

Childhood and Materiality VIII Conference on Childhood Studies

May 7–9, 2018, Jyväskylä, Finland

Leena Alanen

Postconstructivist childhood studies, materiality and generational order(ing)

For some time a ('new') materialist strand of thinking has been on the rise in the social sciences, in so much that in some fields of research it has been observed as 'the New Black' (Jarzabkowski & Pinch 2013), and a fashion (Lemke 2015). This internally very diverse movement generally argues that language/culture/meaning as constituting (social) reality has had detrimental effects on social theory and research. By reopening the study of the social towards materiality, the exponents of this initiative aim to move social theory from epistemology towards embracing a realist ontology.

Critical realism is a broad realist (and materialist) movement within the philosophy of science and is increasingly practiced and further developed within a wide range of research fields within social science. Critical realism challenges the postmodernist/social constructivist vogue in the social sciences by defending a 'deep' (or stratificationist) ontology of reality *contra* the 'flat' ontologies which many versions of 'new' materialist thinking tend to prescribe.

Both of these intellectual movements criticize the radically culturalist/socio-constructivist epistemology which has served as the "orthodoxy" for much of the childhood studies we know. The paper considers their potentials for providing a viable ontology for the social study of childhood, and then suggests that the realism-based concept of 'generational order' (Alanen 1994, 2005, 2009), specified as a *socio-material structure*, provides one conceptual tool for overcoming the excesses of constructivist childhood research. Finally, some empirical 'generationing' studies are briefly presented, to assess the current state in childhood studies in respect of this.