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## Citation

Nolas, Sevasti-Melissa. 2020. Childhood publics. In: Dan Cook, ed. The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies. London: Sage. ISBN 9781473942929 [Book Section]

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## **CHILDHOOD PUBLICS**

This entry introduces the term childhood publics. Publics describes a cultural and political phenomenon involving the assembly of people around matters of common care and concern and, in this formulation, provides a way of bringing experiences in and of childhood closer to political imaginaries and public life.

### **A short history of ‘publics’**

The theory and practice of gathering around issues of common concern is as old as democracy itself, even if its forms and objects of concern have evolved in response to contemporary realities. Jürgen Habermas, amongst others, has argued that the public sphere, a product of European Enlightenment discourses, emerged in the separation between church and state, the invention of capitalist markets, and the emergence of civil society.

Publics were the outcome of a particular cultural and historical moment in time that was characterised by a rise of a merchant class in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that sought to influence the economic activities of emerging nation states. The move away from cottage industries and the development of work outside the home, the invention of the printing press and the subsequent creation of readers (of newspaper, novels, pamphlets) also played a role in the development of a public sphere.

A publics was the gathering of mostly men in public, private, and hybrid meetings places (agoras, homes, bars, cafes, salons), spaces that were relatively

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unencumbered by state power and private commercial interests, to discuss and deliberate issues of common concern.

Publics are brought together through practices of communication, in particular those practices that involved public address. Historically such discursive gatherings happened face-to-face; argumentation and debate took place in order that assembled members could reach reasoned consensus and action on the issues being considered.

As societies grew bigger these publics became virtualised, becoming more imagined or represented. Contemporary practices of communication create publics through a diverse range of media with audio, visual and textual texts created and received by a range of audiences. Importantly, these discursive practices are not dyadic, between writers-readers or speakers-listeners, the interlocutors are many and varied, and different media circulate amongst them.

### **The exclusion of children as publics**

From antiquity public life excluded those who were not free (slaves, women, foreigners, children), and many of those exclusion persisted into the emergence of publics in contemporary British, German and French societies (Habermas's original cultural focus) and other post-industrialised nations, as feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser and others have shown.

Taking the case of children, a group yet to be fully addressed by the literature on publics, the rise of schooling and the decline in children's work meant that children became increasingly excluded from labour negotiations, despite historical examples of working children striking for example.

The continued age-restrictions on normative understandings of citizenship also meant that children, like women before them, continue to be excluded from

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opportunities to influence their countries, and this exclusion persists. These are exclusions that are of course amplified where childhoods intersect with categories and experiences of gender, race, ethnicity, class and caste.

The focus on discursive practices, especially the heavy role of speech in public address, has meant that children are further excluded and/or disadvantaged from traditional public practices. Public address often involves particular and learned forms of expression, like argumentation, turn taking, and listening, practices that most children, as well as uninitiated adults, are not well versed in.

Yet children do encounter and experience public life, belong to and traverse various publics, and often engage in public address. They are also readily present in the meetings places which host public address as well as creating their own meeting places.

### **Publics as situational configurations of strangers**

More recent theoretical developments on what publics *do* offer fresh opportunities for thinking about the intersections between childhood and public life. The literature on publics has returned to a definition of the political as a practical art involving moral and ethical questions, and not just formal politics alone. Here public life has been conceptualised by geographer Clive Barnett as ‘a family of practices of sharing with others’ and there has been a renewed interest in everyday life, people’s lived experiences, and thinking about what matters to people, what moves and propels them to connect to the wider world.

There has also been a broadening in our understanding about who participates in publics, as well as how they participate. The idea that publics are emergent and situational configurations of strangers who are brought together through things that

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matter to them has been helpful because it allows us to position previously unimaginable persons, the poor, the immigrant, the woman, the child, in the category of the stranger therefore extending possible membership of a publics.

Furthermore, the original notion of a reading publics has of course been critically extended with the advent of new technologies. As well as reading publics, it is possible to consider viewing, producing, and curating publics alike, publics in which children and young people are often active participants. Such media have diversified forms of address and textual circulation allowing us to imagine contemporary publics as far more multimodal than their yesteryear counterparts, and providing children and young people new avenues for engagement.

What might the forms of expression and modes of address sound and feel like in a childhood publics?

### **Childhood idioms**

The Idea of Idioms of childhood publics is useful when it comes to considering the ways in which matters of common concern are expressed within a childhood publics. Historical records from the women's movement show that, in the absence of formal political incorporation through voting, women employed a range of 'idioms' (domesticity, motherhood, supporting roles) to access public life and public arenas.

Contemporary research of children and young people's everyday lives provides us with a number of examples of idioms of childhood publics. Banter, charm, daydreaming, hanging out, humour, insouciance, noise, 'pester power', play, stickers and trading cards are all examples of ways in which children demand attention from each other as well as from their adult interlocutors. As cultural theorist

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Michael Warner has argued publics come into being and stay alive through mutual and distributed practices of paying attention.

These idioms are far from trivial, though might easily be dismissed as such. They point towards the very embodied ways in which childhood publics might be imagined with many of those idioms invoking an image of bodies in motion, commotion and reverie. Caring for others, both human and non-human, so often associated with children and forming part of children's lived experiences, can also be considered an idiom of childhood publics.

Importantly, these idioms are not to be dismissed as functioning for purely developmental or educational purposes and outcomes. They are modes of expression and public address that culturally mediate children's participation in larger collectives, which may or may not, like any other publics, emerge into a communicative network and action.

In line with shifts away from old forms of citizen engagement and with new forms of political interest emerging, idioms of childhood publics show where civic culture in childhood lies. Banter, charm and humour become resources to be deployed in negotiations with authority; caring for animals, nature, friends, parents and/or siblings demonstrates a habit of responding to vulnerability and practices of solidarity; play, insouciance and daydreaming become resources for everyday childhoods as well as political imaginaries.

### **The future of publics**

Publics is a controversial term which overlaps with other cultural and political entities and terminologies such as audiences, collectives, crowds, and commons.

Contemporary uses of the term have been productive in considering the assembly,

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configuration and movement of strangers around issues of common concern.

Theories of publics still need to further embrace temporality and its lived experiences, including experiences in childhood and the relationship between childhood and public life.

The plurality of children's experiences is also a key consideration both within nation states and across. The Euro-centrality of the concept of publics, with its heavy focus on the spoken word as a key medium of communication, does raise questions about its cross-cultural relevance, including when it comes to children.

As anthropologists have argued convincingly, personhood is assigned, acquired and lived in many different ways, with different temporalities and rhythms. Embracing more multimodal and sensory approaches to communication will be especially important for exploring, recognising and constructing childhood publics across time and place.

*See also* children as photographers, the creative child, You Tube, iPad, App, children's working movements, [any other entries to do with reading or children as producers of culture].

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