Discourses of Childism: How COVID-19 Has Unveiled Prejudice, Discrimination and Social Injustice against Children in the Everyday

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Abstract

Do children suffer from discriminatory structures in society and how can issues of social injustice against children be conceptualised and studied? The conceptual frame of *childism* is examined through everyday expressions in the aftermath of policies affecting children in Sweden, the UK and Ireland to develop knowledge of age-based and intersectional discrimination against children. While experiences in Sweden seem to indicate that young children rarely suffer severe symptoms from COVID-19, or constitute a driving force in spreading the virus, policy decisions in the UK and Ireland to close down schools have had detrimental effects on children in terms of child hunger and violence against children. Policy decisions that have prioritised adults at the cost of children have unveiled a structural injustice against children, which is mirrored by individual examples of everyday societal prejudice.

Keywords

childism – misopedia – violence against children – child-poverty – generational exploitation – systemic childism – children's rights

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to introduce childism through examples of everyday expressions targeting children and their rights. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, decisions have been made that marginalise children, from the closure of schools and childcare services to the banning of children from shops on the grounds that they are “vectors of the disease”. Moreover, policy responses to the socio-economic effects of COVID-19 have often prioritised supporting workers and business owners while overlooking vulnerable children. In what ways have these decisions been based on prejudice against children that lead to a structural discrimination and violation of their fundamental freedoms and rights?

By studying discourses of *childism* under COVID-19, we may better disclose how the pandemic has held up a mirror to society on hitherto un-named systems of prejudice and discrimination that would force us to address how we treat our most vulnerable members. According to reports on COVID-19 and children's right to education by UNESCO,¹ around 234 million children were, in January 2021, affected by the school closures globally. This paper addresses prejudice and discrimination against children under the pandemic from a social justice point of view, by developing the concept of *childism* in the study of policy decisions that have had detrimental effects on children's wellbeing (eg, impact on child hunger). Moreover, language describing children as “vectors of disease” are studied as expressions of childism and misopedia (hatred against children); while the rhetoric of “personal responsibility” of parents for child poverty is linked to state refusal to alleviate child hunger and thus is seen as a potential justification for institutionalised childism and misopedia. While violence against women has been researched in relation to misogyny (Gill and Mason-Bish, 2013; Rollero, Bergagna and Tartaglia, 2019), violence against children has not, to any large extent, been related to misopedia. Ignoring the evidence on children and COVID-19, and needlessly sacrificing their wellbeing and education, would be a continuation of adultist power structures based on childism.

Childism is a relatively new and under-theorised aspect of social justice. In order to contribute to the conceptualisation of childism, this paper will take an oblique approach. Instead of analysing childism through purely conceptual means, the paper will proceed by unveiling childism as an institutional form of prejudice, through the examination of discourses surrounding policy decisions during COVID-19. Some of these policy decisions have had immediate

1 <https://en.unesco.org/COVID19/educationresponse>.

and widespread negative effects on children and betray a systemic injustice against children, which is mirrored by societal discourse concerning these policies. The first section of this paper will focus on violence against children. Here, again, a lack of theory on the link between violence against children and childism creates a fragility; overlooking children's uniquely vulnerable position and severing communication links between child and state have contributed towards a "silent pandemic" of violence against children. The article will then proceed to examine the language of "vector" when used in relation to children during the pandemic. Such language is stigmatising and intimidating; unchecked use of the term vector by doctors, politicians and shop owners may be seen as childist. Finally, the closure of schools and child hunger during the pandemic is discussed from the point of view of childism. Policy decisions during the pandemic that exacerbate child hunger are shown to be a clear instance of *systemic childism*, wherein socioeconomic conditions maintain inequality for children. Before proceeding to discuss expressions of childism during the pandemic, the rest of this section will focus on sketching the intended contribution to child rights studies wherein childism lies.

This is the first time childism is introduced to human rights theory as prejudice and discrimination against children with the aim of contributing to the understanding of child rights issues and social injustice against children by exploring the structural effects of childism. Childism as used in this paper builds on earlier work by Elisabeth Yung-Bruehl (2012), while extending her conceptualisation of childism as prejudice and negative attitudes against children, to exploring childism as a system of age-based discrimination and oppression against children. Institutional childism is a structural injustice against children imbedded in laws, policies and regulations that normalise and maintain prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination on the grounds of beliefs about age-related differences and inequalities between adults and children. Childist prejudice characterises persons as defined by their lack of adult abilities and as inferior to adults with such abilities. On this basis, children are assigned or denied certain perceived abilities, skills or character traits (Adami, forthcoming). Childism in language – for example using the word "childish" as describing unwanted behaviour – is an offensive reminder of the way the culture sees children. Childism as it is used here² thus finds its equivalence

2 The usage of childism in this paper is distinct from that of John Wall (2019), by which childism finds its equivalence in feminism. Wall's definition of childism is problematic in how it presupposes adults to include children and advance children's human rights in prejudice-free and unbiased ways, seemingly without the necessary first step of addressing adults' compliance in child-subordination. By contrast, drawing on Young-Bruehl, our use of childism

in sexism, racism and ableism (prejudice and discrimination against persons labelled as disabled) and requires an intersectional lens on how children as a heterogeneous group are affected by overlapping systems of oppression.³ Human rights theory concerned with critically exploring the hindrances to the realisation of children's rights will gain analytical sharpness through analysing not only how children suffer from gender-based and racialised violence and discrimination but also how they suffer from ableist normativity and age-based violence and discrimination. The question of whether children can be seen as subjects of human rights including welfare rights and protection from violence has been debated within the human rights discourse from moral and legal perspectives. Moral arguments on children's rights⁴ would be preoccupied with debating children's capacity as moral agents, their possible corresponding duties as rights-holder and debating rationality, empathy and reason of small children (see Adami, R and see Dineen, K. in Roth *et al.* 2020). Legal perspectives on children's rights⁵ would focus more on their legal capacity, their epistemic trustworthiness, and their ability to be heard on legal issues affecting them. These discourses reflect challenges to social justice for children in how adults speak of children as "other" and try to solve this otherness by either treating children "as adults" or by denying them human rights motivated by ideas of children's lack of capacity, corresponding duties or abilities relative to adults.

2 Childism and Discriminatory Violence against Children

During the pandemic, women's organisations have communicated an increased risk of violence against women. The impact, however, of COVID-19 lockdowns on violence against children is still in need of systemic analysis of this violence as a structural inequality that has resulted in age-based and discriminatory violence against children. During the initial months of the pandemic, the potential of significant increase of violence against women could be seen through the increase of related calls to helplines. In contrast, a review on family violence has witnessed the opposite in regards to children, stating that 'many child

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calls for critical self-reflection by adult researchers on how ontological and epistemological assumptions are stained by possible prejudice and by negative or ambivalent attitudes towards children.

3 See other child rights scholars who have argued for an intersectional lens on children's rights (Dowd, 2016; Alanen 2016; De Graeve 2015).

4 For moral debates on the existence of children's rights, see (Brighouse, 2002; Macleod, 2018).

5 For legal perspectives on children's rights, see (Freeman, 2010; 2015)

welfare organisations around the world are noting a significant drop in reports of child abuse or neglect' (Pereda and Díaz-Faes, 2020). Moreover, in the UK, the National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, 2020) has noted that the disruption of services to children (for example, schools, GPs, children's centres, and health visiting) has resulted in almost a halving of referrals to children's social care (NSPCC, 2020; Calkin, 2020). This (initial) reduction in reports of child abuse is not borne out by hospital admissions of children with injuries related to physical violence, leading clinicians to warn of a "silent pandemic" of violence against children (Sidpra, Abomeli, Hameed *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, INTERPOL have warned of under-reporting of child sexual violence and increased sharing of child exploitation material through peer-to-peer networks as a result of the pandemic. INTERPOL cite the closure of schools and the limited access to community support services as among the factors exacerbating this increase (INTERPOL, 2020). Meanwhile, in the UK and Ireland, there has been no discernible shift in policy initiatives to address this "silent pandemic" of violence. Under the heading "COVID-19 Measures", Irish governmental guidance on child protection and welfare (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, June 2020, updated February 2021) states the need to 'make some changes to the way we do things'; yet there is no mention of what these changes entail or how they will address the difficulty of reaching children whose means of communication has been restricted. Similarly, UK guidance on violence against children during COVID-19 seems to focus on the role of parents, guardians and other carers in keeping children safe. For example, one recently updated policy document, which 'brings together sources of information about the main risks children may be particularly vulnerable to during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic' (Department for Education, February 2021), focuses exclusively on the role benevolent adults play in advocating on behalf of children. No mention is made of the difficulties children might face in communicating about sexual and physical violence during COVID-19.

Violence against children has been identified by human rights scholars as a major problem in the protection of children's rights both in the private as well as public space (Sherbert Research, 2007; Leviner, 2013; Andersson and Kaldal, 2014). During COVID-19 through lockdowns of schools, and children staying at home, we see dire consequences from the fact that children lack means and channels to be heard in the public debate. Closing schools and other child focused services functions to cut a line of communication between the child and the state so that violence against children is allowed to become a "silent pandemic" endured in the private. Ambivalent sexist attitudes influence the extent to which different forms of violence (physical, sexual, limitation of rights and freedom) is recognised as violence against women or seen as "normal"

i.e., socially accepted through dominant sexist discourses in societies (Rollero, Bergagna, and Tartaglia, 2019). It could be assumed that due to unreflected childist discourses in societies, different forms of violence against children are not being recognised as such but deemed socially acceptable treatment of children. As Gill and Misoh-Bila note, human rights discussions have studied connections between different forms of inequality, and between human rights and various forms of violence (Gill and Mason-Bish, 2013). Discriminatory violence, as they note, target members of disadvantaged social groups. According to Gill and Mason-Bish, violence against women, 'like religious and racial violence, can be argued to be the result of wider social structures of subordination and domination' used as a means to intimidate and reinforce social hierarchies (Gill and Mason-Bish 2013: 4). Naming childism as a system of oppression upheld through violence enables us to discern how violence against children are not isolated events but part of a broader power structure. Gill and Mason-Bish have studied possible support for including gender as a basis for hate crimes in British society and found that although there were difficulties raised in implementing such legislation, participants felt it would challenge normalisation of violence against women by connecting these crimes to inequality and discrimination (Gill and Mason-Bish, 2013: 17). By naming and conceptualising childism, violence against children could be viewed as instances of discrimination against children and a means to maintain child subordination. Prejudice and violence against children constitute part of a structural and institutional discrimination which has thus far not been mapped as such.

Adults interests, rights and freedoms seem to have dominated the public debate following the lockdowns, while children's situation following policy decisions have been marginalised. As men's violence against women will not be solved by focusing only on "victims of domestic abuse" and overlooking broader sexist beliefs in society, adults' violence against children will not be solved by overlooking the overall *childist beliefs* in society (Adami, forthcoming). Violence is here seen as a method to intimidate, silence and maintain patriarchal power structures in the private sphere and society at large (Adami, forthcoming). In human rights discourse we have seen an important shift from talks about "domestic abuse" and "family violence" to "violence against women". This shift enables us to understand gender-based violence in relation to various infringements of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights and has turned what was regarded "private domestic matters in families" into an international problem concerning structural discriminatory violence of public and societal concern. A similar shift is needed for age-based violence against children to be addressed as deadly forms of discrimination against children that can only be altered through political public debates and policies, instead of

treating this form of violence as a domestic, private concern. Violence against children is generally labeled instances of “domestic abuse” or “corporal punishment”. The word “abuse” has its origin from Latin, to use something wrongly. The term “domestic abuse” points our attention to the ingrained childist idea that children are of domestic concern and of adult use. Violence against children under COVID-19 lockdowns has unveiled how children are seen as in adult possession where different forms of psychological, emotional and physical violence can be sanctioned against children in the home and out-of-home placements. Reflection on how to acknowledge the particular vulnerabilities that characterise children’s position in the domestic sphere, and in different types of placements, in facilitating children to report violence, is needed. Here legal perspectives on children’s rights may divert our attention from the ways in which “equal treatment” and “legal criteria” for determining what constitutes violence against children are informed by adults’ prejudice against children. By naming childism we may study how children suffer from different forms of discriminatory violence that helps us question discussions on “child-friendly” approaches in legal proceedings instead of developing child-equitable ones. Moral discussions on adults’ violence that disregards childism may overlook how the very ontological and epistemological assumptions – what we think we can say about children and what knowledge they can testify of – are coloured by prejudice and negative attitudes against children. Theory on childism provides us with the needed conceptual tool to address prejudice and age-based discrimination against children that result in deadly discriminatory forms of violence.

Mapping and analysing the effects of institutional discrimination against children calls for an intersectional understanding of children’s position in societies in which childism intersects with other power structures related to prejudice and stereotyping such as racism, sexism and ableism. Hanson and Peleg argue that child rights theory should encompass an understanding of intersectionality (Hanson and Peleg, 2020). In order to address structural discrimination against children based on ideas of inferiority connected to age, children should not be treated merely as appendages to their families and guardians. We need to see their position as individuals (below 18) belonging to a specific marginalised group – children – who face discrimination not only due to their parents or other family being labeled in certain social categories. “Children” as a heterogenous, marginalised group face prejudice enmeshed with other negative attitudes and a child suffers under intersecting power structures leading to double or triple forms of discrimination. Prejudiced discourses of childism intersect with discourses of racism, sexism and ableism and oppressive functions of these include stereotyping, ambivalence in prejudiced attitudes and

discriminatory effects of bias in language. Intersectional power analysis is thus crucial when studying discourses of childism in how it intersects with other forms of prejudice and discrimination. Pulrang (*Forbes*, 2020) argues that ableism has led to deadly discrimination during the pandemic in the disability community (being at higher risk, impossibility of social distancing due to dependency on care, being in densely-packed institutional facilities, or being unprioritised in already stressed emergency care). The intersections of how childism and ableism have resulted in deadly discrimination of children in the disability community needs to be further problematised and adequately addressed through protective legislation against such discrimination.

Violence used to uphold patriarchal power structures in families and society at large targets both women and children. The experience for example of “boys” suffering from sexist violence – either witnessing sexist violence or experiencing violence targeted against them based on sexist beliefs about gender stereotyping (that boys can “take” a beating, or that violence ‘toughens’ them) or experiencing emotional and psychological violence if not adhering to hegemonic masculinity and heterosexual normativity exhibit additional vulnerabilities “a boy” may experience under overlapping oppressive systems. Different forms of discriminatory violence against a child are connected to both racism, sexism and ableism. Children are today covered neither under current legislation against hate crimes nor in proper legislation against age-based violence against children. To sum up, from an intersectional lens, it would be necessary to include gender-, racialised-, religious- and homophobic violence to cover children as a heterogeneous, marginalised group. A lack of an intersectional approach covering childism creates a theoretical gap in the literature on violence against children. In contrast, appreciating the unique vulnerabilities of children as a heterogeneous, marginalised group might give policy makers and children’s services providers the conceptual resources necessary to avoid making decisions that exacerbate children’s vulnerability to violence. A lack of theory on the link between violence against children and childism may have contributed to policy decisions that severed communication links between child and state, which in turn may have impacted upon the emergence of a “silent pandemic” of violence against children.

3 “Vectors of Disease” Expression of Childism

The language of politicians, doctors and shop signs during COVID-19 in which children and youth are described as “vectors” of disease can be seen as expressions of childism and misopedia (hatred against children) that serve to keep

children in a subordinate position to adults. A pediatric consultant quoted in the *Irish Times* said, ‘remember with corona children are vectors not victims. In most epidemics young children are the transmitters’ (O’Brien, 2020). This statement – that children would be the transmitters – has been refuted in a public report by the Health Agency of Sweden, “COVID-19 in schoolchildren”. In Sweden, schools for children up to 16 years have been open throughout the pandemic. The report was written in cooperation with the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare to compare the effect of different approaches in regards to school closure, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is stated in the report – based on national data in both countries during 2020 – that:

Severe COVID-19 disease as measured in ICU admittance is very rare in both countries in this age group [below 16] and no deaths were reported. Outbreak investigations in Finland has not shown children to be contributing much in terms of transmission and in Sweden a report comparing risk of COVID-19 in different professions, showed no increased risk for teachers (“COVID-19 IN SCHOOLCHILDREN: A COMPARISON BETWEEN FINLAND AND SWEDEN”, 2020: 7).

School children have, nonetheless, been denied entry to shops during the pandemic, as was the case in a grocery shop in the Stockholm area for all children from a nearby school during school hours with the impetus being that children entered in ‘too large groups’, ‘being loud’ and under the suspicion of ‘possible picketing’ (Loman, 2020). Moreover, similar shop signs in Ireland explicitly refer to children as vectors. For example, Supervalu Cellbridge (a shop in Co. Kildare, Ireland) displayed a sign that read, “No children at any time as they are vectors for COVID-19 (infants in buggies or shopping trolleys are permitted)” (thejournal.ie, 2020). Through a lens of childism, these signs are examples of age-based discrimination against children.

Sweden closed schools for children over 16-years old in Spring 2020 but generally kept them open for younger children throughout the pandemic. ‘Our view on children and infectivity has not changed. Our previous assessment remains that children transmit less than adults and that the school environment has not been a driving force in the spread of infection’ said Public Health Agency microbiologist Karin Tegmark Wisell in a statement (The Local, 2020).

Schools and childcare facilities have closed in response to the pandemic more than once. As we write (January 2021), all schools and childcare facilities in Ireland are closed. In the UK, schools remain open only to children of “essential” workers. On speaking of school closures in the global context, Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, warned of the consequences of

such closures on children. Without school meals, children are 'left hungry and their nutrition is worsening'; without daily peer interactions and less mobility, they are 'losing physical fitness and showing signs of mental distress'; and without the safety net that school often provides, they are 'more vulnerable to abuse, child marriage and child labour' (UN, 2021). These considerations led her to conclude that 'closing schools must be a measure of last resort, after all other options have been considered'.

While evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic pre-UK variant corroborates the position that outbreaks in schools and childcare facilities are more likely to follow community transmission than drive it (Lewis, 2020), the UK variant of the virus may not follow this pattern. As it stands, the extent to which the new variant will increase transmission in schools and from schools to the wider community is 'highly uncertain' (Kirby, 2021). Nevertheless, policy in the UK (and elsewhere) has not reflected this uncertainty; with Boris Johnson referring to the efforts to control the new variant as justification for school closures. Johnson reiterated the language of "vector" here, stating that, 'efforts to contain the spread of a new variant would not be sufficient if schools continued to act as a potential vector for spreading the virus between households' (Prime Minister's Office, 2021).

It may be the case that, in the current phase of the pandemic, we have entered last resort territory; and the closure of schools and childcare facilities is a reasonable step to protect teachers, children and mitigate community spread. Yet, it should be remembered that the upward trajectory of R numbers was a predictable outcome of government policies. For example, the Irish government was warned by public health officials that opening both restaurants and allowing for increased household mixing in the run up to Christmas would have a massively detrimental effect on COVID-19 transmission rates.⁶ It should then be queried whether adults and children are treated equally, when it comes to bearing the brunt of lockdowns. If politicians had been briefed on the impact of opening businesses in December, and the reality of that decision would mean school closure in January, it is reasonable to assume that opening

6 This is a contentious claim. Currently, the Irish government claims that the opening of the hospitality sector was the advice of The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), with Tánaiste Leo Varadkar stating, '[opening up for Christmas] was the advice given to the Government by NPHET. I am not sure we would take that advice if that advice was to be given again, because that turned out to be too quick' (RTE, 2021). This claim is curious, given NPHET's written advice on the topic. NPHET's advice on 26 November stated: 'the risks associated with socialisation in [hospitality] remain too high at current infection levels, particularly in the context of the other forms of socialisation and interaction between people, families and across generations' (NPHET, 2020).

businesses for the important Christmas trade period trumped children's rights to education.

4 Child Hunger and Policy maintaining Systemic Childism

While studies on the impact COVID-19 has had on child hunger state that, 'Of particular concern is an expected increase in child malnutrition, including wasting, due to steep declines in household incomes, changes in the availability and affordability of nutritious foods, and interruptions to health, nutrition, and social protection services', there have been policy suggestions during the pandemic in the UK against free school meals (FSM) for children living in poverty. Policy response to the increased vulnerability of children to hunger has shifted back and forth between refusing the extension of FSM to U-turns responding to pressure from campaigners.⁷

The UK government decided to extend free school meals over the summer 2020 to children living in poverty, however according to the UK Department of Education, in the form of 'direct payments to families whose children would usually benefit from a school meal' (Gov. UK March, 2020). This is problematic as the policy to address child poverty does not reach children directly but relies on their parents and relatives. Another example of how to solve the situation of children missing out on free school meal in Ireland was to give out free meals through child care settings but the budget allocated for this seem not to have reached children equally, as twitter accounts demonstrate the very scarce amount of food given to children.

The move comes amid ongoing pressure from both the European Commission and the United Nations on Ireland's child poverty rates – 18.4 per cent of children are at risk of poverty, while 9 per cent are in consistent poverty' (HOLLAND, *THE IRISH TIMES*, 2019).

7 The UK government has twice seemed to change position on the refusal to extend FSM into holiday periods during COVID-19. The first U-turn followed Ministers defending the policy of not extending FSM to cover the summer holidays of 2020 (Syal, Stewart and Pidd, 2020); while the second followed a parliamentary vote where MPs opposed the motion to extend FSM over the midterm holidays (322 votes to 261 votes) (UK Parliament, 2020). The briefing (Roberts *et al.*, 2020) that accompanied the proposed motion, in the name of Kier Starmer, to extend FSM for the second time, provides an overview of the key policy areas. Also informative on the UK government position on this issue, as well as providing a link between FSM and government responsibility for child hunger, see Shields (2021).

The UK government has repeatedly suggested not extending free school meals for children in poverty over the holidays. The UK government opted to supply food parcels rather than the £30 vouchers that had been supplied previously. Controversy ensued when pictures of meagre and substandard food parcels circulated on twitter. These pictures led some campaigners to question who was profiting from the difference in the funding of these parcels and the market value of the food provided. For example, in an interview in *The Guardian*, Jack Monroe (2021) queried the role that Chartwells, a subsidiary of Compass Group, played in the provision of substandard food. Without naming prejudice and discrimination against children as serving the interests of adults' access to power and property at the expense of children, instances of generational exploitation risk being overlooked. David Oldman (Oldman 1994) provides a class-analysis of work opportunities that are generated by children for the profit of adults. He problematises instances where profit is not re-invested in children.

If we can show that the value to adults grows at the expense of the value to children, then it becomes possible to talk of exploitative relationships between adults and children. These would be the hallmark of what we might call a 'generational' mode of production (OLDMAN, 1994: 155).

What is notable in both the government policy actions concerning FSM provision during COVID and political (and societal) rhetoric used to justify failure to provide such meals and substandard provision, is the lack of focus on children. Social opinion, as evidenced by social media, often displaces focus from vulnerable children to undeserving parents. For example, a MUMSNET thread titled, "A loaf and a block of cheese is not lunch for ten days" (MUMSNET, 2021) is informative on how a certain section of society (MUMSNET users) view the issue. The initial thread received 40 pages of replies (the maximum number) and voting was enabled. 25 per cent of posters voted that the original poster was 'unreasonable' for querying the standard of food provided in the FSM parcels. Themes evidenced through the posts of MUMSNET users who seemed to believe it unreasonable to criticise the parcels included the ingratitude of receiving the parcel and complaining ('Why can't people be grateful for the help they do get. People are always wanting more', 'So bloody entitled'), the potential for parents to misuse vouchers ('Local to us some parents were known to have been [sic] trying to use the vouchers to purchase alcohol') and the role of the state as providing a safety net ('To be honest, I look at threads like this and wonder when the Government became responsible for feeding children'). Taken together, these themes speak to the idea that the hunger of

children is down to the 'personal responsibility' of parents, rather than a societal issue with tragic and avoidable ramifications for hungry children.

This can be seen as expressions in which both discourses on racism and childism intersect in how children living in areas with minority populations suffer poverty and hunger that can be studied as connected both to systemic racism and systemic childism. Children living in poverty with hunger are here asked to 'carry the burden of their parents' choices', while living with the dire consequences of systemic racism and the effects of class in society. The quote is thus read as an expression of the ways in which childism intersects with racism. Child hunger and policies against free school meals can be seen as part of systemic childism which refers to the socioeconomic conditions that maintain inequality for children. Systemic childism is maintained through a socioeconomic reality in which children's access to food for survival, their access to quality education, to a home, to clothes and shoes depends on the goodwill of adults. Even the most common situations for a child will be stained by their glaring deficiencies, such as walking into a shop and not having their own money to buy something (Adami, forthcoming). Child poverty and children's economic and social rights are obviously connected but, indicators and indices measuring poverty on the one hand and policy results of welfare institutions ensuring economic and social rights on the other, risk overseeing the subordinate position of children in families. Legislation and policy aimed at reducing social injustices may not reach a child in terms of income, social insurance or family allowances depending on other risk factors. Nolan and Pells note that, 'further work is needed to assess how a child [economic and social rights] approach can be used to address the root causes or structures that create, or fail to reduce, poverty' (Nolan and Pells, 2020: 123). If we address child poverty as an issue of social justice, whereby discrimination against children hinders the realisation of their economic and social rights, then the prevalence of systemic childism is a needed theory for policy-makers and legislators to explain root causes to child poverty.

These situations could be seen as the consequences of systemic childism, as children's partial lack of influence over their own survival is due to economic resources being controlled by adults (Adami, forthcoming).

5 Concluding Discussion

The concept of childism, finding its equivalence in sexism, racism and ableism, names a system that discriminates against children based on prejudice about their inferiority. As adult researchers we have a responsibility to address structural

discrimination against children, and to explore epistemic injustice against children – seeing them as untrustworthy, as not reliable sources of information. Adults have the power, privilege and voice to name injustice against children that adults take implicit part in – in order to acknowledge the social, economic, political and cultural hindrances against the realisation of children's rights. Addressing adult ignorance of child-subordination is not the same as claiming to “speak on behalf of” children, to “empower” them or to “give voice to” children; rather, it is a step toward unveiling how adults stand in the way of children's rights by giving precedence to adult interests, needs and power in issues affecting children. In this article, we have identified areas where the rights of the child are limited due to childism – discriminatory violence against children, socio-economic deficits of children who are regarded as appendices to their families and the inherent conflict between adults' interests and children's rights, epitomised in how schools have been locked down based on ideas that children are vectors of COVID-19. When using the concept of childism in child rights studies, we argued that it is most fruitful to take an intersectional lens to explore how racism, sexism, ableism and childism intersect in the marginalisation of children in different contexts. We need to understand institutional forces that exacerbate violence against children through the conceptual framework of childism. This paper calls for new prejudice-free approaches toward children. How would such a needed discursive shift toward children affect future legislative and policy responses to human rights issues of global concern?

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