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THE SOCIAL MEANING OF CHILDHOOD

Introduction

We all have experience of childhood, not only as children but also in bringing up children, working with children or simply being members of a society that values childhood. Children are a common part of our physical and social landscape. Our culture and values nowadays are suffused with memories, experiences and symbols of childhood and all things ‘childish’. Moreover, we think of childhood as a natural and inevitable phase that we all go through before we reach adulthood. We may be forgiven, then, for taking children and childhood for granted. Given this situation, we are rarely asked what childhood is or how it relates to children. If we are pushed to define childhood, the invocation of ‘nature’ directs us towards thinking about children’s ‘natural’ biological incapacities. Children are physically smaller and weaker than adults. Common sense tells us that their size and stature are visible markers of difference. This is an unexceptional observation in itself, for no one would deny that children are not as fully developed biologically as adults. We assume that this smallness becomes increasingly less significant as children move through childhood into adulthood. Childhood is thus commonly associated with this smallness. ‘Children’ and ‘childhood’ here are seen as aspects of the same thing; children being the grounded and physical manifestations of childhood. It is then a quick step to deducing childhood from what we commonly experience in society: children. Children’s physicality is what also seems to characterise children’s minds and identities; throughout most of the twentieth century, at least in Western societies, the idea that children’s physical immaturity determines their social identities has been built into our way of thinking such that it assumes the status of fact.

We might concede that childhood is an abstraction, a set of ideas or concepts, which defines children’s nature and the kinds of relations they have with other members of society. Yet because children and childhood are seen to be more or less the same thing, the abstract ideas associated with childhood seem to flow directly from children and their smallness. Our concern in this chapter develops out of debates within the social sciences, and more specifically within the sociology of childhood, on what it means to talk about childhood as an abstraction. In particular, sociologists and others working in related fields have been challenging the notion that there is a close connection between children’s physical immaturity and the cultural and social features that make up childhood. As Postman (1982, p. xi) proposes, ‘from a biological point of view it is inconceivable that any culture will forget that it needs to reproduce itself. But it is quite possible for
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a culture to exist without a social idea of children’. The basic thrust of this chapter, then, is to separate the link made between the physical and abstract features of children. We intend to do this by emphasising the meaning of childhood, a bundle of ideas and sentiments that characterise the socially constructed nature of childhood.

In this chapter, I introduce childhood as part of the subjective realm by emphasising its malleable, changeable and ultimately contested nature. In the first section of the chapter, I address our taken-for-granted ideas about childhood and draw out their social and, by implication context-dependent, contours. I hope to demonstrate, through an examination of one key feature of childhood, child’s play, that the meaning of childhood cannot simply be taken for granted. In the second and third sections I outline in more substantive terms social constructionism, which has arguably now become an established theoretical framework for the analysis of children and childhood (Lee 2001). I start from a more historical perspective and examine the historical construction or development of a modern childhood. This is followed by an exposition of a more radical social constructionism where childhood is produced through discourse. Sociologists abandon any idea that there is anything to childhood other than what we think and say about childhood. Childhood here is a quintessentially cultural phenomenon. In the fourth section I step back from our exposition of social constructionism and examine some of its limitations. In the final section I attempt a synthesis of constructionist and more ‘universalist’ approaches to childhood. Sociologists are correct to stress the influence of culture and the idea of a range of different childhoods. Nonetheless, our starting point must be some very general and more or less given differences between adults and children found in most, if not all, societies.

The ‘playing child’ construction

In their theoretical text on childhood, James, Jenks and Prout (1998), while not completely rejecting the relationship between biology and culture, paraphrase Ennew and suggest that childhood is characterised by sets of cultural values:

> In the twentieth century … Western childhood has become a period in the life course characterised by social dependency, asexuality, and the obligation to be happy, with children having the right to protection and training but not to social or personal autonomy. (James, Jenks and Prout 1998, p. 62)

What we have here is a definition of childhood in terms of distinguishable features. It also suggests that these features not only distinguish children from, say, adults, it implies that the meaning of childhood may be different depending on our cultural and historical backgrounds.

Let us take one key feature of this construction of childhood, the ‘obligation to be happy’. We commonly equate this with children playing.
Let us also examine the ‘playing child’ in common-sense terms, to begin with. We might think of play as a cultural space within which children have fun, explore their imaginations, and learn in a desultory fashion how to get on with others, usually their peers. Play is also seen as a part of childhood in that it is a period of time when children are free from responsibilities. Children play because they have no responsibilities. This lack of responsibility is often taken to mean that children do not work, at least in terms of earning an income or paying income tax. Responsibility here equates with how earning a living generates sets of expectations and obligations, whether it relates to providing for other members of the family or having broader social and moral responsibilities as a citizen. These responsibilities in themselves have been the subject of much debate, not least in the way they have become powerful cultural means of compelling people to work. Nevertheless, the point I wish to make is that we expect adults to provide for children economically and morally by working and earning an income. Being a child and going through the period of childhood means having no economic and moral responsibilities; it means not having to work.

I have characterised childhood in terms of lack of work. In the process I have also offered a definition of adulthood. To simplify things a little:

Childhood = Play
Adulthood = Work

In strengthening the adult/work equation we can point to the numbers of adults excluded from earning a living, some of whom are unable to find work. Most of these groups, such as single parents, the unemployed and the sick, are able to claim some sort of income from the state because in other circumstances they would be in a position to work. Furthermore, in some countries the state recognises the financial responsibilities of unemployed adults by providing them with different levels of financial support on the basis of their child-rearing responsibilities. As I said before, when it comes to children there is no expectation that they work. Thus, children in their own right cannot claim an income from the state. The grounds for this exclusion are legal, with children under the age of 13 in the UK excluded from the labour market and with older children limited to a few hours’ work a week during specific times of the day. Pressed further, we would probably refer to children’s size and immaturity. We assume that laws which prohibit or at least restrict children from working are based on the idea that children are incapable of holding down a job. This in turn stems from their lack of development; their lack of understanding of the world, which would make it difficult for us to think that children could make the right decisions within the workplace. Children’s emotional, cognitive and social immaturity is commonly seen to relate to biological growth. As children grow, so do their emotional and social abilities. Thus we assume that when children are old enough to work they are competent enough to do so.

In linking childhood to play, play is seen as the opposite of work: a period free of responsibility, where individuals can relax and have fun. Now, play in relation to modern childhood can be structured and educational.
As we shall see in Chapter 6, some have argued that an excess of structure within play undermines the very idea of childhood. Nevertheless, our common sense distinguishes between play, which is fun, and work, which is more serious, the latter often viewed as something that we adults have to do.

Let us now examine a little more closely the claim that children play and adults work. From an historical perspective we might ask whether children have never worked and have always played. After consulting the work of social historians we would probably answer this question by saying that children have always played and have only recently stopped working (Corsaro 2017, pp. 69–70). Children in the past, particularly those from poor families, had considerable economic responsibilities. In the UK, for instance, it was only in the first few years of the twentieth century that children’s economic responsibilities were superseded by compulsory schooling. The ‘playing child’ image of childhood is, therefore, a recent construction. Zelitzer (1985) talks about the changing value of childhood in the USA. She refers to children’s working responsibilities in the nineteenth century, with parents viewing children as having economic value. This is not to say that parents did not love their children or that they treated them harshly; children were simply included as members of an economically productive unit. As children moved out of the work sphere in the early twentieth century, parents gradually saw their children differently. They became emotionally valuable, with parents placing more importance on their children’s social development and happiness. What Zelitzer (1985) is pointing to is a change in value and meaning; she is exploring the idea that childhood might have meant something different in the nineteenth century from what it does today.

From a sociological and anthropological perspective we might ask about children’s present-day responsibilities. Is the ‘playing child’ image a universal one today? Have all parents followed the American example of protecting their children from the world of economic responsibility by providing for them? In answering this second question we might say that the childhoods of children in North American and European countries are inadequate guides to the lives of children in many poor developing countries. In Chapter 11, I discuss the problem of ‘child labour’ and the plights of children who work in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Yet it is evident that many children in the early years of the twenty-first century have considerable economic responsibilities which are prioritised before any time to play. The centrality of play in children’s lives is recognised in international law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) clearly states that all children have the right to play. Thus Article 31 states: ‘States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts’ (UN 1989).

We could argue here that this Article was drafted precisely because many of the world’s children are not in a position to take up this right due to work, family and community responsibilities. UNCRC will be discussed in further chapters, but it is worth stating at this point that not only is the ‘play-child’ construction historically recent, it is culturally specific.
**THE SOCIAL MEANING OF CHILDHOOD**

A third question surrounds the ‘childish’ nature of play: to what extent does the association of childhood with play as fun, imaginative and chaotic compromise children’s contributions to society? If play exists within the adult world, is it residual not real, something done after the important business of work. Do we undervalue play because it is associated with childhood or do we compromise childhood because we trivialise play? Play in these terms can be linked with another taken-for-granted feature of childhood: innocence. We can equate innocence with children having insufficient character and social guile to make their way in the world. Childhood here becomes a period where the real world of sexual, economic and public action is suspended until children are old enough to cope. Child’s play is synonymous with innocence. As I stated earlier in the chapter, children play because they have no responsibilities. Innocence connotes ‘irresponsibility’ in that children’s moral and social fragility, their vulnerability, precludes them from having responsibilities. Play thus becomes a key feature of the child’s world, with the latter sequestered from the adult world through a dominant imperative to nurture and protect. In these terms childhood has a political as well as cultural and historical meaning. By associating play with childhood we are unintentionally marginalising children, treating them as immature and incomplete members of society who require constant adult attention and regulation. In returning to the earlier definition of James, Jenks and Prout (1998), politically children have very few rights, corresponding to the absence of ‘social and personal autonomy’.

**The historical development of modern childhood**

The ‘making’ or constructing of childhood can be viewed historically. I look at three versions that emphasise the development of childhood historically: Ariès’ and Shorter’s emphasis on how childhood developed as a bundle of sentiments; Postman’s focus on how technology transformed the nature of childhood, and a social history that concentrates on children rather than childhood.

**Ariès and modern childhood**

Phillipe Ariès was a social historian writing in the 1960s. While the origins of his thesis can be traced back to Norbert Elias’s arguments on the civilising process (Cunningham 1995, p. 5), his work has been rightly acknowledged as one of the earliest challenges to the existing orthodoxy on childhood: its natural and universal status as a stage of development. There is some ambiguity as to whether Ariès is proposing childhood as a modern invention. He refers to the similarities between the Hellenistic and Neolithic periods and the modern period: both were preoccupied with regulating children’s lives. He goes on to talk about the ‘revival, at the beginning of modern times, in education’ (p. 396) and by implication the re-emergence of childhood from the sixteenth century onwards. That being said, his focus is the medieval period onwards and the change in sentiments. His thesis is that during the medieval period, from around the twelfth to the sixteenth
centuries, childhood did not exist as a period within which children were treated either as uniquely different from adults or as nascent individuals who had to be carefully nurtured. There was a distinct lack of sentiment, an indifference to children as a separate sector of the population. In effect, Ariès concludes that our understanding and treatment of children in medieval times indicates the absence of the concept of childhood.

This indifference was clearly brought out by Ariès in his treatment of the medieval school, which was 'not intended for children: it was a sort of technical school for the instruction of clerics, young and old. … Thus it welcomed equally and indifferently, children, youths and adults, the precocious and the backward' (p. 317). For Ariès the modern image of childhood is crystallised in the shift from the amorphous, disorganised and undisciplined nature of the medieval school to the tightly structured and regulated demands of modern schooling. He focuses on the increasing significance attached to age as an organising principle. First of all, schools were becoming the preserves of children, with a gradual narrowing of the age range. Drawing on statistical material, he also contrasts the variegated ages found in year groups in medieval schools with the gradual segregation of children by age, and the emergence of the classroom as a significant organisational unit in French schools in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The medieval indifference to children was apparent in the way that 'schooling' took place in a range of adult contexts. 'Child' as well as 'adult' students' life in school was characterised by a lack of manners and morals, and violence and licentiousness were common. The need to isolate, protect and discipline children was apparent in the way that schools and classrooms were physically segregated from the rest of the community, with the introduction of colleges from about the seventeenth century onwards. These were 'designed not only for tuition but also for the supervision and care of youth' (p. 169). It is clear that the school as an 'essential institution' was starting to display the characteristics of the modern school with its separate teaching staff and disciplinary codes. It was also starting to become apparent that the classroom was becoming a container or laboratory for the assessment and regulation of children’s social and moral development. Discipline gradually became less severe as childhood started to be seen as a sort of social and moral apprenticeship: there was a stronger emphasis on conditioning, in preparing children for their futures as adults. As I shall go on to discuss in following chapters, a key characteristic of modern childhood is its future orientation, the idea that children are nascent individuals with personalities and social and moral predispositions that need to be harnessed and moulded in preparation for adulthood.

While schooling seems to dominate Ariès's analysis of modern childhood, the rise of the private conjugal family plays a significant if subordinate role in the construction of childhood. Ariès's inferential approach identifies the rise in childhood sentiment from the changing nature of family portraits in medieval and modern periods. The child as a focal point for the parental gaze and the central position of children in portraits from the seventeenth century onwards indicates a degree of child-centredness.
Yet this goes along with a more implosive trend in family life, with the middle and upper classes distancing themselves from community, kin and latterly household servants.

Ariès documents an uneasy relationship between the evolution of the modern school and the privatised family, which reflects many of the concerns that we have today about the relative power exercised by adults within each sphere (see Chapter 7). The school became an important reference point for the development and disciplining of children. Schools were seen as being important for parents because they were relatively close, allowing parents to see their children as much as possible. However, the literature on manners and etiquette that was widely distributed in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries served to limit the power of the school to socialise in that this literature tended to be read by both parents and children within the family. Thus, a range of manuals on how to discipline and punish children and how to prepare them for school as well as how adults ought to conduct themselves were circulated within families. And some of this material addressed the children themselves.

Ariès identifies the influence of moralists and pedagogues in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Powerful ideas started to restrict children’s access to the community and the adult population. Moreover, these ideas – distributed among middle- and upper-class children in the form of manuals on etiquette – emphasised both the necessity of their education and the need to protect their innocence. Social class and gender are significant here. The modern sentiments regarding childhood had a limited impact on the poorer sectors of society until well into the nineteenth century. And, as several authors have noted, Ariès’ construct of childhood really only applies to boys; girls were excluded from schooling throughout most of the modernising period, continually expected from an early age to have domestic responsibilities (Gittins 1998). Girls continued to approximate to ‘miniature women’ during this early modern period, whereas there was more distinguishing between boys and men.

Thus, for Ariès, two institutional developments are crucial between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries: the introduction of a modern system of schooling and the privatising of family life. Each is significant in the gradual separation and segregation of children from adult society; each reflects modern sensibilities on the child as both the embodiment of innocence and purity and an investment in the future.

Shorter and motherhood
Edward Shorter’s (1976) work can be associated with Ariès in that they are both dealing with sentiments and values relating to family and childhood. Nevertheless, there are significant differences. Shorter’s analysis of childhood is more indirect, focusing on the development of the modern nuclear family rather than childhood per se. His analysis covers a shorter, more recent historical period and he takes a more explicitly comparative line than Ariès, drawing on premodern eighteenth-century mothers and twentieth-century modern motherhood. His research base is wider than
that of Ariès in that he was (a) trying to incorporate the lives of peasant and working-class mothers as well as the bourgeoisie, (b) drawing on wider European sources as well as France, and (c) making regional comparisons largely between rural and urban situations.

Having said this, the realm of ideas and values is significant for Shorter as it is for Ariès. Shorter focuses on the development of spontaneity and romantic love, and the gradual rise in the ‘sacrificial’ role of the mother. As with Ariès, Shorter separates nature from culture: he spells out the cultural rather than instinctive importance of ‘good mothering’. Rather than there being some innate tendency for mothers to bond with their infants, in the past there was often a lack of care and attention to children's specific needs; there was a general maternal indifference towards infant children. Shorter is arguing that whereas modern mothers put the interests of their children above all else, mothers in the eighteenth century failed what he called the ‘sacrifice test’. Shorter thus takes a different and harder line than Ariès with respect to the culpability of eighteenth-century mothers. While Shorter is not explicit about this, maternal indifference is equated with modern-day notions of abuse and neglect, and seen as a determinate factor in the continually high rates of infant mortality during this period. According to Shorter, mothers ignored their babies’ cries, were likely to treat them roughly and constrict their movements through swaddling, and often farmed their children out to wet-nurses who were incapable of looking after their children. The net result was often the children’s early death, with mothers ‘often resigned to (their children’s) squalling, usually fatal ‘convulsions’ and ‘fevers’’ (Shorter 1976, p. 170).

Maternal indifference stemmed from an inability to view their children as any different from any other aspects of their lives. Children were not central or special or in any way a priority in the lives of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mothers. If we think of childhood in terms of the way parents related to their young children – notions of centring, nurturing and protection, that is, if we define childhood in a relational sense – then Shorter is arguing that as well as ‘good mothering’, childhood did not exist.

Shorter draws on a change in sentiments from about the middle of the eighteenth century among the affluent members of society. The influence of thinkers like Rousseau, the rise of romantic love and the circulation of ideas about proper child care all contributed to the development of a discourse on good mothering. Child-rearing practices changed: wet-nurses took a less mercenary approach to their work, ‘attaching’ themselves to their charges, and there was a gradual decline in their employment as women started to attach themselves to their babies through breast-feeding. These sentiments and practices gradually percolated down to the working classes by the beginning of the twentieth century. Women, then, over time, have had to learn how to be good mothers and, in the process, become aware of children as separate entities in need of love, protection and separate treatment. The construction of a modern Western childhood is thus intimately linked to the historical development of motherhood.
The Rise and Fall of childhood – a materialist analysis

Postman’s (1982) thesis provides a material basis to the history of childhood. While Ariès and Shorter concentrate on the power of attitudes, moral dispositions and expectations, Postman (1982) refers to their technological underpinnings. Childhood evolved much earlier for Postman than Shorter, between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, owing to the demands that adults made on children to learn to read. This was in turn a consequence of the invention of the printing press, which allowed for the dissemination of the written word. Reading skills were to be learned by children in a sequential and developmental way, thus producing distance between children and adults who had gone through the process and were charged with regulating children's reading. This process was gradually institutionalised through mass schooling. The developmental ‘secrets’ acquired through learning to read thus served as a literal and metaphorical basis to schooling. Children were located within a system of learning organised around children's age-related, incremental acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Postman also focuses on the ‘fall’ as well as the ‘rise’ of childhood. I will deal with the former in more detail when I come to discuss the crisis of childhood in Chapter 6. Yet it is worth saying that Postman views the ‘unmaking’ as well as the ‘making’ of childhood through technological change. The moral and cultural boundaries that separate children and adults were gradually eroded throughout the second half of the twentieth century owing to the influence of electronic media. The television, in particular, comes in for criticism as a medium that introduces children to ‘a world of simultaneity and instancy’ (Postman 1982, p. 70). The immediacy of television undercuts the sequential and adult-regulated process of reading and development, flattening the boundaries between adults and children. Thus children through watching television are put on a par with the parents; are exposed to the same images, ideas and risks as their parents. Children thus lose their special qualities as vulnerable, innocent and dependent.

A social history of children

So far I have emphasised the construction of childhood in terms of adult sentiments and material factors that subordinate children. I want now to turn briefly to a sociology that foregrounds the activities of children themselves. In this third, broad, historical approach I focus more on children than childhood. Cunningham (1995) refers to this in terms of the ‘actualité’ of children, a concern for the flesh-and-blood lives of children and the parts they played in relation to their own cultures and in terms of a more central role with adults. A more revisionist history of childhood concentrating on children’s roles and voices in the past has to contend with the lack of documentary evidence on children’s formative social roles. One difficulty in outlining a history of children’s agency is the difficulty in gaining access to children’s voices on their historical involvement. Hitherto there has been
a lack of interest in children’s historical involvement. This means that data capturing children’s accounts of their lives and contributions are difficult to find. Hendrick (2008, p. 45) contends: ‘while a history of childhood as a changing form is possible, that of children, by virtue of their apparent ‘silence’ as subjects can never be satisfactorily written’.

Despite the ‘invisibility’ of children in historical terms, Corsaro (2017) has been able to draw on several studies of children’s lives in the past in order to illustrate the idea that children themselves as well as adults were active in creating their own cultures. Hanawalt’s (1993) work on children in medieval London attempts to document the roles that children played in community celebrations and rituals as well as creating their own games. Corsaro refers to children’s lives in early nineteenth-century slave communities in the southern United States. Here, white children often played with slave children, with the former often playing the superior roles in their games. Slave children also had important socialising and caring responsibilities with their younger siblings. Finally, Corsaro illustrates the ‘agentic’ child in historical terms through his case study of the ‘newsies’. In the first years of the twentieth century in many American cities, newspaper publishers subcontracted newspaper-selling to the newsies: children in their early teens who stood on street corners and sold the evening paper. Children had to buy the initial supply from the publishers and sell all their papers to make a profit. Corsaro states that they became well known for their entrepreneurial skills on the street and formed their own trade union in an attempt to protect themselves from the intermittent unilateral increase in paper prices.

**Radical social constructionism**

A radical version of social constructionism sees childhood as a product of discourse. While there is now a bio-social approach to studying childhood, this conception of social constructionism views childhood as disembodied, with little or no tangible substance or essence (Ryan 2012). Childhood is almost entirely composed of myths, accounts and visual representations. In the key text, *Stories of Childhood* (Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers 1992), we have a meticulous working-through of the logic of social constructionism. It is worth mentioning that the Stainton-Rogers completely reject any biological basis to childhood. Biology implies a physical essence, a reality that stands outside any interpretation or text. Reality here can only be produced through discourse or ‘stories of childhood, a multiplicity of texts on the young’ (p. 7). We do not simply read about childhood or talk about childhood or even theorise about childhood: we bring childhood into being. Human and social endeavour produces ideas, ‘facts’ and knowledge that constitute childhood. What we have are accounts of childhood and nothing beyond or underneath this. Childhood is a product of discourse: we do not ask what childhood is, but from what standpoint and for what purposes do we talk about childhood?

In these terms, developmental psychology, which we shall discuss in the following chapter, offers us a dominant account of childhood. From a constructionist perspective, the academic discipline associated with the study...
of child development was able to gain a legitimate status as the founder and trustee of the ‘truth’ about childhood. It has been able to weld together folkloric knowledge about children’s essential characters, and concepts akin to the natural sciences (Turmel 2008). Thus the power of these stories or myths of childhood lies in the plausibility of the idea that human development is a combination of nature and nurture. The seeming validity of this combination develops through a scientific structure of concepts and techniques that generate a discreet and esoteric body of knowledge. Thus child development is both familiar and strange in terms of its resonance. For the Stainton-Rogers, what is grounded and truthful is exposed as constructed and mythical. Furthermore, the techniques for uncovering these truths, the measurement and observation of children in ‘controlled environments’, are seen to be moral and political. Developmental psychology has helped to bring childhood into being. In going back to our introductory comments on the conflation of biology and culture, developmental psychology is a particularly powerful story of childhood because it plausibly accounts for the fixed biological nature of childhood, making it difficult for us to view childhood any differently.

Deconstruction
I will pursue the moral and political nature of the science of childhood in the following chapter. The exercise in stepping back and analysing childhood as a cultural product is an exercise in deconstruction. The analysis goes behind the naming of a social phenomenon and examines the interplay of social, political, intellectual and economic forces that bring the phenomenon into being. In turning to another example, the street child, Glauser (1997) asks whose interests are being served by naming the problem ‘street children’, and for what reasons? His purpose is to lay bare the forces and interests behind the public concern for children on the street, to deconstruct the commonsensical notion that street children, particularly those in developing countries, can be saved through benevolent Western state action. His analysis uncovers a range of competing interests, from those with a liberal Western conscience intent on ‘saving’ children from the nefarious forces on the street, to those who take more extreme punitive actions in freeing the streets from the perceived ‘criminogenic’ tendencies of vagrant children. Paraphrasing the Stainton-Rogers (1992, Chapter 11), what deconstructing the street child does here is to offer a ‘concern about concern’, to question some of the powerful images of childhood that imply particular courses of action, whether these are generated by the need to control or the need to protect children.

A final example or construction, ‘the sexually abused child’, concentrates more on the media’s ability to generate powerful images of children who suffer at the hands of adults. These images generate particular conceptions of abused children through images and texts. Kitzinger (1997) refers to two characteristics of childhood brought out through this construction, children as innocent and passive. Sexually abused children are depicted as innocent victims with little or no ability to deal with the problem. Their innocence has been ‘stolen’ or ‘betrayed’, their passivity constructed in the
way that abusers are seen as all-powerful predators attacking their vulnerable victims. What this does, according to Kitzinger (1997), is generate powerful protectionist impulses among the adult population. Powerful stories in the media are often followed by periods where the control of young children is tightened, and among parents there is a deep distrust of strangers within the immediate vicinity of their children.

The case of Megan Kanka exemplifies this point. Megan, a 7-year-old girl from New Jersey, USA, was sexually assaulted and murdered by a neighbour who had previously been convicted twice for sexual abuse. The subsequent furore centred on the inability of the family to take preventative action because the law forbade the publication of information about the whereabouts of convicted child sexual abusers. In 1996 the Clinton administration passed what was known as ‘Megan’s Law’, which requires the authorities to release information about the whereabouts of convicted sexual abusers who have been released from prison.

Pluralism

One of the underpinnings of a radical social constructionism is that childhood presupposes few truths or starting points and that different interests and vantage points produce different ways of seeing the world, what Rex Stainton-Rogers (1989) refers to as ‘multiple realities’. If childhood has to be situated within specific discourses, then different discourses generate different childhoods. Hendrick (1997) explicitly draws this out in his

Academic Insight: Deconstructing Child Abuse

Kitzinger (1997) deconstructs these images of childhood to demonstrate the difficulties they create in tackling the problem of child sexual abuse. First, given that sexual abuse often stems from ‘normal’ adult/child relations in families and ‘caring’ institutions, a greater reliance on adults to keep children close, which protectionism implies, may simply open up more opportunities for adults to sexually abuse children. That is, an emphasis on regulation and protection may unintentionally reinforce children’s vulnerability. Secondly, to construct innocence as a period of naivety and asexuality is to make it more difficult to think that children themselves can be better equipped to deal with the problem through sex education. Thirdly, to emphasise children’s passivity is to marginalise and trivialise any attempts that children might make to fight back. Kitzinger’s (1997) deconstruction exposes the protectionist structures that reinforce a dominant construction of childhood, unintentionally making it difficult to deal with the problem of abuse. Deconstructing therefore becomes an exercise in transforming the taken-for-granted into the problematic through the uncovering of power and competing interests, what Foucault (1980) has called ‘regimes of truth’.
historical examination of British childhoods over the past two centuries. The convergence of different forces during different periods produces different understandings of childhood. To take one example: the political, social and economic debate on the introduction of compulsory schooling in the second half of the nineteenth century generated understandings of childhood in terms of schooling and state regulation. Thus, all children would experience a proper and natural childhood through schooling; the education, the control and the morality that emanated from school produced a dominant image of the ‘schooled child’ during this period. According to Hendrick (1997), the schooled child had developed from the ‘delinquent child’, the product of an earlier period where the political and social concerns revolved around children and crime, children as both vulnerable victims and precocious offenders. The ‘schooled child’ and the ‘delinquent child’ are not totally contingent, as there was a general trend throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century towards state regulation of children. Nevertheless, childhood is different in the middle and later parts of the nineteenth century because different combinations of adult interests generated different meanings of childhood.

Limits to social constructionism

Social constructionism separates the cultural and biological aspects of childhood, with the former taking precedence over the latter. Accentuating ideas, sentiments and meaning rather than the material elements has arguably become the new orthodoxy within the sociology of childhood. At the same time, various authors have taken issue with this approach.

The physicality and experience of childhood

Gittins (1998) takes issue with the radical version of social constructionism because of its overreliance on accounts of childhood. She argues that this approach talks up childhood, seeing it merely as a product of competing discourses. The material aspects of being a child, children’s experiences, which would presumably result from dominant constructions such as innocence, naivety and incompetence, are ignored. As Turmel (2008, p. 59) comments, ‘the social-constructionist approach overemphasises the representational and discursive aspects of childhood, leaving the whole question of embodiment and materiality aside’. While children may not always have a language for communicating their sensual and physical experiences, it may be plausible to speculate that living through childhood in an embodied sense generates particular ways of seeing the world. An emphasis on accounts and stories that are strictly segregated from any experiences also implies that the physicality of problems relating to being a child, such as abuse, poverty and, as I mentioned earlier, being on the street, are neglected. Some authors have argued that social problems revolving around children are social constructions, an analysis that focuses our attention on discursive processes through which abuse is placed on the political agenda (Hacking 1991).
As well as little attention being paid to the experience of being a child, there is an absence of any consideration of underlying factors that put children in situations where they are more likely to be abused than adults. Once we start questioning the absence of equivalent concepts such as ‘adult abuse’ or ‘adult poverty’, we start to think of features that are intrinsic to children rather than any other group within society.

The embodied nature of childhood has also been highlighted through the actor network theory (Latour 1993; Prout 2000b). Social constructionism is seen as an innovative but ultimately flawed way of viewing childhood. Rather than counterpoising culture and nature, Prout (2000b) locates children’s bodies next to their dominant representations. Thus the discursive and material worlds are part of a more complex assemblage of things that make up the social world. In these terms, children’s developing bodies and accounts of childhood that accentuate vulnerability and incompetence are significant, as are a multitude of practices and objects in constituting children’s social worlds and adults’ understanding of childhood.

The neglect of global universal features

If childhood is a product of discourse, it is also a product of very specific sets of circumstances. As I outlined earlier, one of the key themes within the sociology of childhood now is that childhood has been pluralised; that is, we can bring into being an infinite number of constructions arising out of an infinite number of discourses. Social constructionism thus cannot deal adequately enough with universal notions such as children’s needs or children’s welfare. Woodhead (1997) in his analysis of the concept ‘needs’, argues that in accentuating the cultural origins of ‘needs’ we tend to obscure the possibility of uncovering conditions and problems that most children face at a global level. Thus the problems of child neglect and abuse and child labour can be found in almost all societies, making it difficult to avoid questions about immanent aspects of childhood that put children in more exploitable positions. In these terms, viewing childhood as a construct generates a relativistic view of childhood. To tie childhood wholly to the context within which we find it is to imply that there is little that can be said generally about the nature of childhood, what Qvortrup views (1994, p. 5) as ‘the preponderance of what is unique over what is common’.

Children as constructors?

A third question turns on the role that children play within the discourse on childhood. One of the key questions running through the book is the role that children play within society as co-constructors. Are children’s lives merely determined by adults, or do children, as Corsaro (2017, p. 18) contends, ‘negotiate, share and create culture with adults and each other’? Social constructionists assume the former in that adults are the creative source here. It is important to be clear about this point. Social constructionists are primarily concerned with how the idea of childhood develops through the intersection of a variety of adult interests. The deconstruction of childhood
One or several childhoods?

A final criticism can be levelled at the historical constructionists. The radical constructionists might talk about a dominant construction of childhood, but the reliance on culture and discourse has produced a relativism that implies a range of different childhoods. The *sentiments school* and the work of Postman, on the other hand, while positing the social contours of childhood and implying different childhoods, produce a singular, modern, capitalist model which assumes a kind of contemporary universal and natural state. Postman’s emphasis on a ‘televisual’ culture, where children now inhabit the same cultural worlds as adults, is an irredeemably American model and arguably not that applicable outside an American context. Despite persistent critical commentary surrounding his assumptions and methods, Ariès presents us with a powerful model of modern childhood. Nonetheless, the fact is, we have only one modern construction of childhood that clearly differentiates the premodern from the modern. The problem is that there is no room for other competing or just different understandings of childhood that existed in both premodern and modern periods. What we are presented with is the historical unfolding of a single dominant conception of childhood. In this book our global analysis generates diverse conceptions of childhood.

Childhood: Variations on a theme?

In this final section I take note of the problems that a social-constructionist approach generates and attempt what we might call a synthesis. Pollock’s (1983) often-referenced critique of Ariès is based on the idea that parents are biologically programmed to love their children. Thus medieval parents quite simply could not have been ‘indifferent’ to their children’s needs because they could not have evolved to behave in this way. I want to hold on to a more universal or fixed notion of childhood without resorting to biological reductionism. To restate what I argued earlier, children’s biological differences from adults need to be separated from the cultural components of childhood. The idea that children are commonly believed to be morally and culturally weaker or less significant than adults does not necessarily indicate that this incapacity or subordination is based on their physiological or biological weakness. As we have seen, children in different historical and cultural contexts are quite capable of actions that belie their physiological immaturity.

At the same time, we need to be able to identify by some means the cultural significance of childhood by linking key features of childhood
to its social and cultural origins. Archard’s (2015, pp. 23–36) distinction between concept and conception is a useful starting point. A concept of childhood refers to some sort of unspecified difference between children and adults in society. A conception of childhood specifies more clearly what that difference entails. The concept of childhood refers to the principle of difference, whereas a conception of childhood provides the details as to what that concept means in any given society. The emphasis on the definite and indefinite article is deliberate here. In the first case, the concept leads us to think that there is a structural distinction between child and adult which suggests some sort of universal difference. We are prefiguring the discussion of structuralism in Chapter 3, but what we are saying here is that there is only one concept of childhood that is found pretty much in all societies and in most historical periods. We are thinking here about some agreed and commonly articulated notions of difference between being a child and being an adult. All cultures have mechanisms for distinguishing between children and adults. In the second case, a conception of childhood means that how this universal difference manifests itself is dependent on the various factors that go to make up the culture, the organisation and the structure of any society. Given that societies are different in their make-ups, so we will find different ways of seeing childhood – different conceptions of childhood. For some people the concept of childhood is significant because they seek to emphasise common social or cultural characteristics of children. Pollock’s (1983) work would come into this category. For others, and I include myself here, the conception, or should I say conceptions, of childhood are equally significant.

Archard’s distinction between concept and conception allows us to ask the question, ‘what is childhood?’ It assumes that the question is worth asking, that there will be several answers to the question, and that these answers will probably be different depending on the historical and cultural vantage point of the curious observer. We might restate the question ‘what is childhood?’ by asking how we distinguish between different conceptions of childhood. When do children become adults and how do societies make judgements as to when children become adults? In addressing these questions, a further distinction of Archard’s (2015) between boundaries and dimensions of childhood is instructive. The idea that childhood is part of the ‘life course’ means that childhood has a beginning and an ending; that is, it is bounded by criteria which mark it off from adulthood.

Adult/child boundaries are defined within societies from a series of perspectives or dimensions. This refers to the categories and criteria that a society draws on in defining this boundary. We might think of this in terms of the different dimensions of childhood, with each dimension reflecting sets of interests that draw age-related boundaries at different points. For example, medical practitioners, legal experts, philosophers and politicians all have an interest in when childhood ends. With different sets of interests drawing on the boundary at different points along the life course, this creates innumerable problems for anyone outside a particular culture wanting to define the childhood of that culture (Archard 2015, p. 29).
In advanced contemporary societies this has become a contentious issue, with familiar refrains such as the loss of innocence signifying that there is no clear boundary between childhood and adulthood. Any concern about the shortening of childhood may be related to a lack of agreement as to how we collectively know when it ends, rather than any intrinsic difference in children’s behaviour and their relations with others. To some extent this has always been a problem in some Western societies. To take the example of the UK and the issue we referred to earlier of responsibility, children are responsible in a criminological sense at the age of 10, sexually responsible at 16, and responsible in a political sense at 18. These divergent dimensions of childhood are not new; if anything, with the reduction of the age of homosexual consent in the late 1990s from 21 to 18 and then to 16 in 2001, the dimensions are less divergent. Nevertheless, until the recent public questioning of childhood, we have assumed that there is a clear boundary between childhood and adulthood, what Archard (2015, p. 32) refers to as the boundary having a ‘virtual status’. However, despite these contentions, broadly speaking, in Western cultures a mixture of legal, medical and political judgements have been made which suggest that childhood ends between the ages of 16 and 18. In Europe and North America we commonly tend to think that by around the age of 18 children are socially and morally responsible enough to vote, pay income tax and be sexually active.

In other cultures, however, children may make the transition to adulthood once they are physically able to work or judged to be capable of bearing arms. In cultures where economic production involves all members of the community or where physical prowess determines membership to the armed forces, the age at which children make the transition to adulthood is likely to be different from that in Western societies. In some cultures marriage or the birth of a first child takes place early and allows the child to assume the status of an adult. Lee (2009) refers here to the case of young women in Afghanistan. One contemporary example of this can be found within working-class Mexican families (Blasco 2005). The introduction of compulsory secondary schooling in Mexico in 1993 had the effect of bringing into sharp relief differing conceptions of childhood between developed and developing countries. In Western cultures childhood is characterised by social dependence and economic ‘irresponsibility’, at least up until the age of 16. Mexican children, on the other hand, spend their teenage years in domestic and paid employment. Blasco (2005) is careful to distinguish between middle- and working-class Mexican children. Nevertheless, the introduction of compulsory schooling compromised the productive role of working-class Mexican children, forcing them to stay at school and extending their childhoods well into their teenage years.

Within a more globalised context it has become far more difficult to come to an agreement as to when childhood ends. In many societies the global mix of communities means that any taken-for-granted conceptions of childhood are inadvertently challenged as people from different cultures with different expectations of children come into contact. Let us take the example of unaccompanied migrant children claiming asylum in the UK.
While the rules are clear that asylum-seeking children need to be under the age of 18, UK authorities draw on common-sense criteria which is assumed to indicate that many child migrants are over 18 and thus deprived of a range of welfare support. From a UK vantage point where children are assumed to be naïve and inexperienced, migrant children in some instances will appear much older than they actually are, given their prior expectations and responsibilities within their home countries. Children may discuss their economic and caring responsibilities and inadvertently support the authorities’ view that they are adults rather than children. The latter’s narrow conception of the meaning of childhood belies the fluidity over the boundary between childhood and adulthood. Moreover, a broader understanding of the dimensions of childhood incorporating economic and a range of social factors as well as biological criteria, might permit border agencies to view childhood differently with more positive outcomes for child migrants.

In some respects, the border agencies’ more exclusive definition of childhood is an attempt to tackle the possibilities of children exploiting age-defined boundaries. Banks (2007), in her analysis of Bangladeshi childhood, notes that children are able to pass themselves off as adults and children at different times for different purposes in order to gain some advantage. Thus sex workers as young as 11 and 12 often have forged papers stating they are 18. The authorities are unlikely to challenge these ‘legal’ claims and these girls are free to work, because they apparently carry the right papers. Similarly, young Muslim boys and girls can pass themselves off as being much older in order to get married. Marriage registrars will often condone this if the children are supported by the parents.

Academic Insight: Migrant Children and Age Disputes

In the absence of age-related evidence such as birth certificates and medical evidence, and despite the ability of children to confirm their date of birth, UK border agencies are likely to assume that children applying for asylum are adults. Thus, almost half of all (45 per cent) asylum-seeking children are treated as adults when entering the UK: the children’s claims to be children are disputed by the authorities (Crawley 2007). The initial impressions of border professionals based on appearance and behaviour become powerful determining features of their subsequent treatment. As one Iranian boy stated when asked about his experiences as a newly arrived migrant:

The worst thing I can remember is they [Immigration Service staff] made me sit there and like a slave market other immigration officers were told to look at me and guess my age. It was like I’m going to be sold. One would say 24, another would say 21. I was told to stand up and down. Then they said ‘you are over 18’ ... Hasan, 16 years old, from Iran. (Crawley 2007)
Conclusion

We need to distinguish between tying children's social experiences to their biological growth and viewing children's biological and cultural development as parallel and interrelated features of what it is to be a child. In the first case, there are far fewer opportunities for viewing children as competent and full members of society. Biology is fixed, and as children are biologically inferior, so are their social positions. In the latter case, biology and culture work in tandem to exclude children, with the former being drawn on as the grounds for children's social exclusion. In this chapter I have argued that this exclusion is based on a powerful set of ideas imposed on children by adults rather than any intrinsic weakness on the part of children. By emphasising meaning I examine the different ways that childhood is constructed. I illustrated the importance of social and cultural contexts to the meaning of childhood through our example of the ‘playing child’. We are familiar with this image of childhood. It embodies other key features of childhood, such as innocence and vulnerability. Moreover, these ideas seem to converge on biological causes. Our common sense tells us that children's smallness, their ‘physiological immaturity’, effortlessly underwrites our understanding of these key features of childhood. Through a range of analytical techniques, and from a variety of disciplinary vantage points, I have questioned the ‘natural’ and universal application of this model or construct.

In emphasising the cultural elements of childhood we are left asking whether there is any solid material basis to childhood. Radical social constructionism takes the meaning of childhood further, for it proposes that we rid childhood of any essence. Childhood is basically an elaborate and very powerful adult myth, a series of stories and accounts that locates children as subordinate figures in society. Within a social-constructionist framework childhood is irrevocably tied to what adults do and think. Whether we are talking about the ‘abused child’, the ‘street child’ or the ‘child soldier’, through discourse and practice adults produce children as social and cultural subjects. Accordingly, there is little sense in which we are able to see children and adults as occupying separate social or cultural positions. We cannot assume childhood; we can only bring it into being.

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