

## Navigating Reconceptualist and Feminist Ethics of Care Scholarship to Find a Conceptual Space for Rethinking Children's Needs in Early Childhood Education

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*The aim of this article is to navigate through differing perspectives on the concept of children's needs in early childhood education. Reconceptualist scholars critique the developmental narrative of the needy and dependent child. In contrast, feminist ethics of care scholars regard having needs and dependencies as ontologically what it means to be human. The article proposes a potential in-between space that recognizes that children have needs and dependencies, as do all entities. At the same time, this recognition is complicated through entangled ideas about subjectivity, needs interpretation, relationality, ethics, and politics.*

**Key words:** early childhood education; children's needs; reconceptualist theory; feminist ethics of care

In the early childhood education (ECE) field, children's needs are predominantly framed through a developmental lens. In reaction to the dominance of developmentalism, scholars who describe themselves as reconceptualists, or as members of the reconceptualizing early childhood education (RECE) movement, articulate how developmental needs are treated as deficits, limiting educators' appreciation of children's capabilities. In their publications, these scholars question the normalizing and universalizing processes of developmentalism and explore new ways of thinking about children that do not center on their needs (e.g., the first and second editions of the RECE Reader edited by Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella [2014, 2018] explore these ways). Feminist ethics of care literature also challenges the deficit framing of needs, but in contrast to reconceptualist literature, argues for the centrality of needs as a fundamental component and experience of being human.

In this article I attempt to bridge my theoretical work with both reconceptualist early childhood education (e.g., Langford, 2010) and feminist ethics of care (Langford, 2019) literature. Thinking about the concept of children's needs within and between these two bodies of literature has been deeply unsettling. The purpose of this article is to explore this conceptual disequilibrium and to navigate reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care scholarship to find a potential space for rethinking children's needs in early childhood education. I begin by setting out the conflicts over conceptualizing children's needs that broadly exist between the two bodies of literature while acknowledging some important points of agreement. Indeed, some reconceptualists use ethics of care scholarship in their own pedagogical theorizing (e.g., Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot, & Sanchez, 2015). In the next section, I explore some ways reconceptualist scholars seek to substitute the language of children's needs for something else. As Andrew Gibbons (2007) suggests, I explore and "play" the ruins of these

conflicts and substitutions. Gibbons writes that “the ruins” refers to “both the contexts within which knowledge(s) and practices in education are disrupted or ‘troubled’ *and* the positive critique of the disruption or troubling” (p. 124, emphasis added; see also St. Pierre & Pillow [2000] for a further explanation of this term). I then arrive at a key premise that appears to directly contradict existing reconceptualist literature: Children (as do all entities) depend on others to fulfill unrealized needs through caring encounters. However, I propose that three understandings are required to support the premise that children have needs: (1) children are relational and embodied subjects with complex needs; (2) the caring encounter in which children’s needs are recognized is a moment of relationality; and (3) interpretations of and responses to children’s needs are ethical and political actions. I suggest that both reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care literature have the critical resources to explore the proposed premise and three understandings and to open up a third conceptual space for thinking about children’s needs in early childhood education.

### Conflicts and agreements

Marianne Bloch (2018) describes how critical perspectives in the ECE field seek to “rupture” dominant discourses and practices in theory, methodology, curriculum, and policies (p. 25). In relation to the concept of children’s needs, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and colleagues (2015) write that postfoundational scholars reject the narrative of children “as having needs and vulnerabilities, mostly defined through developmental lenses” (p. 46). Other reconceptualists, such as Glenda MacNaughton (2003) and Michael O’Loughlin (2018), rightly argue that the focus on children’s developmental needs has led too readily to theorists and educators taking a deficit view of children’s knowledge and skills, particularly those of children deemed different. Further, reconceptualists (e.g., Moss, 2019) have documented the intensification of this deficit perspective with the rise of the neoliberal state, which values above all else in early childhood education evidence of learning in children quantified through technical assessment tools. More recently, reconceptualist posthumanist scholars have critiqued both developmentalism and the centering of the human experience in ECE, which, from their perspective, results in the exclusion of the experiences of all other entities. For example, Osgood and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2019) state, “until now, childhood studies has been ... a human matter focused on the needs of individual children” (p. xvii). They argue that another approach to childhood is to address the profound, human-induced ecological challenges facing both the human and more-than-human world. Other posthumanist reconceptualist early childhood scholars (e.g., Hodgins, Yazbeck, & Wapenaar, 2019) work with Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) exploration of moralism beyond “anthropocentric ethics” and the displacement of care as merely human (p. 13).

In contrast, feminist ethics of care as a critical moral and political theory (Robinson, 2019) emphasizes responsibility for and responsiveness to the needs of dependent others. Care scholars such as Marian Barnes (2012), Virginia Held (2006), Eva Kittay (2015), Tove Pettersen (2008), and Joan Tronto (2013) view dependency, vulnerability, and the having of needs as ontologically what it means to be human. Tronto (2013), for example, proposes the concept of equally needy citizens; as she says, “being needy is shared equally by all humans” (p. 28). Kittay (2015) describes the human condition in a similar way: “We are all inevitably dependent and inextricably interdependent” (p. 58). In using language such as “needy” and “dependent,” Tronto and Kittay seek to unsettle what they believe is a denial of and a discomfort with a human ontological state. These care scholars argue that liberal and, more recently, neoliberal theories that permeate discourses, policies, and practices in many contemporary societies privilege the autonomous, independent, self-interested, and self-made person. As Tronto (2013) has documented, some people in the public sphere seek through individualism and privileged irresponsibility to escape from the neediness of others, while in the private sphere, predominantly women and racialized groups are expected to be responsive to these needs in the home and in low-paying, low-status jobs.

In broadly describing differing points of view on the concept of needs, I do not mean to suggest that the two bodies of literature are diametrically opposed to one another. As elaborated on in later sections, feminist ethics of care and reconceptualist scholars share a rejection of binaries such as the “self” and the “other,” holding a belief that human beings are constituted as selves and subjects through relations with others (Robinson, 2019). Universalism also is rejected for an understanding of context and “the particular experiences, histories and relative power of others” (Engster & Hamington, 2015, p. 3). In addition, scholars (e.g., Donovan, 2007; Hodgins et al., 2019) from the reconceptualist, animal rights, and environmental movements pay attention to the more-than-human world through feminist care theory. In my own response to Osgood and Pacini-Ketchabaw’s call for a posthumanist approach, I recognize that my focus on the concept of children’s needs is a humanist project. In this regard, Bloch, Swadener, and Cannella’s (2018) critical question guides me: “Even as we ... acknowledge the human impact on the more-than-human world, how do we avoid losing our focus on young children, their lives, care and education” (p. 7)? However, I believe that it is possible to imagine the needs of all within entangled relational contexts of both human and more-than-human worlds. For the purposes of this article, I begin to imagine a way through the highly contested conceptual terrain of children’s needs with some tentative engagement with posthumanist theory.

For some postfoundational scholars, feminist ethics of care has been a source of pedagogical inspiration (e.g., Arndt & Tesar, 2019; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Hodgins et al., 2019). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) draw on ethics of care scholars Sevenhuijsen (1998) and Tronto (1993) to emphasize that in early childhood “ethics [is] a creative practice, requiring the making of contextualised ethical decisions rather than following universal rules or codes” (p. 73). This ethics, they add, is about “care of and responsibility for the Other, both of which arise from proximity, from being confronted by the Other” (p. 73). Dahlberg and Moss also acknowledge human needs in relation to care’s responsiveness, although this reference is bracketed in their text (p. 74). Building on Dahlberg and Moss’s use of ethics of care, Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) describe this ethical approach as the means to critically think about, challenge, and disrupt expert discourses such as those associated with children’s developmental needs (p. 179). Thus, these scholars draw on the ethics of care yet distant themselves from Tronto’s (1993) contention that “what is definitive about care seems to be a perspective of taking the other’s needs as the starting point for what must be done” (p. 105).

### **Substituting children’s needs for something else**

From a feminist ethics of care perspective, Tronto (2013) and Bourgault (2014) examine approaches that seek to substitute needs for something else. Tronto states, “The question of trying to define and to specify ‘needs’ is a difficult problem, both politically and philosophically. Others have tried to articulate another approach that avoids ‘needs’ and focused instead on ‘basic human capabilities’” (p. 162). This alternative approach is evident in reconceptualizing literature wherein discourses of children’s competencies dominate. To clarify, these discourses importantly and positively generate an image of the child as capable, intelligent, and agentic (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Further, reconceptualist literature appears to elevate discourses of competency to resist the neediness/competency binary so evident in developmentalism and to complexify an understanding of children. From my perspective, the competency discourse is, however, problematic when viewed as the antithesis to developmentalism so that competency becomes in opposition to needs. Furthermore, I have wondered why the language of the “competent child” has emerged in ECE systems plagued by a neoliberal social investment narrative of human capital and high returns (Moss, 2019). In other words, through this grand narrative, the competent child appears to have become politically salient in a neoliberal state. Could it be that the rise of competency discourses represents a reinscribing of the developmental goal of independence required from children for becoming future self-made entrepreneurs in the neoliberal state (Duhn, 2010)? While reconceptualists resist such insidious reinscribing, does this new emphasis on competency inadvertently reinforce the value placed on those ideal children who demonstrate

growing independence and the devaluing and stigmatizing of those different and exceptional children perceived as more dependent, needy, and requiring care?

Ethics of care scholars reject the binary between competency and neediness, asserting that humans with needs are not at all exceptional; they are all of us (Paperman, 2006). Furthermore, these scholars argue that competency does not negate need; in fact, feminist ethics of care scholars maintain that we are competent when we recognize and address our own and other persons' needs (Noddings, 2010; Tronto, 2013). They contend, therefore, that we need more complex language that describes human beings, including the youngest humans, as both having competencies as well as needs and as being relationally autonomous as well as dependent on others to fulfill these needs. In this way, care scholars suggest that accepting the ontology of human (and more-than-human) neediness cuts more productively through the competency/neediness binary.

Tronto (2013) and Bourgault (2013) also examine substituting rights for needs. Some reconceptualizing scholars emphasize the value of an ethics of rights for amplifying children's voices and addressing social justice issues in early childhood (e.g., Swadener & Polakow, 2011). While not disputing the importance of listening to and hearing what children think and want, from an ethics of care perspective, an ethics of rights represents a political definition of a (neo)liberal, universal, and normative understanding of the individual person (e.g., Bourgault, 2013; Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). Care scholars argue that a person with rights is viewed favourably as an autonomous and active agent or self-interested individual who assert their rights through rational thought linked to independent action (Held, 2006, p. 13). Furthermore, Kari Greenswag (2017) suggests that an ethics of rights, with its focus on universal rules, is an appealing, straightforward proposition in that rights are predicated on the idea of legal equality in which persons have the same rights. Ethics of care scholars contend that needs which permeate every aspect of life do not function in the same way; they are always subject to different contexts and levels of caring attention and support (Davy, 2019; Polakow, 2018). In making this claim, feminist ethics of care scholars do not abandon a focus on social justice. For example, in laying out the processes for a political ethics of care, Tronto (2013) includes *caring with*, which requires that caring needs and "the ways in which they met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all" (p. 23). Admittedly, a focus on needs through an ethics of care perspective is a much messier and more complex ethical proposition, but it is the way ethical decisions can be enacted given our ontological interdependence.

### **In the conceptual ruins of children's needs**

In previous sections, I set out problems with the concept of children's needs, and potential approaches for avoiding or substituting needs for something else, such as competencies and/or rights. While in these conceptual ruins (Gibbons, 2007), I emphasized several times a central theme in feminist ethics of care, which is that "relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence" (Robinson, 2011, p. 4). Accordingly, depending on others to have needs met is not a human deficit, a weakness, or a limitation; it is what makes us human. It is this ontological understanding that I am not willing to give up even in the conceptual ruins of children's needs.

My underlying premise for rethinking children's needs then is not surprising: Children, as do all humans (as well as nonhumans), depend on others to fulfill unrealized needs. While on the surface this premise seems to retain the status quo, feminist ethics of care scholars argue that it is a radical statement (Gilligan, 2013). Positioning neediness (and I use this language as a provocation) as what it means to be human strikes at the very core of liberal theory that valorizes the autonomous, independent, self-interested person unfettered by a need for care and the neediness of others. Moreover, valuing caring relations simultaneously demands an assertion that humans

depend on others to recognize and respond in caring ways to their needs. Another way of putting this is, if others, whether human or nonhuman, require care then they must have dependencies and unfilled needs. Even if we talk about interdependence, which reconceptualists often do, then we have to acknowledge that needs are inextricably tied up in interdependencies. And even if we talk about educators attuning to children, children to educators, and educators attuning to the more-than-human we have to ask: What are they attuning to? In other words, attunement, a key element of care, is always a response to something; often this something is an expression of need. Denials of what it means to have needs that require responses all fall into the trap that patriarchy sets out to keep needs, dependencies, and vulnerabilities hidden away in a private sphere of second-class citizens. Gilligan (2013) calls for resistance to all forms of oppression that seek to deny the need for care and the caring capacities of all citizens of a democracy.

From my perspective then, the problem with the concept of children's needs lies not in its ontological nature and moral value. The problems, I contend, lie in how we understand who children are and what their needs are, how educators interpret and respond to children's needs (as well as their own), and why these interpretations and responses are underpinned by ethics and politics. I therefore propose three understandings that support the premise that children have needs: (1) children are embodied subjects with complex needs; (2) the caring encounter in which children's needs are recognized is a moment of relationality; and (3) interpretations of and responses to children's needs are ethical and political actions. In illuminating these three understandings, points of congruence and divergence in reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care literature are discussed while recognizing that both serve as important critiques of developmentalism.

### **Children as embodied subjects with complex needs**

In early childhood programs that use a developmental framework, the individual child is understood as having fixed needs that are externally defined (O'Loughlin, 2018). A child is expected to grow out of their needs through linear instruction and increasingly demonstrate independence in their taken-for-granted skills and knowledge. Reconceptualist scholars reject this unitary construct of the individual child (MacNaughton, 2003; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). Rather, children are understood as subjects constituted and reconstituted through various unconscious discursive practices enacted in social interactions in different contexts (Davies, 1989). Some reconceptualists draw on Judith Butler's notion of gendered performance in which a subject's identity as a girl or boy is constituted through a stylized repetition of acts or performances (Butler, 1988; Taylor, 2010). Through these performances, bodies become gendered, although Butler views embodiment as variable, changeable, and coconstituted with class, race, and other social positionings. Feminist materialism theory has further enriched these ideas of subject formation. Osgood and Robinson (2019) write, "A growing body of new materialist and posthumanist approaches invite a re-examination of how we come to understand children and childhood—which also foregrounds context, fluidity and performance but which brings materiality and affect more forcibly into the frame" (p. 4). This perspective suggests that children's subjectivities are "not only created through discourse but emerge in the very moments of encounters between bodies, things and discourse" (p. 215). Overall, Bloch, Swadener, and Cannella (2018) conclude that postfoundational theories—humanist and posthumanist—offer ways to think about children as embodying "diverse situated identities and a multiplicity of subjectivities" (p. 7).

Understanding children as subjects therefore requires a different understanding of the needs of that subject. However, critical discussions about children's needs in relation to their multiple subjectivities appear to be largely absent from reconceptualizing literature. In ethics of care literature, notions of subjectivity, identity, and embodiment are explored, although more often in relation to a caring identity than to the identity of a person requiring care (critical disabilities studies, concerned with the experiences of persons with disabilities, is an exception). However,

in general, care scholars maintain that care relations are “constitutive of identities” (Raghuram, 2016, p. 516). Maurice Hamington (2004) further argues that care cannot be understood without attending to its embodied dimension; indeed care, lived as a material practice, as labour and an experience, emphasizes its embodiment (p. 4). Hamington maintains that “care does more than underpin yet another ethical theory—it is the very foundation of morality rooted in our body and our bodily practices” (p. 5).

These reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care perspectives potentially lead to a different kind of understanding of children constituted as embodied subjects with complex needs through immersion in caring relations. This understanding, however, still begs the question “What are children’s complex needs?” Many reconceptualists have exposed a problematic narrative about children’s needs that states children have physical needs requiring care and they have learning needs, classified into various developmental domains, requiring education. In ethics of care literature, a few scholars have sought to classify needs. Nel Noddings (2013), for example, classifies needs as basic (i.e., physical) or as expressed wants and interests. Stephanie Collins (2015, p. 55) in her analysis of the core of care ethics quotes Jaggar (1995) who states that beyond needs, “participants in caring relations also strive to delight and empower each other” (p. 180). Sophie Bourgault (2014), drawing on French philosopher Simone Weil, describes the needs of the soul or psychic and moral needs (p. 8). However, I am reluctant, as are many reconceptualist scholars (e.g., Dahlberg & Moss, 2018), to promote a technical and potentially hierarchical practice of classification. Brunella Casalini (2019), a care scholar, offers one reason for this reluctance. She maintains that care in the neoliberal state is concerned with “improving and perfecting the care receiver,” who is constructed as human capital. Casalini states, “Such improvement [will] be susceptible to some form of measurement and achievement assessment” (p. 4). Reconceptualists argue for resistance to such neoliberal concerns, improvements, and forms of measurement. Another reason for this reluctance is that the early childhood education field already has a pernicious divide between what are perceived as care needs versus education needs. Peter Moss (2019) has rightly articulated the position that “care as an ethic should permeate all education” (p. 59). Nevertheless, the binary between care and education persists, as reconceptualist scholars argue, because it represents the body-mind split perpetuated through Western patriarchal discourses and systems (e.g., Van Laere, Roets, & Vandebroek, 2019). Similarly, Fiona Robinson (2019), a care scholar, states that “care ethics recognises that Western patriarchy is itself constituted by various forms of racism and by explicit or implicit colonial logics—all of which are themselves constructed through what we might call ‘master’ binaries—between ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ and ‘body’ and ‘mind’” (p. 6). As do humanist and posthumanist reconceptualists, Robinson seeks to “transcend these binaries through repudiation of the modern, disembodied moral subject, and open the door to the relational subject—embodied, connected, situated, heterogeneous, plural” (Robinson, 2019, p. 3).

In avoiding a classification of children’s needs, I still have not satisfactorily provided a description of what children’s needs are, particularly one that shifts thinking away from developmentalism. In this regard, I make the claim that children themselves throughout their childhood express their needs in caring relations. I view the expressed needs of children as a complex set of wants, goals, views, wishes, desires, concerns, and interests (along with other possibilities) that differ among children and are always changeable. This complexity resists an easy classification of children’s needs in that children self-define in relation with others what their needs are. Some reconceptualist scholars, for example, Liane Mozère (2014), invoking Deleuze and Guattari (1987), capture this complexity using the language of desire so that in early childhood encounters “desire meets desire” (p. 104). Certainly, the language of desire seems lighter, more interesting and exciting whereas the language of needs seems heavy, ponderous, and burdensome. However, in suggesting that needs encompass desires, wants, goals, views, wishes, concerns, and interests, the language of needs can be enlivened, representing forces that the flow in and between humans and more-than-humans.

Children communicate their complex needs in multiple ways and forms, eloquently captured in the “hundred languages of children” described in Reggio-Emilia educational philosophy (Malaguzzi, 1996). Children actively and competently seek (and are actively encouraged by educators to do so) to have their needs recognized through multiple caring encounters in diverse human and nonhuman contexts. Conceptualizing children’s needs as expressed signals that having needs is compatible with agency and the exercise of autonomy within care relations. Thus, children are understood as engaged, curious, and intelligent subjects constituting and reconstituting their needs as they live in, explore, investigate, and experience human and more-than-human worlds. Furthermore, care scholars stress that care is a coparticipative process and that caring is “not complete” without the other’s engagement and response (Engster & Hamington, 2015, p. 4). Therefore, not only do children actively engage in expressing their needs, they also communicate their responses to interpretations of these needs. This means that children are not passive recipients of care. Moreover, those who care for children must critically reflect on and judge their caring actions (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In such a caring encounter, a one-directional, interventionist, instrumental, and technical approach to meeting children’s needs is therefore rejected. This understanding also insists on an orientation not toward achievements in meeting predefined needs required for the future, a neoliberal value, but toward caring encounters in the present, the everyday, and the ordinary (Casalini, 2019).

There may be three objections to this conceptualization of children’s needs. One objection may be that, in abandoning a framework of children’s developmental needs, even reconceptualists require a way to think about what is important for children’s experiences in early childhood education. I agree and point to several reconceptualist early learning curriculum frameworks that set out a vision and broad goals for early childhood education in their particular geographical, social, and political context. For example, British Columbia’s framework has goals in the following learning areas: well-being and belonging; engagement with materials, others, and the world; communication and literacies; identities, social responsibility, and diversity (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). A second objection may be that inevitably educators (in fact, everyone) will make assumptions from their own life experiences and professional education about what children need and do not need. These assumptions particularly flourish when educators believe that young children cannot competently communicate their needs. However, reconceptualist and ethics of care scholars agree that if we regard children as relational subjects with complex needs expressed in multiple ways then this requires interpretation, tempered by humility, not paternalistic assumptions about these needs. In caring encounters, an interpretative orientation to children’s expressed needs honours careful listening, emotive knowledge, sensitivity to contextual nuances, and conversation. Hamington (2018) states that responsiveness to needs requires contextual knowledge of those needs, “making the process of care a form of inquiry” (p. 310). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) emphasize that even with respectful inquiry that genuinely seeks to amplify children’s views and interests, care responses may still be partial and provisional. In other words, it is not possible to know fully the human or more-than-human in need. More broadly, Tronto (2013) maintains that “the process of determining needs is one of the foremost political struggles of any account of care and the key point of democratic caring practices will be to embrace this struggle as an intrinsic part of democratic life” (p. 162).

A third objection to my claim may be that that it is impossible to respond to every child’s needs, particularly when framed as interests, desires, and wants. A related concern may be that this responsiveness reifies the needs of individual children and works against a collectivist understanding of human and more-than-human needs (Taylor, 2018). However, care and reconceptualist scholars stress that all human beings are constrained by their “social existence” and fundamental relationality and connectiveness within and between human and nonhuman worlds (Hamington, 2018, p. 310). This means that while the expressed needs of individual children are taken seriously, there can be conflicts over them, and some may not be reconciled through inquiry and dialogue. Importantly though, Noddings (2010) insists that care is a precondition to interpreting and responding to needs even when

conflicts arise. In addition, caring educators frequently ask how forms of oppression influence the ways in which they enact care in response to children's needs. As Robinson (2019) states, "the relational subject of care ethics" constantly negotiates relations with others in ways that break down existing relations of power (p. 3). In the context of early childhood education, Mozère (2014) beautifully writes, "adults may snatch at the children's desiring machines that can connect to their own concerns and discover possibilities to explore and within which they too can flourish" (p. 104). Gail Boldt (2019), leaning on Stern (2010), describes these encounters as moments of vitality in which attunement, variation, flow, and relatedness are profound forces.

## Relationality in rethinking children's needs

In the previous section, I sought to show that both reconceptualist and ethics of care scholars explore ideas of subjectivity, identity, and embodiment although with different emphases. While these scholars diverge on the place of needs in subject formation, I found that they are concerned with the processes of responding to embodied relational children as subjects and with the full participation of them in the caring encounter. Out of this discussion, I began to rethink an understanding of children's needs as expressed, complex, and compatible with agency and autonomy within care relations. This section explores in more depth the idea of relational subjectivity (Hollway, 2006) in rethinking children's needs.

Care ethics recognizes through the concept of intersubjectivity that subjects themselves are "constitutively in relation" with others (Pulcini, 2016, p. 125, as cited in Conradi, 2019). In other words, there is no separate self outside of being relational; relationality, then, constructs the self. Needs are therefore not a discrete aspect of an individual in the sense that they are not separate from being in relation with others. This recognition is the second condition for my premise that children, as do all humans (as well as nonhumans), depend on others to fulfill unrealized needs in caring encounters. Consequently, this emphasis on relationality requires two conceptual moves, discussed in turn, that go beyond a focus on the individualism of children's needs and the dyadic adult-child relationship. Reconceptualist and ethics of care scholars converge to address this individualistic and dyadic focus as a conceptual limitation to understanding relationality in and between human and more-than-human worlds.

Practices of observing and identifying the individual needs of children are common in early childhood programs. Indeed, there is a belief that, without an individual focus, some children are overlooked and neglected. However, MacNaughton (2003), taking a reconceptualist position, argues that this individualism actually "mask[s] the way in which the social relationships and dynamics produced through gender, ethnicity and class influence a child's becoming" (p. 178). She states further that "masking these influences also marks the qualities and injustices that they create in our social relationships and dynamics" (p. 178). Accordingly, educators critically observe to think about and act on the social dynamics in a group of children and their effects (MacNaughton, 2003, p. 207). Does MacNaughton's perspective then reject a focus on children's needs, particularly if needs are located in the individual child? My argument is that if children have needs, as do all entities, then caring encounters in which needs are expressed, interpreted, and responded to are relational moments in which social relations, dynamics, and injustices are always at play. In this way, it is possible to see the caring encounter as a collective concern and a moment of relationality whereby relational and embodied subjects come together to recognize that we are all "equally needy" (Tronto, 2013). Consistent with posthumanist thinking, it is also possible to see the presence of many entities in the caring encounter. Affrica Taylor (2018) writes that she regards "children's lives as inherently *interdependent* [her emphasis], and agency as the outcome of intra-actions between entities (both living and inert), not as something that exclusively resides within the (human) individual" (p. 206). While my conceptual project in this article is by and large humanist in its orientation, I share with Taylor (2018) her "collectivist rather than individualist" approach

(p. 206) in that I view participants in a caring encounter as constituted by their relationality. Within a collectivist approach, therefore, children come to understand their needs and subject positions as always inside and in relation to others. At the same time, the educator maintains an open-ended dialogue with herself about what enables and constrains her caring responses within larger social relations and “reinvents” her caring identity in relation to others (Casalini, 2019, p. 8). This approach begins to unsettle the dominant narratives of the individual child and the individual adult-child relationship, regarded as discrete units immune to other social relations and injustices that occur in an early childhood program.

Some care scholars further seek to displace the logic of the individual caregiver and care receiver dyad in caring processes by examining who else is responsible for making the outcome of a caring encounter a satisfying experience for those involved (Tronto, 2013). For example, Kittay (1999) proposes a complex understanding of mutual dependency and interdependency as “nested dependencies” in democratic and equitable spaces whereby those who care for others at the everyday and ordinary level depend on others who provide supports and/or policies at the institutional and political level (p. 132). This proposal has particular relevancy for early childhood education because educators need supports (e.g., adequate staffing ratios, a flexible schedule to listen and respond to children) provided at multiple system levels to engage in satisfying caring encounters. Tronto (2013) further observes that complicating care in this way begins to “break up the relentless hierarchy of power” (p. 151) that is present in many dyadic relations. In the context of early childhood programs, a hierarchy of power is evident in the power educators simultaneously hold over children in terms of predetermining their needs and assigning value to some needs over others and in the power an uncaring system holds over educators that constrains their caring practices. As Kittay and Tronto both maintain, by locating the meeting of unrealized needs in only the adult-child relationship, others at multiple levels are not held ethically responsible for encounters that seek to meet children’s needs. For this reason, I imagine entangled humans and things, some actually present and some hovering spectres, always living and relating in the caring encounter.

Posthumanist reconceptualist (e.g., Arndt & Tesar, 2019) and some ethics of care scholars (e.g., Hamington, 2018) also seek to decenter the humancentric focus in an ethics of care. Hamington (2018) writes that since care ethics is not interested in a precise definition of what it means to care ethically, there is room to push thinking about “the care of non-human entities and objects as a means to develop non-exploitive caring relationships for humans and non-humans alike” (p. 9). In the context of early childhood education, Arndt and Tesar (2019) advocate for decentering the educator subject through an ethic of unknowing which requires the caring educator to take a stance of humility and trust in “the unknowability and constant formation” of the child subject within human and more-than-human worlds (p. 53).

## **Responding to children’s needs as ethical and political actions**

The last section indicates that reconceptualist and ethics of care scholars consider relationality beyond individualism, the dyadic relationship, and the human world as central to their theorizing of care relations. In addition, these scholars link social relations to patterns of power and injustice. However, I suggest, not surprisingly, that care scholars offer more insights into how care relations are shaped socially, ethically, and politically by who does and does not assume responsibility for meeting dependencies and needs. Thus, rethinking children’s complex needs requires an understanding that they are expressed within complex webs of care relations in which there is a shared responsibility for responding to these expressions of need. This position leads to my third condition for accepting that children have needs, which is to regard the care required in responding to children’s expressed needs as ethical and political actions. While reconceptualist and care scholars agree that ethics and politics are central to care, I discuss how these scholars may diverge in their focus on motivations for care relations.

Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) state that “ethics are conceptualized from a relational standpoint; accompanying actions are situated, contingent and often marked by uncertainty. This means that we understand ethics to take into account whom we are working with at a specific time in a specific place” (p. 174). For this reason, caring practices are not viewed by these scholars as arising out of natural maternal instincts; rather they are ethical choices and decisions. Similarly, from an ethics of care standpoint, Casalini (2019) states that the caring person rejects ready-made answers to ethical situations, using instead “a contextual ethics that is open to the contingency of a concrete care situation with a concrete embodied other” (p. 8). Reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care scholars also maintain that recognizing and valuing difference is central to ethical caring responses. As a reconceptualist, O’Loughlin (2018) urges educators to see children becoming subjects as a challenge to sameness and to find opportunities for children “to think, imagine and experience their own critical possibilities for becoming” (p. 71). From a feminist ethics of care perspective, Robinson (2019) argues that a “revisable” care ethics responds to difference by resisting oppositional hierarchies in favour of relationality that is acutely sensitive to context (p. 1). Writing on the experience of subjectivity in care relations, Catrin Dingler (2015) further observes,

Caring practice shows that the subjectivities of both [care givers and care receivers] are constituted and altered in an open and unpredictable way. So the particular experience of care helps us understand that the concept of relational subjectivity can only be realized in ongoing practice, in which difference is expressed and negotiated always anew. (p. 214)

Furthermore, reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care scholars generally agree that socio-institutional settings in which such practices occur are not neutral; rather, they are political spaces in which practices in the here and now and in a specific geographical space, context, and time are enacted ethically (Tronto, 2013). Contesting education as a technical practice, Moss (2019) argues that “education is, first and foremost, a political practice, building on political questions that call for choices to be made between often conflicting alternatives” such as those associated with an understanding of the child subject (p. 49). Coming from a care ethics perspective, Tronto (2013) contends that the absence of explicit political discussions about care and care work in a democracy, and in democratic institutions, keeps care as a central aspect of life “hidden in the background” (p. 26). For this reason, Tronto, along with many care scholars, holds the position that there is no ethics of care without a political understanding.

However, there are differences in how reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care scholars articulate motivations for acting ethically in political spaces. In ethics of care literature, the primary motivation for acting ethically is to respond in a caring manner to the needs of others. As discussed in previous sections, reconceptualist accounts of ethics of care practices in early childhood education (Moss, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) do not point to a connection between needs and care relations. Moss (2019), for example, highlights an ethics of care as a guide for how everyone in the political space of the early childhood institution can relate to each other. Taylor (2018, p. 208) further captures this focus by describing situated and entangled childhoods which foreground how children are enmeshed within complex human and more-than-human networks of relations that have ethical, political, and pedagogical implications.

In addition, the two bodies of literature appear to favour the motivation for acting ethically either as an obligation emphasized in traditional moral theories or as an inherent aspect of relationality and as a responsibility. For instance, some early childhood posthumanist scholars (e.g., Hodgins et al., 2019), draw on Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) who, while taking a collectivist caring orientation, refers to duties and an “obligation” to care for the more-than-human world. Similarly, to address social justice issues, other reconceptualists (e.g., Swadener & Polakow, 2011) make use of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets out the duties and obligations of governments, families, and social institutions to ensure that children’s rights are respected and upheld. However, Noah Kenneally (2017) suggests that “from this perspective rights can be seen as a type of exchange that is almost

economic: adults and governments are obliged to take care of children and ensure their well being, and so pay them in a currency of things they are entitled to—children’s rights” (p. 344). Care scholars such as Greenswag (2017) also criticize human rights discourses for their inability to see beyond the entitlements of the individual human agent. Greenswag uses an example relevant to caring for young children to support her analysis. She describes a case in which a family fulfills their obligation to uphold their nanny’s rights to minimal decent working conditions set out in labour standards. However, what this contractual obligation fails to acknowledge is that the nanny is emotionally isolated from her own children left behind and emotionally connected to other children in her paid work. In contrast, through the lens of care ethics, Greenswag argues the “emotional exploitation” in this social, economic, and political arrangement and its ethical implications become clearer (p. 803). In this situation, recognition of the nanny’s emotional pain would be a starting point for addressing the challenges in sustaining a complex web of care relations across geographical spaces. Moreover, this recognition requires an ethics of responsibility that puts participants together to justly allocate caring responsibilities and the resources needed to care well (Tronto, 2013).

Thus, in contrast to the language of obligation, care ethics maintains that relationality itself motivates care. Robinson (2019) writes: “Responsiveness—which requires the ‘unlearning’ of patriarchal individualism in favour of the moral skills of listening, patience and loving attention—is based fundamentally on the recognition that the other and the self are mutually constituted and interdependent” (p. 10). Furthermore, care scholars generally agree that care given does not have to be reciprocal in the sense of an exchange of one thing for another. In other words, children are not obliged to give care back in a caring encounter (Noddings, 2010). Rather, children recognize that they are in relation with others, and in experiencing relational care, generate their own care of others and things.

## Conclusion

I began this article by laying out conflicting views on the concept of children’s needs in reconceptualist and ethics of care literature. In the ruins of these conflicts, I salvaged an ontological position that children have needs, as do all human and nonhuman entities. Nevertheless, I proposed that this premise is neither satisfactory nor complete unless three understandings are considered: children are relational and embodied subjects with complex needs; the caring encounter in which children’s needs are recognized is a moment of relationality; and interpretations of and responses to children’s needs are ethical and political actions. In exploring these three understandings, I navigated humanist and posthumanist reconceptualist and ethics of care scholarship to find a way to rethink children’s needs. I pointed out agreements and disagreements between scholars with the most contentious disagreement coming down to the use of the language of needs itself. I found that reconceptualist scholars emphasize relationality but minimize a connection, made by feminist ethics of care scholars, between having needs and being in relation with others. However, I proposed some possible ways that could potentially contribute to a more complex understanding of children’s needs, beyond the reductionist construct of the individual child with developmental needs rejected by reconceptualist scholars. I suggested that reclaiming a lively language of children’s needs raises the salience of having needs as a profound aspect of being and becoming in multiple worlds and of being in relations of mutual care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017 p. 161). At a most fundamental level, and put simply, I maintain there is nothing wrong with having needs and being dependent. From my perspective, rather than a cause for degradation and avoidance, having needs should be a cause of celebration since it is through this ontological state that connection and relationality flourish.

I have therefore arrived at a third conceptual space that could potentially encapsulate a different way of thinking about children’s needs in early childhood education. I offer the following preliminary, perhaps overly packed, statement, which summarizes the three understandings supporting my key premise as a way to begin to rethink children’s needs:

In the political space of early childhood education, children, as relational and embodied subjects, express their complex needs and respond to the needs of others in generative encounters in human and more-than-human worlds, grounded in an ethics of care that recognizes the vitality of all things. Acknowledging that everything in the political space is mutually constituted and interdependent, educators' ethical caring interpretations and responses to children's needs are contingent on context, difference, and a shared responsibility for care.

In offering this alternative statement, I seek a paradigmatic shift, from foundational to postfoundational thinking about children's needs. At the same time, this shift is anchored in a premise, articulated in feminist ethics of care as a critical, postfoundational theory, that dependency and ethical responsibility for responding through caring actions to this dependency are fundamental to human existence. Thus, a tension between reconceptualist thinking which tends to reject singular truths and care scholars' insistence on a truth about being human remains a challenge for rethinking children's needs. Furthermore, posthumanist thinking contests the very meaning of being human, implicating the human in relation with the nonhuman.

I began this article by describing the conceptual disequilibrium I found myself in after working with the concept of needs in reconceptualist and feminist ethics of care literature. Motivated by a reconceptualist value of opening up theoretical possibilities, I persisted in increasing rather than decreasing the conceptual complexity of children's needs in early childhood and, as a result, I remain unsettled. This article, therefore, can only serve as a starting point for persisting with critical and, I believe, necessary dialogue about children's needs framed by rich insights offered by humanist and posthumanist reconceptualist and ethics of care literature.

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