 2012, followed by 6 months of additional work over the next 3 years (2013–2015). Most of the data collection took place in a rural area in Rwanda which I will call "Kinunga."¹ In 2012, slightly less than half of all households in Kinunga fell below the government's poverty line. Access to clean water and electricity remains limited. Nearly all families in the area relied on agricultural production. Most children were expected to help their families by fetching water, cooking, collecting firewood, looking after cows, cultivation, and protecting rice crops from birds and thieves.

During my fieldwork, I spent time in all seven primary and secondary schools in the area. I principally relied on school- and community-based participant observation, including unstructured and semi-structured methods such as classroom observations, group discussions, and informal discussions. At the core of my project was a collaboration with a group of 20 primary school and secondary school “focal students.” I sought out a group who collectively comprised a range of sociodemographic characteristics and dispositions such as age (12–20 years), gender, ethnicity, geographic proximity to school, language ability, academic performance, and personality traits (e.g. shy, outgoing, etc.). My work with focal students was not a single data collection event but rather an ongoing collaboration. I drew from multiple methods including life history interviews, home visits, photo projects, journal activities, and informal discussions (Williams and Rogers, 2014). Through these activities, my aim was to gain a better understanding of how schooling informed children’s expectations, aspirations, and perceptions of possibility.

Most of the focal students attended a school of 9YBE called Groupe Scolaire Kinunga (GSK). Those who attended GSK were from poor families but had enough financial security to allow their children to continue their studies at the post-primary level. As a 9YBE school, GSK was a day school. Some studied there because they did not pass their national examination but wished to continue their studies. Others passed their primary examination but could not afford to attend a more expensive boarding school. Most of the focal students I collaborated with at GSK also shared one common characteristic. In 2012, each was about to complete their terminal phase of their lower secondary studies later that year. When I returned the following year, I learned that all had transitioned elsewhere for work, further study, or were staying at home with their families.

Part II: A framework for theorizing children’s subjectivity

In this section, I draw from ethnographic material and existing literature to introduce how I conceptualized children’s subjectivity in this study. The interpretation of “children’s subjectivity” offers the conceptual terrain needed to locate and better understand children’s educational experiences—and their interpretation of those experiences—in relation to overarching and impersonal structures, systems, and relations of power. It consists of three vantage points including (1) subjective-experiential, (2) intersubjective-relational, and (3) macro-historical. This conceptual framework helped me to explore how the experiences of young people were informed by broader conditions. It privileges ways in which factors such as education policy, corruption, or structural violence are not simply crystallized in institutions such as the state or the school as sites of “subjection” but also directly inform children’s actions and inactions and sense of possibilities and inevitabilities. It is informed on the basis of exploring how proximal and seemingly distal factors converge to constitute subjectivity and the production of local, lived experience (Stephens, 1994).

Vantage point 1: Subjective-experiential

The purpose of the subjective-experiential vantage point is to explore the individual, personalized accounts of young people. “Experiential” refers to biographical events and

autobiographical accounts, while “subjective” invokes the interpretive aspect for how young people understand their own experience. The experiential dimension points to the need to consider the specificity and individuality of a young person’s experiences. Divine and Delphine, for instance, may have been two 18-year-old girls who lived in close proximity to one another, attended the same school of basic education (GSK) and who had fathers who died during the genocide. The experiential perspective is individualized in the sense that it suggests that we should not assume that these two girls shared the same interpretation of their experiences. The experiential perspective allows us to consider the following themes: What abilities and disabilities, interests and disinterests does the young person have? How do they locate their own participation with formal schooling within a broader account of their life? What are their priorities, their aspirations, and their worries? For example, Divine took a distinctly fatalistic view of her situation, believing that continuing in school was only to delay entry into manual labor. But her close friend and GSK counterpart, Delphine, held onto the hope that if she did well on her national examinations, she may be admitted into a well-regarded boarding school for upper secondary school. The experiential perspective adds layers of nuance and differentiation in relation to dispositions, preferences, values, and outlooks. It enables us to embrace an increasingly complex explanation of subjectivity, one that extends beyond biology and/or impenetrable historical, political, and economic structures.

This vantage point also draws attention to the interpretive dimension of children’s subjectivity. During life history interviews with focal students, for example, I asked them to help me understand how they grew up. But what I implied was, “How do you interpret how you grew up?” This question enabled young people to reconstruct their past as well as explain how they saw their future. “Memory is more than a way of accessing the past,” Allison James (2005) reminds us. “It is also fundamental to the present, and by implication to the future” (p. 260). The recollections and interpretations young people assign to a historical event are as significant as the historical event itself. One historical event can be understood by children differently depending on innumerable factors—not the least of which is the young person’s level of comfort with the researcher and the prospect of being a research participant. The same “objective” historical event or experience that might foster a sense of resilience and perseverance for some may contribute to a sense of persecution or helplessness for others (Kleinman, 2006). For some in Kinunga, repeating a year of primary school was interpreted as offering supplementary preparation before continuing on to secondary school. But others interpreted this experience as a sign that this was the beginning of the end of their formal education, viewing this failure as symptomatic of a broader set of inequalities and injustices that intersected with class, gender, or ethnicity. Different interpretations of a historical event may or may not have bearing on children’s short-term trajectories, but they may have profound consequences for how young people came to see their situation. Similarly, the absence of a key life event from an account narrative could be telling—perhaps, representing something one finds to be difficult, painful, or shameful. The death of a sibling, failing an exam, or a parent being released from jail—such events not only directly impacted children’s lives; they could also compromise one’s dignity or trigger a strong emotional response. The absence of discussion of a particular issue—should it ever become known—was obviously a challenge for theorizing subjectivity (Spyrou, 2015). For instance, I grappled with how to

make sense of the fact that ethnic identity was rarely discussed by children. Should less weight be placed on such an issue that was not discussed—or more? Ethnicity has long played an important function in shaping social and political life in Rwanda (Vansina, 2004). While open discussion of ethnicity is taboo in Rwanda's current political environment, many scholars contend it remains an undercurrent that continues to structure social and political relations within Rwandan society—and an important reason why the government opposes ethnic labels in the country (Straus and Waldorf, 2011). No readymade solution exists for how to understand the salience and significance of ethnic identification in Rwanda today, but as Paul Willis (1977) cautions, an ethnography of visible forms is “truly only half the story” (p. 121).

An investigation of subjectivity gives empirical validity to contestations, contradictions, and conflicting accounts that are susceptible to revision and re-envisioning over time (King, 2009). One way to understand these apparent contradictions is through what James Scott (1990) refers to as “hidden transcripts” that offer subtle critiques of power structures. For instance, children could paint a sweepingly positive picture of education in Rwanda when participating in a non-governmental organization (NGO)-sponsored event celebrating the importance of education—or when meeting with western researchers for the first time. But such “public transcripts” can often be contrasted with alternative narratives that emerged over time, which may include feelings of discontent and resentment, fear and uncertainty, and the contradictions that lie therein. Hidden transcripts were revealed in different ways: when young people describe their educational experiences in critical, if subtle, terms—when focal student Jean Damascene expressed uncertainty as to whether his education would lead to a job or when a focus group of boys at GSK lamented that they were unable to learn because their teachers themselves did not have a solid grasp of the country's medium of instruction.

The point of the subjective-experiential vantage point is not to provide a recipe for how to reconcile or analyze conflicting accounts or apparent contradictions. Instead the subjective-experiential vantage point offers one way to understand how young people account for their lives.

Vantage point 2: Intersubjective-relational

Subjective experience is not produced in isolation but rather shaped and reshaped in relation to one's family, peers, and community (Qvortrup, 1994). In the intersubjective-relational vantage point, “intersubjective” attends to the fact that children are social beings and that the “production” of subjectivity can more accurately termed “co-production.” Simply put, in a social relationship, as you are contributing to the production of my subjectivity, I am helping to inform yours. As Leena Alanen (2009) explains, “Children are ... involved in the daily ‘construction’ of their own and other people's everyday relationships and life trajectories” (p. 161). The “relational” aspect of this vantage point draws attention to the ways in which different social groups and relationships form and inform how young people think about their lives and the possibilities for the future. “[Subjectivities are] not something invented by the individual himself,” explains Foucault (1989), but rather, “They are models that he finds in his culture and that are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society and his social group” (pp. 441–442). To be

sure, many of the ideas presented in this conceptual framework may well apply to the study of adult subjectivities. But I contend that it is the intersubjective-relational vantage point in this section that makes this conceptual framework so deeply oriented toward exploring subjectivities of young people. At its core is the fact that childhood is a social construction (Prout and James, 1997). How this construction is understood impacts upon how adults relate to children and how children relate to one another and even themselves. Children may assume particular social roles, expectations, and responsibilities within their family and community (Alanen, 2009). That children occupy roles distinct from those of adults is perhaps most evident within the institutional context of the school, but it also extends to other spheres of social life such as work (Punch, 2004) and household reproduction (Katz, 2004). Young people in Kinunga lived, worked, played, and studied in Kinunga. But they also had socially sanctioned and designated roles and responsibilities that were set apart from adults. Children were required to go to school along with performing child-specific duties such as fetching water, tending to cows, singing in their church choir, and so on. Alanen (2009) refers to these forms of demarcation as the “generational ordering” (p. 161) of young people, a term which draws our attention consider how everyday practices and existing structures reinforce the significance of childhood in the Rwandan context.

To some extent, the constructed parameters of childhood could be distinguished from that of adults. However, children’s worlds were not quarantined from adults. Quite the opposite, intergenerational relations provided further insight into children’s subjectivity. For instance, as a school of basic education, GSK was commonly referred to as the “school for those who fail”—a sentiment widely held by children and adults in the area. Teachers at GSK internalized the belief that their students were considered failures. Their own commitments often reflected this belief. Students at GSK complained that their teachers were late for class and often arrived unprepared. The relationship of the community to the school, transmitted through teachers, informed the quality of the interactions between students and teachers. In a focus group discussion at GSK, one boy said that “Many students here don’t study well because their teachers don’t encourage them. The teachers just say that it is a [school of basic education], so students are unable to learn.” Thus, not only did students contend with factors such as a long walk to school, lack of materials, and a challenging English-only curriculum, but they also encountered teachers who did not believe in their potential to succeed.

Children’s experiences were also produced through ongoing social engagement with family, kin, and others closest to them. A mother, uncle, brother, or grandmother often played an important role in shaping the meanings, expectations, and perceptions of possibility embraced by children. Some caregivers were committed to seeing that their child was able to continue their studies, perhaps, because they themselves had not been given the opportunity to continue to secondary school. Other caregivers expressed indifference. A change in the economic situation of the family through caregiver illness or a poor harvest season could quickly change a family’s circumstances and, thus, alter the priorities of young people and how they considered their futures. When families did not have financial capacity to allow their child to continue to boarding school or university, children doubted whether schooling could function as a mechanism for social mobility. Some looked at school with a degree of resignation that, for reasons of poverty,

exclusion, or ethnicity, schooling would do very little to change their circumstances. For these reasons, the constitution of a caregiver's own outlook, disposition, and practical circumstances often impacted children's outlook on their own situation.

Friends, classmates, and peers also played a key role in informing subjectivity. Ethnographic scholarship includes plenty of vivid examples for how children's social and cultural worlds shape lived experience and influence the meanings they give to their lives and expectations they have for the future (Corsaro and Rizzo, 1988; Dyson, 2010; Werbner, 2002). Peers compelled one another to behave in particular ways, to support certain causes, and to subscribe to certain systems of belief. Children exerted pressure on one another to join a sports group, to engage or disengage in school, to reject or embrace traditional forms of healing, to initiate sexual relationships, to support the country's ruling political party or question its authority, and so on. Social relationships can be an enduring, cross-cutting dimension of children's lives in ways that include and extend beyond specific locations such as school, home, church, the trading center, the street, a banana grove, or a football field. In short, children's social relationships produced synergies, contradictions, and forms of dissonance that inform subjectivity.

Vantage point 3: Macro-historical

In the first two vantage points, we saw the ways through which seemingly proximal, visible and invisible, and sometimes articulated dimensions of children's lives converged to inform subjectivity. The macro-historical vantage point enables us to further consider how political, economic, and historical conditions—factors seemingly on the periphery of children's lives—inform that which is most intimate and personal for young people. In practical terms, this meant exploring how the government's economic restructuring project informed the aspirations of Jean Damascene; how Delphine, a genocide orphan, saw her future; and by contrast, how Nadine's resentment of genocide orphans had a political, economic, and historical location that shaped her sense of what her own future might hold. It also meant interrogating how Rwanda's recent introduction of English as a medium of instruction reconstituted what it meant to be an educated person in Rwanda almost overnight and the impact this change in policy had on the experiences of young people attending GSK (see Abbott et al., 2015).

Locating children's subjectivity within a macro-historical perspective was far from a straightforward endeavor. It entailed more than a cursory reading of the historical literature or review of the policy documentation that seemed relevant for this study. As such, anthropologists have been dissuaded from attempting to locate their research within a macro-historical perspective, and for good reason: it poses challenges methodologically, analytically, and in terms of textual representation.

To address this challenge, I sought to keep the *background* of this ethnographic study at the *foreground* of my own analytical commitments. George Marcus (1986) advocates that this must be done “without losing sight of the fact that [the background] is integrally constitutive of cultural life within the bounded subject matter” (p. 172). It entailed exploring how the practices and stated aspirations I learned about in Kinunga also had a macro-historical location. It was this perspective that enabled the possibility of exploring

how aspects seemingly on the periphery of children's lives may be directly implicated in young people understood their situation and the ways they thought about their future.

Marcus and Fischer (1999) recommend dividing the analysis into what they characterize as systemic-tracing and historical perspectives. Below, I consider the implications of each to the study of subjectivity.

"Tracing political and economic processes," that is, the "macro" dimension of this vantage point, is broad and encompassing. "Tracing" large-scale processes signals an awareness that the transmission from the "global" to "local" is fluid and dynamic. Through the government's decentralization policy, radio messaging imploring caregivers to send children to school, celebrations of children's rights, or the introduction of English in schools: each provides an example for how broader political and economic processes can be located within a particular context and help to shape children's subjective experiences. It also enables us to consider how modernity, capital accumulation, and governance shape and reshape value systems, affect culture, and reconstitute the meanings people attach to their lives. For example, Hope, a student at GSK, learned that she should revise her wish of becoming a traditional healer. She noticed that the small trees and shrubs used by traditional healers were being removed. The decision of which trees to plant was now dictated by market requirements. "It means [the government] will remove those trees and plant the type of trees they want," she said. "The traditional trees will disappear."

"Historicizing the present" is another way of stating the obvious: the present is not ahistorical (Foucault, 1977; Marcus and Fischer, 1999: 95). Had my fieldwork occurred 10 years earlier, the education policy context in Rwanda would have suggested that there was little possibility that many focal students in Kinunga would have had the chance to continue their studies beyond primary school. Had the study taken place 20 years earlier—on the eve of a civil war and in the wake of the 1994 genocide—the opportunity for young people to attend school would have been very much in doubt.

Exploring the ways in which contemporary life has been produced within a historical framework was essential to producing a valid account of children's subjective experiences. Attending to the role of the past was an essential part of accounting and analyzing the present. Understanding children's ideas of the future was, in an analytical sense, as much retrospective and reflective as it was prospective and forward-looking. For instance, school access, curriculum, and language of instruction must be examined in relation to Rwanda's forward-looking aims as well as how these aims were informed though the country's history of colonialism and legacy of ethnic discord (King, 2014). The English-language policy highlighted the ways through which history and political economy converged with the local and personal experience of attending school to inform subjectivity. The issue of language had an outsized effect on how well children performed in the classroom. It shaped how they thought about their relationship with their peers; and it had consequences for whether and how young people saw themselves as educated. Jean Damascene failed to learn English well when he was a primary school student. And the French he knew was of little use when the language of instruction in schools was abruptly switched to English in 2009. The language shift occurred just after Jean Damascene repeated Primary 5 in order to get a better grasp of French and just prior to his Primary 6 national examination which was held in English. "I don't know English,

and it is the language we use in all subjects,” he told me. As a secondary student at attending a 9YBE school, Jean Damascene studied hard for his national examination in 2012, but he did not as well as he had hoped.

Investigating children’s subjectivity using a macro-historical perspective also provides a more complete explanation of the data produced through the other vantage points within this conceptual framework. When children and caregivers discussed their own experiences, their broader historical significance was not always apparent. As mentioned above, the significance of ethnicity in Rwanda is one such example. Most participants did not talk openly about ethnicity. But by locating the life experiences of young people in relation to a broader historical context, it was often possible to discern ethnicity through proxies such as refugee status during the 1990s, languages spoken, and political ideologies. Understanding the ongoing importance of ethnicity was therefore made more significant for Nadine. Being an orphan was not sufficient to qualify for educational assistance, she said. Her father was killed during the period of the 1994 genocide, but he was a Hutu, not a Tutsi. This meant that the members of Nadine’s family were not classified as genocide survivors. Nadine learned she was not entitled to the educational services available to households with such an implicitly ethnic and political designation. “But those ones who lost their parents after the genocide, they get nothing,” she explained.

Such a historical awareness informed Nadine’s subjectivity in concrete historical and political terms that have contributed to her own forms of awareness, expectations, and perceptions of possibility—and, by extension, her subjectivity.

Conclusion

Subjectivity can be an off-putting concept, often relegated to inter- and intra-disciplinary squabbles, with less concern for how it may be applied to the study of social life. This article sought to take a meaningful step in this direction. The particular interpretation of subjectivity advanced here was informed on the basis of exploring how proximal and seemingly distal factors converge to run through the very capillaries of existence of young people (Foucault and Gordon, 1980). Their convergence forms the site for how children come to terms with their own experiences and sense of possibility for the future. The reconstitution of the relationship between seemingly “proximal” and “distal” aspects of children’s lives is exemplified in the quote from Byron Good et al. (2008): “[Subjectivity] places the political at the heart of the psychological and the psychological at the heart of the political” (p. 2).

The three vantage points were introduced in such a way that emphasizes the interrelatedness of different theoretical domains of children’s lives. It assumes, for example, that the contributions of a macro-historical perspective toward theorizing subjectivity can never be fully isolated from social relationships. In the framework, I was less concerned with imposing an order or establishing a hierarchy than about analyzing their convergence in order to explore how subjective experience was produced. An analogy offered by Clifford Geertz (1990: 333) might be useful for understanding this convergence. Geertz once likened such complex theoretical endeavors to the preparation of elephant and rabbit stew: the analytical task, as he saw it, is to make each flavor—both elephant and rabbit—discernible in every spoonful. Such a perspective is useful for

theorizing children's subjectivity. Less concern is placed on understanding each vantage point in isolation than is placed on understanding its contribution to the production of subjectivity, however contradictory, divided, and incoherent it might be.

Finally, this paper cannot finish without attending to the role of the researcher in exploring children's subjectivity. Throughout this article, I have suggested the need to investigate the ways that broader impersonal political and economic processes informed local experience and shaped inner worlds. But how might subjectivity be investigated without assuming that researchers know more than those with whom they work? Perhaps a lesson can be drawn from some of the ongoing debates within childhood studies. Some scholars have sought to confront the sub-discipline's eager and enthusiastic reverence for children's voices, arguing that while children's subjective experiences are important, it is also necessary to recognize that children's awareness of the conditions that inform their experience are often constrained (James, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). But at the same time, some anthropologists have described their own experience as "childlike" in the sense that their knowledge of the social and cultural context is often limited (Kirschner, 1987). The conclusion I have come to is to proceed with humility, reflexivity, and commitment to mutual discovery throughout the research process. As Byron Good advises: "[W]e must return over and over again to the Ordinary, to acknowledge that... we too have enormous resistance to listening to the present, to truly being present for what is said to us rather than escaping into interpretation" (cited in Rahimi, 2010). Through mutual discovery, reflexivity, and careful consideration to the broader context that informs experience, I contend that ethnographic investigations of children's subjectivity can be a potentially rich, productive, and meaningful endeavor that can offer new ways of understanding and explaining children's experiences. It can encourage forms of social action that can better attend to impersonal, broader structures can have a deeply personal and intimate impact upon children's lives and imagined futures.

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