

Everyday Intellectualism and “Undefining Childhood”

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Children cross-culturally are famously known as prolific question-askers. These questions are related to processes of intellectual inquiry that children engage in. In this study, I investigate childhood memories of autistic adult women and non-binary people from an online Facebook group from the New York City area, in order to look for clues about where these kinds of processes of inquiry into personal interests might begin, and whether and how they last into adulthood or blur the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. I chose this group because I was familiar with the members from when I lived in New York City for a couple of years, and they are my peers. In addition, a central aspect of the autistic experience, from what I have seen, is focusing somewhat obsessively on particular topics of interest for long periods of time. While it is still my contention that all children (and people in general) explore intellectual interests every day in different ways, I thought that the particular conscious attention that autistic people pay to these processes may prove useful for investigating more openly what that experience of everyday intellectual exploration was like. My data was indeed fruitful in terms of specific details the interviewees provided about these processes.

The study uses three individual, approximately one-hour-long Zoom interviews to explore childhood memories of informal learning that these adults (referred to by pseudonyms hereafter) have. Informal learning is defined here as learning that takes place outside of (and with no connection to) school, for the purpose of exploring one’s own interests. I have chosen to define informal learning in this way for the purposes of this study in order to uncover the types of learning that traditional school curricula do not typically acknowledge or address. There is a long tradition of critical social inquiry into the ways in which schools try to define all learning as belonging to or resulting from formal instruction, and the ways in which there is learning taking place outside of the school environment which does not necessarily conform to school goals or purposes (see Lave 1982; 1990; 2019; Willis 1977; Urrieta 2013; 2015; Illich 1971; Paradise 1998; Golding, Brown, and Foley 2009; Graff 2003). Given that children cross-culturally spend many (if not most) of their waking hours outside of school, sometimes pursuing their own interests, this is a significant area of children’s intellectual life that this study aims to begin to explore through adults’ recollections. In particular, the tendency for informal learning to blur the boundaries between childhood and adulthood is something I aim to explore here. This is based on an understanding that, according to the most accepted definition of childhood within Childhood Studies, childhood is socially constructed, a variable of social analysis, and that children are actors in their social lives and those around them (Prout and James 1997).

Foundations of Memory

In this study, I explore a working concept I'm developing known as "everyday intellectualism." This is everyday, informal learning about interests that serve no practical purpose (e.g., career training) per se. Put simply, this is learning, outside of school, just for the sake of it. Previous literature has referred to children's informal learning outside of school mostly as preparation for community life in terms of performing specific practical tasks (Lave 1982; 1990; Urrieta 2013; 2015). While this is often true and valuable, there are other interests children have that do not necessarily serve an immediate practical purpose, and these are undertheorized and understudied. While it is difficult to locate studies of this specific type of children's informal learning directly, when the focus is broadened to studies of adults' childhood memories of informal learning, three studies provide useful context. The first study is an autoethnography of the researcher's journey from K-12 schools to a research career (Gallardo and Gindidis 2020). Gallardo considers the "intellectual" only within the context of the academic (2020, 292), which sets up a strong dichotomy throughout her account between "intellectual" experiences in school and emotional experiences outside of it. The second study (an interview-based one) provides more circumspect advice for attempting to use adult narratives of childhood memories as a window into childhood experiences. The authors caution that adult memories can be factually inaccurate and are mostly useful for understanding "...idealized forms of childhood, representations, and/or imaginations of cultural norms, values, or symbols" (Harris and Valentine 2017, 506). Even though these adult narratives may not contain factually perfect memories, they can still be useful for understanding how the learners remember and discuss their experience of this learning. The third study is an ethnography of a rural community in the mid-Atlantic U.S., including interview accounts, which emphasize the monumental importance of space and time to childhood experiences of informal learning (Tilhou 2022). Tilhou's project is to undefine childhood by exploring how time moves forward and backward in the process of meaning-making and learning, and how informal learning crosses back and forth between childhood and adulthood, so that "[o]ur ageless childhoods are continuously manifested" (865). This connects to previous research she describes as demonstrating "...that there are enduring characteristics of child that can be found no matter biological age or other adult-like characteristic" (Tilhou 2022, 871). Thus, the folk assumption of distinct "child" and "adult" characteristics is proved to be erroneous in the context of everyday intellectualism, where the child as an everyday intellectual undoes the commonsense association between age and learned wisdom.

All three studies share one feature in common: they point to different aspects of adults' memories of learning social information and ways of being as children, but they do not give us a real sense of what those adults remember about pursuing their interests. In this way, all three of them skate across the surface of childhood memories of encountering people, places, and things without delving into the depths of what it was like to really be in those communities of learners and to be a seeker of something more than an attitude or a fact. This is where this sort of research leaves off, and this is where my research picks up.

Current (and Past) Narratives

When designing this study, I had originally set out to explore how the memories that autistic adults have of following their intellectual interests outside of school in informal learning contexts shape their present-day intellectual interests, and what sorts of relationships they recall forming in childhood while pursuing those interests. To that end, I inductively and qualitatively coded my interviews using the program NVIVO and the coding strategies described in Saldaña (2014). Several themes emerged during this process, but the theme of non-linear movement through time in terms of the way these adults remembered and described their childhood interests was most relevant to my theoretical question about how informal learning collapses many differences between children and adults, and so for that reason and due to limited space, I focus on that theme here.

All three of my participants showed a strong continuity of interests between childhood and adulthood, and this continuity seemed to lead to their sliding back and forth between childhood and adult memories of similar interests. Much more than when they were describing the less common interests they had that didn't continue into adulthood, time seemed fluid in narratives of interest and engagement that spanned long periods. I had 20 instances of the code for "Continuity Between Childhood and Adulthood" across the three interviews. While this is only a handful more in number than the code "Differences Between Childhood and Now," the participants had much longer and more detailed answers for the cases of continuity than of differences. The sole exception to this was Nina's interview, where she only briefly mentioned either differences or similarities between childhood and adulthood since she seemed to enjoy staying with her childhood memories and trying to relive them for our interview. I focus here on Tonya's and Barbra's narratives since they went into the most detail about how their interests as children related to their interests as adults and vice versa. Please note that I kept the syntax of how my interviewees spoke intact as best as I could gather from the recording and my transcription software (otter.ai), to give a sense of their intonation and expression.

When I asked Tonya what she was curious about as a child, she listed so many different interests that I had to ask her how she decided to switch from one activity she enjoyed to another. This prompted her to explain (after describing the reasons for her bedtime routine in great detail), how she grew up with parents who she described as "really strict about going to bed early" but with a family who were "...very supportive of [her] interests" (I had asked her how she got support for her interests), including interests in dinosaurs and animals. She is old enough that she mostly remembers reading books because "...back in the day internet wasn't really that big yet" and her mother encouraged reading both in support of school achievement and because:

...the neighborhoods I grew up in, were not safe. So my mom tried to keep me away from that...

She attributed this unsafe neighborhood to being "just the environment you grow up in when you're in the inner city, unfortunately." The resulting encouragement that her mother gave her for reading resulted in the following:

I love books. I have like 300 books. Now, at this point as an adult, the monster that is developed into is because I have ebooks. But I've always loved books. I've always loved reading, I read to this day, every single day somehow.

Thus, Tonya was quite explicit about the many interests she has now that began in childhood, especially animals and books. But with music, in particular, she was enthusiastic about explaining the connection between childhood and adulthood:

But then what happened was with the music, when I became a adolescent, I discovered music and realized I really loved it. At first, the first music I fell in love with was hip hop. But then I went to high school, and through exposure to music videos, and some other kid, I develop an interest in heavy metal. And rock. So now that's my favorite music, rock.

Notice here how although the structure of this story appears fairly linear on the surface, once deconstructed, the nonlinear order of the story becomes apparent: she begins by describing when she became an adolescent, then moves on to describe an unspecified time when she fell in love with hip hop, then returns to when she went to high school, and ends with the present day (adulthood). It's as if she is skating through the history of her music interest, throwing bits and pieces at me to construct a vivid picture rather than tell one continuous narrative. In this narrative, it is impossible to make neat distinctions between her childhood and adult interests in different types of music, or between her childhood and adulthood at all. This is just one example of how a discussion of personal interests can so quickly collapse any association of age with a neat, linear development from one type of interest to another.

After a short conversation about her interests as a child in which she asserted that she loved rollercoasters as a child and continues to love them as an adult, which prompted me to ask her what about them fascinates her so much, Barbra was even more explicitly non-linear with her description of her love of both rollercoasters and designing them with software, which is charged with emotion:

And I mean, as an adult, I like the sensation of facing my fears. I was really terrified of them as a kid. And I was too scared of them, but I do them because it feels rewarding after face the fears. And, and I think they do have a physically liberating thing, like, just surrendering to gravity. Though, but I think all of that is just rationalizing why I liked them. I don't really know when I'm like, but I would say that even nowadays, I spent some time like watching roller coaster videos.

She does a similar thing when describing her continued interests in learning ballet and dance, or languages (English and Arabic since her first language is Portuguese), or physics in general: she uses emotion and a sense of freedom to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, and reveal her common experiences across that divide. It's unclear at times whether she is describing an emotion, thought, or sensation experienced in childhood or adulthood, or both, but that is the whole point.

Undefining Childhood

I began this project looking for the ways in which these individuals' memories might reveal the blurry (or perhaps even nonexistent) boundaries between childhood and adulthood in the realm of informal learning. More specifically, I looked to further explore the phenomenon Tilhou (2022) demonstrated in which adult narratives of informal learning show that childhood practices of informal learning persist into adulthood, and that the concept of childhood is not stable in terms of linear time. Thus, "[t]he stories of past childhoods can remain open, unfinished, as the present retells and uncovers pieces left untold" (Tilhou 2022, 865). What I found is that not only did my participants describe childhood interests from their memories which persisted today, but that their understanding and experiences of those interests today is continuously influenced by these childhood memories, in ways which make it difficult to distinguish between their childhood and adult interests at all. Additionally, the way they describe their memories is riddled with the relationships they had, particularly in Tonya's narrative, where she describes how her interests were structured by her parents and other kids she knew, by her recollection. Yet she never loses herself in these accounts, very clearly articulating how she charted a path for her own interests among this web of social relationships she participated in. This is consistent with some anthropological and other research on memory, which emphasizes how "the past exists in the present" (Cole 2005, 109) and "memory connects the individual and private with the social and public in complex ways" (Cole 2005, 104).

What these interviews reveal is that the boundary between childhood and adulthood can be far more porous in the memories and understandings of adults than many traditional developmental theories would imply (see Tisdall and Punch 2012, 250-251 for a review of widely acknowledged Childhood Studies critiques of traditional developmental theories such as Parsons' or Piaget's). Specifically, the ways in which all three participants explored their interests crossed many boundaries between childhood and adulthood, both in the nonlinear ways they told their stories and in the inventive ways they sought out information or resources about their interests. The resourcefulness of a child (or adult) who is determined to learn something interesting apparently knows no bounds beyond their material conditions. While children occasionally have more time to explore certain interests than adults (but also less freedom), there is no essential, singular quality of "child" or "childhood" that distinguishes the everyday intellectualism of children from adults, or even the everyday experiences of children from adults, at least in these memories. Narrative storytelling by adults about their childhood interests, in conjunction with research with children directly exploring those interests, may be a way to begin undefining childhood and uncovering what lies beneath this construct.

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To cite this article: Gologorsky, Natalie. 2024. "Everyday Intellectualism and "Undefined Childhood." *NEOS* 16 (1).

To link this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol16iss1spring24/gologorsky/>