

# Beyond 'developmentalism': A relational and embodied approach to young children's development

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## Abstract

This article begins by discussing 'developmentalism', one of the key debates that has characterised the current theoretical impasse in the development of childhood studies. I use Norbert Elias's concept of the relation between love and learning as a foundation to develop the way in which young children's development is a non-linear, temporal and embodied process. I argue that we need to develop a relational approach that moves beyond some of the binary divisions between 'nature' and 'biology', drawing on concepts from particular theoretical traditions that have been under-utilised, particularly the relational school of psychoanalysis and the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

## KEYWORDS

child development, childhood, developmentalism, Merleau-Ponty, Norbert Elias

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent discussion, Punch (2019) has argued that though Childhood Studies is a multidisciplinary field more could be done to develop existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks. According to James (2010) it has reached a crossroads in its development because of the competing paradigms that are now being pursued. The feasibility of interdisciplinarity within childhood studies has also been questioned, given that to date most disciplines have worked separately in exploring children's lives, bringing together disciplinary perspectives alongside each other rather than in a fully integrated manner (Thorne, 2007). Morrow points out that 'childhood studies could make much greater effort to learn from and speak to other disciplines in a conciliatory manner' (Cook et al., 2018, p. 15). Moreover,

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Tisdall suggests childhood studies need to move ‘beyond the friendly’ disciplines to those that are more challenging (Alanen, Baraldi, Coninck-Smith, Ni Laoire, & Tisdall, 2018).

One of the most important debates in developing a ‘new’ paradigm for childhood studies has centred on the role of developmental psychology in explaining young children's lives—they have traditionally rejected most forms of ‘developmentalism’, the set of ideas about the child and childhood systematised and promulgated by child psychology’ (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1992, p. 37). In the early 20th century, developmental psychology became established as the dominant paradigm for studying young children, influencing professional practice in care and education (Woodhead, 2003). Discourses about ages and stages became linked to developmental norms, encoded in milestones and developmental delay. Within this framework, childhood is viewed as an apprenticeship for adulthood that can be charted through stages related to age, physical development and cognitive ability: groups of children were organised according to their birth dates, institutionalised in age-graded classrooms with their progress tracked according to predefined key stages (Woodhead, 2008).

Jenks (2008) and Morss (1990) have argued that the developmental approach in psychology that emerged in the 19th century was based on an evolutionary model that emphasised natural growth as a biological series of stages from childhood to adulthood. The origins of developmental psychology can be traced to seminal texts, among them Darwin's 1877 ‘A Biographical Sketch of the Infant’, Wilhelm Preyer's *Die Seele des Kindes* published in 1882 and G. Stanley Hall's ‘Content of Children's Minds’, published the following year (Archard, 2004). Morss' critique of developmentalism is based around the predominance of biological ideas in developmental thinking—according to him, young children's maturation is universally constructed as a sequence of progressive, developmental states, evolutionary in its framework. Central to the stage framework is linear progression and periodicity: each phase, stamped by regularity and repetition, must be completely gone through before reaching adulthood. The idea of progress is underpinned by evolutionary theory and is at the core of the concept of development.

According to Woodhead (2008), James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) went furthest in their critique of traditional developmental psychology, focusing on the assumptions of one of the most influential developmental researchers in 20th century Europe, Jean Piaget. As immature learners, young children are viewed as a set of ‘potentials’, a ‘project in the making’, researched within an evaluative frame that is mainly interested in their position on the stage-marked journey to mature, rational, responsible, autonomous, adult competence. However, he provides a more balanced assessment of the contribution of developmental theories of childhood by arguing that these critiques overstate their case, rejecting wide-ranging scholarship labelled under the broad heading ‘child development’ (Woodhead, 2008). When we begin to rethink the relation between biological and psychological approaches to young children's development, it is then possible to develop a more nuanced critique of a narrow ‘developmentalism’. He argues that researching biological, social and cultural processes of human learning and development is consistent with an agenda for childhood studies, concluding that while ‘Cruder versions of developmentalism may properly be consigned to the dustbin of history, it would be a mistake to discard a field as diverse as developmental psychology’ (Woodhead, 2008, p. 28–9).

## PIAGET AS A RELATIONAL THINKER

One of the key thinkers in developmental psychology was Piaget (1970). In Piaget's framework children's intellectual development is compared to an evolutionary process, one in which the later stages of development succeed earlier ones because they are more adequate to reality. Development is viewed as a self-regulating interaction between the child and the physical and social environment, which

gives rise to new forms of knowledge. As they progress through a series of sequentially linked stages, children gradually learn the cognitive skills involved with reasoning, logic, causality and morality until they achieve adulthood. Within developmental psychology, what was important was finding ways of turning the immature, irrational and incompetent child into a mature, rational and competent adult. These dominant principles at the heart of developmental psychology have been referred to by Smart, Neale, and Wade (2001) as the embryonic model—one where young children are considered to be in a state of permanent transition, either within or between stages.

For Piaget, the child's cognitive development is driven by a constant process of assimilation of new information and accommodation of pre-existing structures to fit recurring but not necessarily identical situations in the material and social worlds. The concepts of assimilation and accommodation were at the heart of his relational perspective. Young children are inherently incomplete: they need nourishment in relation to the environment in order to move towards equilibration. Since no form of nourishment is itself complete, they must accept it, changing the form of nourishment while at the same change time changing themselves. In the dynamics of this relationship, both young children and their environment change in relation to each other. Piaget's theory is therefore best understood as a relational-historical process (Fogel, Garvey, Hsu, & West-Stroming, 2006).

This repositioning of Piaget's perspective as a relational thinker is intended as an important counter-critique to the dominant discussion of how sociologists of childhood had traditionally rejected most forms of 'developmentalism', especially those based on the Piagetian perspective, as a 'stage' and 'age' approach to young children's development. The contemporary popularisation of Piaget as a developmental psychologist who proposed a static stage theory of infant cognitive development is an impoverished image (Kitchener, 1991), which does not take into consideration his attempted syntheses of physics, biology, psychology and epistemology in *Biology and Knowledge* (1971) and his philosophy of science in *Psychogenesis and the History of Science* (1989). He was a polymath whose writings defied disciplinary lines and who left an indelible mark on both the Anglo-Saxon and continental scientific fields.

If we re-focus our attention on Piaget's (1970) concept of a *psychological structure*, we can begin to identify the embodied aspects of young children's development. For Piaget (1954) schemes are conceptualised as patterns of action or thought that emerge out of the relationship between young children and their environment. As patterns of action within the environment, schemes are relational procedures—they are the way that young children engage with and come to know their environment. His explanation of change was disequilibrium—the young child perceives that something is missing or incomplete in the relationship and orients his or her activity to something that is more likely to realise their intention. For example, when a baby notices that her kicks on the side of a crib make the mobile move she continues to kick with the newly found intention of moving the mobile.

Piaget's main emphasis was not on cognitive structures as static representations, but on the generation of *bodily schemas* and *operations*, through which the young child is then able to transform those representational structures into plans of action in the world, acquiring new cognitive structures from the feedback obtained from her practical action. In the long run, as schemes become more articulated and differentiated in relation to the environment, they become at the same time more linked and integrated with other schemes. Piaget considered knowledge to be primarily an *operative process*, with cognitive development being influenced by the interplay of different structural systems, some bodily motor and some symbolic. He argued that cognitive development tends towards an *equilibrium* or balance between accommodation and assimilation processes. As a consequence, the young child becomes more linked with his or her environment through an increasing set of relational schemes.

However, Piaget can sometimes overlook compassionate relations between young children and adults. A good example of the way that young children's behaviour can be misconstrued and easily

dismissed by adults is given by Bruno Bettelheim in his critique of Piaget's child psychology. In response to a 4-year-old child who asked him about an elephant's wings, Piaget answered that elephants don't fly. The young girl insisted, 'Yes, they do; I've seen them'. Bettelheim (1991) argues that if Piaget had engaged in conversation about where the elephant needed to fly to in such a hurry, or what dangers he was trying to escape from, then the issues which the young child was grappling with might have emerged, because he would have shown his willingness to accept her way of exploring the problem. He comments that 'This is the tragedy of so much child psychology: its findings are correct and important, but do not benefit the child. Psychological discoveries aid the adults in comprehending the child from within an adult's frame of reference' (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 120).

## SOCIAL AND BIOLOGICAL PROCESSES

I will now argue that Norbert Elias can provide a very important way of rethinking the relation between biological and psychological approaches to young children's development.

He argues that we need to clearly define the difference and relationship between *biological evolution*, *social development* and *history*. These three concepts form distinct but inseparable layers in a process encompassing the whole of humanity, but each level runs at a different speed. In biological evolution, 10,000 years is a very short period. The changes that have taken place in the biological constitution of our species are relatively slight. Although there were some evolutionary changes in the social relationships of our ancestors, we are always concerned with human beings, people like ourselves: 'Whatever the ancestors of humanity may have been, as far as we can see back into the past we see an unbroken chain of parents and children, who in turn become parents' (Elias, 2010, p. 24).

However, in social development 10,000 years is a considerable period of time because the changes in social organisation that have taken place are relatively enormous. What makes history possible is that the structure of our social life takes place without changes in our biological constitution (see Elias, 2008)—historical change is possible because the experiences gathered from one generation need to be transmitted to the next. In every generation, young children need to learn from their elders and adults need to ensure the survival and care for biologically immature human beings, though the particular form of childhood is historically specific. But in terms of the time it takes for young children to grow into old men and women, long-term social developments take place so slowly that they seem to stand still. This gives the impression that developments in the relationship between adults and young children are static, rather than structured changes in social expectations and behaviour. In the development of language, for example, a young child develops into a human being and is integrated into a particular society by learning to produce words and sentences which are understood by others. Passed on from one generation to the next, young children need to learn and internalise an enormous social fund of knowledge about the world.

For Elias (2009) it was crucial for sociologists to determine the relation between nature, culture and society, and the unique characteristics that distinguish human beings from other animal species. He argued that one of the distinctive characteristics of the human species is the 'interlocking' of biological and social processes in the development of young children.

In the evolutionary process, the biological propensity for learning is one of the main differences between animal and human societies, providing a framework for social development to take place without any biological changes. According to Elias (2009, p. 147), there are 'natural human structures which remain dispositions and cannot fully function unless they are stimulated by a person's love and learning relationship with other persons'. He coined the phrase 'love and learning' to draw attention to the way in which young children's development is both a cognitive and affective process, intimately

woven together in different societies. This important relational concept of love and learning aptly summarises a great deal of previous psychological research on young children's development, bringing together specialised areas within psychology (particularly the separation between cognitive, social and developmental psychology).

The work of Trevarthen (2005) is important because he has developed this relational approach to young children's development, synthesising a great deal of neurological, biological and psychological research to highlight the unique biological equipment of human beings that prepares babies, infants and young children to enjoy and share companionship with others. Trevarthen (2005, p. 60–1) has emphasised how the 'human body and brain' are adapted for communication: momentary shifts of gaze and 'gazing reverie' are made possible by the distinctive white sclera of human eyes and the versatility of human vocalisation achieved by the 'uniquely adapted human respiratory system'. Moving selves regulate contact with one another by 'felt immediacy' (Bråten, 2009) with emotions that direct an awareness of one another with different degrees of intimacy.

Stern (1985, p. 6) also begins in the pre-verbal realm, suggesting that 'several senses of the self do exist long prior to self-awareness and language'. Pre-verbal awareness is linked by Stern to direct experience, which takes place not in the subject or the object, but in the relation itself. During very early development, the infant is endowed with an innate capacity of subject–subject engagements, in a game of bi-directional communication that enables the infant to possess direct 'alter-centred participation'. He treats the relation as the node of creative interpersonal potential, shifting away from an individualistic self-self model of interaction, towards a radically empirical notion of immanent relationality.

## RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

A distinctive school of relational psychoanalysis developed from the early 1980s in the work of Greenberg and Mitchell (1983), who posited a relational model in opposition to classical Freudian drive theory. They co-authored the influential text *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, in which they argued that many different psychoanalytic theories, including various object relations theories, self-psychology and the interpersonal psychoanalysis, were in agreement about one central point: that the psyche was formed and defined by interpersonal relationships, not biological drives. This 'new tradition' draws on three long-standing bodies of thinking in psychoanalysis: the American interpersonal tradition (see, for example, Sullivan, 1953), which emphasised the importance of understanding the network of relationships within which individuals exist; the British object relations tradition (Bowlby, 1969; Winnicott, 1965); and the work of American psychoanalytic feminists (Benjamin, 1998; Chodorow, 1999).

According to Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016) each of these lineages of theory posed its own challenges to the monadic model of drive theory, with its primary focus on intra-psycho processes, on the quest for rational control by the ego and the developmental goal of separation and autonomy. Their shared orientation conceptualises the self as relationally constituted, where the matrix of mother or carer–child relations provides the very conditions of possibility of existence for the young, dependent child. For example, in Winnicott's (1971) account of early life the significance of drives is linked to the establishment of the self as a 'whole person', where relationships precede individuality and are governed by the need to relate. Playing the other enriches and expands the boundaries of the self and at the same time sharpens the differences between the two. It is designed to attach the infant to the caregiver and at the same time enable him or her to keep the right distance from the mother. In this space, the baby identifies something, an object, which is at the same time 'not me' and 'not mother'. Using that object is important since only by identifying it as non-self can it act as a transitional object

and enable the infant to relate his or her inner reality to what is outside. Winnicott does not separate the child from her environment in terms of the discovery of self, objective distancing, naming, or rationalising but proposes a fluid process of separation involving intuition, experimentation and play. Hence, from the beginning, the individual child is intrinsically social, our sense of autonomy and agency inherently relational.

Elias also indicates how individuality is a process embedded in society with a specific history and therefore every young child in society is ‘thoroughly individualized and socialized at the same time’ (quoted in Brown, 1997). He developed, integrated and synthesised concepts in a highly original fashion, using a network language of interweaving, intermeshing relationships:

*But what we have here characterised as ‘interweaving’ to denote the whole relationship of individual and society can never be understood as long as ‘society’ is imagined, as is so often the case, essentially as a society of ‘finished’ individuals who were never children and never die. One can only gain a clear understanding of the relation of individual and society if one includes in it the perpetual maturation of individuals within a society, if one includes the process of individualisation in the theory of society. The historicity of each individual, the phenomenon of growing up to adulthood, is the key to understanding what ‘society’ is. The sociality integral to human beings only becomes apparent if one is aware what relations to other people mean for the small child.*

*(Elias, 2010, p. 28–9)*

In Elias's (2014) long essay on ‘Freud's concept of society and beyond it’, he undertook a processual reinterpretation of psychoanalysis, arguing that there remained unresolved tensions in Freud's theoretical model that are based upon a false dichotomy between the individual and society and ‘nature’ versus ‘nurture’. For Elias, Freud treated the individual to a large extent as if he or she was a society in miniature, while at the same time his model of society was pre-eminently individualistic. Elias argues that Freud did not consider the possibility that the process of biological evolution was responsible for the distinguishing characteristic of human societies. According to Elias, Freud's inability to authoritatively consider the relation between nature and nurture led him to set up a false division between drives as a manifestation of nature and drive regulation as ‘culture’ or anti-nature, which to this day remains an unresolved tension in the line of some of Freud's followers, such as Melanie Klein, the great child psychologist.

Kilminster (2007) argues that Elias profoundly sociologises Freud by providing a multi-levelled model of the embodied human personality that derives its specific character from the complex self-steering activities of people. The modern personality is one in which ego and super-ego functions have become increasingly differentiated from drives, that is, less accessible to them—something that is the result of a long social and historical process that is reinforced through high thresholds of shame, embarrassment and repugnance in relation to dealing with natural functions and with bodily violence, meat preparation and eating. This capacity for developing forms of self-restraint is central to Elias's argument in *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012): the increasing social constraint towards self-constraint is related to more demanding standards of self-control. Social pressures lead to more self-control, with the behaviour of individual people being regulated ‘in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner’ (Elias, 2012, p. 406).

An integral aspect of this civilising process is that young children should eventually grow up through their own self-regulation: ‘In my view human beings *are by their very nature* at certain times ready for learning self-regulation’ (Elias, 2014, p. 14)—drive regulation is a condition of the relative autonomy of individuals in their relations with themselves as well as with others. As Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl (1999, p. 8) write, ‘For human beings, nurture is our nature. The capacity for



culture is part of our biology, and the drive to learn is our most important and central instinct'. Elias argues that though there is a great deal of psychological and physiological literature on learning there is very little on the structuring of the habitus through learning (Elias & Dunning, 2008, p. 93). What remains unexplored is the establishment of controlling impulses which interpose themselves between the recurrent upsurge of drives from lower biological levels and skeletal apparatus towards which they are directed. For small children, feeling and acting, moving one's skeletal muscles, one's arms and legs and one's whole body are not yet divorced: it only later appears in adults as a 'feeling state' (usually referred to as emotions) when they gradually learn to do what small children are never able to do, not to move their muscles, not to act in accordance with their emotional impulses. In a key passage, he writes.

*But psychoanalysts, by the very nature of their method, can have only an indirect access to the growth process of a person. They have to reconstruct it from the evidence provided by the reminiscences and behaviour of their adult patients. Valuable as it is, this type of research requires supplementation by means of direct research into the building up of civilising restraints, of forms of self-regulation by human beings on the road from infancy to adulthood.*

*(Elias, 2014, p. 51)*

However, this process is largely forgotten as adults, where a high level of civilising restraint forms part of their social habitus. This restraint appears to grown-ups as 'automatic', a part of their 'second nature' which is treated as something with which they were born. Elias (2011) argued that the capacity of young human beings to steer their conduct by means of learned knowledge gave them a great evolutionary advantage over other species that were unable to accomplish this at all or only to a very limited extent. He refers to this process as humankind's 'symbol emancipation'.

In a similar way, Rapoport and Ben-Shahar (2017) argue that such a relational drive theory requires a language that acknowledges the vitality of the drives while also acknowledging the agency of the body. They suggest that the pioneering work of Sabina Spielrein (1885–1942) can help provide conceptual tools for reintegrating relationality and drives, charting a path for a relational drive theory. Sabina Spielrein, a Russian-born psychoanalyst, was initially a patient of Jung's but subsequently became his student, colleague and intimate friend. She was also in contact with Freud, presenting papers to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. The cultural forgetting of Spielrein was, however, no mere coincidence. She was omitted because she was a woman and refused to give up her intellectual autonomy by allying herself exclusively with either Freud or Jung. And her integrative, drive-relational view of human psychology was too daring and excessive in the analytic climate of her time. Significantly, she also developed professional and intellectual ties with Vygotsky and Luria in the Soviet Union in the 1920s (see Naszkowska, 2019).

For Spielrein (2003), the infant is inherently social and needs to communicate and relate. She argues that the development of language lies in a transitional area, the area of play: the baby playing at the breast, playing with letting it go and latching on to it again, creating an emotionally charged fantasy of it through sensorimotor experience when it is no longer available. She explains how adults play with babies verbally, 'feeling into' the baby's mind from the 'depths of their own mind' and their own earlier experience. She poses the question of whether the child makes his language, or whether he simply inherits it; 'Does the child himself make his language, or is it simply handed down from adults? In my opinion this question should be formulated differently, thus: is the child by natural inclination a social being who has a need to communicate?' (Spielrein, 2003, p. 291). In a similar way, Lorenzer (1981, p. 21) took issue with the traditional Freudian view of drives as purely internally arising states,

arguing that they reflect ‘the unity of biology and culture’. Although profoundly embodied, drives are not distinct and fully formed entities that are then brought into interrelationship with reality. He argued that although drives have their own levels of determination, they cannot exist independently of one other: one drive exists only in relation to another. For Lorenzer, a neonate’s experience of the world is multidimensional, embodied and relational.

## EMBODIED RELATIONALITY

I now want to discuss how Merleau-Ponty viewed childhood as an embodied and relational experience, one that can offer a different way of understanding the sociability of children, their need to communicate and to relate to others as embodied, sensuous, intertwined human beings. Jean Paul Sartre (1965, p. 321) once described Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher driven by wonder like a ‘child scandalized by our futile grown-up certitudes, who asks shocking questions which the adults never answer’. Rather than depicting childhood and adulthood as discrete stages, Merleau-Ponty observes a fundamental consistency. The child does not first self-consciously reflect on his or her body and then encounter objects; rather, he or she experiences both the body and the world as a fundamental unity, with each sense working together in his or her actions. This orientation towards the world continues to persist into adulthood. Even more, it reveals the false binary of Cartesian dualism that leads to the so-called problem of other minds: I am not first and foremost an isolated mind that is subsequently inserted into a body and a world. Infants do not first have a self-reflective understanding of their body, question whether the face of the other is another human, and then proceed to imitate their facial gestures.

Rather than ‘the body’, Merleau-Ponty (1968) speaks of ‘the Flesh’, a term he uses to describe something not previously conceptualised in Western thought. For Merleau-Ponty, exploring the experience of embodiment takes us beyond the traditional Western dichotomy between subject and object, observer and observed. Through embodiment, we are immediately and inherently linked in a shared understanding; no one can touch the other without *being* touched. Totton (2014) has chosen to call such patterns ‘engrams’, a long-standing neurological term for the physical unit of memory, which was never pinpointed in neural structures and is now conceived as holographic. The term ‘engram’ literally means something *inscribed within*. Embodied relational engrams are formed in our earliest relationships; and we use them, for better or worse, as blueprints in each attempt to negotiate new encounters. There are two interwoven aspects to this: the infant *responds* to the adult in the act of *receiving* the adult’s emotion. The at-a-distance image of embodied mirroring is perhaps better conceived more tactilely, as an *intaglio print*, in which the convex and concave, the ‘receiver’ and ‘transmitter’ faces of the same image match and coincide. With an intaglio print, an image is cut into a metal plate and then inked; a sheet of paper is pressed into the image with a roller, and this intimate contact produces an embossed image on the paper. An image (engram), which has been carved into one surface, now stands out from another surface.

Malloch and Trevarthen (2018) have argued that any attempt to understand the early embodied development of human life also needs to start with observing what infants are aware of and what they do by moving. Organisms regulate the development of their lives by growing structures and processes from within their vitality, by what Maturana and Varela (1980) refer to as ‘autopoiesis’, a self-making of a form of life with its ‘consensuality’ or adaptation of behaviours by which a child uses the environment to cooperate and convey feelings of joy with other people. According to Stern (1985), events in early infancy are immanent and part of the field of relations. He questions:



*the entire notion of phases of development devoted to specific clinical issues such as orality, attachment, autonomy, independence, and trust. [...] The quantum shifts in the social 'presence' and 'feel' of the infant can [...] no longer be attributed to the departure from one specific developmental task-phase and the entrance into the next.*

*(Stern, 1985, p. 10)*

This new perspective in developmental psychology represents a breaking point with the Freudian and Piagetian legacy anchored to egocentric assumptions (Ferrari & Gallese, 2007). Stern (1985) moves beyond Piaget's concept of the sensory-motor schema by developing the idea of 'vitality affects', which are characterised by personal feelings as well as dynamics of movements—they are usually understood as the pre-verbal force of what will become emotions. He was well aware of the complexity of the concept of vitality affects, so he defined its meaning as 'elusive qualities [which] are better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms' (Stern, 1985, p. 54). While humans are accustomed to experiencing discrete affects, from joy to distress and disgust to wonder, they appear very early in life when infants begin to experience pleasure and displeasure that is connected to somatic states.

These qualities of vitality, or well-being, become the basis for relationships and social activities (see, for example, Narvaez, 2014). They convey relational feelings for a degree of consensuality or sharing of expression in moving, regulated between human beings by affective expressions of feelings of vitality from within our bodies (Stern, 2010). There is evidence that infants show a rich spectrum of expressive movements of the upper parts of their bodies (Trevvarthen, 1984), the 'complex social emotions' that Damasio (2010) describes as regulators of well-being in intimate interpersonal relations. McCarthy and Prokhovnik (2014) have explored these relational aspects of embodiment that encompass enlashed beings, incorporating the felt and sensory qualities of experience. They believe that Blackman and Venn's (2010, p. 14) idea that 'bodies should be defined by their capacities to affect and be affected' as a radical form of relationality, drawing attention to 'entanglements' of relationality which subvert ideas of relationships as 'an interaction effect between pre-existing entities' (Blackman & Venn, 2010, p. 10). This embodied relationality allows us to consider a close, enlashed, relationship as generating an 'us' that helps to shape the 'me' and 'you', constructed through diverse cultural and personal resources.

## TEMPORAL PROCESSES

The child as a temporal 'becoming' to adulthood in classical developmental psychology has usually been contrasted with the notion of the child as 'being', developed by sociological researchers in their critique of developmental psychology. How we understand the relation between 'being' and 'becoming' remains one of the most contentious categories that haunt previous and recent attempts to develop a sociology of childhood, mainly due to its close associations with the developmental model of childhood. It is such a contentious issue because it draws attention to some of the unresolved tensions in the relationship between *natural* or biological processes and the *social*. A good illustrative example is the article by James (2010), a bold attempt to overcome competing theoretical perspectives based on the dichotomy between one universal category of childhood and multiple childhoods. In developing his argument, dichotomies keep emerging and encouraging him to take a closer look at age differences between children and young people. Although James mentions that the English language contains important relational terms to distinguish between different aspects of childhood—a newborn, an infant, a babe-in-arms, a toddler, a child—he remains steadfast in his rejection of 'a hegemonic developmental perspective' (James, 2010, p. 396).

Morrow (2013, p. 154) similarly remarks that although being an infant or a young person is important, underlying assumptions about age ‘run the risk of solidifying developmental thinking’, limiting the relational child to a specific chronological age group. Uprichard (2008) offers an alternative perspective by arguing that childhood is a stage of the human life course that chronologically precedes adulthood, part of a biological and irreversible ageing process: ‘being’ a child *and* ‘becoming’ an adult is necessarily bound by the ‘arrow of time’ (Coveney & Highfield, 1990). She attempts to uncover some of the temporal dimensions that lie behind the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ discourses in different constructions of childhood: children are not only aware that older people were once younger, or that they will change as they become older, but they also have different views and experiences about what it means to age in a changing world.

I now want to draw on another important aspect of Merleau Ponty's relational aspects of embodiment to argue for a rethinking of temporality beyond linear views on time and biased notions of children as ‘either or’. He presents a non-serial theory of time, chiasmic and reversible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Chiasm is one of the central terms Merleau-Ponty employs to describe flesh. A chiasm, as Mallin (1989, p. 220) describes it, is a relationship in which its members are related to each other ‘sinuously or flexuously by means of bending themselves to each other’. Both sides of a chiasm bend towards each other through interlacing, encroaching and criss-crossing. One major characteristic of a chiasm is its reversibility. Hence the temporal flow is not just a moving forward. Time has its different layers or depths, between which moments can flash or slide. Past, present and future transform and unfold into different layers. The past experiences and memories we have—together or individually—are ubiquitous, while at the same time they are in a process of change, sliding between the dimensions of temporality. Thus, a mutual relationship between the different dimensions of time becomes visible:

*It is not the past that pushes the present, nor the present that pushes the future, in to being; the future is not prepared behind the observer, it is a brooding presence moving to meet him, like a storm on the horizon.*

*Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 478)*

In this final part of my paper I will turn to the poetry of Dylan Thomas to illustrate how the different layers of embodied experience that a child experiences when growing up can beautifully be evoked by poetry. In letters written to Pamela Hansford Johnson in 1933–5, Thomas discusses his approach in terms of a ‘process poetic’; that is, one with a focus on ultimates, first and last things, which link body and cosmos and understand the universe from a Darwinian, Einsteinian perspective: time and space, energy and matter, growth and decay, birth and death are all equally interchangeable and active within each other—aspects of the same ‘force’ in which potential and actual events were indistinguishable. ‘Again and again’, Miller argued, ‘Thomas invents phrases which assert the reciprocal participation in one another, as activities, of what would ordinarily be thought of as isolated objects’ (Miller, 1966, p. 198).

In Thomas's process universe, what are normally distinct seasons and life periods are frequently presented in ways which make it impossible to tell them apart; if linear time is an illusion, then conception, birth, the eruption of adolescence, sexual climax and death may all be understood as containing each other (Goodby, 2013). Goodby (2013) argues that change is its key thematic concern, one in which different temporalities could overlap, collide and register their own completion. But Thomas's poetry enacts this knowledge at the level of style, too, with its incessant wordplay mimicking the processual, somatic rhythms of our bodies, of breath, heartbeat, feeding and sex. He described his radically compressed, mobile poetic practice in a letter of 23 March 1938 to Henry Treece.

*I do not want a poem of mine to be, nor can it be, a circular piece of experience placed neatly outside the living stream of time from which it came; a poem of mine is, or should be, a watertight section of the stream that is flowing all ways; all warring images within it should be reconciled for that small stop of time.*

(Thomas, 2000, p. 328–9)

I now want to turn to one of Dylan Thomas's famous poems, 'Fern Hill' to illustrate the different layers of time that he conveys about childhood. The first verse sets the tone for the rest of the poem:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
 About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
 The night above the dingle starry,  
*Time let me hail and climb* (My italics)  
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
 And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
*And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves* (My italics)  
 Trail with daisies and barley  
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

In the first verse, the adult becomes a child and this is conveyed in the temporal incompatibility of 'Now' and 'was'. Initially we read 'now' as an introduction, but it has an uncanny fusing of present and past tenses. While the poem is technically in the past tense, a plethora of connectives ('And ... and ... and') also give rise to a run of continuous present participles ('lilting ... singing ... shining'). According to Goodby (2014) *once below a time* is an inversion of the traditional fairy-tale opening, which has the child both out of time to all appearances and in time, subject of and to a time and future subject of another. It is also implied that if something can exist on the surface flow of time it may exist below it in the timeless present of the unconscious. Phrases like 'all the sun long, all the moon long', show how the child measures time by nature, not by the clock, and how each day seems a long savouring of experience. An important distinction can be made between 'Nature-centred' time, which is experienced by the child in 'nature', not by the clock, and where each day is a delightful sequence of moments, in contrast to self-regulated institutional time, a nexus of impersonal events symbolised by the relentless coming and going of calendar years (Elias, 2007).

Crehan (2001) provides a useful psychoanalytic interpretation by arguing that Thomas's verbal play encourages readers to return to and engage in the spontaneous pleasure of linguistic manipulation, a timeless and libidinous 'anarchic paradise of play'. After being born, the child imitates the sounds, rhythms, alliterations that she or he hears. Here the child does not yet possess the necessary verbal form of communication, its melodies and babblings are an image in sound of its bodily instability. In his 'Poetic Manifesto', Thomas tells of a time before the comprehension of words, during which it was enough to delight in the 'babble' of language as material, although first heard 'on the lips of ... grown-ups' (Thomas, 1971, p. 154–5).

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that we need to develop a relational, embodied and processual approach to children's development, one that can address and overcome some of the persistent concerns about 'age' and 'stage' that sociologists of childhood have had about 'developmentalism'. In order to

accomplish this, I have suggested that we develop approaches that are multidisciplinary and offer bridging and sensitising concepts to overcome traditional divisions between ‘nature, ‘biology’ and ‘culture’: Norbert Elias's concept of love and learning was used as an important foundation to integrate findings from other disciplines, highlighting the unique biological equipment of babies and young children that prepares them to enjoy and share companionship with others.

I then turned to other theoretical approaches that have been marginalised, overlooked or neglected within the multidisciplinary field of childhood studies. The rich and relatively untapped resource of relational psychoanalysis and Merleau-Ponty was drawn upon to criticise the prevailing dominant discourses around developmental psychology in order to emphasise the inherent sociability of children, their need to communicate and to relate to others as embodied and sensuous human beings. As young children grow up, their development is intimately connected to their non-linear experiences of time. In a brief poetic interlude, I suggested that Dylan Thomas's evocation of childhood can offer us ‘the hope of reclaiming—or perhaps experiencing for the first time—forms of human aliveness that we have foreclosed for ourselves’ (Ogden, 2002, p. 113).

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