

“IS THERE GOING TO BE ANOTHER COMPETITION TODAY?”

Contesting Development through Competition

Annie McCarthy

Abstract: Valued for its affective and material affordances, competition has long been fundamental to children’s participation in development. Despite this, the experiential and material worlds of child competitors have long been overlooked. Combining ethnographic insights from fieldwork in a Delhi NGO with archival sources and reflections on the legacies of Enlightenment philosophy, this article offers a child-centered corrective to Thomas Malaby’s call to focus studies of games on institutions and their projects. Additionally, heeding Liisa Malkki’s challenge to reconceptualize children as persons and not just as elementary forms of shared humanity, I argue that it is only through sustained engagement with children’s experiences and material contributions to competition that we can properly understand how these frequently exceed—and trouble—institutional aims.

Keywords: childhood, competition, development, Enlightenment philosophy, fun, participation, subjectivity

During my ethnographic research in 2013 with slum children living in Delhi, India, I observed the ways in which children’s participation in NGO programs was constantly mediated by talent-based assessments and contests. These included initiatives like student of the month, drawing and story writing competitions, a recurring ‘scream as loud as you can’ competition for girls, as well as auditions held to cast films for NGOs. Competition was so closely associated with development that on one occasion, a boy—whom I had met only the day before during a community outreach activity—approached me immediately upon my arrival in his community the next day to eagerly ask: “Is there going to be another competition today?” Yet the association between competition and



development is by no means unique to this organization or to India, nor is it particularly new. Competitions have long been key to projects of development and humanitarianism. As one United Nations website states, competitions and contests “represent a fun, at time[s] challenging, way to engage creatively with topics that are a priority for the organisation.”¹

Tracing the global history of competition as both a ‘fun’ and an incredibly materially productive mode of engaging children in humanitarianism could begin with World War I and the innumerable art, craft, and writing competitions of the Junior Red Cross (see Sheehan 1987). Alternatively, we could look at competitions for children run by the League of Nations (Wright 2020) and later the United Nations, or drawing competitions organized by the Save the Children Fund (SCF) and UNICEF. While some of these competitions were very clearly employed to attract child supporters, others were designed to engage the child beneficiaries of aid programs. For example, in 1949 UNICEF organized a drawing contest for children in Austrian and Czechoslovak schools receiving food aid (*The Child*, April 1949), and in 1966 Oxfam organized an essay competition in Swaziland on the topic of school feeding (*Freedom from Hunger: Magazine of the Food and Agriculture Organization*, July–August 1966) (see fig. 1). As with these two competitions, winning entries were often circulated via development periodicals, which, when surveyed en masse, provide a rich archive of diverse child-authored material with which to theorize.

That competition can do more than just affirm the effectiveness of specific humanitarian and development programs becomes clear when looking at a winning entry from the 1966 Oxfam competition by Thembesele Mary Jele, who described seeing her own reflection in the mirror and noting the change following school feeding: “I was very proud and happy to see that I am now pretty as a lily, all pimples are moved away, so I am fresh as butter and beautiful as a super rose flower. I am brave as a lion and feel no pains in my body.” Yet rather than engage with the unique and creative ways children use competition as a vehicle to make claims about themselves and their relationships to development, academic engagement with this archive of winners has largely emphasized the adult mediation and use/misuse of these materials (Malkki 2015; Strassler 2006). Liisa Malkki (2015: 79–80) describes “the ritual work” done by “standardized, representational uses of children—be they images of children themselves, images children have made, words they have written, or songs they have sung.” Commenting on children’s cultural productions about peace, Malkki notes the way that child-authored materials are “set apart by adults in an infantile utopian dimension that is freely celebrated and almost as freely ignored” (ibid.: 100).

That children’s participation can be tokenistic, decorative, or outright manipulative is a central observation and methodological concern within childhood studies (see Gal and Faedi Duramy 2015; Hart 1992; James 2007). Tokenistic participation, as defined by Roger Hart (1992: 9), is actually a form

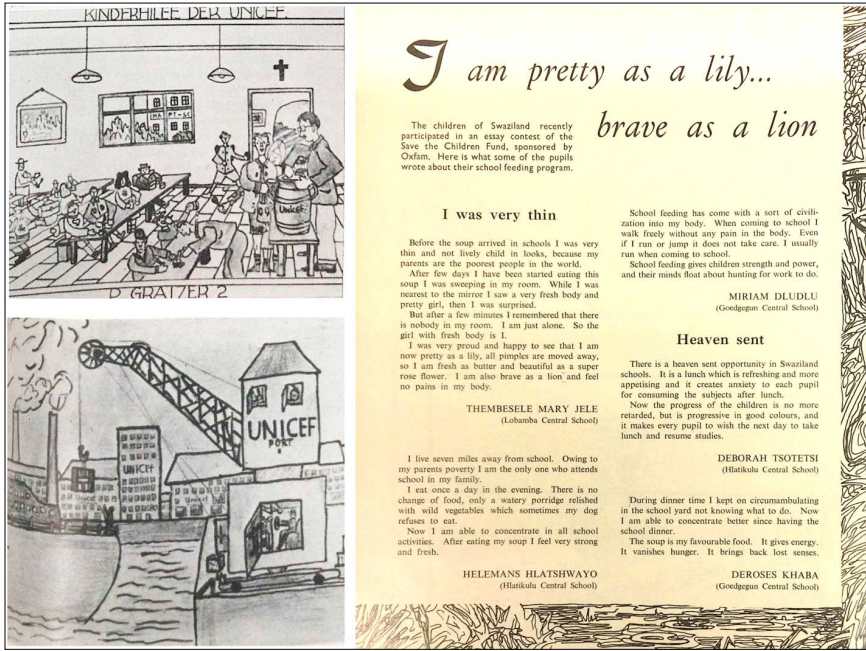


FIGURE 1: Left: Images from a poster contest held for children in Austrian and Czechoslovak schools, published by the United States Children's Bureau's *The Child*, March 1949. Right: Poems published in *Freedom from Hunger: Magazine of the Food and Agriculture Organization*, July–August 1966.

of non-participation in which children “are apparently given a voice” but have little opportunity to express their own opinions in ways that they choose (for a critique, see Lundy 2018). Associating competition with “adult-controlled settings” that are “supervised, individualistic, and competitive,” Hart (1992: 20) suggests that, while not manipulative, something like a “drawing competition, where the judging criteria and process are made clear in advance, ... is perfectly honest about not being participatory” (ibid.: 9). Both Hart’s comments and Malkki’s analysis go some way toward explaining the caution and lack of scholarly interest in child-authored materials produced via competition. Yet while frequently equated with adult-controlled and tokenistic engagement, competitions do produce children’s participation on a scale far grander than any child-centered participatory researcher could ever hope to generate, which leaves the question of how to engage with this participation as an experiential, material, and contextually situated practice.

As a contribution to the discussion on ‘what competition does’, this article will argue that understanding the indeterminant and “diverse affordances and outcomes of competition in social life” (Hopkinson and Zidar, this issue)

necessitates greater attention to both the material and experiential worlds of child competitors. Just as Hopkinson and Zidaru's article in this special issue challenges "canonical understandings of competition as a mechanism for defining value or instituting and reinforcing order," I argue that such a focus does not require assuming that competitive forms of participation are "inherently empowering" or that its products are "children's authentic vision(s)" (Strassler 2006: 65). It does, however, mean generously engaging with children's experiences and cultural productions as contributions to, and constitutive projects of, development. It also requires recognizing that what Thomas Malaby (2020: 15), in his work on games, describes as the "modern over-emphasis on the expressive (experiencing) individual" may not apply to scholarship on children. Thus, Malaby's proposed corrective to focus on "institutions and their projects" (*ibid.*) is, in this case, no corrective at all, but a move that further entrenches adult-centric approaches.

That children's competitive worlds are understudied is perhaps most glaringly obvious in critical scholarship such as Malkki's. Although calling for the reconceptualization of children "as *persons* and not just as elementary forms of 'our shared humanity,'" Malkki (2015: 101) does not engage with a specific body of child-authored materials or a particular community of children. Similarly, Chika Watanabe's (2021: 254) otherwise excellent work on children's participation in disaster preparedness caravans in Japan and Chile concludes by suggesting that "it would be fruitful to understand better the children's own phenomenological worlds." To explore further the reasons for this neglect, in the final part of this article I reflect on the legacies of Enlightenment philosophy that emphasize adult-driven socialization over the diverse projects and passions of children.

This article thus takes up the challenge of engaging with children's competitive worlds and contributions to development in two ways. First, it illustrates the varied ways in which competition sustains children's engagement with development as both an institutional and personal project in the context of a child-focused NGO in Delhi. Discussing four ways that competition structured children's participation in this NGO, I emphasize how the material and experiential outcomes of competitions can be read as key sources for learning about children's knowledge, practice, and performance of development. Contributing to a growing body of research about children's engagement with development (see Cheney and Sinervo 2019; McCarthy 2021; Romani 2016), in this section of the article I am guided by the following questions: What projects do the child competitors understand themselves to be participating in? What ends do they strive for? And what subjectivities do they inhabit?

In the next section of the article, I historicize these questions via an analysis of development periodicals produced in the UK and Australia from the 1960s to the 1980s. Given that child-authored materials and stories about child competitors circulate widely in development periodicals, this section introduces a range

of competitive modes of participation and the adult debates surrounding them. Here I explore what might enable a child-centered reading of these materials that acknowledges their selection, curation, and circulation by adults, but does not set them apart in an “infantile utopian dimension” (Malkki 2015: 100). In calling attention to examples of competition from diverse contexts, I do not seek to collapse geographical, economic, and cultural differences, nor do I equate ethnographic research with archival research. Rather, I seek to emphasize patterns within children’s engagement with competition, and consider these alongside the adult intentions and anxieties that are similarly produced within and by competition. In the final section of the article, I trace these anxieties to the Enlightenment philosophies of Locke, Smith, and Rousseau, in turn highlighting their periodic resurgence at moments of social change.

Contesting Development in Delhi

In contemporary Delhi, competition is a key driver of child-focused NGOs’ most prized resource: children’s participation. Although children have long been ‘participating’ in development, the contemporary turn toward participatory methods emerges in response to particular crises and critiques of development. Likewise, the inclusion of participation as a right within the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has consolidated participation as a key engagement method, pedagogical style, and performative indicator of development. Children’s participation thus mutually reinforces the structures that prescribe it: if participation is a right, facilitating children’s participation instantly produces both a rights-bearing subject and concrete proof of this subjectivity in the form of a photograph of a grinning winner or a prize-winning drawing (McCarthy 2021: 6–7). These smiling winners and colorful artworks also demonstrate that the performance of child rights requires forms of participation that fulfill a “Western adult cultural script” (Sinervo and Cheney 2019: 13). That this script largely excludes things like direct participation in waged labor, conflict, or sexuality and instead reinforces a twin emphasis on play and pedagogy was clearly demonstrated in the programs of the media NGO with which I conducted my 2013 doctoral fieldwork.

The children who attended the media NGO’s programs, mostly aged 12–16, lived in four different slum communities in the south and east of the city. These communities were each courted by several NGOs, including the mobile media NGO, which visited its locally based partner NGOs each week to run a three-hour media club. In these clubs, children were engaged in creating, developing, and performing a range of media products such as films, street plays, and comic books designed to spread information or ‘development messages’ to the children’s own communities as well as other communities of slum dwellers. Each

year, the media NGO's programs culminated in the production of an annual feature film, which in the year of my fieldwork was to promote handwashing. As this topic was relatively unpopular with children, it was a competition that, seemingly at every step, drove children's engagement with the campaign.

Games

Although some children in the media NGO clubs were as old as 19, information was typically delivered—following a dominant convention of child-focused participatory methods—through games. While not always formalized as competitions, these games usually involved competitive structures in which children could showcase their knowledge and skill—activities such as ‘who has the cleanest hands?’ and ‘who can name the most brands of soap?’. As the tag-along anthropologist and an extra pair of hands in the media NGO, I was tasked with setting up and running one such game for children during a day of community outreach/film shooting. This included making a large cardboard cutout of an Indian-style toilet with a hole cut in the middle. Children were then lined up at an appropriate distance and given a small ball (symbolizing a poo) to throw into the hole. Called “poo toss,” this carnival-style game was received with much hilarity by younger children, many of whom lined up to play it over and over again.

This game arguably trivializes development problems that are largely the result of infrastructural neglect, not slum dwellers' lack of awareness. In fact, children were very much aware of the dangers of poor sanitation. As one child's entry for a poster competition declared: “The germs on our hands can be lethal.” Like the games in the disaster preparedness caravan described by Watanabe (2021: 240), which encouraged children to learn survival skills and accept a “catastrophic future,” this activity sustained an ambiguous relationship between education and fun. As Watanabe describes, children learning how to pass buckets of water to effectively survive a fire participate in both a potentially lifesaving educational exercise and a game in which two teams “furiously pass the bucket from one person to another, spilling water all over the ground” (ibid.: 253). For Watanabe, this produces a ‘double take’—a productive confusion over the nature of the activity, “which means that play can also exceed its ideological effects” (ibid.: 243). This analysis resonates with Anjaria and Anjaria's (2020: 234) observations about “*mazaa*—the Hindi/Urdu word for fun or pleasure,” which for them requires “being open to a politics whose direction is neither inevitable nor foreseeable.”

Posters

The first poster-making competitions in this campaign were designed as part of baseline activities to assess children's awareness about the importance of

handwashing, although later iterations of this competition performed a kind of crowd control function to prevent non-participating children in the community from walking in front of the media NGO's rolling cameras. This itself highlights the ways that similar, if not identical, competitions can serve very different institutional goals, from pedagogical assessment to getting children out of the way. In the first competition, children were presented with a series of prompt images, some taken from advertising, depicting germs, taps, soaps, toilets, and hands. By doing this, the media NGO indicated the kinds of symbols children should include in their posters. Discussing children's drawings about peace, Malkki (2015: 94) describes an "imaginative grammar" that conjugates peace through images of children, doves, and the globe. Rather than being "*spontaneous* truths from innocent minds as yet untainted by politics or calculation," Malkki notes how "the genre is actually meticulously taught, learned, and conventionalized" (ibid.). Even though they employ different symbols, entries to this poster competition very clearly demonstrate the process of children coming to learn, practice, and experiment with the media NGO's imaginative grammar. They also highlight the extent to which children may depart from these formulas in situations where they are unfamiliar or do not serve the intended purpose.

In figures 2.1–2.4, we see some examples of how children have incorporated the prompt images, either by coloring them (2.1 and 2.4), tracing them (2.3), or meticulously copying them into their posters (2.2). In figures 2.6–2.8, we see children reproduce the image of the germs on the hand. Figure 2.7 declares simply "This is a dirty hand," but without the enabling tool of the magnifier. In images drawn by 'community children' unfamiliar with the conventions of the media NGO (2.10–13), we see hands (some accompanied by soap), water, and a mango (2.11), while others feature a hand with a bird (2.12 and 2.13). That these latter images are almost identical points to the proclivity for children to copy and cooperate with one another as they seek to master particular drawing conventions, even in competitive environments. Reluctant to attempt something new, other children may opt for more familiar stock images, like houses, mangos, and trees (2.10). Yet even children familiar with the conventions of the media NGO may not always select from the 'correct' stock of images, choosing to practice those with which they are more familiar. Dhanisha's drawing (2.9), which shows an industrial cityscape, was almost identical to another of her drawings that I had seen displayed on the pinboard of the media NGO's partner organization, whose programs she also attended. These drawings, with pollution pouring from buildings, are perhaps better fitted to an environmental campaign, although in this case her slogan—"Our homes are very dirty"—links the image back to handwashing, cleverly shifting the blame onto industry.

Children's slogans, such as "To beat and stay away from sicknesses, we must remove these bugs" (Figure 2.1), directly foreground the danger of germs. This image, chosen as its club winner, became the 'inspiration' for what ended



FIGURE 2.1–2.13: Handwashing poster competition entries, Delhi 2013. Photographs © Annie McCarthy

up as one of the highly digitally edited posters produced by the media NGO. Although the organization typically adopted children’s slogans, it changed their imagery in some cases beyond recognition (see fig. 3). This itself raises interesting questions about the conditions under which children’s imagery attains the affective power required to operate in the transnational ritual spheres described by Malkki (2015: 79). Ultimately, though, the huge range of entries for this competition highlights the importance of attending to competition itself as a process through which children come to learn, practice, and sometimes depart from development conventions.

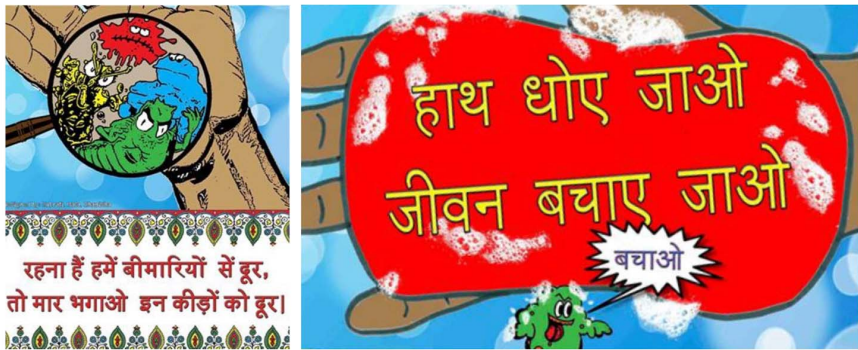


FIGURE 3: Two examples of the media NGO’s final posters, with the adaptation of fig. 2.1 on the left. Delhi, 2013.

Stories

After the first poster competition, the media NGO staged a story writing competition in each of its media clubs. The winners of this competition were then selected to participate in a two-day writing workshop designed to brainstorm and develop the final film script. Sadly, the media NGO’s story writing competition ended like the poster competition—hardly any of the children’s ideas made their way into the final script. There are a number of ways to analyze this. First, we may see it as a failure of the competition to produce the raw material desired by development organizations hungry for fresh, genuine, grassroots participant-generated messages fit-for-purpose. Second, it can be seen as a failure of the participatory methods themselves, marked by an inability to even tokenistically incorporate children’s ideas. Third, from the ethnographer’s perspective, a close reading of the stories reveals how the children employed the very narrative skills and conventions promoted by the media NGO to ‘play along’ with this competition (see McCarthy 2021).

Children here did not produce first-person accounts of conditions in their own communities; instead, they wrote funny stories or stories about poor,

helpless, ignorant others. These latter stories were used to make claims to development, enabling them to scoff disdainfully, as a doctor in Suraj's story did: "Don't you know that before you eat any fruit you must wash it very well?" Primarily using the doctor to demonstrate his superior knowledge of hygiene, in the final line of his story Suraj chose to address his readers directly, stating: "This story is also for you so that you may learn something and remain healthy." Here we see the way children used the narrative forms conventionalized and taught in development spaces to directly address 'underdeveloped' others. This in turn allowed them to discursively reposition themselves on the other side of the underdeveloped/developed binary. Following Michael Jackson (2002: 26), we can see how these stories enabled children to exploit the beliefs, sympathies, and desires of the media NGO in order to secure "some *future* advantage." As Jackson suggests: "Getting what you want very often means getting the right story" (ibid., citing Bruner).

Stardom

What many of these children wanted was the opportunity (*mauqā*) to star, or, more specifically in Hindi, to make the name of their village, their slum, their family, or even their NGO *shine*. Although just one of the numerous opportunities offered by the media NGO to star in its productions, the NGO's feature film was the grandest. As such, all children approached the task of auditioning with nervous anticipation. They were also excited to be involved in the filmmaking process for the multiple experiences it offered: visiting other slum communities, being driven across Delhi, wearing their best clothes, hanging out with their friends at rehearsals, and attending the film's glitzy premiere. While it was a key driver of hope, both here and in other competitions held by the media NGO, winning was not the only outcome offered by competition and the kinds of social worlds it created.

Yet the desire to win and attain stardom was central to the plot of the media NGO's feature film, which revolved around a character named Rahul who was obsessed with the Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan. Fortunately for Rahul, Shah Rukh Khan was booked to judge a talent competition at his school. But on the day of the competition, Rahul was careless and failed to wash his hands after going to the toilet, after playing a game of soccer, and before eating. Just when the critical moment came for him to show off his acting skills, Rahul could only cower on stage, his body wracked by the cramps and the discomfort of violent diarrhea. Abandoning his friends in the middle of their play, Rahul rushed to the toilet. His humiliation was complete when, startled by his friends, he fell in his own excrement, and with soiled hands he was dismissed by his hero Shah Rukh as too dirty even for a handshake. At the conclusion of the film, it was Rahul's sister who offered a final ray of hope,

reminding her brother that one day he will be famous. He just has to make sure he washes his hands.

The choice to structure the film around a competition highlights the extent to which the media NGO relied on competition to drive participation in its programs, while remaining skeptical of and ambivalent about its effects. Rahul did not win the competition, and in fact the ultimate message of the film was that any kind of stardom he may find in the future would depend not on his talent, but on proper development knowledge and practices. Thus, while many of the child participants in the media NGO were attracted to this program in the hope that it would be the first step on their journey toward becoming famous, this was not the kind of orientation and commitment to development that the organization ultimately sought to promote. In fact, several staff at the media NGO were anxious about the potential damage—both to individuals and society more broadly—that might be done by programs based on comparison and merit that set children up to dream big and fall short.

In order to temper the dangerous potential of competition to set children’s hopes soaring, the media NGO continually sought to emphasize the idea that knowledge, cooperation, and community-mindedness were more valuable than talent. To demonstrate this, several months after the premiere of the NGO’s feature film, the boy who played the lead role in it was punished, along with a group of his friends, by having their next project—a short film about dreams—canceled due to their poor attitude and lack of commitment to their fellow club members. Thus, a film about dreams—which was itself structured around a talent contest—could not be allowed to go ahead without proper grounding in the empathetic and cooperative structures of the media club. This clearly indicates that although the media NGO had made competition a key driver of participation in its programs, it continually struggled, and often failed, to successfully rig the contest in favor of the particular set of values and ideas it labeled ‘development’.

The Play of Development

Each of these vignettes indicates that while competition was incredibly ‘productive’ as a driver of participation and performances of development, this ‘productivity’ was not easily confined to a set of goals and values predetermined by the NGO. Children’s posters and stories demonstrated that while children may have used competitions to practice and rehearse development knowledge, this knowledge could also be used to support their own claims to development. Other children abandoned the imaginative grammar of development entirely for more familiar images and stories, and still others sought to ignore the development component of these activities entirely, focusing instead on demonstrating their mastery of acting, dancing, or story writing. The sole

pursuit of these skills without an appropriate orientation to development, particularly when pursued by boys, often resulted in censure by the NGO's staff. Yet this pursuit of mastery and the anxieties associated with it highlight something more than just a "double take of fun and education" (Watanabe 2021: 342). It shows the way children utilized competition to pursue personal rather than institutional goals.

By highlighting the ways in which play can exceed its ideological effects, and how fun—or *mazaa*—requires an openness "to a politics whose direction is neither inevitable nor foreseeable" (Anjaria and Anjaria 2020: 234), these examples also demonstrate the play of what R. Maithreyi (2019) calls 'strategic opportunising'. For Maithreyi, actors respond to and reinterpret the contexts and discourses that shape them in ways that are neither fully emancipatory nor "wholly self-defeating and reproductive" of extant social orders; rather, actors proceed "based on the limited understanding of the present and future available to them" (ibid.: 78). This is what Malaby (2009: 208) might call a "dispositional stance towards the indeterminate," which for him is a "mode of experience" that is not just unique to games but rather saturates our experience in other domains of life. This saturation highlights that alongside an analysis of the competitions and games played in development spaces, we must also attend to how development itself can function in game-like ways for the many children who 'play it' both to have fun and in service of their own development projects and agendas.

The complex ways that competition is both productive and constraining for children and NGO workers emerge clearly here from the ethnography. However, this rich ethnographic context is not recorded for many, if not most, of the materials produced by children in development spaces. Yet given the sheer number of child-authored materials generated in these spaces and the ritual power of their transnational circulation, in the following section I explore competition in two development periodicals produced in the UK and Australia from the 1960s to the 1980s. In these archival sources of diverse global forms of participation via competition, I explore the possibilities for child-centered readings of competition and propose ways of reading these sources against the institutional grain to foreground other meanings, claims, and agendas.

Archives of Competitive Development

With the expansion of development education and youth outreach programs in the post-World War II period, children and young people were, as Anna Bocking-Welch (2012: 882) argues for the Youth Against Hunger (YAH) movement in the UK, given "unprecedented opportunity to participate in International Development." Yet the benefits of this participation were not always understood to

emerge internationally; rather, participation in development efforts became "something of a safety valve" capable of channeling the youthful idealism and enthusiasm of British youth to the betterment of society (Bocking-Welch 2016: 159). That competition was a key tool to generate this participation becomes clear when looking at the innumerable development periodicals and newsletters of the period. Focusing on just two publications, the SCF publication *The World's Children* (*TWC*), in both its British and local Australian editions, and the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign's (AFFHC) publication *Hungerscope*, we can see that—just as in Delhi—knowledge, mastery, self-making, and critique emerge as key components of children's competitive striving. What is different about analyzing competition in these periodicals is that, rather than capturing the range of participation, this is primarily an archive of adult-selected winners.

Both *The World's Children* and *Hungerscope* demonstrate the varied ways children could play, compete, and win while participating in development. For example, the June 1978 issue of *TWC* featured nine-year-old David Abraham from North Yorkshire, who was awarded the individual Roundabout Award by Princess Anne for his fundraising efforts selling miniature rocking chairs he made from clothespins. Earlier that year in March, *TWC* reported on the games of underwater chess played by a group of Bristol divers seeking to break the world record for hours spent underwater. Another example, reported in *Hungerscope* in December 1968, was a 168-hour continuous trampoline-athon by a group of Perth children to raise money for AFFHC. These stories appeared alongside coverage of more commonplace events like walk-a-thons, starve-a-thons, and other famine events geared toward competitive fundraising. Yet these too were often structured to highlight the efforts of a particular child, such as one *TWC* article in December 1979 featuring a "sturdy blond chap" with spina bifida who participated in a sponsored walk around the school grounds for the STOP polio campaign. While competitive fundraising events structured around endurance or deprivation specifically sought to evoke "bodily empathy" (Bocking-Welch 2016: 165) with the fundraising efforts' intended recipients, they also clearly enabled individual children of various abilities to be recognized for unique skills, talents, and hard work. In fact, it is the very specificity and peculiarity of many of these feats that forces an engagement with the actual rather than the ritual child.

While SCF saw younger children as having an "inherent attraction to the funds work" (*TWC*, December 1977), one article anxiously fretted about engaging teenagers, whom it characterized as "desperately trying to establish themselves as persons in their own right." Concerned with developing empathy in older children, the article went on to note that SCF must find new ways to convince the adolescent "to be concerned about the plight of the Third World child." Perhaps one attempt at this was the Teenager of the Year competition

launched in 1979 by the Victorian branch of the SCF. Here judges evaluated “qualities of co-operation in school, creative flair, helpfulness and community interest in the welfare of the less privileged.” While teens were judged on their orientation to others, victory could also easily be seen as establishing them as persons in their own right. Suggesting the kinds of children who strove for this recognition, a report on this award noted that in the four years since its foundation “no student from a metropolitan area has been successful” (*TWC*, Queensland, Victoria, and WA division, 1983).

Poetry and other writing competitions were also favored as a means of facilitating and evaluating children’s empathetic understanding and orientation to development. In 1971, the Queensland FFHC committee held a poem and essay competition for children and young people, and in 1977 Save the Children United Kingdom launched a poetry competition that received 12,500 entries in its first year. This competition, which aimed to “focus attention on the plight of refugee children,” utilized an image of a refugee girl in Bangladesh as a prompt image, requiring children to base their poems on “her and her feelings.” Whether a result of adult selection or children’s own understandings, the winners of these narrative-based competitions often reproduced sentimentalized representations of the Third World child. Yet they were by no means anti-political. The final stanza of a poem by Sarah Richards (aged 11) reads:

In Bangladesh the starving girl
Who cries at the Eastern Star,
Could live for years on the price of a pearl
From the Broach of the girl in the car

Another by Claire Nicholson (aged 17) situates the image of the crying girl within the context of a business deal in which “a big fat, well-fed, succulent world” dominates a meeting with “a little thin world who did not have a chair.”

One reading of these poems would be to see them, as Malkki (2015: 89) likely would, as contributing to “the pervasive social imagination of children as keepers of universal truths.” For Malkki, this truth is “a universal but non-specific, generally powerless form of truth” (*ibid.*: 91). Yet a close engagement with these texts suggests the complex ways children mobilized particular narrative forms to demonstrate their own knowledge of the global inequalities and to publicly critique their own societies and the adults who run them. The vehemence of these critiques forces us to reconsider exactly what it is that makes these truths ‘powerless’. Perhaps a re-engagement with the political quality of children’s own words might itself go some way toward reinstating such power.

While work with archival sources differs greatly from ethnographic work, it is similarly in the little details—the rocking chairs handmade from clothespins, the hours spent trampolining, the dominance of rural children, the big

smiles in photos of children receiving certificates and awards, and unique phrases like "a big fat, well-fed, succulent world"—that we get glimpses of the diverse ways competition may be productive for children themselves. To better understand why this aspect of children's participation in competition has been so neglected, we need to look further back in time and grapple with the way Enlightenment thinking about childhood, competition, and subjectification has limited our field of vision—and continues to do so.

Some Thoughts Concerning Our Enlightenment Inheritance

In discussions of human nature and the socialization of children, competition emerges as a central problematic for a range of Enlightenment thinkers. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke (1693: 55) stresses that "if you can once get into Children a love of Credit, and an apprehension of Shame and Disgrace, you have put into them the true Principle, which will constantly work, and incline them to the right." Highlighting the productive potential of this, Locke states that the love of "Praise or Play" can be "made use of to excite him [the child] to activity" (ibid.: 146). While not specifically mentioning competition, Locke does suggest that the desires of children "to be like those above them, will give them an Inclination which will set them on work in a Way wherein they will go on with Vigour and Pleasure" (ibid.: 80). Locke's focus on the motivational aspects of comparison and reward indicates the ways that competition can incentivize and drive children's participation and labor. Yet this productivity also has a moral sense—an inclination toward 'right'—that aligns nicely with development's own progressive teleology.

An orientation to the beneficial and relational aspects of competition can also be seen in the revised edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which Adam Smith ([1759] 2009: 260) argues that "emulation, the anxious desire that we ourselves should excel, is originally founded in our admiration of the excellence of others." For Smith, in order to attain satisfaction from admiration, we must be able to view our character and conduct "with the eyes of other people" (ibid.: 253). This suggests the complementary nature of sympathy and emulation, and the capacity of competition to expand and extend our relations with others. This idea was taken up by the winner of the 1800–1801 French National Institute contest for the Class of Moral and Political Sciences (responding to the question, 'Is emulation a good means of education?'), who drew on Adam Smith to advocate "competition for personal and social well-being" (Staum 1985: 165). This emphasis on personal and social well-being is perhaps also what the SCF sought to promote in teenagers, and what the media NGO feared some of their teenage boys were lacking. This latter concern demonstrates anxieties about the productivity of competition that were also on display in the

1800–1801 contest. Arguing against emulation, one entrant, awarded the First Honorable Mention, argued that “overeducated prizewinners would disdain manual labor,” noting that, “after school contests, ‘every brat thinks he’s called to be Cicero, Virgil, or Voltaire’” (ibid.).

These kinds of concerns are not unique to nineteenth-century France or twenty-first-century Delhi, but appear to reoccur at moments of social change. In 1805, a key opponent of English charity school reformer Joseph Lancaster’s model of mass education described the scheme as “likely to unsettle social hierarchy by ‘elevating ... the minds of those doomed to the drudgery of daily labour, above their condition, and thereby rendering them discontented and unhappy in their lot’” (Hogan 1989: 406). Likewise, Nancy Green (1978: 131) shows that when faced with the expansion of schooling to girls in the nineteenth century, North American school reformers “realized that the traditional stress on competition as a means of motivating students was in conflict with their ideal of womanhood.” Although this concern faded away as education became a pathway into teaching and a “productive role for middle-class women” (ibid.: 139), it highlights the need to attend closely to the social dynamics of cycles of concern about competition and the subjects it produces. Specifically, for both anthropology and development, it is important to consider how the instrumental and productive uses of competition cyclically give way to concerns about the extent to which competition unleashes forces that can destabilize moral and social structures—the same structures that initially stood to benefit from competition’s ‘productivity’.

That anxieties about the danger of competition can themselves be linked to coercive regimes of discipline and deception is no more apparent than in *Emile, or On Education*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ([1762] 1979: 89) extended thought experiment on subjectification. This text demonstrates an orientation to ‘childhood’ for its own sake that has led many to see Rousseau as the originator of modern ideas of childhood. In *Emile*, Rousseau makes clear his break with the past, noting: “It is quite strange that since people first became involved with raising children, no instrument for guiding them has been imagined other than emulation, jealousy, envy, vanity, avidity, and vile fear” (ibid.: 91–92). And so Rousseau advocates: “Let there never be any comparisons with other children, no rivals, no competitors, not even in running, once he has begun to be able to reason. I prefer a hundred times over that he not learn what he would only learn out of jealousy or vanity” (ibid.: 184). Competition here is configured as leading to comparison and a “debasement dependency,” the source of “every kind of vice” (K. Smith 2014: 71).

Yet despite his objection to competition and emulation, Rousseau in the same treatise highlights the pedagogic potential of running races in an episode that is first presented as being about another child—idle and lazy, although intended for the army—and later presented as being about Emile himself

(Rousseau [1762] 1979: 436). In this episode, the narrator notes with much self-satisfaction how he got his young charge to begin running by offering a small cake as a prize to some local boys to run a race. After several weeks of watching these races, the pupil who desired these cakes for himself began to practice running in secret. At first, when he was winning only a few races, he eagerly devoured the cake like his rivals before him, "but, in accustoming himself to victory, he became generous and often shared with the vanquished" (*ibid.*: 142). The narrator then goes on to detail not only the boy's developing athletic prowess and expanded sense of fairness and generosity, but also improvements in his ability to estimate and measure distances, which are accomplished after the tutor reveals he has been tricking his pupil by making him start behind the other boys. In this controlled pedagogical experiment, the dangers of competition are neutralized and translated into an array of educational and moral benefits. Control is key here, as is the presence of the "unseen hand" of the tutor, who constantly seeks to manipulate the child and his environment to facilitate "his maturity as though nature had formed him" (Kessen 1978: 159).

In the case of Rousseau's ([1762] 1979: 143) running races, the child's supposed 'natural growth' is dependent upon a level of commitment and training by the child himself, with "the play becoming a sort of passion." An engagement with this passion, the child's training, the sweetness of the cakes so well earned, the wind on the child's face as he runs, the look on the other boys' faces as they struggle to catch him—all offer clues for a possible child-centered, ethnographic approach to competition that recognizes how children can direct competition to their own ends. Objects like cakes or miniature rocking chairs, the applause of the crowd, the smiles on the faces of one's teacher, the bounce of the trampoline, and the feeling of writing your name on a drawing you are proud of, these moments, objects, affects, and 'goods'—which are themselves distributed unevenly throughout competition—have cumulative effects that multiply the subjectivities available to participants. After all, this is one of the key intentions of competition, that is, to create a 'distribution' of outcomes rather than uniformity, since there can only be one winner. While typically conceptualized as a predictable and linear representation of success or failure with positions clearly enumerated (third, fifth, tenth, and so on), this distribution is actually indeterminant and diverse. There is the joker who wants to make his friends laugh, the serious poet or artist, the vain performer. There are those who participate half-heartedly, those who dream of winning, those who try to game the system, those who work hard to make their families proud, those who help a more talented friend, and those who wait until the next competition. While these other subjectivities can perhaps occasionally be harnessed to, or recognized by, institutional structures, they frequently operate according to other logics and agendas.

It is precisely this distribution of subjectivities that is neglected in debates about competition that anxiously fret over the effects of a universal and uniform desire for success, whether in the context of Enlightenment models of human development or in contemporary debates about the effects of neoliberalism. In this configuration, questions such as what is ‘good’ about competition for each participant are very quickly abandoned for society-level concerns about what is good—or bad—about competition for ‘us’. This impulse, which is only magnified when applied to child subjects, must itself become an object of critique, particularly given its cyclical reappearance in times when the constituency of ‘us’ is changing or threatened. This is particularly telling for development, which is, at least ostensibly, working to expand the scope of those who can enjoy the fruits of ‘success’. There is not only a tendency to neglect the multiple and distributed subjectivities produced by competition, but also an attempt to try to fix these positions in a way that fails to recognize their mutability. Specifically, it is the sheer proliferation of competitions in development spaces that makes determining such positions an impossibility, as children quickly reorient themselves to the next opportunity, asking “Is there going to be another competition today?”

Conclusion

Rousseau, who gave each of his five children to a foundling home without noting their dates of birth or genders (Kessen 1978: 155), was perhaps never in a position to have witnessed the ‘strategic opportunising’ (Maithreyi 2019) of children. Nor does the model of personhood and child development that ‘we’ in the West inherit from Enlightenment philosophy really countenance the value of such an outcome. This results in a recurrent concern about the possibility of competition to produce more than what is intended, coupled with an almost complete disinclination to seriously engage with the diversity of this ‘production’. This anxious and dismissive disposition is clearly displayed in the way competition is deployed by development organizations working with children, both in the past and in the present. This double-edged disposition operates at both a material and experiential level, such that children’s experiences of competition in development spaces and the products of this competition have long been neglected. Thus, in this article I have proposed that it is through sustained and critical engagement with the material and performative work done by children in competitive arenas that we can engage with the real—rather than ‘ritual’—children, whose competitive labor is one of the key transnational engines of development.

Such a focus should also include an account of the adult apprehensions that surround, structure, and inform children’s participation. Yet ultimately it must

attend at least equally (if not more) to the kinds of things that adults have, seemingly for centuries, not been that concerned about. This includes scholars in anthropology, history, the social sciences, and even childhood studies, who have for far too long neglected the material, performative, and experiential dimensions of children's participation in competition. Recognizing children "as *persons* and not just as elementary forms of 'our shared humanity'" (Malkki 2015: 101) thus requires engaging with them as "expressive (experiencing) individual[s]" (Malaby 2020: 15) *and* as subjects of institutional discipline, whose contributions to competition are diverse, unruly, and frequently exceed institutional aims.

Annie McCarthy is currently an Assistant Professor in Global Studies at the University of Canberra. Her work explores the way marginalized children negotiate and challenge the institutions that seek to preserve, foster, or establish childhood. She is the author of *Children and NGOs in India: Development as Storytelling and Performance* (2021), an ethnography of slum children's participation in development programs in Delhi. More recently, she has begun work on a historically grounded project exploring the constraints and dynamism of children's participation in development and humanitarianism, foregrounding the concrete and material ways in which children—as both political and historical subjects—produce development. ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-0500-5199. E-mail: annie.mccarthy@canberra.edu.au

Note

1. See United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, "Competitions and Contests," <https://unric.org/en/category/united-nations-digital-engagement-hub/united-nations-competitions-and-contests/>.

References

- Anjaria, Jonathan Shapiro, and Ulka Anjaria. 2020. "Mazaa: Rethinking Fun, Pleasure and Play in South Asia." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43 (2): 232–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1725718>.
- Bocking-Welch, Anna. 2012. "Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses: British Involvement in the United Nations Freedom from Hunger Campaign, 1960–70." *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40 (5): 879–896. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2012.730840>.

- Bocking-Welch, Anna. 2016. "Youth Against Hunger: Service, Activism and the Mobilisation of Young Humanitarians in 1960s Britain." *European Review of History* 23 (1–2): 154–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1121974>.
- Cheney, Kristen, and Aviva Sinervo, eds. 2019. *Disadvantaged Childhoods and Humanitarian Intervention: Processes of Affective Commodification and Objectification*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gal, Tali, and Benedetta Faedi Duramy, eds. 2015. *International Perspectives and Empirical Findings on Child Participation: From Social Exclusion to Child-Inclusive Policies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Green, Nancy. 1978. "Female Education and School Competition: 1820–1850." *History of Education Quarterly* 18 (2): 129–142. <https://doi.org/10.2307/367796>.
- Hart, Roger A. 1992. "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship." Innocenti Essay, No. 4, UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Florence. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100-childrens-participation-from-tokenism-to-citizenship.html>.
- Hogan, David. 1989. "The Market Revolution and Disciplinary Power: Joseph Lancaster and the Psychology of the Early Classroom System." *History of Education Quarterly* 29 (3): 381–417. <https://doi.org/10.2307/368910>.
- Jackson, Michael. 2002. *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- James, Allison. 2007. "Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials." *American Anthropologist* 109 (2): 261–272. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.2.261>.
- Kessen, William. 1978. "Rousseau's Children." *Daedalus* 107 (3): 155–166. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024569>.
- Locke, John. 1693. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. London: A. and J. Churchill.
- Lundy, Laura. 2018. "In Defence of Tokenism? Implementing Children's Right to Participate in Collective Decision-Making." *Childhood* 25 (3): 340–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218777292>.
- Maithreyi, R. 2019. "Children's Reconstruction of Psychological Knowledge: An Ethnographic Study of Life Skills Education Programmes in India." *Childhood* 26 (1): 68–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218798014>.
- Malaby, Thomas M. 2009. "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience." *New Literary History* 40 (1): 205–218. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0079>.
- Malaby, Thomas M. 2020. "Institutions in Play: Practices of Legitimation in Games." In *Playful Participatory Practices: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections*, ed. Pablo Abend, Benjamin Beil, and Vanessa Ossa, 15–30. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Malkki, Liisa H. 2015. *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McCarthy, Annie. 2021. *Children and NGOs in India: Development as Storytelling and Performance*. London: Routledge.

- Romani, Sahar. 2016. "Being NGO Girls: Gender, Subjectivities and Everyday Life in Kolkata." *Gender, Place & Culture* 23 (3): 365–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1013446>.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. (1762) 1979. *Emile, or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Sheehan, Nancy M. 1987. "Junior Red Cross in the Schools: An International Movement, A Voluntary Agency, and Curriculum Change." *Curriculum Inquiry* 17 (3): 247–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.1987.11075292>.
- Sinervo, Aviva, and Kristen Cheney. 2019. "NGO Economies of Affect: Humanitarianism and Childhood in Contemporary and Historical Perspective." In Cheney and Sinervo 2019, 1–36.
- Smith, Adam. (1759) 2009. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ed. Knud Haakonssen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Karen M. 2014. *The Government of Childhood: Discourse, Power and Subjectivity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Staum, Martin S. 1985. "The Enlightenment Transformed: The Institute Prize Contests." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 19 (2): 153–179. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2738640>.
- Strassler, Karen. 2006. "Reformasi through Our Eyes: Children as Witnesses of History in Post-Suharto Indonesia." *Visual Anthropology Review* 22 (2): 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.2006.22.2.53>.
- Watanabe, Chika. 2021. "Playing through the Apocalypse: Preparing Children for Mass Disasters in Japan and Chile." *Public Culture* 33 (2): 239–259. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-8917206>.
- Wright, Susannah. 2020. "Creating Liberal-Internationalist World Citizens: League of Nations Union Junior Branches in English Secondary Schools, 1919–1939." *Paedagogica Historica* 56 (3): 321–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2018.1538252>.