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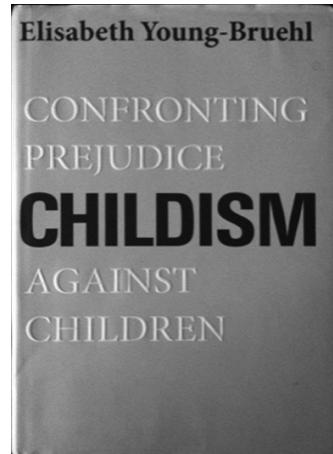
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Childism: Confronting Prejudice against Children

by *Elisabeth Young-Bruehl*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012, 353 pp.

When I was asked to review this book, my first thought was: I don't know anything about childism. Then I remembered that if you read anything by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, you can be confident that she will tell you all there is to know. No academic, historical, or political stone will be left unturned, and she will deliver her findings and ideas with both passion and dispassion. Young-Bruehl is one of the few writers who can write about a topic about which she is passionate, and yet present every side of the conflict without bias. This book is no exception.



The kernel of the book is presented on the first page:

People as individuals and in societies mistreat children in order to fulfill certain needs through them, to project internal conflicts and self-hatreds outward, or to assert themselves when they feel their authority has been questioned. But regardless of their individual motivations, they all rely upon a societal prejudice against children to justify themselves and legitimate their behavior. (p. 1)

The rest of the book explains why this is so. In her first chapter, "Anatomy of a Prejudice," Young-Bruehl explores the concept of prejudice, and explains why we need this concept to understand how we treat children. She writes, "Prejudice is a belief system not a knowledge system." Sexism is justifying the assertion of control on the basis of sexual difference. In the same way, childism justifies acts of control and unempathic treatment on

the basis of the myriad needs that adults bring to the parent-child equation: "Attitudes, ideas and prejudices rationalize acts of harm and failure to meet the needs of children." Thus, we need the term *childism* to activate the political and institutional systems that are ignorant and blind to the true needs of children.

Young-Bruehl offers a wonderfully written case history and formulation illustrating many different types of abuse towards a child and advocating the need to expand the concept of abuse to include neglect. Her patient, "Anna," comes alive on the page.

It is stunning to remember that the diagnosis of battered child syndrome was introduced only in 1962. Young-Bruehl's history of the development of the concept and the political attempts to deal with it through legal means makes for interesting, yet dispiriting reading. Despite legislators' and activists' best efforts, somehow they miss the point. Too much effort is expended in diagnosing and labelling the symptoms of abuse, rather than in looking deeper and asking about the causes. Treatment of perpetrators varies from neglect to punishment, with very little attention being paid to the antecedents of their behaviour. All of this she puts down to childist attitudes and states that too much time has been wasted in trying to find the common symptoms of an abuser. The truth is that there are many "types."

Without condemnation, Young-Bruehl introduces the thorny problem of adult psychoanalysts coming late to the table in acknowledging the real trauma their patients have experienced. She points out that child analysts have always been aware of the real abuses children suffered. She also writes about the part feminists have played, by unwittingly supporting childist attitudes while being immersed in that political maelstrom created by the "family values" faction, the psychoanalysts, and the child abuse activists—all of them fighting for their particular corner and not seeing or asking, "What is it that children really need?"

And she writes about the damage done by the pendulum swinging from child abuse not being recognized at all to it being seen everywhere. This, Young-Bruehl states, led to the mass hysteria of abuse accusations occurring in day cares—many of which could not be substantiated, as well as allegations of satanic ritual abuse, false memory syndrome, and parent alienation syndrome—when fathers are falsely accused of sexually abusing their children during custody battles. We are only now recovering from this and are reflecting in a more sober manner on the complex issues of child abuse and neglect and the strange enactments that can occur in its wake.

Young-Bruehl also explores emotional abuse and its psychological sequelae. The attempt to understand the impact of narcissistic parents on

children explains why analysts in the past have tried to deal with the differences between physical and emotional abuse, rather than seeing them as a continuum along a spectrum. Both lead to a destruction or distortion of the self. It is not the physical trauma that hurts so much as the psychological trauma of annihilation of the self that accompanies it.

The author has special condemnation for the narcissism and self-absorption of the “baby boomers.” She describes three of her patients profoundly affected by the divorce of their parents in the 1980s who were not attuned to their children’s needs. She also discusses at length the particular problems created by narcissistic parents.

In my experience children who have been narcissistically inscribed are among the most knowing and analytical of survivors, but they are often powerless to help themselves get over their own injury or get away from the abuser or build relationships with anyone outside the narcissistic family regime. Their split is that they have insight but no desire, no motivation, these are what has been erased. (p. 248)

Helicopter parents, hockey parents, and tiger parents all treat their children as narcissistic extensions of themselves. Children have to perform to make these parents feel better. They are not given the psychological space to express and develop their true selves. This leads to deadness, emptiness, and vulnerability to addiction.

Childism is a very American-centric book. Baby boomers are a North American cohort. The particular legislative problems Young-Bruehl describes are the result of the byzantine behemoth of American governance that hamstring every attempt at reform. Young-Bruehl is clearly very frustrated with her country and rightly takes it to task. However, I think her concept is too important to be confined to North America. The lack of true attunement to children’s needs is universal. Every country has egregious examples of how it has treated its children in the past and how they still fail to truly look after them. Canada has the residential school scandal. Children go to school hungry every day in Toronto, yet our mayor wants to cut funding for school meals. England has sent its children to boarding schools, which are often abusive, from the age of seven, crushing generations of them. These are examples of childism. We can see injustice to children all around us—an injustice we accept and ignore until somebody like Elisabeth Young-Bruehl points out the obvious.

I started out reading with a slight scepticism, wondering if we needed another “ism,” but reading as a child psychiatrist, I had the experience of concurrence. I assess children in the care of the Children’s Aid Society,

whose attachment and other needs are routinely ignored. I do my best to educate workers about this. Anna Freud tried to address this in a series of books about the needs of children requiring care, the first being *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* (1973). Although the books had an important impact when they were published, their recommendations now seem to be largely forgotten. Child analysis and child psychiatry have long been the poor relation of their adult counterparts. I have witnessed cuts to essential services for children over the years, only to see the saved money go to adult psychiatric or medical programs. Anna Freud struggled to get her new specialty the respect it deserved from her male adult analyst counterparts, a struggle described in Young-Bruehl's 1988 biography of her. Somehow helping children was not seen as important as helping adults. There is also a whiff of sexism here; after all, children are women's work.

As analysts, we try to mop up the mess of societal and parental mis-attunements. It behooves us to step back and reflect on this. Attunement to other's needs—whether child or adult—prevents the worst of maltreatments. Society is rabidly mis-attuned to its weakest citizens, but especially to children. As analysts we are best placed to illuminate the unconscious enactments of sadism and cruelty and so to contribute to the understanding of this complex problem.

In the last chapter of her book, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl tells us what to do posthumously. Adults have to advocate for children, they need to address the conscious or unconscious justifications for childism and child abuse and to broaden the focus from protecting children to providing for their developmental needs.

So whom is this book for? The depth and breadth of it is impressive. I found the history of the political struggle to protect children in the United States informative. I was surprised that the United States has not signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations because of the objections of the ultra-conservative lobby. I found Young-Bruehl's clinical examples and formulations enlightening. As an analyst, I learned about aspects of the treatment of traumatized adults and those with narcissistic parents, which I will take into my practice. As a child psychiatrist, I was reminded of my sorrow about all the sad and neglected children I have seen. As a concerned citizen of Canada, I mourn the loss of social democratic values in our current political agenda. The lack of awareness of the impact of abuse and neglect that leads to troubled youth and gun violence, and our knee-jerk punitive response to it, makes me feel that as a society we have ignored all the child development literature.

In summary, there is something in this book for everyone. I am an enthusiastic convert to Young-Bruehl's thesis, because she creates a coherent explanation for much of what I have witnessed and experienced throughout my career. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has contributed mightily to varied fields of knowledge, but *Childism* may be the best of her legacy.

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Doubt, Conviction and the Analytic Process: Selected Papers of Michael Feldman

by Michael Feldman

London, UK: Routledge, 2009, 268 pp.

This book is edited by Betty Joseph and contains 10 previously published papers and 3 papers that are published first in this volume. The articles span Feldman's work from 1989 to the present. Feldman, whose mentors include Rosenfeld, Segal, and Joseph, became an analyst in London during a time of lively debate and creative thinking. Some essays, like "The Oedipus Complex: Manifestations in the Inner World and the Therapeutic Situation," first published in 1989, have been widely read. The two papers that give the collections its title, "Filled with Doubt" and "The Problem of Conviction in the Session," are new.

Several of Feldman's papers deal with clinical phenomena eminently well explained by Kleinian theory, but more importantly, they are amenable to orthodox Kleinian technique—among them, "Manifestations of the Death Instinct in the Consulting Room" and "Envy and the Negative Therapeutic Reaction." In the former, Feldman rethinks Freud's death

