

Beyond the Rupture: COVID-19, Children, and the World Anew

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Abstract

This article presents an autoethnographic exploration into the disruption of my PhD field research with children and youth because of the COVID-19 pandemic. My exploration bridges what Roy (2020) has called the “rupture” of the pandemic, and the subsequent impact on the ability to complete graduate research and on the opportunities that have been created to reimagine not only our research approaches but also our world anew. I argue that the gateway to creating a new world of our imagining, in research, policy, and practice, must include the visions and voices of children as they respond to the immediate interruptions caused by the virus and as we collectively imagine the path forward. Children can provide a unique perspective of the pandemic from their lived experiences at home, at school, and in the community, as well as in their insightful and thoughtful ideas of how we need to move through this virus together. It is through our collective actions that we decide what is on the other side.

Keywords: children, COVID-19, ethnography, children’s participation, interdependency

Introduction

After a year and a half of pandemic living, it is almost cliché to say that the COVID-19 crisis has created a massive disruption to our lives as we knew them and lived them. As we have watched this pandemic play out throughout the world, we have witnessed appalling inequalities being exposed, experienced grief and loss, and have been challenged to consider what world we want to live in after this virus passes. No one has been spared impact from this global rupture, including children. Throughout the world, young people have been required to adapt to life at home, away from their friends and social networks. They have learned how to breathe, smile, and cry through masks. Many children have lost their access to school, had contact with family members restricted, and experienced precariousness in their living situations. For some children, it has even meant the death of a loved one. As children have felt and experienced immeasurable disruption and loss over the last year, it is with children that we adults must interpret what all this means for our collective futures, and it is with children that we must envision our world post-pandemic. Together we must ask ourselves how we address the social and economic inequalities that continue to be exposed, how we build relationships with the environment and with our more-than-human partners to prevent pandemics in the future, and how we resist the urge to return to “normal” and instead work to create the socially just world of our imagining.

In this article I introduce the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has created a rupture in our practice and research as academics through an autoethnographic analysis of the disruption to my own doctoral research with children and youth. Further, by asking questions

that explore how young people are experiencing the pandemic through the diverse measures taken by their governments, schools, and families, I present examples of how this pandemic has caused a rupture to children's lived experiences by disrupting old corporeal practices and creating opportunities for new insights, spatialities, relationships and affects (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021). Although I acknowledge the social, economic, and emotional difficulties experienced by young people and their families throughout the pandemic, in this article I seek to expose the agentic ways in which some young people have been able to negotiate the pandemic through self-discovery and by reworking notions of productivity, engaging in care work, and building social connection. Finally, I argue that the rupture has opened a gateway to create the world anew, requiring the collective effort of children and adults to imagine a world in which all can "flourish together" (Taylor & Giugni, 2012, p. 108).

The Pandemic as Rupture

Thinking Ethnographically in Pandemic Times

In her article, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," Roy (2020) wrote,

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt as nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality," trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. (para. 47)

Roy highlighted how the early stages of the pandemic caused significant interruption to global markets, transportation, labour, education, access to resources, business, and manufacturing. The virus moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital and locked down humans in their countries, their cities, and their homes (Roy, 2020). The pandemic made the world strange to us as virtually every aspect of the world we were accustomed to was interrupted in some manner and, in an instant, we became strangers to the lives we had been living (DeHart, 2020).

Children have also been affected by this rupture in both individual and historic ways (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021). Most children throughout the world have experienced some disruption to and reduction of their social lives, education, and access to resources. However, this global phenomenon has had differentiated effects on children's lives in different regions of the world and within different socio-economic groups (Bessell, 2021). Many families have had their incomes affected, and with closed schools and lockdown measures, the home space has seen its interactions increased and its uses intensified (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021). For more marginalized families, this pandemic has caused life-altering changes, including loss of house and habitat; precarious access to drinking water; entrenched inequities in education, health and technology access; and increased risks of violence and mental health issues (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021). Children have experienced these times very differently based on the resources that their families have access to, the areas they live in, the kind of house they have, and the health and education systems they are connected to (Bessell, 2021). Since societies have been transformed and inequalities deepened as a result of the various national and international responses to the pandemic, it is imperative to understand how children have been, and will be, affected in social, economic, and emotional ways (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021). Researchers concerned with children's rights and well-being must take into account children's perspectives in order to begin to interpret which measures have been,

or could have been, more effective in mitigating the various effects of COVID-19 on young people and what the long-term impact of this rupture has been on children's lives (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021).

As a student in my first year of doctoral studies seeking to ethnographically capture the lived experiences of young people, I too felt the pandemic rupture not only in my personal life, which meant I would be spending the next 12 (and counting) months in my rental apartment in a new city where I knew almost no one, but also in my academic work. My doctoral seminars were abruptly moved online with all styles of follow-up, structure, and requirements from the instructors, who themselves were attempting to adapt personally and professionally. As a first-year doctoral student, much of my course work focused on developing a research proposal and planning for a year of ethnographic field research. Through the support of my professors, and my own stubbornness, I limped through the end of the semester and completed all my required courses. However, as the pandemic raged on through the summer months, time meant to be spent creating a plan for my field research, I began to question how I would be able to adequately complete my ethnographic work and whether I should even continue with my doctoral studies.

The long-term effects of this pandemic are not merely economic, as neo-liberal rhetoric tries to convince us, but are deeply tied to the mental and emotional roller coaster of our personal and collective experiences of uncertainty, fear, hope, grief, and weariness. Not only have we experienced these waves of emotional disturbance in our personal lives, but we have felt these disturbances acutely in our professional worlds as well. Researchers, especially those whose ethnographic work includes spending long periods of time immersed in the field with their participants, have had to consider how this pandemic has affected the areas of inquiry they have been studying, whether their research questions remain valid and how, or even if, they would be able to conduct their research in the ways they had imagined (Saxena & Johnson, 2020). My own research project is centred on conducting sustained face-to-face ethnographic research and a photovoice project with young women in rural Canada. If doing ethnography is about face-to-face encounters and gatherings, how could I as an ethnographer confront a disruption of this scale, during which physical distance, not proximity, is imperative (Kumar, 2020)?

As I grappled with these questions, I also thought about my research intention prior to the pandemic. I had been, and still was, motivated to carry out feminist inquiry with a commitment to social justice. I had been, and believed I still was, deeply devoted to ethnographic inquiry with girls to “join girls in creating different cultural stories, images and realities that open pathways to opportunity, power and possibility” (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008, p. 126). I realized that ethnographic research, even in adapted forms, continues to be an effective method to join with young people to better understand their lived experiences. As DeHart (2020) wrote, “Ethnographers see [these] phenomena as part of social relations” and the “current global context begs for the very contextualized understanding of changing practices, values, and politics that ethnography can provide” (p. 2). As ethnographers, we can pay attention to, and document, the emergence of shared and contested forms of living under pandemic conditions, and by using different visual and textual resources, we can capture important reflections of local realities (DeHart, 2020; Saxena & Johnson, 2020). Kumar (2020) wrote, “If there is one thing stable about ethnography, it is its instability. ... ethnographers are encouraged to view disruption as a learning moment, even a rite of passage

of the discipline.” By reengaging with my original ethnographic intentions and with the essence of what ethnographic inquiry is all about, I began to look at this rupture not as a barrier to conducting my doctoral research but instead as an opportunity. I began to see my research during a crisis as an occasion to notice and document how the pandemic was changing research practices, values, and politics and how together with children we, as academics and activists, could open new pathways for “pandemic imaginaries” (Saxena & Johnson, 2020, para. 15).

A Song About My Pandemic Experiences

In her song titled “Today and Tomorrow: A Song About My Pandemic Experiences,” 12-year-old Navvab Talisman wrote,

This is who we are today but today is not tomorrow.
 All our actions lead the way, to find happiness or find sorrow.
 So when a cry is heard for help, always think of your tomorrow.
 Only find a way to help, so you make it tomorrow. Hey. (p. 311)

The presentation of children in media coverage throughout the pandemic has focused almost solely on the educational and mental health implications of lockdown measures; however, the impact of this global phenomenon extends beyond these elements into all areas of young people’s lives (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021). The closure of school, the disruption to recreational activities, and the requirement to remain at home have interrupted and transformed children’s ordinary lives and experiences physically, socially, mentally, and emotionally (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021; Thompson, et al., 2020). These measures have reshaped children’s everyday geographies, disrupted intergenerational kinship systems, and exposed deep inequalities that mark children’s lives (Jones et al., 2020; Mukherjee, 2021; Sistovaris et al., 2020). Overlooked as political and social actors during the pandemic, children have appeared in public discourse multifariously as vectors of the disease and, as such, a threat to older adults; voiceless receptors of virtual education; an extra burden for parents to cope with when trying to work from home; passive victims of mental-health issues as a result of lockdown; and irresponsible people who are likely to cause new waves of contagion with their reckless socializing (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021). These types of stigmatizing discourses around children and youth have essentially rendered their views and experiences during the confinement and lockdown invisible. The question about how the pandemic has actually affected young people needs to include perspectives and methodological approaches that consider the everyday impact of this global phenomenon on their lives (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021).

As the shock of the pandemic was at first destabilizing and overwhelming, months of self-isolation resulted in tiring and repetitive feelings of loss and loneliness for many young people. All of this was compounded by the fear and uncertainty of what was happening and what the future was going to look like (Thompson et al., 2020). After the pandemic, children will remember how their lives and the lives of their loved ones were shaped by self-isolation, social distancing, and the enduring angst of their caregivers (Charles & Anderson-Nathe, 2020). Despite the heaviness and difficulty experienced, there is also an indication that children, as political actors within their own spaces, have negotiated time, reworked notions of productivity, and created opportunities for social connection in spite of and as a result of the pandemic’s disruption. It is essential to acknowledge and understand the tactics that young

people have developed based on their situated practices and their desire to look after themselves and others, while sustaining the affective relationalities that are important to them (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021). Considering the various aspects of children's lives that have come together to dissolve or create perceptions and action spaces, including materialities, people, and technology, it is possible to see children's agencies and their experiences as potentially transformative. We can also learn what resources they need to become active social and political agents (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021). In the following section, I discuss how some young people, through self-reflection, care work, art, and imaginative play, have responded to the pandemic in creative and politicized ways, emphasizing a desire to meaningfully connect with themselves, other people, and the environment.

Negotiating the Pandemic

Time for Self-Discovery

Despite difficulties associated with self-isolation during the pandemic months, many young people around the world have expressed gratitude for the time that staying home has freed up in their lives for play, skill building, and self-discovery. To highlight the creative ways in which children were using their new-found free time during the pandemic, UNICEF (2020) created the *Learn with Me* video series. In this series, children from around the world captured the interesting ways they were using their time while coping with home-schooling and staying indoors. The children in these videos revealed how by staying home during times they would normally be in structured activity, they were able to pause, listen to themselves, and discover what it was that they were interested in learning about or doing with their time. This period away from the structured institutions of school and scheduled activities allowed them the opportunity to pursue activities that they found fun, as well as restorative, in working through the angst of the pandemic. In these short videos we see children making banana bread, drawing cartoon characters to role-play the pandemic's impact in their lives, learning new dances, and caring for their pets (UNICEF, 2020).

In their research with young women in Québec, Thompson et al. (2020) found that girls responded actively to self-isolation by exploring creative activities and hobbies. All the girls in their study expressed gratitude for the time to develop new interests and self-directed learning that pre-COVID school-focused routines had not allowed time for. Without the pressure of school, girls had more time to read books, play instruments, write music, sew, garden, and learn new languages. Having more time in their lives gave the girls more time to explore what mattered to them personally outside of what was expected of them in organized structures and routines (Thompson et al., 2020).

These examples demonstrate how children have used the extra unscheduled time in their lives to engage with their passions and interests as ways to stay positive and active during lockdown measures. While these children highlight the importance of activity as a coping mechanism, other children have said that stay-at-home measures afforded them the opportunity to rethink the need for productivity that had previously framed their lives.

Reworked Notions of Productivity

There has been much attention paid to the disruption to children's structured education with an over-psychologizing and economizing of the impact that this interruption will have

on education outcomes and children's future "success" (Eyles et al., 2020; World Bank Group, 2020). Families already anxious about their health and well-being became further stressed by the pressure to suddenly become home schools for their children (Charles & Anderson-Nathe, 2020). Deferring to arbitrary markers of academic success rather than the importance of children's emotional and social well-being, the media has placed much emphasis on the fear of children falling behind academically (Charles & Anderson-Nathe, 2020). Less attention has been paid to the role the pandemic has played in disrupting the logic of social reproduction¹ embedded in children's education and to the ways children are reworking notions of productivity during stay-at-home measures.

Ferguson (2017) has argued that child-development ideologies assert that the transition from a wilful, playful child into a rational, restrained adult is natural and inevitable. Yet when the naturalness of this progression is questioned, children's agency becomes more evident, as does the motivation behind the education system's adherence to these ideologies. The anxiety raised by institutions concerned about "educational outcomes," and "a return to normal" works within the framework of the "naturalness of progression" with the goal of "learning one's way into capitalist subjectivities" (p. 127) by defining success as "productivity." Through the regulating and supervising of children's learning and play, "children's more playful ways of being in the world ... and the sensual, creative qualities of living" (p. 127) are stifled, as is the time to self-reflect on these processes of "development." The pandemic has afforded young people the opportunity to pause and consider the ways in which development discourses have created immense pressure to be continuously productive and also the time to consider their responses to these productivity demands.

For girls in Québec, the pandemic provided new-found time to consider and develop self-care practices (Thompson et al., 2020). In a photovoice project conducted with girls during imposed stay-at-home measures, one girl, aged 16, from Wemotaci First Nation took a picture of a lake and wrote, "I thought this was beautiful. When I walk outside, I have time to think about everything, to relax. I feel lucky" (p. 56). This particular girl preferred her life during COVID-19 as she could sleep more and could go out for walks with a friend. Although she missed the support of her school support worker, she felt she needed less support during lockdown measures, as school presented significant struggles and the pandemic helped her disconnect from academic pressures (Thompson et al., 2020).

Other girls recognized the social value that was placed on being busy and the ways in which the education system imposed tightly controlled schedules and plans on their lives (Thompson, et al., 2020). For Charlie, 16, the most significant change in her life since the pandemic had started was in how she redefined her relationship with productivity. "We're in a society where you always have to be productive.... Before, I only considered my schoolwork to be productive. Now it is productive for me to do things for myself, as well" (p. 57). Self-isolation has provided a critical shift in agency, with many young people having more freedom to choose how they want to spend their time, for themselves, in new ways. This shift toward intuitive, autonomously motivated choice is fundamental to working toward

¹ Ferguson (2017) argued that, from a social-reproduction feminism perspective, children, as present and future labourers, participate directly in the processes and institutions of social reproduction. She also argued that children are both objects of the reproductive labour of others and are also agents of their own self-transformation into capitalist subjects.

self-determination (Thompson et al., 2020). As the girls enacted hope and positivity through their reconceptualization of productivity, they freed up time not only to care for themselves but also to build social connection and develop caring relationships with others.

Care, Social Connection, and Collective Well-Being

During lockdowns, with people largely confined to their homes and with little access to peer groups and leisure centres, children's education, family time, and recreation have intermingled like never before. Digital domains, central to many families' lives before the pandemic, have become vital to accessing and engaging in work, education, and outside social interaction. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed our interconnectivity and interdependency. It is by listening to young people and learning how they have negotiated and navigated the pandemic that we become conscious of how interconnected the experiences of children and adults are (Spray & Hunleth, 2020). This interconnectedness is particularly evident in the often-invisible care and labour that young people provide within their households and within the wider social systems in their lives (Spray & Hunleth, 2020).

When young people are thought of as coproducers within the webs of interdependencies, they can be recognized as both the receivers of care and helpers in coproducing the health of family members, friends, neighbours, and teachers (Spray & Hunleth, 2020). Children, like adults, have been required to follow public-health guidelines, including handwashing, wearing masks, and social distancing. Through the acceptance of these measures, children demonstrate their care for others by caring for themselves. By caring for themselves, they are not only protecting themselves but also easing the mental burden of their caregivers, thus indirectly supporting their caregivers' well-being (Spray & Hunleth, 2020). In addition, children have felt motivated to care for and protect their loved ones (Spray & Hunleth, 2020). This desire to care and protect is demonstrated in a short letter posted by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to her official Instagram account. Penned in thick red marker, the message reads,

Jacinda, My Dad is not washing his hands properly. He is not putting soap on his hands and not rubbing for twenty seconds. I will work on this with him. (Ardern, 2021)

By listening to children and taking seriously what they communicate, we can think of children not as defenceless victims of a virus but as family members who, like the adult members of their families, feel motivated to care for and protect their loved ones (Spray & Hunleth, 2020). Children have contributed to the care of others in many ways throughout the pandemic. For some older individuals denied face-to-face time with loved ones, young people's technological savviness has become a wireless lifeline (Jones McVey et al., 2020). For younger children, care has often been exhibited in a drawing, in a touch, or in elaborate fantasy play (Spray & Hunleth, 2020). Some of the creative care work performed by children has extended beyond the confines of their homes, has brightened local streets, and has transcended national borders. These displays created by children have offered a sense of social connection and "coming togetherness" for children and adults alike.

In various places around the world, children have displayed drawings in the windows and on the balconies of their homes with positive messages for those passing by and in support of the health-care workers on the frontline of the pandemic. Across Italy and the United

Kingdom, children's drawings of rainbows inscribed with messages such as "Everything will be all right" and "Thank You, NHS" (in support of Britain's National Health Service workers) caught global attention and inspired the hashtag #chasethe rainbow (Mukherjee, 2021). The bright rainbows and the corresponding positive messages have become symbols of hope and positivity (Mukherjee, 2021). During the height of the lockdown in Ottawa, Canada, where I was living, sidewalks became covered in children's chalk drawings, interactive hopscotch games, and messages of encouragement for those walking by to engage with. Similarly, lockdown "teddy-bear hunts," whereby children displayed teddy bears on their front windows and porches and pinned their location on the bear-hunt website, enabled children to "hunt" teddy bears as they were out for their daily exercise with their family (Mukherjee, 2021, p. 25). Through social isolation, the global teddy-bear hunt has become a means for children's participation and lived citizenship as children are making their presence felt and symbolically engaging in the public debate on lockdown (Mukherjee, 2021).

Although an emphasis on the cheerful and uplifting nature of children's rainbow art has been criticized as a trope of childhood innocence that ignores the diversity of children's lived experiences (Patterson & Friend, 2020), rainbow drawings, street art, and teddy-bear displays can also be considered vehicles for children's solidarity with other children and adults and a means of social communication for many (Mukherjee, 2021). In writing about the Chilean research project Núcleo de Estudios Interdisciplinarios en Infancias (Childhood in Confinement Times), which invited children and families to share their experiences of the pandemic through drawings, videos, pictures, audio, and writing, Cortés-Morales and Morales (2021) said,

From these experiences we have learnt that children create or find objects that allow them to represent the work they inhabit. Their creations enable them to produce new ways of relating to an historical experience like the pandemic, and to open a space for sharing with others these experiences and meanings. Drawing, pictures, writings about the pandemic express what they have lived, but also situate them in relation to others, enabling the emergence of a collective experience. (p. 7)

This sense of solidarity and social communication has led young people to advocate for collective well-being and to have their voices heard in the public discourses around the pandemic. Young people have taken to social media to speak out against injustices and inequalities that they and others have experienced. In Québec, Thompson et al. (2020) heard from girls that they were concerned about the inequities within the education system and generally felt that they were not consulted or heard in matters related to their own education. Further, these young people expressed concern about the poor management of long-term care facilities and issues related to elder abuse and neglect. Issues related to the health and well-being of vulnerable people more generally concerned the girls, and they felt these issues of injustice, discrimination, and power needed to be addressed through a lens that politicized well-being.

As demonstrated in their pandemic narratives and activities, young people are political actors concerned about collective well-being and speak out against exposed injustices (Aitken, 2021). Cortés-Morales and Morales (2021) argued that

understanding the effects of the pandemic in children's lives according to their positions as social and historical subjects requires approaches, that despite current circumstances, do not quit to focus on the minutiae of everyday life. The pandemic

challenges us as researchers to not overlook the smaller scales of the phenomenon, those details created in the private spaces of affect, emotion and action, so that these aspects are not overrun by exclusively economic, epidemiologic or social control perspectives. (p. 7)

It is imperative to remember, however, that this pandemic has not affected all children everywhere equally, with lockdowns adversely affecting the most marginalized sections of society the most significantly. A geographical and intersectional approach is key to understanding how children have differentially experienced the pandemic around the world and how what childhood means continues to diversify in this historically significant period of increasing inequality (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021). In response to these inequalities, it is time to rethink the world we live in by imagining the world we want to live in. Working from relationships of interdependence and interconnectedness, children and adults must work together to coproduce a post-pandemic world of our collective imaginings.

The World Anew

When this is over and done we will find a way to live.
 We will mourn, we will rejoice, we will be sad, we will forgive.
 We will go and celebrate and knock on our friend's door.
 —Talisman, 2020, p. 312

Talisman (2020) reminded us that it is our actions that “lead the way, to find happiness or find sorrow” (p. 312). The end of this pandemic will afford us an important opportunity as individuals and members of various systems and of society to think about what inequalities have been exposed and what is not working (Charles & Anderson-Nathe, 2020). The question about how the pandemic has affected and continues to affect young people needs to be approached from a perspective that considers their everyday lives. The current predominate approach has been limited to, or focused on, the psychopathological effects of the pandemic on education and mental health (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021). This approach is limiting in its view, as it overlooks the resources and capabilities that children and youth have and the agencies that they develop with others when coping with difficult and restricting circumstances (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021). In writing this, I do not suggest ignoring the inequalities, difficulties, and injustices that they may be encountering, but I do support and argue for an approach that does not reduce children to vulnerable passive subjects but instead acknowledges them as actors and agents (Cortés-Morales & Morales, 2021). Children need to be recognized as capable human beings by being invited into conversations and by having their thoughts and feelings taken seriously in moving forward together with adults (Garlen, 2020). By authentically engaging children in dialogue, we as adults open ourselves to knowledge that has previously been excluded and to opportunities to have “conversations that matter” that can lead us to the kind of world we wish to live in (Cassidy & Mohr Lone, 2020, p. 23). Meaningful interactions between adults and children are built through an acknowledgement of our interconnected relationships, and when engaged, these relationships can foster conversations about shared concerns and evoke ideas for alternative ways of being (Cassidy & Mohr Lone, 2020). In thinking through and about the relationships of our shared, common worlds, we can create opportunities to actively assemble and bring together ways in which to renegotiate, reinvent and “flourish together” (Taylor & Giugni, 2012, p. 108). Learning how to live together with difference in ways that

allow all, human and more-than-human, to flourish is the most fundamental and compelling lesson that we can take away from this pandemic (Taylor & Giugni, 2012).

Roy (2020) prompted us to think of the pandemic as a gateway between one world and the next. It is up to us whether to

choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead issues, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can choose to walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (para. 49)

As a doctoral student conducting ethnographic field research during pandemic times, I intend to use this occasion as an opportunity to notice and document how the pandemic has impacted local practices, values, and politics and to think about how we as researchers can join with young people, as academics and activists, to open new pathways for our collective imaginaries.

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