

# A Meta-Theoretical Discussion on Strengthening the Processual-Relational Sociology of Childhood

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**Abstract:** The relational sociology of childhood often has a structural character; however, the main problem is that the structural character largely confines the “ontological turn” in childhood studies. This is related to the fact that how structures are understood in relational analysis is mostly based on a one-way perspective: Structures are “systems of human relations between social positions”. In this context, this article problematizes the structural character of relational childhood ontology. In order to overcome the problem, we should trace alternative relational conceptualizations and show how we can work them in relational childhood sociology. Based on the processual character in hybrid-relational childhood ontology, this article argues which features of Elias and Dépelteau’s relational ontologies can be included in the relational ontology of childhood in order to strengthen the understanding of interdependence relations at the interactional level. The aim of the article is to make a theoretical contribution to the strengthening of the processual character in the relational analysis of childhood by drawing attention to the need for processual-relational childhood ontology as an alternative to the structural-relational perspective. Looking at children’s agency from a processual-relational perspective will further reveal the potential and capacity of children to transform their social worlds and social fields.

**Keywords:** Relational ontology, childhood, agency-structure, assemblage, figuration, trans-action, structural-relational ontology, processual-relational ontology.

**Öz:** İlişkisel çocukluk sosyolojisi çoğunlukla yapısal bir karakter taşımaktadır. Temel sorun yapısal karakterin çocukluk araştırmalarındaki “ontolojik dönüşü” büyük ölçüde sınırlandırmasıdır. Bu ilişkisel analizde yapıların nasıl kavrandığının çoğunlukla tek yönlü bir perspektife dayanması ile ilişkilidir: Yapılar “sosyal pozisyonlar arasındaki insan ilişkileri sistemi”dir. Bu bağlamda bu makale ilişkisel çocukluk ontolojisinin yapısal karakterini sorunsallaştırmaktadır. Bu sorunu aşmak için alternatif ilişkisel kavramsallaştırmaların izini sürerek onları ilişkisel çocukluk sosyolojisinde nasıl çalıştırılabileceğimizi göstermeliyiz. Hibrit-ilişkisel çocukluk ontolojisinin süreçsel karakterinden hareketle, karşılıklı bağımlılık ilişkilerinin etkileşimsel düzeyde anlaşılmasını güçlendirmek için bu makale Elias ve Dépelteau’nun ilişkisel ontolojilerinin hangi özellikleriyle çocukluğun ilişkisel ontolojisine dahil edilebileceğini tartışmaktadır. Makalenin amacı, yapısal-ilişkisel perspektife alternatif olarak süreçsel-ilişkisel bir çocukluk ontolojisine yönelik ihtiyaca dikkat çekerek, çocukluğun ilişkisel analizinde süreçsel karakterin güçlendirilmesine kuramsal bir katkı sağlamaktır. Çocukların faillğine süreçsel-ilişkisel perspektiften bakmak, çocukların sosyal dünyalarını ve sosyal alanlarını dönüştürme potansiyellerini ve kapasitelerini daha fazla açığa çıkaracaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İlişkisel ontoloji, çocukluk, faillik-yapı, birlik, figürasyon, işlem, yapısal-ilişkisel ontoloji, süreçsel-ilişkisel ontoloji.

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## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, some childhood sociologists have expressed the need for a relational approach to the study of childhood. According to them, this is related to the argument that the ontological views of the 'new' sociology of childhood, which emerged as a new paradigm in the study of childhood in the mid-1980s, on children are problematic. The categorical view of childhood, which was first promoted by Qvortrup (1987; 1994), was criticized by Alanen (2001a; 2001b) and Mayall (2001a; 2001b). The concept of generation creates children as a social category with the operation of some differences and inequality relations between social categories, and separates them from other social categories (Alanen, 2001a, p. 13). Children are consequently brought together under the category of socially constructed childhood, and far less attention is paid to their agency. Childhood is studied empirically in relation to macro processes or variables. The aim here is to arrive at a definition or description of childhood shared by children in a particular context. Children's diverse experiences are, therefore, identified with a single identity that cannot explain this diversity; similarities are, thus, brought to the fore instead of differences (Alanen, 2014, p. 136; Oswell, 2013, p. 15). In addition, in the categorical gaze, children are defined as external: There are certain categories of being included in the childhood category. Category membership is determined by some observable similarities or shared attributes among individuals, or the sum of these. Therefore, the relationships between categories (child-child and/ or child-adult) are external and possible (Alanen, 2001a, p. 20; Oswell, 2013, p. 15).

Secondly, the child-centered approach, which understands the agency of children in an essentialist way, is criticized (see Lee, 1998; 2011; Prout, 2005; 2011; Oswell, 2013; 2016). The essentialist view sees the agency of children as an individual child's own property, self-possession, and competence (Lee, 1998, pp. 468-469; Syprou, 2017, p. 434). In other words, there is a tendency to see children as autonomous and independent agents, apart from a complex network of interdependencies (Prout, 2011, p. 8). This individual agency of children is taken as a universal feature of the category of childhood: All children are seen as potential agents through their reflexivity, will and intentions, beyond the need for empirical research. This categorically attributes power and agency to childhood. Thus, the agency process that constitutes the childhood category is ignored (Oswell, 2013, p. 15). The aim of child-centeredness was to legitimate the 'new' sociology of childhood as a separate and autonomous field of study. At that time, although this approach was necessary for the inclusion of children in sociology on their own and thus the formation and definition of childhood studies, it should be discarded (Syprou, 2018, p. 61, 2017, p. 433; Lee, 1998, p. 463; Oswell, 2016, p. 24). Unlike child-centeredness, which

has an essentialist conception of agency, the relational ontology allows for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of children's agency (Syprou, 2018, p. 128).

Considering these criticisms, both categorical and essentialist perspectives seem to make sense of children's agency on the basis of certain constraints. While the categorical approach ignores children's agency and different forms of agency, the essentialist approach does not sufficiently include interaction processes in children's agency. On the other hand, the relational ontology of childhood has been shaped by the relational integration of children's agency into the notion of categorical childhood in the 'new' sociology of childhood, and the distribution of agency within a network of relationships consisting of heterogeneous (material-natural and social) elements or entities as a consequence of the decentralization of essentialist child agency. Therefore, the relational sociology of childhood is basically the study of children's agency in the focus of internal relations (interdependence relations).

We can categorize these relational ontology debates in childhood research, which Syprou (2018) defines as "ontological turn", in three ways. The first of these is the approach that emphasizes generational relations by linking the agency of children to adults on the basis of interdependence. These approaches examine generational structuring processes based on generational relations (see Lee, 2001; Mayall, 2002, Alanen, 2001a; Alanen, 2001b; Mayall, 2001a; Mayall, 2001b; Prout, 2005; Alanen, 2009; Alanen, 2011; Leonard, 2016). The second approach is the critical realist approach which bases children's agency on 'powerful' structures on the basis of enabling and hindering characteristics (see Mayall, 2002; Alderson, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Alderson & Yoshida, 2016; Larkins, 2019). The third approach expands the scope of the interdependence relationship between the agency of children, and highlights the hybrid relationship which links the agency of children to humans and non-human heterogeneous (material-natural and social) elements or entities (see Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005); Oswell, 2013; 2016; Esser, 2016; Raithelhuber, 2016; Syprou, 2017; 2018; 2019). In this article, epistemologically, the first two approaches are classified as structural-relational childhood ontology, whereas the third approach is categorized as processual-relational childhood ontology. The main problem here is that the structural character of the relational sociology of childhood is dominant and that this largely confines the "ontological turn" in childhood studies. In order to overcome the problem, we should trace alternative relational conceptualizations and show how we can work them in relational childhood sociology. The main aim is to show how we can use other relational conceptualizations and theorizations to overcome the problem, taking into account the existing conceptualizations and theorizations in relational childhood sociology.

The relational sociology of childhood focuses on agency problems, arguing that agency is produced socially, collectively and relationally rather than being the property of the individual child (Syrou, 2019, p. 317). In this article, I argue that the relational conceptualization of children's agency often has a structural character. This is related to the fact that the issue of how structure is conceived is often based on a one-sided perspective. In generational-relational analysis, childhood is conceptualized as a social position within generational structures (Alanen, 2014, p. 136), and children's agency is shaped by the structural features of these generational relationships (Leonard, 2016, p. 174). Here, internal relations (interdependence relations), which are the key element of relationality, are included in the analysis at the structural level. In critical realist analysis, children's agency is limited by structures that have causal power (Alderson & Yoshida, 2016, pp. 109-110; Alderson, 2016, p. 205). Here, structures are seen as having a causal power that exists analytically apart from agency, ontologically prior to agency. A structural view of children's relational agency increases the possibility of being influenced by taken-for-granted conceptualizations of childhood because the "overemphasis" on structural causes uncovers an effect that reinforces the inequality of power between children and adults. Therefore, we should look at the sociology of relational childhood from the perspective of "process-relational thinking". According to Dépelteau (2018, p. 503), "process-relational thinking is to help us understand that we can improve our control over social processes, out of the comfort or hegemony of social regularities". Applying process-relational thinking to relational childhood ontology is possible by moving internal relations (interdependence relations) from the structural level to the interactional level. This is to ascribe a processual character to relationships of interdependence. Thus, the power that enables or prevents the agency of children emerges in interdependence relations with a processual character at the interactional level.

In this context, the view of hybrid-relational analysis places on interdependence relationships is a crucial contribution to the future of relational childhood analysis because it paves the way for a more dynamic and fluid understanding of structure as a 'network' consisting of the assembly of the interdependence relations of the agents at interactional level rather than the ontologically pre-existing and analytically separate and causal character of the agency. Using such a more dynamic and fluid conceptualization instead of structure appears as a precondition for strengthening process-relational childhood ontology. Therefore, such conceptualizations need to be strengthened in the relational sociology of childhood. This is to substitute "flexible" relationship networks for "strong" structures. Using more relational concepts instead of structure alleviates the one-way pressure of structures on agency. This approach is important in terms of relationally examining the social areas of children who are

disadvantaged compared to adults in terms of their social status. In this context, this article discusses which characteristics of Elias' (1978) conceptualization of "figuration" and Dépelteau's (2008; 2013) conceptualization of "trans-action" can be included in the relational ontology of childhood in order to question its processual character as an alternative to the structural character of relationality, by problematizing the structural character of relational childhood ontology. Starting from these conceptualizations, attributing the power that enables children's agency to relationships of interdependence in interaction processes is to advocate a relational ontology of childhood, not structural but processual. Looking at children's agency from a processual-relational perspective at the interactional level further reveals their potential to disrupt the taken-for-granted and powerful conceptualizations and sense-making of children's social worlds because it increases the possibility of deconstructing unequal power relations. The aim of the article is to make a theoretical contribution to the strengthening of the processual character in the relational analysis of childhood by drawing attention to the need for processual-relational childhood ontology as an alternative to the structural-relational perspective. The understanding of structure, which locates structure only in relationship networks at the interactional level, is to draw attention to the need for process-relational childhood ontology as an alternative to the structural-relational perspective. Therefore, this article draws attention to the processual character of the relational analysis of childhood by bringing into question the structural character that is dominant in agency debates in the focus of relational childhood sociology. Generally, the aim is to bring a new perspective to the discussion on relational childhood ontology by pointing out its deficiencies or limitations, rather than an opposition to structural-relational childhood sociology.

### **Categorizing Relational Childhood Sociology Epistemologically**

Social theory has been embodied in different forms in certain periods in the sociological study of childhood. In this direction, relational sociology was applied to the sociology of childhood in the early 2000s, and has been partially developed to date. While some of the emerging approaches reflect the legacy of the structural approach to relational childhood ontology, some, even fewer, have adopted a more radical process ontology. Therefore, we could actually speak of a classification in relational childhood ontology as Vandenberghe's (2018, p. 37) classification in relational sociology (structural-relational and process-interactionist approach). Vandenberghe regards the distinction between structural-relationists and processual-interactionists as an epistemological distinction. This distinction is related to how the ontological status attributed to entities is comprehended (2018, p. 49). Such

an epistemological distinction seems to have emerged in the sociology of relational childhood: Structural-relational ontology and processual-relational ontology. These two different epistemological approaches are related to how the ontological status attributed to children is comprehended. While childhood status is conceived at the structural level of interdependence relations in structural-relational ontology, it is constructed at the interactional level of interdependence relations in processual-relational ontology. In the processual route, the social status of childhood acquires a more flexible character in the complex network of interaction processes because the dominant power of structures becomes more prone to dissolution in the interaction process and allows for a more open-ended agency.

### **Structural-Relational Childhood Ontology**

The structural-relational ontology of childhood comprehends the agency of children from a structural perspective. It consists of generational-relational approach and critical realist approach. First, the generational-relational childhood approach bases children's agency on "generational order(ing)". Children's agency acquires a relational dimension through generational relations and generational structures. Leonard (2016, p. 174) argues that children's agency arises from, and works within, generational relationships. Alanen (2009, p. 170; 2011, p. 26; 2001a, pp. 20-21) argues that generational structures that determine children's 'strengths' or 'weaknesses' should be defined in order to determine the scope and nature of children's agency. In the conceptualization of generational structures, the internal relations that children establish in their social worlds or fields should be focused on. Therefore, children's agency is based on the social organization of generational relations which is named as "generational order(ing)". This concept refers to a complex set of social processes in which children and adults are built together. According to Esser et al. (2016, p. 8), the concept of generational order(ing) is important because it enables or limits children's agency, which child agency reproduces or transforms.

The generational-relational approach has a structural character because childhood is conceptualized as a social position within a socially constructed generational structure. As members of this social position, children take part in the reproduction of generational relations (Alanen, 2014, p. 136). Besides, adults and children are positioned differently within generational order, depending on the distribution of power and resources. Children's agency is shaped by the structural characteristics of these generational relationships: It is the generational relationships that emerge with the collective participation of children with adults that enable or limit their agency (Leonard, 2016, p. 174).

Second, the critical realist approach bases children's agency on "powerful" structures. In other words, it is directly the structures themselves that enable or limit agency. In the study of childhood from a critical realist perspective, special attention is paid to the structures that shape children's lives, in other words, to macro causes. Considering strong structural reasons, such as class, gender, race and generation, is a strength, not a weakness or "prejudice" (Alderson, 2017, p. 4, 10). On the basis of this understanding of structure, children are constantly constrained by structures, other individuals, and resources (Alderson and Yoshida, 2016, pp. 109-110; Alderson, 2016, p. 205). These structures, which have a causal power, become visible with the results they create; in other words, they are embodied in social practices and policies (Alderson, 2017, pp. 11-12). Institutional and ideological structures, traditions, beliefs, and policies shape how childhood is understood and structured in relation to adulthood, and how childhood is lived in certain societies (Mayall, 2015, p. 13, 24).

However, structures do not completely control events in a deterministic way; instead, they only affect them. For example, some disadvantaged children do very well in school. They challenge structures of inequality, such as poverty, and overcome serious disadvantages (Alderson, 2017, p. 10). In this regard, research from a critical realist perspective can reveal children's experiences with collective agency by identifying conditions that indicate the potential to disrupt existing patterns of disadvantage. The first step is to focus on processes in order to recognize the potential emerging strengths of children and structures as well as the specific conditions and contexts in which they can exert their power (Larkins, 2019, p. 427). Yet they do not refute the great power of structures in shaping social life. While some disadvantaged children may be successful in school by resisting structures, such as class by chance or thanks to higher education standards, friendships and other factors, other children, who work equally hard, continue to be unsuccessful when these factors do not work (Alderson, 2017, p. 10). Therefore, the critical realist perspective contributes to the strengthening of the structural character in relational childhood ontology by emphasizing that structural forces, such as class, ethnicity (race), gender, and generation, rarely allow transformation in children's social fields. However, what is more important in relational childhood analysis is to focus on conditions that reveal the potential to disrupt existing patterns of disadvantage.

### **A Critical View of The Structural-Relational Childhood Ontology**

In the context of the relational study of childhood, Alanen (2011, p. 26) proposed the concept of generational order in order to transcend the structure-agent dichotomy conceptually and methodologically. Generational order is the structured network of relations between children and adults as generational categories (Alanen, 2009,

pp. 161-162). Generational-relational analysis allows childhood and adulthood to be grasped as relational rather than fixed and static; in other words, it allows children and adults to be determined mutually through relational differences (Honig, 2009, p. 71). Nevertheless, Alanen's relational approach has been criticized especially by Punch (2020) and Prout (2005) for reconstructing childhood in the focus of the child-adult dichotomy and repeating the idea of a deterministic structure. Regarding this, Alanen's conceptualization of generational order mobilizes the idea of structure, which tends to overemphasize the constancy and rigidity of generational relationships. The generational structuring process partially loses the possibility of an open-ended process that covers all kinds of heterogeneity and possibility (Punch, 2020, p. 133; Prout, 2005, p. 78). However, Alanen considers the criticism that the generational order superficially corresponds to invariable power differences between generational categories with the effect of institutionalized, taken-for-granted or normative thought patterns regarding intergenerational relations, as a repetition of a misinterpretation based on a determinist 'structure' understanding (2020, p. 142). However, the main problem of this approach is that, rather than repeating the claim of the constancy of power differences between generational categories, childhood and adulthood as social positions are ascribed to social statuses with structural features prior to relations of interdependence. This acceptance is to emphasize the low possibility of change of power differences, not the constancy of power differences. Besides, it trivializes children's potential to disrupt existing patterns of disadvantage in their social world, by underestimating children's capacity to transform their social fields.

Thus, it is necessary to consider these criticisms of generational-relational analysis. Childhood studies using a critical realist perspective in recent years strengthen these criticisms by presenting a relational ontology compatible with generational-relational analysis. In fact, the emphasis on structuralism in critical realism is more evident and robust than in generational-relational ontology because the critical realist perspective directs towards "strong" structures themselves without using a more relational conceptualization as the conceptual tool on which children's agency is based. Besides, structures are ascribed to a more "powerful" meaning of entity that is separate from and exceeds all the elements or parts that compose them, by defining structures as emergence. According to Elder-Vass (2010, p. 192), structures as a whole consist of parts, and once they emerge, they have emergent features that their parts do not have, and thus acquire causal power. Structure is emergent and has a separate existence that ontologically differs from the actions of all the participants that compose it (Elder-Vass, 2007, p. 18). Moreover, structures have causal power, and over time precede and last longer than individual agents who do not construct them (Bhaskar, 2008; Archer, 2003; Alderson, 2016; Alderson and Yoshida, 2016;

Alderson, 2017). Larkins (2019, p. 427) attaches importance to this emphasis on the pre-existing power of structures since this understanding of structure draws attention to the questioning not only of children's social relationships in certain contexts, but also of possible underlying causal mechanisms that affect their lives. According to Dépelteau, this understanding of structure in relational ontology is problematic because it could open the way to the structuralist paradigm by creating the impression that structures are actually external to the continuous relationships that produce them. The problem here stems from the fact that structures are built on the basis of a "relation of causality" rather than a "relation of composition" (2013, pp. 174-177).

In the context of this understanding of structure, which is criticized by Dépelteau (2013, 2008), the social ontology on which the relational analysis of childhood is based should be questioned because structural-relational childhood ontology weakens the processual character of relational childhood ontology. It adopts structure concept which Porpora (1998, p. 339) defines as "systems of human relations between social positions". According to Alanen, who attributes structure status to the concept of generation, "generation is a system of relations between social positions. Thus, children and adults are the owners of certain social positions defined in relation to each other and defined within certain social structures" (Mayall, 2001a, p. 3). Based on this, agency is partly attributed to children as social position holders; however, the causal power of structures is brought to the fore. Children's social positions are structurally ascribed power before the level of interaction. Therefore, the agency of children is actually understood on the basis of the enabling and limiting nature of pre-existing structures that have causal power. This emphasis on structuralism erodes and undermines the transformative power of relational analysis.

This reminds us of Dépelteau's (2013, p. 181) argument in relational ontology about the "constitution of the logic of the social in social structures". According to Dépelteau, the reduction of the logic of the social to structures and their causal powers is problematic because "structural causal powers" may appear to be stronger empirically than they are in social life (2013, p. 181, 183). To some extent, the relational conceptualization of childhood faces such a problem: Children's agency is explained in terms of these structural causal forces. This leads to a tendency to overemphasize the power of structure, to attribute more power to structure than it actually is, and to define childhood with structural processes and the adult perspective in the child-adult dichotomy. Therefore, the shadow of the structuralist paradigm permeates the relational conceptualization of childhood. To dispel this shadow, we need to ponder alternative conceptualizations and approaches that further emphasize the processual character of relational childhood ontology.

## Processual-Relational Childhood Ontology

The processual pole of relational sociology, in contrast to the structuralist pole, emphasizes “demergence”. It advocates a radical process ontology. There is no structure, system, level or layer in this processual view. Instead, there are only streams and processes of becoming; mutual and internal relations at the horizontal level; and the constant re-destruction and reproduction of society (Vandenbergh, 2018, p. 44). The dominant view is that interdependence relations that reproduce social fields and patterns emerge as unstratified and combinatorial, rather than the understanding that the whole (structure) is superior to its parts and has causal power (emergence). From this perspective, we can categorize the hybrid-relational childhood approach epistemologically in processual-relational childhood ontology.

The hybrid-relational childhood approach distributes children’s agency in heterogeneous networks of relationships. Agency in the relational ontologies of childhood is perceived as embedded in social relations and collective rather than being the property of the individual child (see Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; 2011; Oswell, 2013; 2016; Esser, 2016; Raitelhuber, 2016; Syprou, 2017; 2018; 2019). The emphasis shifts from the autonomous and independent individual to the networks of relationships that make up the social world (Syprou, 2018, p. 129). Instead of the myth of the “individual child”, which advocates the individual reflexive agency of children, the distributed and ontologically heterogeneous and dependent agency of children, which advocates the view of children’s agency that exists “only through their relationship with others”, is emphasized: Agency is not a property, and is always relational and diffused (Oswell, 2016, p. 19; Oswell, 2013, pp. 264-270). Thus, children’s agency emerges as an assembly of heterogeneous elements or entities (human and non-human actors), which enable or constrain their actions (Prout 2000, pp. 16–17). It is important to explore children as productive beings in an assemblage because their agency emerges relative to other agents in the assemblage (Oswell, 2013, p. 81). Accordingly, childhoods are built not only from interactions between people, but also through the continuous interaction of heterogeneous (material-natural and social) actors (Prout, 2005, p. 70, 109). As ‘hybrid actants’ in different relationship networks, people and things take a role together in the construction of ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ (Prout, 2005, p. 82; Prout, 2011, p. 11). Thus, relational ontology decentralizes both in the construction of childhood and adulthood and considers how and under what conditions they mutually produce each other (Prout, 2011, p. 7). Children’s agency becomes more visible through the addition of multiple ‘actors’ (both human and non-human) to their relationship ‘networks’ (Lee, 2001, p. 130).

Processual-relational childhood ontology is less visible and under-represented than structural-relational childhood ontology. Besides, it adopts a more radical process ontology. As such, it paves the way for a more nuanced examination of the disadvantaged status of children in their social spheres and the possibility of transforming unequal power relations through deconstruction. Therefore, the processual character of relational childhood ontology needs to be strengthened through the conceptual and theoretical guidance of relational sociology.

### Strengthening of Processual-Relational Childhood Ontology

Based on the “assemblage” conceptualization in hybrid-relational childhood ontology, this article argues that strengthening the “combination” character with the “figuration” and “transaction” conceptualizations might offer an insight into relational childhood ontology. Structure and derivative concepts overshadow the processual character of relational analysis because of their taken-for-granted meaning in social theory. As Elias (1978) stated, the conceptual tools that we use in relational analysis should be dynamic and loaded with relational qualities, not static and isolated. The “assemblage” conceptualization in hybrid-relational childhood ontology is such a conceptual tool. With reference to this conceptualization, Prout (2005, p. 71) argues that there can be many different types and macro- and micro-scale actors, namely hybrid beings, such as human (children and adults) and non-human objects (organisms, man-made artefacts, and technologies). All of these are hybrid entities emerging through networks. Each actor acts in a hybrid relationship network with a complex character. Such networks can be stable or changeable. In this sense, according to Oswell (2013, p. 70), Prout accepts that “structures” are the results of the stabilization process of a network of actors and argues that structures did not exist before such a mobility (fluidity). Therefore, we cannot make any assumptions before empirical examination about the agent [who or what acts as an actor (human or non-human)] or the social association patterns that are usually assumed to be structures (Oswell, 2016, p. 26).

In order to strengthen processual-relational childhood ontology, it is necessary to turn to dynamic and relational conceptualizations as a force that enables or limits the agency of children. In this context, Elias’ (1987) “figuration” and Dépelteau’s (2008; 2013) “trans-action” conceptualizations appear as a path towards a radical process ontology. The concept of trans-action refers to complex interdependencies in social relations (Dépelteau, 2015, p. 12). Figuration is a network of relations that consists of the intertwining and fusion of the actions of individuals in a relationship of interdependence (Elias, 1978, p. 130). They substitute these conceptualizations for the concept of structure. They reject the autonomous, pre-existing and causal character of the structure notion since it reifies structure by necessitating the

claim that structures have an existence beyond and outside individuals and are therefore independent from individuals, which consequently gives a metaphysical entity status to structure (Dépelteau, 2008; 2013; Elias, 1978, p. 16). King (1999: p. 222) agrees with them about the structure notion. Instead, they adopt the idea of structure only consisting of relations between individuals (King, 2007, p. 215; Dépelteau, 2013, p. 276, 179; Dépelteau, 2008, p. 60, Elias, 1978, p. 16). According to this view, structure is never more than the sum of individuals and the relations between them, and therefore does not point to any metaphysical existence above and beyond all individuals (King, 1999, p. 223).

According to Dépelteau (2008, p. 60; 2013, p. 179; 2018, p. 509), structures (social patterns) are continuous trans-actions between individuals and are regarded as the effects of trans-actions between interdependent individuals. Power is not in structures or agency itself, but in social relations, more specifically in complex interdependencies because the characteristics of structures and agency are not inherent in them. Instead, they emerge through relations of interdependence; in other words, they cannot exist outside or prior to social relations. Similarly, figurations do not express abstract social patterns or structures external to or isolated from people, since figuration itself does not have an independent existence from individuals (Elias, 1978, p. 130). On the contrary, it points to different and flexible forms of relationships that mutually affect each other among “open people”, which Elias (1978) calls *homines aperti* (Tsekeris, 2013, p. 93).

Considering the idea of more flexible and fluid structure, individuals are not limited by structures, but by social relations (Dépelteau, 2013, p. 182). Although social structures are often thought to exert coercion or pressure on individuals in line with their own internal laws, beyond human action or independent of human action, social coercions or pressures actually emerge with the effect of inter-individual relations (Elias, 1978, pp. 17, 20): “Individuals are constrained by their embeddedness in social relations with other individuals, which determines the legitimacy of their actions and their thoughts, but they are not determined by pre-social interaction rules (King, 2000, p. 421).” In this context, the constraint of the society on the individual – social constraint – does not arise from structures, but from the relations, which include the expectations and material and political position of other people to whom we are connected, between individuals. However, this understanding of structure does not completely eliminate the reality of social constraint or make it less real (King, 1999, pp. 222-223). This model of relationality is based on a flat social ontology. Social reality emerges at a single level: interactions between interactors (Dépelteau, 2018, p. 516).

This understanding of structure allows it to have a processual character by moving relational analysis from the structural level to the interactional level. This is exactly what the relational analysis of childhood needs because the potential to disrupt the power inequality between children and adults is more evident in the processual-relational model at the interactional level. Based on this theoretical background, the power should be attributed to particular forms of interdependence relations such as figuration or transaction, and not to structural forces such as causal mechanisms or generational structures that influence and shape children's agency in relational childhood ontology. Placing children's agency in figuration or trans-action conceptualizations increases their potential to transform their social fields. This will provide us with some advantages for a more processual relationality model: By suspending the taken-for-granted power of structures (institutions, social norms and values, traditions, etc.) and the inevitability of adult authority, it brings the role and influence of children closer to that of adults in shaping their social worlds and social fields. We do not focus on the impact of any childhood-related social patterns or structured positions that precede the interaction because we suspend any structural power that is independent of the interactional level. The power that shapes children's agency is actually inherent and revealed in interactional processes. This is to make sense of children's relational agency at the interactional level. Focusing on the interactional level, we recognize the transformative capacity and potential of each element of figuration or trans-action involved in interdependence relationships. Thus, the interactional level allows us to better see and analyze complex connections and relationships between figuration or trans-action elements.

From the structural-relational perspective, the agency of children is explained with reference to the social position of children defined by structural conditions or forces such as poverty, education system, parental authority, and teacher authority. This is the structuring of children's social positions prior to interdependence relations at the interactional level. Instead, we should focus more on specific social contexts and practices, suspending taken-for-granted ideas and meanings based on our belief in structural conditions and forces. This route is to seek the power that enables or limits the agency of poor children in their interdependence relations with their parents, peers, siblings and teachers that emerge in interaction processes. In this context, how these are experienced at the interactional level is more important, beyond the predefined disadvantaged living conditions, school system, and parental authority because how children and other social actors are positioned in the interaction process makes a difference in a certain context. Dalfidan (2020) revealed that a poor child's class at school, the quality of the interaction with her/his teacher and peers shaped her/his educational success or strategies to cope with poverty. Here, I emphasize

the effect and difference created by the interaction of social actors coming together in a certain context beyond a certain educational or economic system. Thus, the relational analysis prioritizing “process-relational thinking” will reveal more open-ended and flexible forms of relationships between children and adults because power is distributed within networks or patterns of relationships, rather than attributing power ‘partially’ to child agents and ‘excessive’ power to structures.

According to Elias (1978, p. 74), power is not just a one-sided possession; instead, it is a structural characteristic seen in all social relations. Although power levels differ, there are constantly changing power balances in every situation where there is a functional interdependence relationship between people. Elias points out that even power balances between different social positions, where power levels are quite unequal, have the characteristics of an open-ended process (Dépelteau, 2018, pp. 505-506). In this context, how power relations are viewed is important in children’s relational agency. While the structural-relational approach examines the agency of children on the basis of “power inequalities” and “power differences”, the processual-relational approach examines it on the basis of “power balances” that are always open to change. Emphasis on power differences neutralizes the role of children in transforming social fields by emphasizing the structural aspect of unequal power relations. The emphasis on balance of power increases children’s potential to transform social fields in the dynamics of interdependence relations, even in unequal power relations. Despite power inequalities, children are more active in shaping their social fields. According to Dépelteau, even if power relations are unequal, when a child plays, s/he certainly influences her/his father’s actions. They interact with each other, and act relative to each other. Therefore, they are interdependent; although personality is important, they do not act according to some pre-given personal characteristics (2015, p. 55). Such a relational ontology makes the power struggles and potentials of using power more visible in children’s interactions with others in their social worlds and social fields, as active participants in any ‘figuration’ or ‘trans-action’ because privileged power is not attributed to any of the parts and causal power is not attributed to the whole itself in the formation of patterns in the social fields of children as a whole. Thus, it is looked at how children are positioned within networks of relationships in a particular social context rather than seeing children as less powerful perpetrators than adults, by referring to the power inequalities between children and adults. In other words, it will be focused on the compromises, tensions or conflicts that arise in children’s interactions with peers and adults, regardless of the pressure of any structured social position.

## Conclusion

Thinking about childhood in terms of relational ontologies offers new possibilities empirically about children and what their worlds are. This is to be open to the reflective evaluation of the concepts and tools of childhood (Spyrou, 2019, p. 8). Through the epistemological categorization of the relational sociology of childhood, this article problematizes its structural character. I suggest that this structural character stem from a one-way (causal) understanding of structure: Defining structures as “systems of human relations between social positions” Porpora, 1998, p. 339). This hegemonic view could lead to a reification of structure. For this reason, if agency is not a property, structure should not be seen as an ontological pre-existing force either, since, as Raithelhuber (2016, p. 98) states, strengthening a relational approach refers to staying away from any reification of structures and children’s agency.

To overcome the structural character of the relational sociology of childhood, I emphasize the need to strengthen the process-relational route concreted in hybrid-relational childhood ontology. This route can be strengthened through Elias’ (1978) “figuration” and/or Dépelteau’s (2008; 2013) “trans-action” conceptualizations. Therefore, this article proposes to locate children’s agency in relational models such as trans-action and figuration conceptualizations. Thanks to these conceptualizations, we can bring the power of interdependence relations into the forefront, not the power of structures in children’s agency. It is important to move interdependence relations from the structural level to the interactional level in strengthening the processual character. This is to adopt “radical process ontology” as stated by Vandenberg (2018, p. 44), which corresponds to the “idea of being in constant flux” as stated by Demir (2020, pp. 24-25) and to “flat social ontology” as stated by Dépelteau (2018, p. 516). This relational model, which has a processual character, opens the door to more flexible forms of relationships between children and adults, and thus makes children’s agency more open-ended because moving children’s agency from the structural level to the interactional level distributes the power in interdependence relations among the agents. Instead of “power differences” and “power inequalities”, it is the emphasis on “power balances” that are always open to change. Thus, processual-relational childhood ontology ensures that children’s perspectives and potential for the use of power are more effectively reflected in relational analysis and might prevent the reification of processes completely or partially, as Dépelteau (2013, p. 180) states.

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