Although I am unable to attend the conference, Deepak asked that I record the lecture I intended to give.
Abstract

The goal of this talk is to identify (unmask) and critique the movement to promote agency as a cornerstone of research, care, education and intervention with children. I make a case that this movement is harmful to a scientific approach to the study of childhood, distorts or ignores key understandings of the evolution of childhood and culture. The presentation demonstrates that the agency movement is ethnocentric, classist and hegemonic representing the dominance of contemporary bourgeoisie child-rearing. It imposes a single, privileged ethnotheory of childhood upon the diverse societies of the world with alternative ethnotheories and practices. Lastly, I argue that the movement is not efficacious either in advancing theory or practice.
In contrast to Hirschfield’s (2002) claim that “Anthropologists Don’t Love Children,” in my work (Lancy 1996, 2008, Lancy et al 2010) I have found and worked with a huge corpus of material on children from the ethnographic record. This material dates from research on the Inuit carried out by Franz Boas 110 years ago (Boas 1901) to the present. Furthermore, I have found that no matter how obscure or dated (e.g. research on children inspired by Freudian theory dating from the 1930s) all of this trove of scholarship can be profitably mined in improving our understanding of childhood. The single exception—an area of research I have not found particularly useful—is work which wears, prominently, the “Children’s Agency” label. I will argue, in this essay, that the agency movement not only impedes scholarship but may also be problematic in terms of effective advocacy on behalf of children.

In the last decade, more and more published work on children in the social sciences, including anthropology, archaeology and history begins with a
Conventionally, in the world we live in, the intelligentsia is divided among academics who carry out inquiry and political leaders, civil servants and aid providers who solve social problems. The second set of actors legitimately play the role of advocates and change agents and they depend on neutral and objective findings and theories from the first group to guide their work and increase their efficacy. As LeVine however notes, blurring this distinction can be harmful to science and intervention efforts. He laments “child development’s dual identity as an ideological advocacy movement for the humane treatment of children and a scientific research endeavor seeking knowledge and understanding” (LeVine 2004: 151). On the one hand, scientific progress is impeded by political agendas and, on the other; policy makers lose confidence in the credibility of scientists. The promotion (and it is nothing less) by academics of children’s agency clearly contributes to this deterioration as the following quotations (emphasis added) suggest:

**Child Agency Problem # 1:** Child advocacy masked as scholarship.

- “Childhood as a social position...children’s agency...is inherently linked to the ‘powers’ (or lack of them), of those positioned as children, to influence, organize, coordinate and control events taking place in their everyday worlds” (Alinen 2001: 21).

- “Adults’ ideas about childhood limit children's agency and actions, thereby denying them status as ‘citizens’” (James 2011: 167).

- “Childhood is a historical creation that imposes limits on children’s social roles and activities. [Some] argue that we should liberate children from childhood” (Lavalette 2005: 147).
I would argue that there is no fundamental difference between child “liberators” trying to manipulate science to advance their cause than the pope doing the same thing on behalf of his agenda. For example, Pope Benedict XVI has called for “world leaders to show more respect for human life at its earliest stages [as] embryos are dynamic, autonomous individuals” (Anonymous 2010, see also Alderson et al 2005).

Unfortunately, the agency dogma has become institutionalized in the processes attendant on the funding and approval of research with children. The various methods and perspectives normally within an anthropologist’s arsenal are largely reduced to an applied, advocacy undertaking in which the children themselves must be accorded the authority to determine the course of the study. This pernicious effect goes largely unrecorded and unpublished. In what I think is not an isolated incident, colleague Diane Hoffman—desiring to study the role of work in a typical Haitian boy’s acquisition of adult identity and standing—was turned
The call to accord agency to children is usually accompanied by the injunction to listen to their “voices” (Kellet 2009) in order to document the uniquely juvenile culture as well as the many changes children effect on the culture at large. Indeed, the thoughts and opinions of children are seen as the most critical data sources. This injunction ignores how difficult it is—outside western bourgeois society—to interview children.
This is a clip of anthropologists Marianne Fermé attempting to interview three recent Sande initiates in a Mende village. I think it is pretty typical of what an anthropologist faces in attempting to interview children.
As an alternative to this frontal attack: “The ethnographer—who might have asked the mother for her views on the child’s experience—may have to wait for moments when young children reveal their culturally shaped behavioral tendencies and expectancies in naturally occurring situations: (LeVine 2011a: 459). However, even when one can elicit meaningful responses, the subjects may explicitly reject “agency.”
We learn from Montgomery’s classic ethnography of a squatter village in Thailand —where the primary source of family income is the earnings of child prostitutes—that children view that they are moral debtors to the parents’ who’ve cared for them.

A robust anthropology of childhood has been based on the traditional, multi-method approach employed by opportunistic fieldworkers and Montgomery’s Modern Babylon is a stellar example. Studies of childhood should include participant observation, key-informant interviews (with adults and children), the study of the cultural context of children’s lives, comparative analyses of childhood in other societies (ethnology), photography, oral recording and film, among others. In contrast, we see a growing number of studies that only or primarily rely on child interviews (including projective drawings) as the data source.

“It would, perhaps, be easiest to claim that [child prostitutes] have been so abused and brutalized by their parents that they continue to prostitute themselves because they know of no other way of life. The children, however, give very different reasons for doing what they do. They claim that they become and remain prostitutes out of duty and love to their parents, that they have a moral debt to their parents for bearing and raising them; a duty known in Thai as bun khum. This is the debt of gratitude that children owe to their parents, and especially their mothers, for their existence” (Montgomery 2001: 82).
Insisting that children exercise agency in creating “cultures that in significant measure are independent of and distinct from those of the adults” (Hirschfield 2002: 612) denies the reality of culture. Culture is dismissed as a “constraint” that limits children’s authority. This stance flies in the face of our understanding of the critical role of culture in human development. “A substantial amount of empirical work from throughout the social sciences suggests that humans rely on social learning or cultural transmission to acquire the majority of their behaviors” (Henrich 2001: 997). This tendency towards social learning means that successful—and some unsuccessful—adaptations are preserved from one generation to the next. It also implies cumulation. Inventions are copied by others and the cultural repertoire expands. All of this argues very much against the notion that children are, by nature, rebellious vis-à-vis cultural traditions and eager to establish their own. This would not make sense in evolutionary terms (Boyd & Richerson 1996).
In keeping with the political nature of the child agency movement, proponents spend little time in analyzing the concept itself, measuring its distribution, correlating with other aspects of children’s lives, etc. As I explored the topic, I realized immediately that agency when applied to children can have at least two distinct aspects: their freedom and their efficacy.
Freedom means just that, the child, from an early age, enjoys a great deal of physical autonomy, or not. Efficacy, on the other hand, means that someone older pays attention and responds to the child’s needs and wishes, he has an effect on others, his social position and power is elevated, again, from an early age. In the dominant society children are granted an enormous amount of the second kind of agency but little of the first. For the village children typically studied by anthropologists, the situation is reversed (Lancy 2009).

- “Asking a child his opinion in Luo society is a rare event and requesting him to be a playmate with an adult is even less common” (Blount 1972: 127).

- “Ganda children over two years of age...sit politely, with their feet tucked under them out of sight, listening to the talk of their elders and speaking only when spoken to. If any young child becomes rambunctious and draws attention to himself, he is told to sit properly [and] be silent” (Ainsworth 1967: 12).

- “From weaning onwards, Kako children get used to a hierarchical relationship with their mother that disallows public expressions of mother’s emotional and physical commitment...no play, no talk, no cuddle; the relationship is one of authority and obedience. In this way children learn to be emotionally independent of the mother and to fit in a wider network of kin who care for them” (Notermans 2004: 15).

- “[Mende children] who display a precocious fund of knowledge are either ignored or regarded with acute suspicion” (Bledsoe 1992: 192).
When anthropologists describe childhood, they consistently describe a situation where children are granted very little efficacy, they must earn it through diligent efforts to master their culture and become “useful” (Lancy & Grove 2011a). In the ethnographic record there is much discussion of children’s responsibilities and almost nothing about their rights (Twum–Danso 2009). These descriptions by anthropologists are not simply throw–away lines, they reflect incisive study of core cultural beliefs or folk theories about childhood.

- “Lepcha childhood is a time of obscurity, of being unimportant; children are not taken notice of and their tastes are little consulted” (Gorer 1967: 314).

- “In a Mayan community...children are taught to avoid challenging an adult with a display of greater knowledge by telling them something” (Rogoff 1990: 60).

- “[Fijian] children of any age should be obedient, quiet and undemanding in the presence of adults” (Toren 1988: 240).

- “Hadza Children up until they are about 3 years old often cry for long periods when they do not get what they want...Rarely do adults intervene” (Marlowe 2010: 198).

- “[Among Mongolian nomads] very few openings for children to be boisterous or to intrude on adult occupations or conversations” (Penn 2001: 91).
“As a general rule, most parents in Sweden try hard to understand the needs and pre-requisites of their children. They are sensitive and empathetic and try to enter and understand the child’s world.

One general conclusion about childrearing which emerged... was that parents tried to ensure their children’s participation in decision making and negotiation of future activities” (Dahlberg 1992: 132–3).

By contrast, the agency folk model as a central feature of child–rearing is found almost exclusively in mid to upper–class societies in the West. In insisting on granting all children the agency to express opinions and enable them (materially) to fulfill their own needs and desires, agency advocates are ignoring the role traditionally assigned to children and behaving in a profoundly ethnocentric fashion (Holloway & Valentine 2000: 10).
The child agency dogma has its roots in the parenting folk model of the modern, well-to-do *intelligencia*. In Adrie Kusserow’s study of childhood in three contrasting sub-cultures in New York City, she documents three differing folk models. In the wealthy, urban elite, even very young children are given agency by their parents as the quotation shows. In contrast, the parents in Kusserow’s Working Class cohort from Queens Borough “did not feel it was harming or inhibited the child’s development if they asserted their power as an adult over the child. Hierarchy was part of life, the way things were, and something the child would have to accept” (Kusserow 2004: 51).
Among the intelligencia, agency can be carried to ridiculous extremes such as parents who raise genderless children so that they will be unhampered in making this important life decision themselves (Blackwell 2011). Swedish parents following this course justified their behaviour: “We want Pop to grow up more freely and avoid being forced into a specific gender mold from the outset; it’s cruel to bring a child into the world with a blue or pink stamp on their forehead” (Anonymous 2009).
Granting children the kind of choice and freedom to indulge themselves that is characteristic of the elite comes at a price. The economist Amartya Sen, in his well-known volume *Development as Freedom*, notes “an individual's agency...is constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available” (Sen 1999: xi–xii).

The classist nature of the agency campaign is even more evident when it is exported to the less privileged “Global South.” Among village children or those dwelling in urban slums, agency means something entirely different. Their freedom to make choices about their lives is a rather hollow “right.” Boys from the village of Piéla in the province of Gnagna in Eastern Burkina Faso can exercise their agency and run away from home with a labor recruiter. Exercising this agency leads them to a year-long ordeal of hard labor in cotton fields, short rations and a bicycle (if they’re lucky). At the end of that year, they gratefully relinquish their limited agency, and return to their communities.

“It is classist.

“Many...had improved the relationship with their parents...they were now more obedient and respectful toward them. The experience had provided them with a rite of passage into becoming a more grown-up and responsible member of the household. Pierre (16 years old): ‘Since my return...I can work really hard. There are also fewer quarrels, I now respect my parents and I listen to them’” (de Lange 2007: 154).
In an earlier survey (Lancy 2007), I discussed the parent–child play movement. The idea that “good” parents should make themselves available as their child’s play partner and provide liberal sums to fulfill the child’s need for play resources is now widespread among the intelligentsia and there are “experts” prepared to assert that the failure to fulfill this parenting mandate reflects a deficiency in the parent and cause for concern about the child’s healthy development (Kaplan et al 2008: 251). There are numerous international programs, which promote this philosophy, and it is being vigorously exported outside the dominant society. In the rest of the world, of course, parents are rarely reported as playing with children. Typically, “parents regard an interest in children’s play as beneath their dignity” (Grindal 1972: 25).

I argued (Lancy 2007: 279–280) that this movement (stemming from the same culture of parenting as the agency movement) was hegemonic as it imposed the values of the powerful on the less powerful with no solid evidence that this
It is hegemonic.

“The Latina providers are especially...critical of the concept of ‘self-esteem.’ They wonder why it so important to parents and parenting experts in the US, especially if it produces a self-centred, individualistic child. While they acknowledge the benefits of nurturing cognitive development and school readiness, they point out that what was missing from their credentialing courses was how to raise a child to be a bien de persona (‘good person’) with la educación adecuada (‘the proper education’) in how to relate to other people. They are critical of certain US middle-class parenting practices, such as recognizing children’s autonomy, cultivating friendships between parents and children, and encouraging emotional expression because they perceive this as promoting an individualistic and egocentric childrearing approach instead of the relational philosophy that they bring from their own cultural backgrounds. They see negative consequences for their family relationships and being in the world. They are critical of US child developmental ideas and their recommended practices that do not first and foremost conceive of children as part of families and communities” (Utta 2010: 734).

Utta (2010) describes a case—one of many—of parents, families and communities actively resisting the hegemony inherent in the child agency movement (for a parallel case from Ghana, see Twum-Danso 2009). It is a study of Latina immigrants participating in a state (Wisconsin) mandated program to train them in US child-care practices so that they might legally offer child-care services to fellow Latinas. The ethnographer interviewed them as to how they viewed the program they were constrained to adopt.

One might feel more accepting of the child agency movement if, like campaigns to eradicate child prostitution, its benefits to children were self-evident. But that’s far from the case. As the above extended example illustrates, Latina parents are quite confident in their child-rearing philosophy of withholding agency (as efficacy) from the child for its own benefit. It turns out that this skepticism may be well-founded (see also LeVine & Norman 2001: 97).
Researchers are just beginning to study the impact of the child agency movement—which itself is of quite recent origin (Zelizer 1985). One significant line of research has been the study (mostly via ethnography) of children’s assumption of responsibility and pro-social behaviour. More specifically, there has been a flood of studies recently of children’s chores or contributions to the household among highly-educated, middle-upper-class families. It is ironic, but hardly surprising, that these studies, while so clearly focused on the effects of granting agency to children, don’t actually claim to be studying agency. The findings are quite consistent.

Child Agency Problem # 7:
It is counter-productive.

- In West Berlin “parents alone are responsible for...the reproduction of daily life...the child is the recipient of care and services: (Zeiher 2001: 43; see also Wihstutz 2007: 80).

- In case studies from the US, “a mother empower(s) her child with agency, and creat(es) more of an egalitarian relationship between them than a hierarchical one.” However, she spends a lot of time cajoling/guiding the child into making her bed. It becomes a big dramatic production after she initially refuses, claiming incompetence. In a comparative case from Rome, the father doesn’t even bother trying to get his 8-year-old daughter to make her bed, he does it himself, while complaining that her large collection of stuffed animals and decision to move to the top bunk make his task much harder” (Fasulo et al 2007: 24, 16–18).
Another disturbing trend that may well be laid at the child agency door is the rapid rise in child obesity, “learning difficulties” and medicated depression occurring in children growing up in affluence. I argued in a polemical essay that these newly proliferating child maladies may originate in a parenting philosophy that places the child’s “happiness” above all other considerations (Lancy 2010b).
A third trend that can be attributed to the child empowerment philosophy is that it undermines the student–teacher relationship. In a study of a secondary school in a mid–upper class (US) neighborhood, “students…routinely question(ed) their teachers’ authority, critiquing how instruction was delivered, judging the utility of what they were learning, and attempting to personalize relationships with their teachers” (Demerath et al 2008: 277). Teachers respond defensively, “dummying down” the curriculum while students become “confident incompetents.”

If these are the results of granting agency to children, it is hardly a policy that, as social scientists, we should be promoting.
It is counter-productive.

In Márquez’ study of street kids in Caracas she found: “that the youngsters are fully aware of the sanctioned opinion that defines them as minors not entirely capable of being responsible for their actions...They know that being younger than eighteen gives them, if nothing else, a certain impunity; they know that regardless of the nature of their crime, most often they will not be treated as adult prisoners” (Márquez 1999: 111).
Returning to the distinction between agency as freedom and agency as efficacy we can see that less privileged children certainly enjoy a great deal of the former—far more than our own offspring. In terms of efficacy, it’s not clear how a political campaign designed to grant them greater agency (or efficacy) absent improved schools, medical care, nutrition, job prospects, etc will do much good. Indeed, in my survey of the literature on street children, I was impressed at how successful children were at adapting to the urban environment. They didn’t need any helpful NGO or moral authority to grant them agency, they already had it in enjoying tremendous freedom of movement and association and in gaining the efficacy that comes with acquiring funds and other resources to support their elective life-styles (Lancy 2010c). I’m not blind to the fact that those choices undoubtedly offer them a severely truncated lifespan but, again, trying to lengthen their lives would surely involve withdrawing agency not granting it.
I will conclude by briefly presenting two examples that suggest how little analysis goes into the child agency movement. At the American Anthropological Association meetings in 2008, I attended a talk entitled: “Learning to Be Social: A Study of Socializing Practices in Danish Daycare Institutions.” The presenter noted that the goal of pre–school pedagogy is to foster cooperation and social relations, how to get along in a group, rather than preparation for academic instruction. She referred to this policy, without irony, as “civilizing” the child. When I asked, after the talk, how this philosophy squares with the philosophy of granting “agency” to children—a position the presenter aligned herself with at the outset—her reply was: “Yes, they are given agency but they must learn to use it in the proper way” (Gulløy 2008, personal communication). Another striking example can be found (Montgomery 2003: 216) in which the Children’s Ombudsman in Norway had to back away from a strong stance on children’s agency in order to justify a ban on teen’s access to cosmetic surgery such as breast enhancement.
Another example is a report on middle–class children and their mothers “getting ready” for Halloween. The chapter is liberally doused with agency holy water, viz: “Newer models, influenced by the field of children’s studies, assume that children actively shape their own socializing process, a process which cannot be understood apart from children’s own accounts and agency” (Clark 2007: 301). But the scenario that unfolds is under the near total control of the parent. The only real freedom the children can exercise is in selecting among a limited array of ready–made and conventional masks/costumes they will ask Mom to buy: “Even if they needed to visit several stores to find a particular costume, mothers generally sought to fulfill children’s expressed role choice” (Clark 2007: 292). No mention is made of the child assembling her own costume from scraps or raiding Mom’s make–up kit. The audience for the child’s Halloween role is composed of adults. All of them, of course, respond predictably: “The adult role as an appreciative audience was amply noted by young informants, who “showed off” their fictive selves and were generally praised for the display” (Clark 2007: 295). There is no mention made of children exercising their agency to “trick” the
I don’t want readers to take away the wrong impression. While I oppose the promotion of their agency as a necessary prologue to research and/or intervention with children, I am very much in favor of treating children’s agency as a phenomenon worthy of attention and study. Agency represents an excellent topic to explore the intersection of culture and ontogeny and is especially critical during a period of rapid cultural change (e.g. Katajala–Peltomaa & Vuolanto 2011, LeVine 2011b). For example, “The prominent role played by youth in the totalitarian movements of [the 20th] century has been widely noted” (Ryder 1965: 850). In a more recent case, Morelli (2011) reported on her fieldwork among the Matses of Peru. Aboriginally, they dwelt in the deep forests of Amazonia but gradually moved to more accessible sites along major watercourses. Matses boys were in the vanguard in exploring and exploiting riverine resources, fish, in particular. Their rapidly acquired competence lowered the barrier for adult engagement with this unfamiliar and previously avoided ecology. Orellana’s (2009) ethnography of Hispanic immigrant families in Los Angeles represents a model of sound empirical practice in the study of children’s agency. My
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