

Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London*

Citation

Nolas, Sevasti-Melissa; Aruldoss, Vinnarasan and Varvantakis, Christos. 2019. Learning to listen: exploring the idioms of childhood. *Sociological Research Online*, 24(3), pp. 394-413. ISSN 1360-7804 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/24589/>

Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: gro@gold.ac.uk.

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: gro@gold.ac.uk

Learning to listen: exploring the idioms of childhood

Sevasti-Melissa Nolas¹

Vinnarasan Aruldoss²

Christos Varvantakis³

^{1,2,3}Goldsmiths College, University of London

How do we recognise children's participation and their relationships to public life? Drawing on evidence from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014-2016 for the ERC funded Connectors Study on the relationship between childhood and public life, this paper explores the ways in which children communicate their encounters with public life. The contemporary phenomenon of listening without hearing is discussed as this relates to the call for listening to children and the simultaneous failure to hear what they say. Idioms are introduced as an 'instrument' for thinking through what it means and feels like to encounter and make sense of childhood and children's practices of relating to public life. The analysis focuses on three emblematic encounters with six- to eight-year-old children living in Athens, Hyderabad, London. We argue that dominant understandings of listening to children rely heavily on cognitive, conceptual and rational models of idealised and largely verbal forms of communication that ignore the affective, embodied and lived dimensions of making meaning. Through ethnographic thick description we trouble what it means to tune into children's worlds and to 'properly hear', and in so doing demonstrate the ways in which idioms support an understanding of what matters to children.

Key words: childhood, public life, listening, idioms, participation, multimodal ethnography, comparative research.

Introduction

Drawing on evidence from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014-2016 for the ERC funded Connectors Study on childhood and public life, this paper develops the concept of idioms as an ‘tuning device’ for understanding children’s cultures and their communication therein, as meaningful and agentic. The term idiom, as used in anthropological and other social science literatures, provides an understanding of the act of communication that goes beyond linguistics and spoken language. It shifts attention towards communication as a social, cultural, temporal, as well as fully sensory act, that includes gestures, practices, actions, and affect. As such, idioms are a way of world-making and this paper focuses specifically on those idioms that were mobilised by children to make sense of and communicate their encounters with and experiences of public life. Children in the study understood public life as activities, places, and things that were accessible, communal, civil and political, known and open (e.g. a range of institutions, parks, toilets, voting, etc). A number of children also commented on the difficulty, also found in the literature, of providing a definition of public life (e.g. ‘I don’t know how to describe what I know about it’). In the social science literature and in practice, such encounters and experiences are often referred to as children’s participation and much has been made in theory and in practice of ‘listening to children’ as a medium for participation. While the failure to listen is systemic and often political, we argue that useful sensitising devices (concepts used to think and act with), such as we have found idioms to be, can support theory and practice development that better resonates with everyday childhoods and their lived experiences.

Listening without hearing

The imperative to listen to children in some spheres of public life, such as institutional settings, is not new (cf. Nolas, 2015 for a review). Listening to children is proposed as a key mechanism through which children’s rights to participation in institutional contexts might be actualised (Mannion, 2007). Activities that constitute listening include consultations with children prior to service design, and involvement in monitoring and evaluation during and post service delivery, as well as letting children express their views in civil proceedings i.e. family court (Daly, 2011). Listening is also considered an effective tool to construct child protection measures.

Recognised approaches to listening to children include the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) and ‘emergent listening’ (Davies, 2014). Clarke defines listening as ‘an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meaning’ which is not limited to voice alone (Clark, 2005, p. 491). Davies (2014, p.1) argues that listening is the willingness to see the world anew and an openness to being affected: ‘it is about being open to difference and, in particular, to difference in all its multiplicity as it emerges in each moment in between oneself and another’. Both approaches are heavily inspired by Reggio Emilia pedagogies in early childhood education that encourage children to express themselves through all of their available ‘expressive, communicative and cognitive languages’ (Edwards et. al., 1998, p. 7). As its former director Loris Malaguzzi puts it in his famous phrase ‘the hundred languages of children’ (Edwards et. al., 1998), the Reggio Emilia approach, which inspired several academics and early years practitioners across the globe, not only believes in children’s diversity of expression but also motivates practitioners to explore ‘the hundred ways of listening’ (see Clarke, 2005).

Nevertheless, within a UK context if not more globally, there is an ambivalence about who is responsible for listening and a tendency to understand communication as purely linguistic (cf. Coleyshaw et. al., 2010). At the same time, and despite the burgeoning of a new professional role in the guise of the participation worker, the explosion of a participation industry in health and social care, and the development of tools and techniques for listening, evidence from the same early years, social work and educational settings indicates a more ‘indifferent practice’ unfolding on the ground (McLeod, 2010; Cashmore, 2002). Institutional failures to listen to children often make headline news and lead to critical case reviews of children’s services (cf. Jay, 2016 for a recent example). Yet, the phenomenon of failing to listen is not restricted to children’s services alone. A recent cross-national study on organisational listening (Macnamara, 2015) which included a broad range of public and private sector organisations in different industries, concluded that there seems to be no shortage of methodologies for listening, eliciting views and experiences. What seems to be lacking in this contemporary moment is competence in managing the vast amount of data that we collect through various listening exercises and activities and the capacity to make sense of these articulations, to hear what they have to communicate.

Contemporary (in)abilities to listen have attracted attention across the social sciences. For instance, Back (2007) argues that the art of listening has given way to the art of talking. Fiumara (1990) described this cultural tendency as ‘saying without listening’, noting that this is an ingrained attitude with a long genealogy dating back to the equation of language as

vocalisation, of sound and of voice alone (logos) (Fiumara, 1990). To properly listen, and to hear meaning, according to Back (2007) consists of ‘the courtesy of [paying] serious attention’ to fragments of experiences, to voices and stories and to interpreting without legislating. Anthropologies, histories and sociologies of listening point towards the liveness of meaning that is made in action, and which shapes worlds (cf. Müller, 2012 for a review). Hearing is at once a source of information, a tool for orientation, a means to gather experience, and a prime component of communication (Müller, 2012). To hear the meanings and to appreciate the worlds that interlocutors are sharing requires complex attention to the sedimented meanings, paralinguistic features of such utterances, as well as to more cultural forms of communication such as gestures, practices, and actions. Articulations of experience evoke images, memories and emotions in search of an ear in which to resonate (Müller, 2012), and it is in that process of re-sounding that connections are rendered possible and political (Oswell, 2009, p. 6-14). Listening is repeatedly identified as a political act with the possibility of alerting interpersonal, family and community dynamics (LaBelle, 2018; Lacey, 2013; Lewis, 1992). It is the connections that are made through speech that lead to action. As one young person remarked to the Office of the Children’s Commissioner with regards to being listened to and supported: ‘*It was building that **relationship** that was nice*’ (Berelowitz et al 2013, emphasis added).

As such, the view we take in our own research is that listening is a social practice, existing in affective, cultural, embodied, relational, temporal and spatial configurations. We argue that dominant understandings of listening to children rely heavily on cognitive, conceptual and rational models of an idealised and superficial forms of communication that ignore the everyday, embodied and lived experiences of ‘sentiment devices’ (Oswell, 2013). While agreeing with positions that voices only become political speech through relationships, we also argue that the moment of encounter with children’s voices needs further attention because it is precisely that moment in which a connection becomes (im)possible. As such, the present paper stays in the multisensory moment of encounter and potential connection, before a relationship is (un)made, when the listener is engaged in the act of hearing by giving serious attention and as such, grappling with making sense of these embodied encounters. We argue that thinking through ‘idioms’ helps us to make sense of children’s worlds, and to identify their meanings and agency.

Methodology

The analysis is developed by drawing on ethnographic experiences from the ERC-funded Connectors Study (2014-2019), a comparative multimodal ethnography that explores the relationship between childhood and public life. The Connectors Study mobilised a theoretical lens of a childhood publics (Nolas, 2015) in order to move attention beyond institutionally defined moments of children's participation and to engage with the emergence of social action and children's agency in diverse everyday lives and cultural settings.

As such, over a three-year period, the study followed a heterogeneous sample of 45 six- to eight- year olds at the time of recruitment to the study in 2014, who lived in different neighbourhoods across three cities (Athens, Hyderabad, London). The *relationship* between childhood and public life was conceptualised in broadly phenomenological terms and a multimodal ethnographic approach was employed to carry out the research including, participant observation, photography, walking, mapping, biographical interviews and workshop methods.

As a research team we brought a plurality of identities to our respective fields. All researchers were in their mid-to-late thirties at the time of the fieldwork and lived full-time in the study cities. Two were already parents, one became a parent in the course of the fieldwork. None of the authors had grown up in their study cities, although two had kinship ties there (Athens and London) and had visited during childhood and young adulthood. Other forms of identity were also at play through middle-class professional occupations, having studied and worked abroad (Athens and Hyderabad), and being employed by a 'foreign' university (Hyderabad). One of the researchers is a woman, one is Indian and two are white-Europeans.

The data archive we draw from consists of over 300 collective fieldwork encounters which took place in children's homes, their neighbourhoods and other parts of their cities, as well as in the case of children in London, during their school day. We carried out between five to eight visits to each child in the study, spread over a two-year period, spending anything from two hours to a whole day with our young interlocutors. The paper focuses on three critical examples from the data which serve to illustrate moments of encountering children's voices, sometimes for the first time, sometimes in surprising ways which stopped the authors in their tracks, and sometimes in more mundane and routine performances we were already used to. These examples are worked through in order to illustrate the labour of 'proper hearing' and 'serious attention'.

A number of texts have helped us in that labour of making sense of and engaging with children's communication. In particular, we have found feminist writing that focuses on the temporal dimensions of everyday lived experience to be especially helpful in providing a reflexive sensory account of what it means and feels like to encounter childhood across different temporalities (Baraitser, 2009; Behar, 1996; Giard, 1998; Seremetakis, 1994). These approaches focus on the mundane and miniscule moments of everyday life when mothers (typically, and as per the above references, as well as in our sample) are with their children in acts of feeding, walking, cooking and caring. These approaches also remind us that the lived experience is not just about the present either. Childhood is both a place for and of remembering and transmitting the past, as well as a way of forging the future. If not quite a method, these approaches certainly sensitise us to the radical possibilities of entanglement with an other different to oneself who is, as Baraitser (2009) argues, ultimately unknowable. It is a sensibility that helps us unravel what might be involved in the art of listening, of 'proper hearing', and of recognising, sensory and relational practices of gathering, receiving, sheltering and keeping an other's experiences.

Idioms as a 'instrument' for hearing childhood articulations

We use the term *idiom* as a tuning device for thinking about children's articulations. Linguistic metaphors are rife in social scientific writing (language, vernaculars, listening) as a way capturing the complex dynamics of communication and culture. Used widely in anthropological writing, the term idiom suggests a honing of the researchers' attention to the cultural codes being employed by interlocutors to live their everyday lives, to make sense of their lives and others', and to understand their pasts, presents, and futures. For example, Evans-Pritchard's conclude that witchcraft was the idiom through which the Azande people explained misfortunes (Evans-Pritchard, 1976 cited in Layton, 1997, p. 195). More recently medical anthropologists exploring emotional lives conclude that the utterances about 'having/experiencing nerves' (Clarke, 1989; Foss, 2002) is a culturally and socially acceptable idiom for publicly expressing otherwise unacceptable private emotions. Another way of understanding what the idiom refers to is Bourdieu's (1980) phrase, 'logic of practice'. Bourdieu uses this phrase to think about the cultural codes he was confronted with in his fieldwork with the Kabyle. Logics of practice are typically temporal, embodied, simultaneously 'senseless' and sense-full, and can only, he argues be grasped in action (Bourdieu, 1980, p.92).

In political theory idioms have served to highlight the ways in which women connected to public life in the 19th century through for example domesticity and motherhood (Fraser, 1990), as well as invention, sewing and patent design (Jungnickel, 2015). Artists and art historians have also begun using the term idiom to focus analytical attention on the multiplicity of *art* practices, and not just grand narratives of *Art* (Leeb, 2017). To think idiomatically is to focus on *specificity* of spoken and visual languages and evokes something of the untranslatable; idioms also indicate the material, economic and ideological conditions that result in one articulation of experience over another (Leeb, 2017). For example, the holistic art of *capoeira*, an Afro-brazilian martial art that combines elements of dance, movement and music, is a good example of an idiom of resistance to authority, initially in the guise of slave owners and more recently in the form of the police and the establishment (Assunção, 2005).

In the Connectors Study, the concept of idioms has been useful for thinking about children's cultural communication and the ways in which they, as disenfranchised individuals and group, connect with the public sphere. Understanding idioms as practices of world-making mobilised by children (in this case) to make sense of and communicate their encounters with and experiences of public life (in this case), has enabled us to hear children's utterances and gestures differently: as meaningful and agentic. In the remainder of this ethnographic section, we elaborate on the idioms of childhood as we encountered these in our fieldwork with children in Athens, Hyderabad and London. Namely, we explore the interrelated childhood practices of *play*, *humour* and *charm*.

Idioms of play

Contemporary discourses of childhood play occupy an ambiguous position in research and practice. Socio-cognitive and developmental understandings of play in early years and primary school settings continue to dominate: children play in order to learn, to develop and to explore roles, leading to critiques that play serves an instrumental role in the service of neoliberal social order (Rosen, 2017). Play also occupies a counter discourse of resistance such as that found in 'the Maker movement': 'the hands-on building of things to boost imaginative learning' (Cook, 2016, p. 4). Here play is heralded as a challenge to social order and a remedy for contemporary ills (cf. Lester, 2013). The emphasis on play has been further critiqued (Ailwood, 2013) as creating and/or reinforcing generational divisions between adults and children, and younger and older children, by using age as a device for organising

space, time, and relationships. Moreover, the playing child is often considered to be ‘the ideal child’ (Cook, 2016, p. 5) in its creativity and rejection of order, an approach that leaves little room for exploring silences and omissions around children’s play (Rosen, 2017).

This triptych view of play as a vehicle for order, division or an expression of deviance sets up unhelpful dichotomies. In our research, we did not set out looking for children’s play as a proxy of anything. Instead play found us. Without fail every research visit was punctuated with the words ‘can we play now?’ Our plans, thoughts and interactions were interrupted and side-tracked. The children we worked with often procrastinated when it came to engaging with our research methods, and at times were ‘willful’ with us (Ahmed, 2004). Initially it was confusing, if not, a little overwhelming. We had a set of research methods we wanted to carry out and a schedule to keep. Children had schedules too. Nevertheless, and unlike other aspects of our lives (as parents, as educators) where our authority might be more clearly demarcated, we found ourselves as fieldworkers in a far more liminal role and with little choice but to follow the children’s leads. Over the two years we allowed ourselves to be recruited into children’s play in subtle and overt ways. During the fieldwork, play became a site of exchange and, sometimes, heavy negotiation, of disruption, of renewal and, ultimately of our edification. At times, we literally found ourselves overturned [Image 1] and over time, we came to recognise play as an idiom of childhood, neither a site of compliance nor of division or empowerment, but a practice of world-making that spans across hegemony, conflict and autonomy.



Image 1: *A view from below*, researcher’s photograph of child’s bedroom ceiling, as researcher takes cover under pillows from pelting Nerf gun bullets.

For example, Erica is a 7-year-old girl one of us worked with in London. We met Erica in February 2015. Erica's play is multidimensional. As she showed Melissa around her room one of the first things that Erica said to her when they were finally left alone, a couple of hours into the first visit, was that one of her favourite things to do is 'to play grown ups'. When Melissa ask why, Erica tells her it's 'because it's good to feel like you have a bit more control'. She has a cupboard full of dress up clothes and is an avid reader, her mother describes Erica's appetite for reading as 'feeding a furnace'. She also plays the violin but doesn't care very much for that, something which she confirms herself in a later discussion and on a separate visit Melissa observes her resistance to violin practice. A child from a middle-class family, Erica attends a private all-girls school. Participation in an enrichment curriculum is typical and expected of Erica both by her family and her school. When Erica makes a drawing of a typical week (winter 2015, primary school year 2) only two afternoons of her week (including the weekends) are described by her as 'do nothing' days. The fieldwork with Erica is squeezed into the 'do nothing' afternoons, half-term weekends and the occasional Saturday gap in the schedule between activities; Erica's temporal rhythms and the ways in which fieldwork was often squeezed into families' everyday lives, were typical across the sample in all three cities. As such, and for the most part, Erica makes sure that these research encounters remain as 'do nothing' moments in her week: some of the research activities resemble 'work' and so Erica finds other ways to engage Melissa on her terms. For example, as the owner of numerous dragons with complicated names, Erica carefully instructs Melissa on her passion for mythical creatures, a schooling that continues on and off throughout her fieldwork with Erica. During a second visit Melissa finds herself enchanted by Erica's imagination; in a third visit, Melissa is invited by Erica and her friend, to participate in their playdate and finds herself fully recruited into the girls' imaginary play [image 2].



Image 2: *No longer a researcher*, the photograph, taken by Erica, is of a seal, who has just dined at a restaurant on pea and mango soup, her beautiful coat and shawl draped over her shoulders. The seal is walking out the door of the restaurant clutching her souvenir dinosaur.

For Erica, as well as play being a space in which the feeling of control can be experienced, it is also a space in which gender is negotiated. During the first visit, as Erica leads Melissa up to her bedroom, she tells Melissa that ‘my mum says that you might find some of my interests unusual for a girl’. During the bedroom tour, this initial comment is followed, by a strong statement that Erica abhors the colour pink, “‘biah”, she says, making an exaggerated facial gesture of something that stinks and tastes bad’. She also describes herself as a bit of a tomboy and tells Melissa that her favourite colour is blue at the same time as showing her witch’s costume as an example of her dress-up clothes. The costume is also blue, but otherwise quite frilly. She doesn’t like princesses either, she proclaims. Later in the same visit, persuaded by her mother to leave the bedroom and to take the researcher on a tour of her area, Erica procrastinates leaving the house. Standing in the hallway half ready, coat on but not buttoned, she pulls a face about the ‘pink’ fleece and scarf she has been asked to wear. She has to make some allowances however for the scarf as her favourite auntie made it, so that the pink scarf is ‘okay’.

These are performances of gender through her play, a way of working out what it means to be a middle-class London girl, attending an all-girls school where girls are encouraged to identify with well-known female role models in the arts and sciences. In Erica’s case approaching her play idiomatically provides us with an understanding of the contours of her social milieu which Erica navigates making use of the materials, competences and meanings (Shove et. al. 2012, p. 22) available to her at a particular moment in time when the research was conducted. Attending to Erica’s play gives us an insight into the dynamics of ‘interpretative reproduction’ (Corsaro, 1997; Bluebond-Langer and Korbin, 2007) as these are experienced by her in a particular time and place. At the same time, her play also makes visible the seriousness of games (Ortner, 2006), meaning that what is at play in Erica’s play is important and does matter. She does not give it recognisable terms such as gender, identity, class, autonomy, interdependence or intensive parenting but these are some of the terrains that her play traverses. In the following two sections, we continue with the idiomatic reading of children’s play exploring two further related forms of expression: humour and charm.

Humour

Children’s humour in everyday life periodically surfaces in relevant literatures (Grace

and Tobin, 1998; Opie and Opie, 1959; Roud, 2010), even if it has been largely ignored in sociological theory (Zijderveld, 1983) and frequently undervalued pedagogically (Hobday-Kusch and McVittie, 2002; Tallant, 2015). Humour is treated as a playful activity that happens as a combination of ‘imagination, creativity and play’ (Loizou, 2005) and develops between acquainted people or socially regulated relationships. Like play, children’s humour has also been studied within a developmental paradigm by exploring different stages of children’s cognitive maturation in relation to children’s ability to engage with and reproduce different types of humour.

In our own research, over time, many of our purposeful formal relationships with children and their families evolved into more informal connections, and sometimes friendships. Humour often found its place in the various encounters we had with the children. We witnessed children comically shoving green beans in their mouths and sticking their fingers into their doll’s mouths to make researchers laugh. We were mocked for always taking photographs and for not having what children perceived as ‘real’ jobs. Children made humorous gestures during our conversations, laughed at us for not understanding their play rules, teased us for our wrong pronunciations of cartoon names, made fun of our adult physical sizes while playing with them, subverted a number of our research methods, and recreated funny moments in their lives for our consumption.

For example, one Saturday afternoon in Hyderabad, Vinnarasan and our colleague Madhavi Latha reached Asha’s house around 2.30 pm. It was their fourth visit to Asha whose house is in the far, quiet corner of a university campus. The pair got out of the taxi and approached the house. It had been more than five months since their last visit with contact being maintained through phone calls and WhatsApp. Hearing their arrival, Asha came out on the veranda. The researchers were struck by Asha’s physical transformation since the last visit; she seemed taller and had lost a couple of teeth. They sat out on the teak wood sofa in the veranda as usual. Asha sat between them and they began a ‘catching up’ conversation.

At this point Vinnarasan started scribbling notes in a notepad. Asha looked at his scribbling pad and frowned, something Vinnarasan experienced as both funny and embarrassing. Asha continued to stare at his scribbling pad, this time with incredulity, while Madhavi began laughing in response to Asha’s gestures. Asha asks Vinnarasan: ‘is it English or what, it looks like Urdu’. Madhavi, now recruited by Asha into the joke, adds sarcastically ‘very beautiful handwriting, isn’t it?’ It’s Asha’s turn to laugh, adding that it looks very small and she can’t read it. Madhavi continues: ‘maybe *Anna* (brother) needs to practice cursive writing (laugh)’, to which Asha adds: ‘my sister also writes like you (laugh)’.

Asha's mum appeared on the veranda wanting in on the joke. Madhavi recounted what just happened. Asha's mother smiled, a hint of disapproval also sketched on her face suggesting a momentary conflict with regards to alignment: to join or not to join the joke, is the question. Her ambivalence does not deter Asha who runs off, returning a few minutes later with a magnifying glass in hand. She started looking at Vinnarasan's handwriting through the magnifying glass. This sent Madhavi into further fits of laughter and the pronouncement that 'you can't read even with the magnifier'. Asha replies to Madhavi: 'I still can't read it, finding it too difficult to read (giggles)'. Asha's mother continues to look ambivalent about her daughter's antics but says nothing since Vinnarasan doesn't look upset. The joke now over, Asha returns the magnifier to her father's desk.

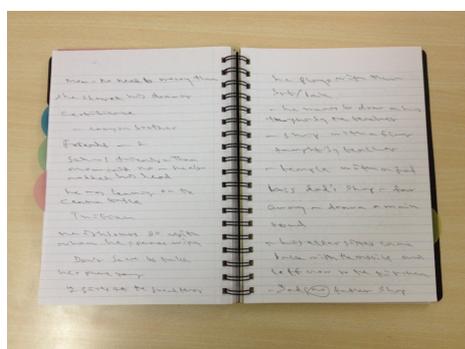


Image 3: *Is it English or what?* A sample of the researcher's handwriting that caused the incident.

Grace and Tobin (1998, p. 48) have interpreted such instances of humour and merriment in their own fieldwork encounters with children, using Bakhtin's concept of the *carnavalesque*. Bakhtin classifies humour as the language of carnival (Tallant, 2015, p. 253). The carnivalesque emerged as a concept in response to readings of 17th century historical and literary texts which revealed a tolerant Church with regards to various inversion rituals in circulation at the time, including the ridiculing of priests and serious religion, considering them a form of truth and a valid approach to the mysteries of the divine (Miller, 2017, p. 436). Carnival is a time when participants enter a world of pleasures, of hierarchical inversions and bad taste. Asha's joke is an example of the inversion of hierarchies. Her playful performance, both exaggerated and dramatised, shows a clear understanding of asymmetrical power relationships and demonstrates a subtle and playful practice of subversion (cf. Loizou, 2005; Croussard and Webb, 2016). Hyperbole identified elsewhere in children's humour practices (Tallant, 2015) is also evident here. Asha cranks up the volume on the power inversions further by fetching the magnifier. Her joke demonstrates her agential power by debasing adult positions. Loizou (2005) in her study describes how

children learn to violate/challenge rules through humorous play when they are in secure relationships and understand the routines of the environment even though they know that what they are doing is not appropriate.

The daughter of activist parents and academics, Asha is the only child in Hyderabad who calls the researchers by name which is unusual considering the cultural context. Her parents' approval of her act of calling the researchers by name also manifest her more liberal upbringing. Her comment as to the language of the handwriting alludes to the unique composition of Hyderabad as an Indian city with a large Muslim Urdu speaking population. Asha speaks Telugu, not Urdu. She knows Vinnarasan as someone who speaks English and who is learning Telugu. She inverts her typical learner role as primary aged child putting Vinnarasan into that role instead, while identifying him as an 'other'. She recruits Madhavi into her joke, another Telugu and English speaker, who plays along with her in positioning Vinnarasan as the errand 'other' schoolchild. The co-production of humour worked here as an act of subversion for Asha. Equally, it also refracts local ethnic and religious configurations and age hierarchies, as well as critiquing educational practices. Such humour serves to identify as well as create incongruity. Jokes such as Asha's, as well as other jokes (e.g. 'poo' and 'butt' jokes)¹, are especially hilarious and pleasurable to children because of the reactions of disapproval they often receive from adults in authority, an affirmation of successful transgression. Yet we need to tread carefully in analysing such humour behaviour as completely transformative. Such a possibility must remain an open and empirical question every time. As Miller (2017) notes, many early analyses of carnival treated its practices of inversion in relatively simplistic terms. As with play, there was an attempt to read carnivals as a kind of 'radical political alternative' or cathartic outlet for the pressures of dominant ideology (Miller, 2017, p. 436). In Asha's case, the more democratic family relationships and the intellectual setting in which her childhood is unfolding provide her with some transformational experiences compared to other children in the Hyderabad sample. Nevertheless, the empowering family setting does not entirely protect her from problematic encounters with public life, such as the ubiquitous 'male gaze' which she experiences while walking past the teashops on campus (cf. Aruldoss and Nolas, in preparation).

Charm

¹ See the British Library's curation of archival material on children's play and especially jokes and rude rhymes, <http://www.bl.uk/playtimes/themes/jokes-and-rude-rhymes>

Children have long been associated with charm in both meanings of the word: as both captivating attention and fascination and in need of protection through the wearing of trinkets and the recipients of incantations intended to ward off evil and bad luck (Rouse, 2017). Yet much of this attention and fascination has focused on the somehow damaged child or that child whose lived experience deviates from accepted social norms (Steadman, 1994). Less is made of charm as a delight and power exercised by children, as a way of being irreverent, and of generating and holding attention and enlisting others into their cultural worlds. From Cindi Katz's (2004, p.78) photograph of a child on a horse with a bucket on their head to a ten-year-old girl's declaration in Mayeza's (2018) evocative ethnography of gender and sexuality in the playground, that 'there are some boys who say [to girls] 'Come and let's go play football...' But, they want to say I love you!', and our own experiences of encountering children talking politics in everyday family lives (Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss, 2017), ethnographies of childhood are full of examples of 'charm'.

Ethnographers frequently engage with such idiomatic expressions as a way of understanding children's cultural worlds. Mayeza (2018), for example, provides a detailed analysis of the terms 'charmer' and 'creamer' used by boys and girls to refer to each other respectively in the South African primary school in which he carried out his ethnography. In so doing, he is able to make visible the ways in which sexuality emerges and is performed by younger children, who are typically not the focus of sexuality research 'stuck' as they tend to be in a paradigm of 'innocence', and therefore only partially human. Mary Jane Kehily (2012) (cited in Mayeza, 2018, p. 136) talks about children being able to express 'sexual knowingness'. Likewise, and in the context of the Connectors Study, we would argue that children are able to express 'political and civic knowingness' and, as argued throughout the paper, the onus is on their interlocutors to decipher the idioms through which such knowingness is delivered.

In our fieldwork we frequently encountered charm as an expression of political knowingness. Take for example the case of Fotini. Fotini is a seven-year-old girl living in a downtown Athens neighbourhood with her mother. In April 2016, Christos carried out a biographical interview with Fotini. At one point in the interview, as Christos asked her about decision-making at home. Fotini responded by unexpectedly waving a Greek flag at the same time as stating matter-of-factly: 'we say okay, one says okay, the other says okay... okay'. She then proceeds to ask how many questions are left in the interview because she's bored, hot and bothered.



Image 4: *Wavin' the flag*, Fotini engaging in the charming art and political practice of distraction with the researcher.

Christos suggests they take a break whereupon Fotini informs him that she will be taking his shoes (still on his feet) and putting them in the basket she is now holding. 'My shoes?' says Christos, 'I think I'm still wearing my shoes!' The recording is paused for a break and for the 'shoenapping' to take place. The interview resumes; Fotini, waving her flag aplenty, urges Christos to get on with his questions:

Fotini: 'Go on, let's finish it, so we can play a game... question, answer, question, answer'.

Christos: 'Hang on a second, let me take a picture of you with your Greek flag and your gypsy skirt'.

Fotini: 'La, la, come on already, stop talking so we can finish, get this over and done with, they're not many [referring to the questions]'

Christos: 'You're tired, we can take another break'

Fotini: 'No way, matey. I'm not tired, I'm just saying...'

Between the banter and the cheekiness, the skirt and flag are easy to dismiss as diversionary tactics. Prior to the discussion Fotini had with Christos, she had requested to take another break to change her clothes, and she returned wearing the dress pictured, describing it as a 'gypsy skirt', and asking Christos how he liked it. She described the skirt as being a 'gypsy' skirt because of its flower motif. She said that she might be a gypsy herself and her mother might have adopted her. Her statement was followed by quick assurances that this was not in fact the case, but it was her 'legend'. Later on, she tells Christos that we have to care for everyone in need, refugees, Greeks, gypsies, punctuating her commitments with the wry rhetorical question while also weaving her flag: 'What do they have? Does one have shit and the other perfume?'

In her commentary, as well as through previous discussions, Fotini demonstrates an awareness of the othering and exclusion that Gypsy (mainly Roma) communities face in Greece, as well as of the refugee ‘crisis’ and the discourses around it, which unfolds over the period of the research. Fotini’s performance charmingly deranged the discussion from the interview questions to discussions she wanted to lead, while she was also performatively embodying not only a political knowingness of current socio-political affairs, but also providing a commentary on these. Her performance, through which she takes control of the discussion while she negotiates the interview process, is simultaneously a playful performance of national identity and a comment on inclusion. Fotini positions herself as the other and offers a discourse of solidarity with, not just the gypsy other but with every other ‘other’ she is encountering in contemporary Athens.

Research on children’s participation repeatedly suggests that children’s political knowingness does not register with adult audiences leading to young people feeling dismissed (Perry-Hazan 2016). For example, Perry-Hazan’s study of adult’s reactions to children’s participation in policymaking, using an example from the Israeli parliament, showed that while it was possible in some meetings to have effective participatory interactions between children and parliamentary committee members, it was equally the case that the same members responded to the way children expressed themselves (‘adorable’, ‘amazing’, ‘fantastic’) instead of to the substance of what was said. Young people’s reflections on their experiences of having participated in these meetings was mixed, finding such comments both ‘nice’ as well as ‘disregarding’. Reflecting on Perry-Hazan’s study and our own analysis, we wonder whether employing a more idiomatic hearing might have enabled committee members to understand children’s utterances as legitimately political and to forge the connections, rather than to flatter children’s perceived ‘cuteness’.

Discussion

In this paper, we have focused on the seemingly intractable problem of listening without hearing and have attempted, through ethnographically grounded analysis and thick description, to re-engage with the lost art of listening, of ‘proper hearing’ (Back, 2007). What matters to people during their childhoods, their relationships of care and concern to the world, often remains a private issue because of children’s structural positioning and the overwhelming focus on their vulnerability at the expense of any ability to respond to and make sense of the world around them. In our research we have engaged with children’s

everyday lives and lived experiences as those are configured outside of institutional agendas and institutionally defined moments of decision-making. We have also engaged with broader cultural dynamics of listening and speaking, as well as the distinctions between listening, hearing and attending to the meanings of utterances.

We have suggested that using idioms as a tuning device with which to think about and engage in children's communication, broadly defined, may go some way towards honing interlocutors' attention and preparing them for the practice of paying adequate attention to children, a disenfranchised group in relation to the public sphere. It also provides a way into understanding political (in this case) knowingness in childhood because focusing on idioms take us beyond the surface, and beyond communication as spoken language or manifest behaviour. Much of the literature in childhood studies describes children as active meaning makers, 'conscious beings who attach specific meanings' (Mayeza, 2018). While we would agree with this as a political positioning which emerged in response to historically and disciplinary specific approaches that positioned children as passive, we would also contend that meaning is much more collaboratively and relationally derived in the moment as well as across time. Meaning is sedimented in and through practice (Behar, 1994; Seremetakis, 1996), with earlier layers not always consciously accessible to the speaker. The idioms approach that we are proposing here allows for an understanding of meaning as historically and relationally situated and transmitted, it takes the listener above, below, and beyond the surface.

The examples analysed build on one another to create an idiomatic understanding of children's encounters, experiences and engagement with public life. For example, Erica's story speaks to the ways in which children resisted 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003), as well as middle-class notions of femininity. Asha's story speaks to the ways in which children challenge authority and the 'moral orthopaedics' of handwriting (Deacon, 2005). Fotini's story demonstrates the ways in which social critique can be read into children's articulations shedding light on children's civic and political knowingness. The examples are emblematic of children's practices and interactions with the researchers across a varied and heterogenous sample. Taken together they demonstrate practices of relating to public life in action.

The articulations of everyday childhoods, we argue, have a capacity to disrupt longstanding taken-for-granted understandings of social issues in ways that can only benefit service design and delivery and make public services more accountable to their users. This was the case, for example, in an evaluation study of children's experiences of a domestic violence (DV) support group (Nolas, Sander-McDonagh and Neville, 2018). Thinking about

children's everyday lives in the evaluation enabled a reading of the support service as providing children a space for play and fun, amongst other things, allowing them to experience more ordinary aspects of childhood; a reading that contrasted to adult-professional emphasis on childhoods damaged by DV. By taking a step back to think about the moments in which the children's articulations are encountered, moments that can be confusing and overwhelming as well as delightful, it is possible to listen differently and to hear a breadth of experiences and meanings, including pleasure in settings and experiences which are dominated by painful scripts (as an example).

Attending to the sedimentation of meaning can be acquired. Photographer Dorothea Lange described the camera as 'an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera'. Analogously we might say that idioms provide an instrument that teaches people how to hear without idioms. It is notable that in anthropological texts the term is often used unreflexively, indicating a shared way of attending to the world amongst anthropologists. It encapsulates an epistemology of paying adequate attention. From a child practitioner perspective paying adequate attention would require giving up hard-earned scientific frameworks characterised by abstraction, distance, and the absence of time (Bourdieu, 1980). To think idiomatically entails yielding to the logics of practice, which means thinking about the sense (in the full meaning of the word) of the action unfolding over time and developing the sort of attention that notices action with awareness, care, courtesy and curiosity; all attention's synonyms. It means allowing oneself to be enchanted by what is seen, heard and felt (Stainova, 2017), as well as being critical, and to suspend reaching for easy explanations and quick resolutions. A reframing of the child practitioner's role when working directly with children, from that of an expert to that of a researcher, a host, and/or an archivist would correspond with the idea of listening and 'proper hearing' as being a practice of gathering, receiving, sheltering and keeping of others' experiences (Fiumara, 1990).

It is important to acknowledge that 'proper hearing' is not without its discomforts. Letting go of normative frameworks and established sense-making practices (e.g. 'at-risk children') is hugely anxiety provoking and increasingly sanctioned by large bureaucracies which have become more risk averse in the face of 'failure' (cf. responses to child deaths from abuse). Nevertheless, as other research indicates (Moss and Petrie, 2002; Tamboukou, 2004; Watkins and Shulman, 2008), such constraints do not make the art of listening impossible. It is always possible to carve out spaces for resistance, for creativity, and for transformation, and exploring and building relationships with sympathetic outsiders (e.g.

activist groups, academics etc) might be one way in which spaces and times for proper hearing can happen and resonate.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to acknowledge their colleague Madhavi Latha who assisted the second author with the fieldwork in Hyderabad. The research was funded by the European Research Council Starting Grant (ERC-StG-335514) to Sevasti-Melissa Nolas. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Open University workshop *Cultures of Listening* (March 2017) organised by Johanna Motzkau and Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, we thank the organisers and all other colleagues in attendance for their feedback on the earlier draft. We are also grateful for the feedback of our two anonymous reviewers.

References

Ahmed, S. (2014) *Willful subjects*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Ailwood, J. (2003) Governing early childhood education through play, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 4(3): 286-299.

Annot, M., and Reay, D. (2007) A sociology of pedagogic voice: Power, inequality and pupil consultation, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(3): 311-325.

Aruldoss, V., and Nolas, S-M. (in preparation) 'Tracing Indian girls' embodied orientations towards public life', *Gender, Place and Culture*.

Assunção, M. R. (2005) *Capoeira: The history of an Afro-Brazilian martial art*, London: Routledge.

Back, L. (2007) *The art of listening*, Bloomsbury: Berg Publishers.

Baraitser, L. (2009) *Maternal encounters: The ethics of interruption*, London: Routledge.

Behar, R. (1996) *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*, Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.

Berelowitz, S., Clifton, J., Firimin, C., Gulyurtlu, S. and Edwards, G. (2013) “If only someone had listened”, Office of the children’s commissioner’s inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups, Final Report, November 2013.

Bluebond-Langner, M., and Korbin, J. E. (2007) Challenges and opportunities in the Anthropology of childhoods: An introduction to ‘children, childhood and childhood studies’, *American Anthropologist*, 109(2): 241–246.

Bourdieu, P. (1980) *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Cashmore, J. (2002) Promoting the participation of children and young people in care, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26: 837–847.

Clark, A. (2005) Listening to and involving young children: A review of research and practice, *Early Child Development and Care*, 175(6) 489-505.

Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2001) *Listening to young children: the Mosaic approach*, London: National Children’s Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Clarke, M.H. (1989) *Nevra* in a Greek village: Idiom, metaphor, symptom, or disorder? *Health Care for Women International*, 10(2-3): 195-218.

Coleyshaw, L., Whitmarsh, J., Jopling, M. and Hadfield, M. (2010) *Listening to children’s perspective: Improving the quality of provision in early years settings*, Department for Education, Research Report DFE-RR239b.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183412/DfE-RR239b_report.pdf (last accessed 23/01/2018).

Cook, D.T. (2016) ‘Editorial - Disrupting play: A cautionary note’, *Childhood*, 23(1): 3-6.

Corsaro, W. (1997) *The sociology of childhood*, London: Sage.

Croussard, B., and Webb, R. (2016) 'Learners, politics and education'. In David Scott and Eleanore Hargreaves (Eds.) *SAGE Handbook of Learning*. London: Sage.

Daly, A. (2011) The right of children to be heard in civil proceedings and the emerging law of the European Court of Human Rights, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 15(3): 441-461.

Davies, B. (2014) *Listening to children: Being and becoming*, London: Routledge.

Deacon, R. (2005) Moral Orthopedics: A Foucauldian Account of Schooling as Discipline. *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary*, 130: 84-102.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Foreman, G. (eds.) (1998) *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education* (2nd edition), Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Fraser N. (1990) 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', *Social Text* 25/26: 56–80.

Foss, N. (2002) 'Nerves in Northern Norway: The communication of emotions, illness experiences, and health-seeking behaviours', *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(2): 194-207.

Fiumara, G.C. (1990) *The other side of language: A philosophy of listening*, London: Routledge.

Giard, L. (1996). Part II: Doing-cooking. In M. De Certeau, L. Giard, & P. Mayol (Eds.), *The practice of everyday life (Volume 2: Living & Cooking)* (pp. 151–246), Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Grace, D., and Tobin, J. (1998). Butt jokes and mean-teacher parodies: video production in the elementary classroom. In Buckingham, D. (ed.) *Teaching popular culture: Beyond radical pedagogy*, London: UCL Press.

Hobday-Kusch, J., and McVittie, J. (2002) 'Just clowning around: Classroom perspectives on children's humour', *Canadian Journal of Education*, 27(2/3): 195-210.

Jay, A. (2016) *Independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham 1997-2013*. Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent_inquiry_cse_in_rotherham
(last accessed 23/01/2018).

Jungnickel, K. (2015) "One needs to be very brave to stand all that": Cycling, rational dress and the struggle for citizenship in late nineteenth century Britain. *Geoforum*, 64: 362-371.

Katz, C. (2004) *Growing up global: Economic restructuring and children's everyday lives*. Minnesota: Minnesota University Press.

LaBelle, B. (2018) *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. London: Goldsmiths Press.

Lacey, K. (2013) *Listening publics: The politics and experience of listening in the media age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Layton, (1997) *An introduction to theory in anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leeb, S. (2017) 'Idioms: the minor 'a's of Art', *Texte Zur Kunst (Idiom- Languages of Art)*, Issue 108, December.

Lester, S. (2013) Rethinking children's participation in democratic processes: A right to play, *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth*, 16: 21-43.

Lewis, C. (1992) *Listening to children*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Loizou, E. (2005) Humour: A different kind of play, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 13(2): 97-109.

Macnamara, J. (2015) *Creating an 'architecture of listening' in organizations: the basis of engagement, trust, healthy democracy, social equity, and business sustainability*. Sydney: University of Technology Sydney.

Mannion, G. (2007) Going spatial, going relational: Why "listening to children" and children's participation needs reframing, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(3): 405-420.

Mayeza, E. (2018) 'Charmer boys' and 'cream girls': How primary school children construct themselves as heterosexual subjects through football, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 39(1): 128-141.

McLeod, A. (2010) Thirty years of listening to children? *Adoption & Fostering*, 34(3): 67-73.

Miller, D. (2017) 'Christmas: An anthropological lens', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7(3): 409-442.

Müller, J. (2012) The sound of history and acoustic memory: Where psychology and history converge. *Culture & Psychology*, 18(4): 443-464.

Moss, P. and Petrie, P. (2002) *From children's services to children's spaces: Public policy, children and childhood*, London: Routledge.

Nolas, S-M. (2015) Children's participation, childhood publics, and social change: A review. *Children & Society*, 29(2): 157-167.

Nolas, S-M., Sanders-McDonagh, E. and Neville, L. (2018) "'Gimme shelter? Complicating responses to family violence'. In Rachel Rosen and Katherine Twamley (Eds.) *Feminism and the politics of childhood: Friends or foes*, London: UCL Press.

Nolas, S-M., Varvantakis, C. and Aruldoss, V. (2017b) Talking politics in everyday family life. *Contemporary Social Science*, 12(1-2): 68-83.

Ortner, S. (2006) *Anthropology and social theory: Culture, power, and the acting subject*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Oswell, D. (2013). *The agency of children: From family to global human rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oswell, D. (2009) Yet to come? Globality and the sound of an infant politics, *Radical Politics Today*, May 2009.

Opie, P. and Opie, I. (1959) *The lore and language of schoolchildren*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Perry-Hazan, L. (2016) Children's participation in national policy making: “You're so adorable, adorable, adorable! I'm speechless; so much fun!”, *Children & Youth Services Review*, 67, pp. 105-113.

Rosen, R. (2017) ‘Play as activism? Early childhood and (inter)generational politics’, *Contemporary Social Science*, 12(1-2), pp. 110-122.

Roud, S. (2010) *The lore of the playground: One hundred years of children's games, rhymes and traditions*, London: Random House.

Rouse, W.L. (2017) ‘Charmed lives: Charms, amulets and childhood in Urban America 1870-1940’, *The Journal of American Culture*, 40(1), pp. 21-33.

Seremetakis, C. N. (1994). The memory of the senses, Part II: Still acts. In N. Seremetakis (ed.), *The senses still: Perception and memory as material culture in modernity* (pp. 23–43). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shove, E., Pantzar, M. and Watson, M. (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. London: Sage.

Stainova, Y. (2017) 'Enchantment as methodology', *Savage Minds*, November 1, 2017
<https://savageminds.org/2017/11/01/enchantment-as-methodology/> (last accessed
18/01/2018)

Steadman, C. (1994) *Strange dislocations: Childhood and the idea of human interiority
1780-1930*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Tallant, L. (2015) Framing young children's humour and practitioner responses to it using a
Bakhtinian carnivalesque lens, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 47(2): 251-266.

Tamboukou, M. (2004) Educational Heterotopias and the Self. *Pedagogy, Culture and
Society*, 12(3): 399-414.

Watkins, M. and Shulman, H. (2008) *Towards psychologies of liberation*. Hampshire, UK:
Palgrave, Macmillan.

Zijderveld, (1983) Trend Report: The Sociology of Humour and Laughter, *Current
Sociology*, 31(3): 1-59.