THE SOCIOLOGY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

NORMAN GABRIEL

SSAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In this book we will develop a relational sociology of early childhood by focusing on the earliest experiences of young children. At birth, babies are born in total dependency on their mother or carers and only gradually do they develop attachments to other people around them – fathers, siblings, grandparents, other relatives and friends, teachers or classmates. Young children are born into and grow up in interdependent relationships that change but are historically structured in different societies. In early childhood, this network is relatively small and the balance is tilted towards dependency on older adults. The lives of young children should therefore be seen as intersections in a network that slowly form part of a wider figuration of relationships in society.

As they grow up they look forward to becoming adults, making connections across generations. When he was seven years of age my younger son Jacob made a subtle distinction about his Grandad, my father-in-law, and my Dad, his Grandpa, 'Granddad, you're old but grandpa is an antique'. Later as adults we look back at our youngest years, trying to establish some formative influences in our earliest experiences. Richard Feynman (1988: 16), one of the most important physicists of the twentieth century, talked about the wonderful influence of his father, the way he encouraged him to explore some of the deep connections behind the principles of science:

> I've been caught, so to speak – like someone who was given something wonderful when he was a child, and he's always looking for it again. I'm always looking, like a child, for the wonders I'm going to find – maybe not every time, but every once in a while.

This chapter will introduce you to why the study of young children has become such an important area for investigation, discussing some of the key theoretical concepts that can be used to understand their early lives in contemporary society. I will mainly focus on the experiences of young children growing up in the United Kingdom today, though relevant comparisons will be made with young children in other countries to emphasise some of the universal features that are common to their experiences and development.

Early Childhood

Early childhood is a complex field with many varied terms, including early years, early childhood development, early care, early care and education, and early childhood education and care. While there are no clear definitions, the terms 'early childhood' and 'early years' are among the two most popular internationally and are often used interchangeably by researchers. Therefore, the two terms 'early childhood' and 'early years' will be used in this book. There is also some controversy regarding the age span of children that should be included in early childhood, with most using the term to refer to young children from birth to age eight. Despite the contested nature of the ages to be included in early childhood, the vast majority of international researchers consider early childhood or the early years as embracing birth to age eight years (Farrell et al., 2015).

The early years sector in the UK can be characterised as a mixed economy of provision marked by variation in quality, poor qualification levels, low pay and low status. This low status of the early childhood worker, rooted in the relationship between 'childcare' and 'mothering', can easily become relegated to 'women's work'. As a highly gendered employment sector strongly connected with the affective realms of caring and nurturance, women who work in this sector have been perceived to lack professionalism (see Dahlberg et al., 1999).

Osgood (2010) argues that tensions over what it means to be an early years professional are made even more complex because nursery workers need to practise a high degree of emotional labour, working collegially and managing the emotions and expectations of parents. Emotional investment is a necessary and integral part of early years practice because the work involves strong feelings towards young children and their families, as well as supporting and caring for colleagues and maintaining a relationship with the wider community (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). She argues that the emotions are a vital aspect of practice

that should be built upon to support future professional development in the early years workforce.

Sociology of Early Childhood

One of the key arguments in this book is that in order to develop a distinctive sociology of early childhood, one should not only focus on the relational aspects of early childhood and adulthood, but at the same time view them as long-term processes with deep historical roots. My emphasis on a relational approach to young children and their relationships is based on a relational turn in sociology (see Dépelteau and Powell, 2013), one which views the social as dynamic, continuous and processual. In Chapter 2, I will explain how these social processes should be seen as dynamic and structured – although transitions occur in dramatic spurts, the history of childhood does not proceed in discrete stages. Short-term changes must be both distinguished from and connected to transformations on a larger scale and to underlying developments in the long run.

To understand these different levels of complexity, De Swaan (1990) offers a very useful metaphor of a clock with wheels which turn at different speeds. Some cogs, moving so slowly that the observer hardly notices any movement, drive other faster wheels that finally connect to a balance wheel, which by its frenetic oscillation controls the movement of the entire machine. Within the very slow clock of biological time the wheels of human history turn, and within this, the much faster cogs of succeeding generations. Looking at the past we see an unbroken chain of parents and young children, who in turn become parents – young children need older people to survive and grow up!

In Chapter 3 I develop the main theoretical framework of the book, arguing that sociologists investigating early childhood need to develop a relational approach that is multi-disciplinary, making important connections with other related disciplines, such as developmental psychology, social policy, history, anthropology, education and health. Sociologists of childhood need to integrate the biological and social aspects of young children's development, particularly overcoming some of their deepest fears and concerns about the role of developmental psychology.

Within this context, I discuss one of the most influential theories in developmental psychology – attachment. According to John Bowlby (2005), a young child needs a sensitive and responsive mother (or caretaker) for the development of emotional security. However, attachment theory can lead to an exclusive focus on adult–child interactions. I argue that it is still too narrowly based on the mother or parent dyad to capture

the relational complexities of young children's social relationships with other significant people in their lives.

Institutionalisation of Childhood

The relative decline in male power and control over women and young children that has occurred in developed countries over the last 40 years has led to large numbers of women entering the part-time and full-time workforce. Both parents can be dual-earners, working full-time, earning a salary and pursuing their own careers. A useful comparison between the UK and Denmark highlights the differences in maternal employment between the two countries, especially for families with children under the age of five. Although the UK is quite generous in the time allocated for maternity leave (up to 52 weeks), much of it is unpaid, putting pressure on families' incomes. Denmark's parental leave benefits are more generous and flexible than the UK, and ensure that one parent can afford to remain at home with a young child over the first year of life, as well as enabling parents to share the childcare so that mothers can continue to invest in their careers. The provision of free or subsidised childcare is so important because it is an incentive to return to paid employment – in the UK, childcare costs are nearly three times more expensive than Denmark (OECD, 2012).

As more young children enter childcare and early education, the issue of transition from their immediate families to group care settings has grown in importance. Such developments make it even more vital to develop a sociological approach that can explain the changing institutional arrangements of care that young children experience. Institutional settings set the tone for the relationships between individual children, dyads (child–caregiver, peer–peer (friendships and playmates)) and group interactions between young children and their caregivers. Within this changing array of people young children learn about the membership rules of various networks.

An important consequence that stems from long hours of full-time paid employment by both parents is that many young children are spending more of their time during the day with childcare providers. In Chapter 4 I develop in more detail the theoretical argument of the book, using the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explore the significance of group processes (social habitus) in young children's relationships. The social habitus refers here to the internalisation of wider structures and processes manifested through the routines and taken-for-granted actions of young children: the longer a young child is located

within a particular set of relationships the more likely they are to develop a practical sense of how to behave and act in certain ways.

We discuss the family as the 'primary habitus' or main institution where young children initially internalise ways of thinking and types of dispositions from their parents or carers. Although families are still important in the shaping of young children's lives, I argue that in contemporary society young children are not mere receptors of family socialisation, but active generators of their own social and cultural capital in early years settings. These settings can usefully be viewed within the concept of a shifting and competitive field, one that enables us to develop an understanding of when and where particular forms of capital become valued or diminish in importance and eventually decline.

Young Children's Play – Challenging the Adult Establishment

When young children spend time together over a long period, as they do in pre-school, they develop social capital in their own peer cultures. Being a pre-school child means that you are part of a very specific peer culture, holding unique, shared ideas of your own social position and status as well as that of your friends. Corsaro's (2005) concept of 'peer culture' is a vital step in overcoming a narrow instrumental view of play and can help us to explain young children's interpretations of their surrounding culture:

> The production of peer culture is a matter neither of simple interpretation nor of direct appropriation of the adult world. Children creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures. (Corsaro and Eder, 1990: 200)

In Chapter 5 I emphasise that young children's play should be framed within a relational context: young children create their own peer groups through the appropriation of adult-centred discourses but they do not mimic or passively accept the adult world. Their play stems from the tensions between their desire for relative independence from adults but their simultaneous dependence on them. I draw on the ideas of the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) to develop an alternative version of play, one that explores the way in which young children's play is not simply an imitation of the real world but highly creative and transformative. Benjamin's perspective is important because it offers a relational approach for reconnecting the world of the

adult and the young child by uncovering young children's alternative modes of seeing and knowing. His writings are an attempt to restore the earliest impressions of childhood which have not yet been tainted by the destructive adult power of habit.

One important way of beginning to understand how young children deeply engage with play is to focus on how they explore and challenge the rules and authority of adult culture. To understand how some of these aspects of play are enacted from a young child's perspective, I use the work of another twentieth-century literary critic, the Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). His concept of the carnival is used to explore the relational dynamics which shape children's relative independence from adults. In a similar way to the carnival, young children try to break down barriers and challenge power inequalities by mocking the hierarchical order established by parents and teachers – they attempt to resist authority and generate disorder to gain more control over their lives.

State Investment, Young Children and Families

In recent years OECD countries have increased their investment in early intervention and prevention initiatives targeted at young children and families (OECD, 2009). In the United Kingdom, New Labour targeted young children, families and disadvantaged communities to reduce social exclusion. The British government was concerned that vulnerable family formations were expanding at a faster rate than 'stable' family forms, and as a result increasing numbers of young children were not being adequately prepared for their future. This changing strategy in government can be understood as a broad approach that changed the focus from old notions of supporting families to making parents responsible for their own children (Rodger, 2012).

Compared to earlier prevention policies, recent British governments have promoted a more extensive preventative agenda, seeking social interventions to identify problems earlier and prevent them from getting worse and, even more ambitiously, to prevent problems from emerging: they have attempted to redefine the relationship between the state, young children and families with new forms of social support, intervention, regulation and surveillance (Little et al., 2002).

In Chapter 6 I argue that some of these changes in government policy towards contemporary families and the apparent 'parenting crisis' tend to be narrowly focused on short-term developments that need to be explained by long-term relational processes, based on changes in the balance of power between men, women and young children. Young children

and parents increasingly live within families in highly interdependent relationships, where there are more and more pressures to control and regulate one's emotions and behaviour. According to Norbert Elias (2008), these changes can be explained by a longer trend of informalisation that has occurred from the late twentieth century onwards. This concept of informalisation refers to a period of movement from an authoritarian to a more egalitarian parent–child relationship where there is a loosening of barriers of authority in relations between young children and adults.

Investing in the Nation: Young Children's Health and Well-being

To briefly give an illustration of the way in which a relational approach to early childhood can be applied I will now discuss the historical development of state investment, looking at young children's health and well-being. Sociologists usually investigate their own present-day societies by mainly focusing on how the macro level of state investment in young children's services influences the finer detail of particular policies in their own nations (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). Even when comparative research is carried out, the dynamic relationships within and between different welfare states is rarely investigated (Lewis, 2008). However, the development of the modern welfare state was determined by its relations with other states. When two states or survival units struggle for survival – whether it is about prestige or scarce resources – they are dependent on each other (Kaspersen and Gabriel, 2008). The intensity of this struggle between different nation-states influences the internal welfare policies developed for young children and can be explained by the compelling force that groups within different societies exert upon each other (Elias, 2012).

   In the latter half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, inter-state rivalry in different European countries was part of a wider dynamic relationship with crucial consequences for the health and well-being of young children. Rose (1990) draws attention to the importance of the young child as a primary national asset, arguing that the future strength of the nation-state became dependent upon the vitality and development of young children:

> In different ways, at different times, and by many different routes varying from one section of society to another, the health, welfare, and rearing of children has been linked in thought and practice to the destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the state. (1990: 121)

During a period of growing nationalism and imperialist wars, the health and fitness of the population became an important concern for different national governments. In England, the health of adult men was brought to light by the Boer War (1899–1902) when two out of five of those who volunteered to go to fight in South Africa were rejected because of poor physique (Cunningham, 2006). The poor level of recruitment and under-performance of the British army were seen as an urgent national problem which was linked to the poor health of young children (Hendrick, 1994). The physical condition of the population was first raised by the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1904 and again in five further government reports between 1910 and 1916.

And this was not solely a British concern because during this time Britain's main imperialist rival was Germany. Heywood (2001) notes that in 1906 the medical expert Arthur Schlossman explained in a speech that tackling high infant mortality rates needed to be given a high priority since an increase in population would contribute to Germany's military strength, its labour force and its consumption. The infant mortality rate is defined by the number of children who die aged less than one year old per 1,000 births. A lower infant mortality rate can indicate that better care is being taken of children and is linked to several factors, including access to health care services for pregnant mothers and infants, the socio-economic status of the child's parents, the health of the mother, low birth weight and preterm birth.

Hendrick (1997) has thus identified the end of the nineteenth century up until the end of the First World War (1880–1914) as a cru-cial period in child welfare reform and policy because there was a shift of emphasis from child protection to national issues of efficiency and health, focusing on the physical and mental development of young chil-dren. This was linked to the scientific study of young children through the development of particular disciplines, particularly those based upon developmental thinking about the 'normal' child. Rose (1990), drawing on the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, argues that the concept of the 'normal child' functioned in three ways: between factual claims and normative assertions, so that what is perceived to be natural is considered healthy; a standard against which young children are judged; and an objective to be achieved through social policies and programmes.

Foucault, Discourse and Power

It is not an uncommon assumption for us to think of power as something politicians exercise at a local, governmental or national level. At the top of the hierarchy are influential politicians with 'absolute' power and the rest

of the population with hardly any. This is usually referred to as a zero-sum situation. But this common-sense approach focuses too narrowly on 'political' power – there are other important relational aspects of power that stem from economic, military, ideological and professional sources. This interpretation is also quite misleading because power is involved in all human relationships – it is influenced by complex sets of relationships which are finely balanced and subject to continuous change.

According to Foucault, we are all actively involved in and governed by power relationships. He viewed power as local and dispersed: similar to a colour dye, it operates through the entire social structure and is embedded in the daily practices of professions. Power produces practices in many fields, determining how problems are constituted, how people are classified and what are considered appropriate ways to shape behaviour. For him it becomes an imperative to unmask the working of power relations, 'to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such' (Foucault, 1988: 155).

Discourse is one of the key concepts that Foucault introduces to explain how power becomes legitimised. The language we use shapes and directs our way of looking at and understanding the world, exercising power over our thought by governing what we see as the truth and how we understand the world. Foucault calls such conventions – our way of naming things and talking about them – *discourses*, and those discourses that exercise a decisive influence on a specific practice can be seen as 'dominant discursive regimes' or 'regimes of truth'. Such regimes serve a disciplinary or regulatory function: they can be used to explain the relationship between discourses on early childhood and the exercise of professional power of a wide range of experts (for example, health visitors, social workers, doctors and nurses) who become involved in the scrutiny of and intervention in the lives of young children.

In Chapter 7 I discuss how childhood and sexuality share a similar historical discourse with that of the eighteenth century – they are crucial dimensions in the contemporary Western definition of childhood and adulthood, maintaining boundaries between them and fuelling debates about the moral dangers of new technologies such as the Internet. I argue that by separating young children from the adult sphere of life and denying them participation in the discourses through which we understand sexuality, adults make young children even more vulnerable to the desires of others. Sexuality is not just knowledge that adults find problematic and uncomfortable, but is built upon relations of power between adults and young children that are maintained and reproduced within society.

Conclusion

This introduction has discussed some of the key themes and chapters that will be developed throughout the book. I have emphasised that a sociological approach to early childhood must be relational in two important ways. First, young children are born into interdependent relationships that existed before them: as they grow up these relationships change but are structured in different societies and in different historical epochs. Second, in order to develop a strong sociology of early childhood, a range of relational perspectives will be used from other disciplines in the social sciences. The next chapter will focus on the important contribution of one key social science discipline, history. I will discuss how historians of childhood began to challenge conventional views on children, paving the way for the development of new sociological perspectives on childhood.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

Read carefully the following quotation from the French novelist Georges Perec:

My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don't know much about. It is behind me; yet it is the ground on which I grew, and it once belonged to me, however obstinately I assert that it no longer does. … However, childhood is neither longing nor terror, neither a paradise lost or the Golden Fleece, but maybe it is a horizon, a point of departure, a set of co-ordinates from which the axes of my life may draw their meaning. (Perec, 2011: 12)

Consider the following questions:

1. How does Perec remember his early childhood?

2. In what ways have your own memories of your earliest years influenced you?

3. 'Childhood is a point of departure' – how can we explain the relationship between early childhood and adulthood?
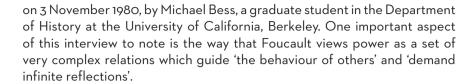

Further Reading

Interview with Michel Foucault: http://www.michaelbess.org/foucault-interview/

This accessible interview with Foucault ('Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual', *History of the Present* 4 (Spring 1988), 1–2, 11–13) was conducted

on 3 November 1980, by Michael Bess, a graduate student in the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley. One important aspect of this interview to note is the way that Foucault views power as a set of very complex relations which guide 'the behaviour of others' and 'demand infinite reflections'.

A. de Swaan (2001) Chapter 5, 'How People Form One Another: Socialisation and Civilisation', in *Human Societies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.

This beautifully written book is a brief introduction to the study of society that may be read without any previous knowledge of the social sciences. De Swaan's engaging style of writing is lucid and jargon-free – each chapter addresses a fundamental question about people in their various arrangements. Chapter 5 examines the learning processes of young children, what they need to learn to survive in different societies and how they become civilised in contemporary society.

S. Efrat Efron (2008) 'Moral Education between Hope and Hopelessness: The Legacy of Janusz Korczak', *Curriculum Inquiry*, 38(1): 39–62.

This article is about Janusz Korczak (1878–1942), a radical Jewish-Polish educator who for more than 30 years devoted his life to educating orphaned Jewish and non-Jewish children. During the Second World War, he stayed with the Jewish children to the end as they all perished in a concentration camp. The orphanages he directed were democratic, self-ruled communities, where the children had their own parliament, court and newspaper. In these institutions relational bonds were highly emphasised in every aspect of community life: 'When I play or talk with a child, two equally mature moments, mine and the child's, intertwine' (Korczak, 1992: 179).

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