

# *The (cross-cultural) problem of categories: who is 'child', what is 'family'*

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## CHAPTER

### **The (cross-cultural) problem of categories: who is ‘child’, what is ‘family’?**

Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Ruth Evans, with Guo Yu, Xu Xiaoli and Fatou Kébé

#### **Introduction**

What task falls to the sinologist, you ask? Above all to challenge himself [sic] to move past the temptation to immediately house Chinese representation in a (European) category that he would already have at his disposal. (Jullien, 2009:201)

The category of ‘child’ is often presumed to be underpinned by ‘natural’ biological differences from the category of ‘adult’, an understanding that also includes biologically based notions of ‘development’ and ‘maturation’. Challenging this view has been a central tenet of the New Social Studies of Childhood (Spyrou, Rosen and Cook, 2019), arguing instead that ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ are socially constructed across time and space. Here we engage with the problematic, not only of this particular ‘biologised’, or even socially constructed, categorisation of ‘child’ in relation to the (similarly naturalised) category of ‘family’ across cultural contexts, but also of the very nature of ‘categories’ more broadly. We explore how the cross-cultural understanding of ‘categories’ themselves and their boundaries varies across, and is embedded within, linguistic, historical and philosophical processes and world views.

We begin with a brief outline of how ‘child’ and ‘family’ have been institutionalised and understood in everyday contexts in Anglophone and Western European societies, notably the UK, before considering how the (often disconnected) categories of ‘child’ and ‘family’ have been understood within the academic work of childhood studies and family studies, rooted primarily in these affluent Minority worlds of the global North. Drawing on the work of the philosopher and sinologist, François Jullien, we then examine how the understanding of ‘categories’ is itself quite specifically located in the history of European thought, and how perspectives from other geo-historical-linguistic contexts may construct the world through more fluid lenses. From there, we turn to explore how ‘child’ may be framed in Chinese

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thought, before considering how ‘family’ may be framed in Senegalese, West African contexts, in which language may be seen to work in specific ways in relation to the notion of ‘humanness’ as ‘ubuntu’. In the first case, the discussion is based on published literature in both Chinese and English, while the second case draws on our own empirical research of family deaths in Senegal. In both these examples, we are heavily indebted to our international collaborators, on whom we are reliant for their generous and patient attempts to aid our understanding of the linguistic, social and cultural issues involved in translation processes. From these examples, we hope to raise questions, and point to complexities, of how to consider who is ‘child’ and what is ‘family’, including issues of generation and gender, as well as themes of individuality, relationality and connectedness, all embedded in diverse ways of categorical thinking.

But first, a word of caution about the term ‘culture’ which is often critiqued as creating illusory images of stereotyped, static and monolithic customs and practices that bear little relationship to the inter-sectional complexities and dynamism of people’s everyday lives and experiences in diverse contexts. Furthermore, such reification of ‘culture’ risks being harnessed towards political projects (Lukes, 2008), including the legitimizing of structural inequalities within particular societies (Ncube, 1998, discussed in Butler, 2000). But equally, to neglect ‘culture’ is to risk leaving out what cannot be accommodated within dominant discourses (Gressgård, 2010). The danger then is that cultural diversities are replaced by terms, categories and perspectives from the global North, that are then imposed in international contexts whether political, practical, or academic. As Baggini points out, there are twin dangers in seeking to understand cultural diversities, ‘of overestimating either how much we have in common or how much divides us’ (2018:xix). Further, as Jullien argues (and as anthropologists have long debated), there is always the risk that ‘other’ cultures are perennially understood and framed through ‘our own’ cultural lenses, in terms of ‘difference’ from what ‘we’ already know. Rather, Jullien (2009) explains his own project of comparing European and Chinese thinking in terms of starting from ‘elsewhere’.

Reifying or essentializing difference is a definitively sterile procedure, but isn't there a completely different one, a stimulating one, the procedure of *putting the gap to work?* (2009:202).<sup>1</sup>

Such attention to the 'stimulating gap' created by difference resonates with the notion of 'reverse innovation' advocated by Zaman, Whitelaw, Richards, Hamilton and Clark (2018), in which, rather than the general pattern of assuming that Western knowledge and practices apply, and are worthy of being exported, around the world, it is instead the knowledge and experience of Majority worlds that are used to shed fresh light, and to reconsider existing practices, in Minority worlds. At the same time, Jullien argues, dialogue itself may require some shared, or 'common', ground between cultures. Yet, despite such calls for cross-cultural dialogue, and the deconstructive academic work of childhood studies and family studies in the global North in recent years, exploring the implications for the development of cross-cultural and post-colonial perspectives on the categories of 'child' and 'family' has hardly begun.

### **Categories of 'child' and 'family' in the global North.**

The category of 'child' is central to the institutions and everyday understandings of life in affluent Minority worlds, being institutionalised through various legal and administrative structures, particularly educational systems underpinned by theories and discourses of child development. Furthermore, this specific categorisation has been institutionalised globally through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Chronological age is central to this institutionalisation, with 18 years constituting the most significant dividing line between 'child' and 'adult' (Hendrick, 2009), constructing an age-specific (idealized) 'childhood' as a special phase of life. Yet in Western Europe prior to the 19th century, 'Childhood was not so much a specific age, but a social role that could be occupied by a wide range of age groups' (Gillis, 2009:115), such that the dependency

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<sup>1</sup> Any emphasis is original unless specified otherwise.

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associated with childhood could last through the life course. The 'modern' category of 'child' was historically shaped by: the development of Enlightenment ideas; industrialisation and urbanization; and political concerns about young people as potentially socially disruptive (Hendrick, 2009). Further back historically, the Protestant Reformation viewed children as having specific needs, either for protection from the corruption of the world, or for discipline and education to bend their will towards Godliness (ideas which still resonate with more recent everyday parenting assumptions, Ribbens, 1994).

With industrialization, home and work became separated, and children removed from the labour force. The significance of compulsory schooling can hardly be overestimated, as age became a key marker for categorising and organising large numbers of children, with standardised measurements of children's normative 'development' in line with these age markers (Cunningham, 2005). Developmental psychology was born and rapidly became key to the institutionalisation of childhood (Rose, 1999), which in turn shaped parenting and domestic space in important ways. With the emergence of households as smaller biologically-based units, childhood as a notion became strongly associated with domestication and familiarization (Zeiher, 2009), albeit always highly classed, gendered and racialised (Davin, 1978; Davidoff, Fink and Doolittle, 1998). This was also reflected in mid-twentieth century functionalist sociology which constructed 'the family' as a monolithic social structure, rooted in 'nature', and fulfilling 'functions' for the stability of society.

Furthermore, along with profound changes in ideas of childhood, ideas of adulthood came to be characterised in terms of autonomous rational individualisation, with the shift away from the particularistic ties of rural feudal society to the universalistic ties of urbanised wage labour, along with profound changes in cultural and religious orientations. The emphasis in developmental psychology on the individual progression of 'the child' through supposedly universal stages towards 'adulthood' must also, then, be seen by reference to the production of a particular understanding of 'the individual' and 'the self' in British culture, in terms of

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the responsible adult: a new kind of 'self', suitable for the later stages of proto-industrialization, the developing nation state and the onset of industrial capitalism. (Hendricks, 2009:104)

### **'Child' and 'family' in childhood studies and family studies.**

Such historical evidence was a significant factor in the development of the 'new' social studies of childhood (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) in the later decades of the twentieth century, which emphasised the *social* construction of the category identified as 'childhood'. Prior to this, childhood was rarely regarded as a social phenomenon, with the category of 'child' studied through the prism of the 'psy' disciplines (Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009). From such perspectives, as well as from functionalist sociology, both 'child' and 'family' were understood as (closely intertwined) categories rooted in 'nature', notably the 'natural' categories and processes of gender, generation and reproduction.

In response to this view of the child as the subject of biologically determined development and/or the passive recipient of socialization, the New Childhood Studies particularly emphasized children as autonomous 'beings' with agency (in the present), rather 'becomings' in development towards their future maturation. Recent suggestions, however, propose it is time to 'move on' from these preoccupations with 'the child', advocating an 'ontological turn' towards understanding 'child' and 'childhood' relationally, as constituted through the entanglements of embodiment, materiality and technology (Spyrou, 2019). Others have highlighted the theoretical significance of relational approaches that work across 'generations' and 'adulthood' rather than being siloed into age specific categories (e.g. Alanen and Mayall, 2001; Vanderbeck and Worth, 2015; Punch, 2019), with, 'agency' also coming under scrutiny, particularly agency embedded in autonomous rationality (Balagopalan, 2019; Holloway, Holt and Mill, 2019).

Questioning the view of 'family' as 'natural', lying outside of 'society', began somewhat earlier than the questioning of 'child' in academic work, with feminist academics in the 1980s (Thorne and Yalom, 1992; Barrett and McIntosh, 1982) debating the category of

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'family' itself. Family sociologists also (Bernardes, 1985, 1999; Gubrium and Holstein, 1990) fundamentally questioned the use and meaning of the language of 'family' at all. As Calhoun (2002) observed:

Once presumed to be a universal feature of human societies (subject to certain variations), both structural definitions of the family based on the kin relations that compose it and... definitions based on the functions that it performs (e.g. reproduction) have failed to meet the challenge of the observed variety of forms of collective, small-group life in human societies.

Accordingly, by problematizing the concept, sociologists sought new ways of thinking and theorising, while simultaneously recognising the continuing importance of the term in both policy arenas and everyday lives (Weigel, 2008; Gilding, 2010; Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2011; Edwards et al, 2012). Morgan (2003), rather than writing categorically about 'family' as a noun, an object-like thing, has instead used the term as an adjective or verb, with his notion of 'family *practices*' (2011) being widely adopted as an alternative approach. Others have explored the (powerful and continuing) *meanings* and resonances evoked by the term 'family' as it occurs in everyday lives and in political and policy contexts (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Ribbens McCarthy, Doolittle and Day Sclater, 2008/2012).

While these developments in childhood studies and family studies have brought forward new perspectives and thinking, nevertheless this work has been heavily rooted in the contexts of Minority worlds, both empirically and academically. This particularly applies to child developmental perspectives rooted in the 'psy' disciplines (Burman, 2008), with much of this work, for example, based on particular, WEIRD<sup>2</sup>, samples (Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan, 2010). Yet this work is taken to provide knowledge about the supposedly universal category of 'the child'. But uncovering the cultural assumptions underpinning such knowledge requires re-considering Minority and Majority worldviews which encompass taken-for-granted underpinning assumptions about what it is to be human and what

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<sup>2</sup> WEIRD as in Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic countries.

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knowledge looks like (Connell, 2014; Bhambra, Gurminder and Santos, 2017), posing major challenges for going beyond the categorical thinking of ‘child’ and ‘family’.

Recognising the specificity of childhood and family studies debates rooted in Anglophone and Western European societies might suggest a need for empirical work from Majority worlds (and this is undoubtedly much needed). Thus ‘childhood’ might be seen as a plurality of social constructions, perhaps resolvable by talking about ‘(multiple) childhoods’, or ‘children’ in the plural rather than the singular (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2016a). This would echo earlier approaches to problematizing ‘the family’ by referring to ‘families’ in the plural rather than as one singular identifiable entity.

Balagopalan (2019) critiques such notions of multiple childhoods as a project of ‘liberal tolerance’, while Kesby, Gwanzura-Ottemoller and Chizororo (2006) warn against simply ‘adding in’ the lives of the ‘missing’ children in some sort of cumulative way. Such an approach risks failing to re-think the Minority world assumptions on which childhood studies have been based (Balagolapan, 2019). Indeed, given global inequalities in social science knowledge production, Evans (2019) argues for an ethic of care that seeks reflexive collaboration across Majority-Minority world boundaries. Additionally, however, we suggest here the need to move beyond categorical thinking itself, as a particular and fundamental feature of Western European thought, which may be hard to grasp within the underpinning historical framework of European and Anglophone language. In this regard, treating the categories of ‘child’ and ‘family’ as flexible historical and social constructions may not be sufficient to avoid the neo-colonial imposition of particular knowledge forms. And while Spyrou argues that ‘entities do not pre-exist their coming together; they are constituted out of the relations they have with one another’ (2019:1), he does not fully follow this through, even when eliding the distinction between child and adult by arguing that they are *both* ‘beings and becomings’ (see also Holloway, Holt and Mill, 2019), and even while recognizing the ‘ontological politics’ (Spyrou, 2019:5) of knowledge production. There is thus further scope to question categorical thinking *per se* around the language of ‘the child’, ‘children’, or ‘childhood’.

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Accordingly, while these most recent developments are important and useful, we also argue for a clear focus on language and discourse with regard to 'child' and 'family' - albeit recognizing that 'discourse is entangled with, produced by, and productive of... materiality' (Spyrou, Rosen and Cook, 2019:7), within global economic processes (Balagoplan, 2019). This focus is both theoretically crucial and key to exploring how these terms are invoked in diverse cultural contexts. Family sociology, having come under such scrutiny (as discussed above), may arguably have advanced further along this theoretical route than childhood studies, with a move away from understanding 'family' as a noun and towards understanding it as adjective or verb. While Spyrou, Rosen and Cook hint at such a possibility when they ask 'how childhood *is done*' (2019:8, emphasis added), childhood studies still treats 'child' and 'children' as nouns, albeit nouns that may be conjoined with a great many different adjectives, as in 'the working child' or 'the special needs child' or 'overweight children' (Spyrou 2019). Moving away from using these terms as nouns, by contrast, fundamentally re-shapes an ontology which views them as *categorical* descriptions of the (social) world. At the same time, using 'child' as an adjective, as in 'child soldiers' or 'child domestic workers' (Evans and Skovdal, 2015) may point to similar categorical thinking behind the adjective.

### **Categorical thinking across cultures?**

These issues are central to the work of François Jullien, whose philosophical project interrogates major gaps in thought between different linguistic and historical cultural traditions. As a sinologist paying close attention to language, including a painstaking examination of Chinese philosophical texts over centuries, Jullien identifies major gaps between European and Chinese languages in ways of thinking about the world:

China provides me with the means for an oblique glance at the unthought of our [European] thought. ... What is put back into question, then, is... the pre-notioned, or the pre-categorized, or the pre-questioned, that is to say, that which constitutes our theoretical *pre-suppositions*. (Jullien, 2009:182, 184)

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One key feature of the European ‘unthought’ reflects the thinking of Aristotelean logos, which is fundamentally alien to the Chinese language. Thus while the logos is predicated upon the idea that language corresponds to, and names, pre-existing entities – giving rise to clear categorical thinking – Chinese thought makes no such pre-suppositions and its fluidity is instead ‘notably well equipped to deal with the endless flux of the universe’. (Mair, 1991:374)

Jullien thus argues that, while Chinese and Western linguistic traditions both entail notions that are defined partly through their interaction with other notions, Chinese concepts function less as semantic units but rather through a network of associations:

Even the notion of ‘Heaven,’ a unique term par excellence and keystone of literati thought, cannot serve as a concept in and of itself. Scarcely can it be said to be a notion, but rather it is a virtuality of indefinite meaning... an empty center... not taking on a conceptual usage except with respect to another term which serves as its counterpart... (Jullien, translated by Mair, 1991:377)

By contrast, in Aristotelean thinking, there is

the assumption that as soon as one starts to speak, one is signifying *something*, so that there already is this something available to which speech can refer. (Jullien, 2009a:185)

This ontological underpinning for European language provides a clarity of dialogue which resonates with science, such that this view has prevailed in European thought. European speech is thus limited by this ‘something’ to which it refers, and speech and thought become co-extensive (except, perhaps, in European poetry). By contrast, Chinese thought and speech are not limited in this way, enabling ‘the “vague” or the “blurry,”’ (Jullien, 2009a:188). Consequently, the experience of reading a Chinese text may entail a sense of not being able to grasp what is the subject that it being talked about. From this point of view, defining something creates a limitation that means something of the original underlying quality gets lost and the definition becomes self-contradictory and sterile. Words in Aristotelean logos thinking involve an ‘entity [which acts] as substrate-support’ (ibid:189),

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but in Chinese speech this is not present: 'no strict relationship of predication is established, this connection is loosened. But, of course, *translations "logically" re-establish them'* (ibid:190, emphasis added).

Further, European thought creates a duality between the spiritual and material, developing another plane of ideality where values of justice and freedom can be found, whereas Chinese thought remains with the functional, the processual, the phenomenal. The Chinese valuing of Harmony thus focuses on harmonious functionality rather than utopian thinking. Rooted in the senses of this world, Chinese thinking seeks to explore and deepen sensibilities, not to escape from them into abstract thinking, to help to realise the harmony that is already immanent in the world. Resonating also with the important theme of non-action as a means of influencing the transformation of a situation, the emphasis on immanence also has implications for individuality. 'Chinese thought dissolves individuality and event in the globality of processes' (ibid:206).

From this discussion, if there is any sense of universality to be found between Chinese and European thinking, it has to be worked towards and constructed, since it is 'on the horizon, not at the point of departure' (ibid:200), working with the gaps that arise between languages. Translation is crucial, but even here:

contemporary Chinese... has itself been reformatted according to European categories [offering] ...but a pale reflection [*reflet*] of Western cultural pre-expectations: written in Chinese though it may be, it is a text which has passed through this uniformization of categories as through a sieve, sterilized and disappointing. (2009b:72)

Nevertheless, Jullien seeks to keep open the possibility for dialogue by positing the coherence and intelligibility of diversity of linguistic thinking.

And so we must hold firmly to a pair: to both the possible gap in ways of thought *and simultaneously* to a dialogism of thinking... I would call this path to come the *auto-reflection of the human...*' (2009b:74)

### **'Child' in historical and contemporary Chinese contexts**

So, what light may be shed by this philosophical discussion relevant to 'bringing children back into the family' in diverse contexts? Writers such as Nadan, Spilsbury and Korbin (2015) and Twum-Danso Imoh (2016b) suggest moving away from global thinking, focusing instead on local contexts and understandings. Such work, we suggest, needs to start with a careful exploration of language that goes beyond issues of 'translation' to consider the underlying gaps and the unthought in relation to approaches to the categorisation of 'child' and 'family'.

As an initial foray in this direction, we draw here on earlier work by Ribbens McCarthy, Yu, Phoenix et al., (2017) exploring differences in linguistic terms and legal parameters of 'child' and 'childhood' in the UK and China. This work developed after a series of seminars at Renmin University in 2014, in which it became apparent after several days that the English translations offered by interpreters strikingly exemplified how Chinese terms were being 'reformatted according to European categories' (Jullien, 2009b:72). Accordingly, we attempted to develop a collaborative inter-cultural dialogue about 'children' and 'childhood', even though this was compromised from the start, being shaped by the questions asked in English by the UK academics, rooted in Minority world childhood studies, while relying on the English language speaking and translation skills of the Chinese academics. Nevertheless, the work opened up cultural 'gaps', highlighting how the category of 'child' looks different linguistically when starting from the Chinese language itself, and how the institutionalisation of 'childhood' diverges between the UK and China when teased out in its legal and policy ramifications.

Most notably, contemporary English has the specific term 'child', closely linked to a specific phase of life called 'childhood' delimited by chronological age. But in both formal and

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informal Chinese<sup>3</sup> there are terms referring to the general category, ‘people’, and then specifying a sub-group of this generic category in terms of size or maturity<sup>4</sup>. This framing is in line with a general cultural emphasis which prioritises the larger collective over the individual, seen also in the way that the ‘family’ name is always placed before the personal name in identifying someone.

The formal term, ErTong (兒童), widely used in legislation and bureaucratic processes, thus refers most literally to ‘people of a young age’.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, with regard to informal terms, XiaoHai (小孩) literally means ‘people who are still small’. The additional formal term, which first appeared in the constitutional legislation of 1992, WeiChengNianRen (未成年人), literally means ‘people in the not-yet-mature time’, or ‘non-adults’, but may often be translated as ‘child’ as in ‘child protection’ legislation. Furthermore, while there are additional relevant formal Chinese terms, including ‘ShaoNian’, ‘QingShaoNian’ and ‘QingNian’, these may be used with great flexibility and seemingly somewhat randomly – resonating strongly with Jullien’s comments on the way Chinese language may not be dependent on any particular substrate of a pre-existing entity acting as a support for a term such as ‘child’.

In bureaucratized life, then, Chinese and English terms that at first sight appear equivalent may, on closer examination, reveal significant ‘gaps’ in thinking. Thus the broad English concept of ‘child’ does not simply equate with the formal language of WeiChengNianRen, the latter evoking a much wider range of connotations than the English legalistic term ‘minor’. Yet, as found in the UN Children’s Rights Convention, ‘child’ is very much the dominant language of Anglophone international legislation.

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<sup>3</sup> This discussion builds upon the earlier publication by Ribbens McCarthy et al, and is dependent upon the valued input of Yu Guo and Xu Xiaoli in that paper. Note also that the distinction between formal written language and informal everyday language is itself a key aspect of Chinese culture.

<sup>4</sup> In her UK empirical work in the late 1980s, Ribbens (1994) found that mothers typified young children very predominantly as ‘different from’ adults, whether understood as ‘little devils’ or ‘natural innocents’. Only a very few of the parents interviewed typified children at any point as ‘small people’.

<sup>5</sup> Understood as all of a young age, so not equivalent to the English term ‘young people’.

More fundamentally still, there are cultural issues to consider in what may, to Minority world scholars, appear to be significant contradictions in China’s child protection legislation (Keith, 1997). On one hand, Naftali (2014) highlights human rights discourse in the legislation, interpreting this as indicating children’s status as persons in their own right, separate from their families. On the other hand, there is a rhetoric which identifies non-adults as the collective future of socialism, patriotism and the nation, along with filial piety requiring obedience and obligations to parents<sup>6</sup>. Tensions are thus evident between non-adults as individual rights-bearing citizens and other cultural themes of deference to the larger, collective unit (Ribbens McCarthy, Yu, Phoenix et al, 2017), evoking very different versions of personhood. Yet, if Jullien’s discussion is valid, perhaps the language of WeiChengNianRen is functioning in accordance with Chinese cultural traditions and linguistic usage, being evoked in vague and fluid ways in variable rhetorical networks of association, and avoiding representation of a fixed, pre-existing category of ‘child’.

### **Personhood, humanness and connectedness in African contexts; the significance of ‘ubuntu’.**

Ubuntu is ‘the unthought of individualism’ (Praeg, 2008: 368)

Translation and categorical thinking are also crucial considerations in African contexts, resonating strongly with Julienne’s discussion of inter-cultural dialogue. This raises issues of how categories function in everyday lives, being embedded in diverse world views of what it is to be a human being. In particular, while ‘family’ in many countries, including in Minority worlds, may involve a tension between themes of individuality and of connectedness and relationality (Ribbens McCarthy, 1994, 2012), in many African contexts ‘family’ and indeed ‘personhood’ are deeply relational and can only be understood through a grasp of the complex interdependencies and ‘oneness’ of people’s lives. Such experiences of connectedness may inflect the term ‘family’ in particular ways, through the notion of ‘ubuntu’, a term originating from Nguni Bantu in South Africa and found in many languages throughout the continent (Ramos, 2003a; Connell, 2007).

Yet adequately translating or defining ‘ubuntu’ may always be compromised, with something of its workings ‘slipping away’ (Praeg, 2008), while evoking something about what it is to be human,

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of ‘filial piety’ is itself complex, flexible and ambiguous, see Ribbens McCarthy and Phoenix, 2017

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translated sometimes quite simply as ‘humanness’. This is an interpersonal notion of humanness in which ‘the individual owes his or her existence to the existence of others’ (Kamwangamalu, 1999:29). Various English terms may be used to convey this in translation, including ‘solidarity’, ‘interdependence’ and ‘communalism’. An additional potentially relevant term is ‘interexistence’ (Macy and Johnstone, 2012), chiming with ‘ubuntu’ as expressed in the Nguni proverb, “a person is a person through other persons” (Gade, 2011: 303) or ‘I am because we are one’ (Nel, 2008: 141). At the same time, while generally regarded in a positive light in terms of expressing African values, ubuntu may also be associated with some negative connotations if the individual is sacrificed to the greater good (Kamwangamalu, 1999).

While much of the recent written literature on ubuntu has occurred in the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the majority of sub-Saharan African countries also share a European colonial history that devalues ‘African’ heritage, leading to a politics and discourse of ‘return’, and African ‘renaissance’ including in Senegal (Nabudere, 2006; Gade, 2011). The question of ‘what is ubuntu?’ itself reflects political struggles ‘within the hegemonic, Northern epistemic power matrix of Westernised philosophy’ (Praeg, 2008:377). On the one hand, Praeg recognizes the ‘working’ of ubuntu as a contemporary experience and set of practices in everyday lives, but in colonial history, ubuntu’s ‘logic of interconnectedness’ was posited as a central feature of the ‘primitiveness’ of African cultures. Nevertheless, ubuntu may now be harnessed towards the search for an ‘authentic’ and valued African heritage to build a sense of nationhood(s). Consequently, on the other hand, there may be some tendency towards ‘inventing’ such discourses in order to further the political project, constituting ‘[a] performative act of de-colonisation’ (ibid:371).

A focus on the working of ubuntu chimes with Kamwangamalu’s argument that the experiences and practices of ubuntu are acquired through everyday family relationships, and an oral culture of proverbs, leading to a ‘collective consciousness’ in which ‘the interest of the individual is subordinate to that of the group... [and] the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all’ (1999:27). Personhood is first dependent on relationships, not individuality, as evidenced also in more general rather than individualistic kinship terms which emphasise generational positionings and bind community together.

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Nevertheless, he argues (as does Eze, 2008) that this does not equate to a negation of individuality, but points to the limited possibilities for individual self-sufficiency.

Ramose (2003b) teases out some of the subtleties of 'ubuntu' through a linguistic analysis proposing that the term constitutes a 'verbal noun', encompassing both being and becoming, with past, present and future evoked within a single concept. He argues that verbs and nouns are not fixed and separate entities, independent of each other, and that the term 'ubuntu' challenges the categorical subject-verb-object structure of language. The importance of recognising the term as verb arises because, 'Motion is the principle of be-ing ['ubu'], the forces of life are there to be exchanged among and between human beings... [and] do not belong to anyone.' (ibid:643). At the same time, the term functions as a noun ['ntu'] referencing its concrete manifestation through on-going processes in actual relationships, while the term also 'affirm[s] one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others' (2003b:643). Within this framework, human be-ing is 'the basis and primary value of all values' (ibid:644). Overall, Praeg ponders how to understand the different (untranslatable) meanings of ubuntu without over-stating its difference from European concepts, none of which can fully encompass the workings of ubuntu, risking either exaggerating or collapsing difference. '[In translation] We proceed by comparison and negation in a way that is as inevitable as it is inadequate' (2008: 374).

### **'Family' in Senegal, past and present.**

This inherently relational understanding of personhood and the importance of mutual, interdependent family ties, encapsulated by the notion of 'ubuntu', were much in evidence in our research interviews concerning family death in contemporary Senegal (<https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/deathinthefamilyinsenegal/report-key-findings/>). Although our discussions with Fatou Kébé (Senegalese researcher in the team) did not identify a specific term in Wolof<sup>7</sup> that directly conveyed the notion of 'ubuntu', the Wolof/ Senegalese notions

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<sup>7</sup> Wolof is the most widely spoken of the six indigenous African languages in Senegal, including those of other ethnicities, particularly in urban areas, together with French (the language of government, legal and education systems and development agencies) and Arabic, to varying degrees.

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of *Dimbulanté* (solidarity) and *Teranga* (hospitality) were central to family and community life within poor urban neighbourhoods. Similarly, Sarli, Scotti, Bulgarelli and Masera (2012) found that understandings of 'health' in a Senegalese village reflected values of ubuntu, with an emphasis on social harmony and equilibrium, rooted in family relationships over generations:

the wellbeing of each of us is expressed through our relationship with others, where 'others' are intended to mean members of our family and community, but also ancestors. (2012:74)

In discussing 'family' in Senegal, as a linguistic term and as lived experience, we are partly reliant on accounts written in European languages and thus reformatted in European categories, whether English or French, which take the term 'family' as apparently unproblematic, alongside the terms 'kinship' or 'clan'. But here, with the help of Fatou, as well as the published texts, we are also able to consider issues of translation, to explore how far Wolof terms are 'captured' by these European words, and how far the Wolof terms themselves imply categorical thinking akin to European linguistic assumptions<sup>8</sup>.

Published European texts suggest that, historically in Senegal in common with many African contexts, extended 'family' structures, clans and lineages were the central organizing feature of societies, emphasizing the significance of connectedness within extensive networks. Indeed, in our research into the death of an adult family member, interviewees identified 'family' as absolutely key in both the present context, as an essential source of support, and also as a source of motivation over time, with the 'family' regarded as a joint project towards 'success' in the future. Furthermore, the possibility of neighbours being considered 'family' was apparent, if somewhat ambiguous and variable (Bowlby, Evans, Ribbens McCarthy and Wouango, forthcoming). At the same time, although Anglophone and Francophone literature on meanings of 'family' in African contexts is limited, Oheneba-

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in line with the earlier discussion of Jullien's work on changes in Chinese, the Wolof terms themselves have been reshaped by encounters with European languages and cultural expectations (Diop, 2012).

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Sakyi and Takyi (2006:2) define 'family' as 'a dynamic social institution with members coming and going', rather than being defined primarily by 'biological ties that household members may have with each other'.

Additionally, in common with many other African societies, patrilineal and matrilineal lineages continue to be central to understanding relationships, each lineage having different names and attributes (Ndiaye, 2009; Diop, 2012). Children are regarded as biological products of the two lineages and kinship is transmitted essentially by blood (*bokk derat*: an expression which translates as 'to have the same blood'), with each lineage being responsible for the inheritance of particular types of characteristics.

In terms of direct consideration of Wolof terms, Diop suggests that family ties and relatedness are referred to by the term 'mbokk' which originates from the word 'bokk', which he translates as meaning 'partager' or 'avoir en commun' in French, or in English, 'to share', or 'have in common' (the same ancestors, the same blood) (Diop, 1981/2012:32). The etymology of the word used for 'family' here appears to demonstrate the relational understanding of personhood encapsulated in the notion of Ubuntu, that prioritises the importance of sharing, oneness, and communitarian values. The expression 'noo bokk' (literally, we have in common) is translated as 'we are relatives/ kin'. A more current phrase which means the same is 'mbokk la nu' (ibid). People with whom you share an ancestral heritage are therefore your 'mbokk'. Furthermore, seven generations are recognised in the terms for kinship –the 'Ego', plus three ascending and three descending generations. This suggests the importance of ancestors, living or dead, to notions of personhood and relatedness in the past, present and for future generations (resonating with the emphasis on processes of 'becoming' encapsulated in 'ubuntu'). The term 'mbokk' was used by our interviewees in response to our direct questions about 'family', as well as more generally throughout the interviews.

Diop indicates that there are few elementary terms used to specify kin relations among the Wolof, such that a single term can be used to refer to several different relatives at the same time. There is thus no specific term for parent in the sense of father or mother, the expression 'waa-jur' referring to these two people at the same time – literally meaning 'those who procreated' (2012:34). Then

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there are other terms that can refer to almost all kin (or even non-kin) of a similar gender and generation; for example, 'baay', encompasses both father and all male relatives of the same generation, with the exception of the maternal uncle. Similarly, 'ndey' or 'yaay' refers to mother and all women of the same generation, except for paternal aunt. Thus, Wolof kinship terms emphasise generational positioning rather than specific kin relations, although they may differentiate between maternal and paternal relatives, especially for 'paternal aunt' and 'maternal uncle', which are associated with particular roles and expectations, in contrast to English and French kinship terms that do not have specific words or roles for these relations and do not generally specify which lineage kin belong to.

In our research, the emphasis on generational positioning and fluidity of language surrounding relationships and household membership caused some confusion about who counted under the category 'family'. We initially sought to develop a 'family profile' of who was living in the household, their relationships to each other and who the deceased was, as part of the purposive sampling approach. Yet different family members often gave different numbers of relatives living in the household compared to the 'family profile' and to each others' accounts. After analysing a number of transcripts and finding it impossible to gain a consistent account of who was 'family' and who was part of the 'household', we recognised instead the mobility of participants and the fluid, constantly changing nature of households, in which, for example, a relative might be part of the household during the daytime and share meals, but go elsewhere to sleep at night (Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Bowlby and Wouango, 2017). Bass and Snow (2006) suggest that people not related by blood or marriage may be identified as belonging to an extended-family household, or even a non-family household, by being part of its social and economic life, whether or not they reside in it. Consequently, an individual may be a member of more than one household. This fluid definition of household sets the context for many created-kinship situations, including rural-urban and circular migration, child fosterage, *talibé*<sup>9</sup>, and apprenticeship arrangements. Indeed, De Vreyer and Nilsson (2019) conceptualise households and intra-household resource allocations in Senegal by distinguishing sub-groups of household members or 'cells' that are at least partly autonomous in their budget management, with consequent gendered and generational inequalities.

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<sup>9</sup> *talibé* is a term meaning 'disciples', used to refer to children, usually boys, living in *daaras* [Koranic schools] who may be sent out by their *marabout* [teacher/ spiritual guide] to beg in towns and cities.

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This account of ‘family’ as a categorical term<sup>10</sup> in urban Senegal presents a complex picture, with entanglements between ethnic groups, cultural values and religion, between former colonizer and colonized, and between post-colonial nation states based on European legal systems and African customs and expectations, with varying power dynamics at play and uneven and partial changes over time. And all these nuances shift across different linguistic terms and their translations. Overall, we may say that the term ‘family’ was understood by participants in our research in very broad terms, by reference to what is shared and found in common, underpinned by, and fostering, a sense of ubuntu. Both the term ‘family’, and household structures themselves, reflect great fluidity and complexity, with considerable diversity in living arrangements. But the notion of ‘family’, as something that people belong to and through which they feel a sense of connectedness, was described by interviewees as key to life, both for immediate survival and as a shared project over time, based on a sense of oneness. (What European languages may refer to as) ‘kinship’ terms reflect this, emphasizing generation above other dimensions of relatedness and conveying a broad range of relationships that are not highly individuated but rather emphasize commonality and a ‘communitarian’ way of life characterized by specific roles and expectations of different genders, generations, household members and kin within maternal and paternal lineages.

### Concluding comments

These explorations of ‘child’ and ‘family’, in the contexts of China and Senegal, are pervasively inflected by gender and generation – issues which we have touched on here. They also highlight diverse understandings of individuality, relationality and connectedness, which we have considered in more depth. Theoretical implications include the view that individuality does not *precede* social relationships but may be ‘carved’ from within their dynamics (Balagoplan, 2019, drawing on Berlant; see also Gergen, 2009; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Holloway, Holt and Mills, 2019). Within the terms of our present discussion, we raise further questions. How far, and in what ways, are ‘child’, ‘children’ and ‘family’ constituted as clearly delineated categorical constructions? What is the underpinning ontology of such categorical thinking within particular geo-political, historical-linguistic-socio-economic

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<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it may be argued that ‘family’ as a noun in the English language also functions as a fluid category, and that this is part of why it is effective, shifting, for example, between ‘family’ as those with whom are shared the closest ties in the present, and ‘family’ as the family of origin.

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contexts? What are the assumptions about what it means to be human that underlie such diverse formulations, within the entanglements of embodiment, materiality, technologies and discourse, shaped within global economic and political power dynamics? How do these underlying views of humanness and relationality affect the intersections of ‘child’ and ‘family’, as these are experienced in daily lives and practices?

Balagopalan, for example, considers what ‘responsibility’ means in the ‘culturally discrete lives of children’ (2019:25), and the implications for how ‘agency’ is understood. She argues that, in Minority world constructions, ‘responsibility’ may be evaluated as oppressive control, undermining autonomy. And, while she acknowledges that discourses of responsibility can be leveraged by both family and State to strengthen hierarchies, she also argues that, in Majority worlds, responsibility may be embedded in a particular notion of the self, that invites

an exploration of the non-sovereign relationalities that sustain children’s agential actions... responsibility exists as a sensibility that both precedes and exceeds rational actions. (ibid:33 and 35).

This resonates strongly with the notion of ubuntu which both underpins and is produced within everyday generational relationships in families and households in many African contexts, while responsibility is formally laid out in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Evans and Skovdal, 2015). In the context of such connectedness, ‘the anthropologist Michael Jackson (1998) argues that:

Language articulates social relationships more than it expresses information and ideas. And agency is not so much self-expression as self-restraint tied to an ability to foster mutually beneficial alignments within a wide field of social and extrasocial relations. In such a world, civility, etiquette and emotions are less a matter of inwards dispositions than of interactive performances, and “we” replaces the discursive “I”. (Quoted by Balagopalan, 2019:32)

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More generally, Jullien’s exposition and elaboration of the gaps in speech and thought between Chinese and European languages provides a striking exemplar of the challenges involved in uncovering the unthought (and unthinkable?) when we come to consider terms such as ‘child’ and ‘family’. Similarly, Praeg points to the impossibility of European languages fully capturing the meaning of ‘ubuntu’ which both shapes and reflects family lives in Africa, and which points to the ‘unthought’ of individualism. These exemplars should give all scholars in childhood and family studies a clear warning of how to consider their defining terms, or categories, across cultural and linguistic contexts, that must go beyond just ‘adding in’ the missing children and families from beyond Minority worlds. Yet, while anthropologists have long understood the key significance of learning indigenous languages and all that is entailed in that, contemporary cross-cultural studies, academic global theorising and research, and global policies and agencies, have signally failed to demonstrate any widespread understanding of what gaps may arise, what may ‘slip away’, and what may be unthought, in working across diverse linguistic contexts. And this risk is significantly magnified where categories appear to be rooted in ‘biology’ or ‘nature’, as with ‘child’ and ‘family’.

Recent theoretical developments have sought to grapple with some of these issues by moving beyond an emphasis on *social* aspects of their construction, to include more embodied, material and technological elements, the entanglements between these producing particular *ontological* constructions:

the complexity and dynamism of life itself necessitates making a “cut” around the object of study and demands of us decisions as to the theoretical and conceptual resources we mobilize. What kind of child do we choose to bring into light? (Spyrou, Rosen and Cook, 2019: 6)

At the same time, Spyrou has also argued that ‘the field will continue to make children and childhood its primary concern’ (2017: 435), while seeking neither to ‘dissolve our field’s distinctiveness nor fix and essentialise it’ (*ibid*). Yet there is a further step to take, invoking questions concerning the sort of ‘cut’ that is involved, and how clearly delineated a category

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this cut produces. Is there diversity in the nature of the 'cuts' themselves such that categorical thinking itself needs to be acknowledged to be culturally diverse?

In this chapter, we have presented an initial exploration of some 'gaps' between different geo-political-historical-linguistic-socio-economic contexts, by reference to the categories of 'child' in China, and 'family' in Senegal, West Africa. In the process we hope to have given significant pause for cautious thought, and perhaps stimulated some imagination of what may be unthought in the categories of child and family that predominate in much of contemporary childhood and family studies, and in the processes of categorical thinking itself.

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