Interview with Rashmi Kumari

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Introduction

This interview follows Smruthi Bala Kannan and Rashmi Kumari's commentary "Collaborations Across Global North-South: Considering Opportunities and Challenges," featured in *NEOS* Volume 12, Issue 1 (2020).

Interview

Chloe: First, I want to thank you for your time as we reflect on your April 2020 commentary. Before talking about the commentary specifically, do you want to tell us a little bit about what you're currently working on? What has changed for you regarding your research with young people since the time your commentary was first published?

Rashmi: Thank you for asking me this question. This is a great opportunity for me to reflect on the commentary that Smruthi and I wrote together in 2020. The pandemic has given us several reasons to reflect on our research and work with young people.

I am currently writing my dissertation which is based on a yearlong ethnographic fieldwork with Indigenous (Adivasi) young people from Central India. My Ph.D. dissertation examines how the figure of the Adivasi child in Central India emerges in the discursive and non-discursive convergence of violence and development. Indigenous children appear in these discourses as innocent and in need of rescue from violent environments. At the same time, Indigenous children are also assumed to play critical roles in the development processes (United Nations 2014). By focusing on multiple, often contradictory processes that inform these children's subjectivities, the dissertation project examines how the discussions and practices of development obscure both discursive and spectacular forms of violence. A way out of the double bind of violence and (under)development in the lives of Indigenous children in post-colonial India is sought in the various spaces and imaginations of education. My ethnographic project focuses firstly on processes and practices of development in the 'conflict ridden' areas of Chhattisgarh that situate education as the 'best possible solution'; Secondly, I explore how Indigenous children figure as the subject of the developmental projects, and how children engage with these. Third, I pay close attention to the ways in which Indigenous children's educational experience demonstrates that they desire development while also expressing discontent with the state-driven developmental projects.

In the last two years between the publication of the commentary and now, the world saw one of the most devastating pandemics (COVID 19) in the recent past. My work has also been affected by this. Although my proposed work remained the same, the site and my engagement with the site changed due to COVID protocols. Instead of locating education, and other associated experiences of young people in academic institutions like formal schools, my fieldwork expanded to include young people's engagement with religion (during pandemic), health (community healing), and social movements (against the state-made crisis and neglect during pandemic). I went on to explore and engage deeply with the way this rural Indigenous community, and especially young people with limited internet connectivity to access virtual classrooms, made sense of the global pandemic.

Chloe: You mention in your commentary that scholarship from the Global South is often skewed by the Global North. How do you think representations of the Global South are skewed and from your perspective has this changed since your commentary was first published?

Rashmi: When Smruthi and I wrote about the representation of the Global South in the Global North, I was thinking it in terms of historical representation of the Global South, and the knowledge production that is so entangled with one, the racial and economic domination of the North, and two, the situatedness of the scholarships. In the commentary, we wrote about the flow of conceptual knowledge, especially in the context of child rights and protection, from the North to the South. Continuing with this example of global child-rights discourse as a flow of concept and of policy not only "normalizes a particular rights-based subjectivity" (Balagopalan, 2019) (read here a neo-liberal individuated child subject of the West), it also makes the child-subject what Chandra Mohanty says "non-classed, non-racialized" in her interview on "under the western eye" in 2015 where she focuses on feminist theories. Extending their arguments, I see that in the figure of rights-based child-subject, although there is a scope for thinking about marginalized children as having their own thoughts and interpretations of power, they are conceived to be existing isolated from the continuing legacies of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism.

Scholars from the post-colonial critical thought have been highlighting the asymmetry in the representation of the Global South and the scholarship emanating from there since the time Spivak wrote that popular piece on the subaltern subjectivity. I, although, see a few representations and to some extent the theoretical intervention of the Global South in overall academic thoughts – especially if one looks at the conversations of post and decolonial, and of Indigenous thoughts. However, within childhoods studies and Anthropology of Childhood, we are yet at a very initial stage.

Chloe: You discuss some of the challenges of transnational collaboration and you argue that these challenges are rooted in structural inequities. You suggest that some of these inequities include uneven access to resources like libraries and databases as well as the uneven valuation of knowledge production from scholars situated in the Global South. How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has changed opportunities for transnational collaboration with our growing reliance on technology?

Rashmi: COVID-19 pandemic has definitely "changed opportunities for transnational collaboration with our growing reliance on technology" but it also made visible the many structural inequities that we see, not only between the North and the South, but within the North itself. For example, internet access as a resource is not equitably distributed and despite the need to go 'online' there are communities of people left outside of those collaborations. However, as I mention in my response to the first question, a majority of the children from my field site have limited access to either the devices or the internet. Some children share mobile phones within a family to continue their classes and this happened only for high schoolers. Children under 9th grade were continuing education through 'neighborhood' schools but again, it took a long time for the administration to bring resources including teachers who were inducted into pandemic-related duties.

Chloe: You mention in your commentary that Global South scholarship can help to complicate binaries in childhood studies, such as "normative" and "non-normative" childhood. You speak, for example, to global-local connections in terms of how childhoods take shape in particular times and places. What are some examples of these global-local connections or important lessons that you think illustrate this point from Global South scholarship?

I do not yet have an example of a collaboration between the North and the South or a global-local connections especially in Anthropology of Childhood or Childhood Studies. I do see some of these collaborations working for disciplines like Sociology, Media and Communication Studies, and even Anthropology where most theorization of concepts have come from this recognition of how global conditions of capitalism, neo-liberal expansionism, colonialism (both historical and ongoing) have shaped the local movement, identities, aspirations, and practices. One of the major global-local connections I see is the work that has happened on child –rights, especially because of the presence of international organizations like the UN. I see that even at the level of policymaking and implementation, scholarship from Global South is hardly taken into considerations. As a recent roundtable conference on childhood and youth succinctly points out "debates in the fields of childhood and youth studies have continued to be largely anchored by epistemological frameworks and theoretical concepts foregrounded by scholars and institutions situated in the global North" (Kannan, et al. 2022).

Chloe: In this Spring 2022 *NEOS* issue, we are working to amplify perspectives from and in the Global South. What other avenues have you seen, or would you like to see that further amplify Global South scholarship on childhood and youth?

Rashmi: Since I am working in India, I obviously see the scholarship on childhood and youth in India, very recent and still in its nascent stage, that could benefit from finding a space in global platforms. I also see Mexico and South American contexts like Brazil and Colombia among other places where a lot of work on youth movements are insightful, but these are not reflected as scholarship on childhood and youth. Similarly, there is also work happening on childhood in Palestine, Kashmir, and similar places that are rift with everyday violence and conflict. Engaging with scholarship in these spaces can be one of the best ways to amplify Global South scholarship on childhood and youth.

Chloe: You mention that prior work in *NEOS* and ACYIG has centered ethics, reflexivity, and care as research praxis. How do you practice ethics, reflexivity, and care in your own research, and how do you think that we can do this in our research as well as with each other as scholars, knowledge producers, and youth-centered researchers?

Rashmi: Being a graduate student, I have a limited pool of experience to draw from about my practices of reflexivity, care, and ethics as research praxis. Yet, I would like to discuss some of the things I have tried during my fieldwork, and I am currently using in post-fieldwork/writing phase. Being a non-Adivasi researcher, and belonging to the dominant caste in India, my work for most part has been in and with Adivasi (Indigenous) communities, and especially young people. Being aware of my positionality as both an international student in the United States, and as a dominant caste researcher in India, I understand my positions of a vulnerable graduate student here in the US, and of privilege within my field site. I understand the same of my research participants as well that they belong to many worlds simultaneously. What I am trying to articulate here is as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) points out in her matrix of domination, it is important to account for positionality and situatedness that embodies both privilege and vulnerability. As a scholar of color from India, I do not assume the authority to represent Adivasi voices. One of the ways I privileged young people's 'voices' during my fieldwork was to incorporate multi-modal ethnography where young people narrated their own stories in writing and other art forms like painting, photography, and video-making. As I prepared to leave the field, these initiatives deepened. My collaborators have continued the work with children and some of their work is currently being published by a popular children's magazine in India.

Chloe: You explain that scholars have underscored how young people are embedded in and add value to their communities and global contexts, but this type of research can be interrupted by institutional discourses of discipline and merit in academia. What would it look like to you to have academia value and recognize this kind of research? How can we persist in getting Global South contributions to childhood studies taken seriously amidst such barriers?

Rashmi: Academia has traditionally valued writing in the forms of PhD dissertations and publishing peer-reviewed manuscripts among others. Most of these are not publicly accessible. However, I also see an emerging practice among scholars who make their scholarship public and accessible to the communities within their research site. Following these examples, my research incorporated the aspects that would center the communities and how they would like to represent themselves. As part of this design, I had conversations with the village elders and youth leaders on how to incorporate their ways of learning and education into the work that I am doing. One of the examples of this I found in my work is that youth willingly shared their videos with me and requested that I tweet about their initiatives. I also accepted the 'refusals' as and when they were voiced by the people. Basically, what I am saying is that perhaps these collaborative methods show how academia can step out of the bind of discipline and merit. Going back to the roundtable conversation I mentioned earlier, I agree with Anandini Dar and others who impress upon the need for a multidisciplinary approach to understanding "marginalized childhood."

Chloe: To conclude your commentary you pose three questions to consider regarding collaborations between the Global North and South. The final question you pose is "how would the theoretical landscape in the anthropology of children and youth be further enriched by such collaborations?" I'm curious what your thoughts are regarding what the answer could be to this question.

Rashmi: It is a rather vexing question that would take sustained effort over a longer period of time. One of the examples of a theoretical intervention within childhood studies I see is in the work of Sarada Balagopalan. In order to give "agentic authority to child as subjects," scholarship (both sociological and anthropological) within early childhood studies, mostly based in North America and Europe, conceptualized multiple childhoods and sought to account for childhoods as socially and contextually constructed. Balagopalan critiques this position by emphasizing the need to look at postcolonial contexts and thoughts to incorporate the historicities of colonialism working upon the lives of children in the Global South. Perhaps we have to engage with multiple scholarships from the Global South that are grappling with the history of disciplines like anthropology themselves while also theorizing within them.

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