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A Sociological Approach to Childhood Development

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There are significant ways in which the positions taken by sociologists and developmental psychologists on the issue of child development diverge. Sociologists problematize the very idea of the child rather than treat it as a practical and pre-stated being with a relatively determined trajectory and certainly do not seek to offer advice concerning its appropriate mode of maturation. As I shall attempt here, sociology endeavors to realize the child as constituted socially, as a status of person which is comprised through a series of, often heterogeneous, images, representations, codes, and constructs. This is an increasingly popular perspective within contemporary childhood studies (James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1982/1992, 1989; Qvortrup, 1993; Stainton-Rogers, 1991).

Sociology is burgeoning in its innovative work in relation to children and in finding its way toward a concerted sociology of childhood and it still has a degree of exciting work to do. A major contribution consolidating such research was provided by James and Prout (1990) in a work that attempted to establish a new paradigm in our thinking. It is worthy of consideration here and I shall quote it in full, it can act as a manifesto in our subsequent considerations of the significance and relevance of sociological theory in our approach to development:

. . . the key features of the paradigm:

1. Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor a universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.
2. Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender and ethnicity. Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single or universal phenomenon.

3. Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concern of adults.
4. Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes.
5. Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is possible through experimental or survey styles of research.
6. Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present. That is to say, to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood. (James & Prout, 1990: pp. 8–9).

Such an approach, in this context, displays a variety of purposes. First, an attempt to displace the overwhelming claim made on childhood by the realm of commonsense reasoning – not that such reasoning is inferior or unsystematic but that it is conventional rather than disciplined (Garfinkel, 1967; Schutz, 1964). Commonsense reasoning serves to “naturalize” the child in each and any epoch, that is it treats children as both natural and universal and it thus disenables our understanding of the child's particularity and cultural difference within a particular historical context. Children, quite simply, are not always and everywhere the same thing, they are socially constructed and understood contextually – sociologists attend to this process of construction and also to this contextualization. Second, the approach indicates that the child, like other forms of being within our culture, is presented through a variety of forms of discourse. These discourses are not necessarily competitive but neither is their complementarity inherent and a holistic view of the child does not arise from a liberal sense of varieties of interpretation or multiple realities. Rather, the identity of children or of a particular child varies within the political contexts of those forms of discourse – hence, the different kinds of “knowledge” of mother, teacher, pediatrician, social worker, educational psychologist, and juvenile magistrate, for example, do not live suspended in an egalitarian harmony. Hendrick (1990) has produced an instructive account of childhood constructions in Britain since 1800 through the analysis of a series of dominant forms of discourse, in which he includes the “romantic,” “evangelical,” “factory,” “delinquent,” “schooled,” “psycho-medical,” “welfare,” “psychological,” and the “family” as opposed to the “public” child – these languages have all provided for different modern lives of children.

Third, the approach intends to work out the parameters within which sociology, and thus its relation to understanding childhood, must originate – therefore I shall attempt to show sociology's conceptual limitations, and also its possibilities, as one form of discourse about childhood and the world. However, before I address sociology's conceptual base and therefore its different approach to the child let me firmly establish its difference from developmental psychology.

The Developmental Psychology Paradigm

In the everyday world the category of childhood is a totalizing concept, it concretely describes a community that at some time has everybody as its member. This is a community which is therefore relatively stable and wholly predictable in its structure but by definition only fleeting in its particular membership. Beyond this the category signifies a primary experience in the existential biography of each individual and thus inescapably derives its commonsense meanings, relevance, and relation not only from what it might currently be as a social status but also from how each and every individual, at some time, must have been. It is the only truly common experience of being human, infant mortality is no disqualification. Perhaps because of this seemingly all-encompassing character of the phenomenon as a social status and because of the essentially personal character of its particular articulation, commonsense thinking and everyday language in contemporary society are rife with notions concerning childhood. Being a child, having been a child, having children, and having continuously to relate to children are all experiences which contrive to render the category as “normal” and readily transform our attribution of it to the realm of the “natural” (as used to be the case with sex and race). Such understandings, within the collective awareness, are organized around the single most compelling metaphor of contemporary culture, that of “growth.” Stemming from this, the physical signs of anatomical change that accompany childhood are taken to be indicators of a social transition, so that the conflation of the realms of the “natural” and the “social” is perpetually reinforced.

Developmental psychology is wholly predicated on the notion of childhood’s “naturalness” and on the necessity, normality, and desirability of development and constructive change through “growth.” Children are thus routinely constructed as partially rational, that is, in the process of becoming rational.

Perhaps the irony of the exclusion of the child through partial formulations of rationality is nowhere more fundamentally encountered than in the formative body of work generated by Piaget. It was Piaget who defined developmental psychology as follows:

Developmental psychology can be described as the study of the development of mental functions, in as much as this development can provide an explanation, or at least a complete description, of their mechanisms in the finished state. In other words, developmental psychology consists of making use of child psychology in order to find the solution to general psychological problems (Piaget, 1972, p. 32).

However, as Burman has pointed out:

Nowadays the status of developmental psychology is not clear. Some say that it is a perspective or an approach to investigating general psychological problems, rather than a particular domain or sub-discipline. According to this view we can address all major areas of psychology, such as memory, cognition, etc., from this perspective. The unit of development under investigation is also variable. We could be concerned with the development of a process, or a mechanism, rather than an individual. This is in marked contrast with the popular representations of developmental psychology which equate it with the practicalities of child development or, more recently, human development (Burman, 1994, p. 9).

Piaget's work on intelligence and child development has had a global impact on pediatric care and practice. Piaget's "genetic epistemology" seeks to provide a description of the structuring of thought and finally the rational principle of nature itself, all through a theory of learning. As such Piaget's overall project represents a significant contribution to philosophy as well. Following within the neo-Kantian tradition his ideas endeavor to conciliate the divergent epistemologies of empiricism and rationalism; the former conceiving of reality as being available in the form of synthetic truths discoverable through direct experience, and the latter viewing reality analytically through the action of pure reason alone. Kant, in his time, had transcended this dichotomy through the invocation of "synthetic a priori truths" that are the immanent conditions of understanding, not simply amenable to logical analysis. Piaget's categories of understanding in his scheme of conceptual development may be treated as being of the same order. His work meticulously constitutes a particular system of scientific rationality and presents it as being both natural and universal. However, as Archard (1993) stated:

Piaget suggested that all children acquire cognitive competencies according to a universal sequence. Nevertheless, he has been criticised on two grounds. . . First, his ideal of adult cognitive competence is a peculiarly Western philosophical one. The goal of cognitive development is an ability to think about the world with the concepts and principles of Western logic. In particular Piaget was concerned to understand how the adult human comes to acquire the Kantian categories of space, time and causality. If adult cognitive competence is conceived in this way then there is no reason to think it conforms to the everyday abilities of even Western adults. Second, children arguably possess some crucial competencies long before Piaget says they do (Archard, 1993, pp. 65–66).

Within Piaget's system each stage of intellectual growth is characterized by a specific "schema" or well-defined pattern and sequence of physical and mental actions governing the child's orientation to the world. Thus the system has a rhythm and a calendar too. The development and transition from figurative to operative thought, through a sequence of stages contains an achievement ethic. That is to say that the sequencing depends upon the child's mastery and transcendence of the schemata at each stage. This implies a change in the child's relation to the world. This transition, the compulsive passage through schemata, is what Piaget refers to as a "decentering." The decentering of the child demonstrates a cumulative series of transformations: a change from solipsistic subjectivism to a realistic objectivity; a change from affective response to cognitive evaluation; and a movement from the disparate realm of value to the absolute realm of fact. The successful outcome of this developmental process is latterly typified and celebrated as "scientific rationality." This is the stage at which the child, now adult, becomes at one with the logical structure of the cosmos. At this point, where the child's matured thought provides membership of the "circle of science" the project of "genetic epistemology" has reached its fruition, it is complete.

Concretely, scientific rationality for Piaget is displayed through abstraction, generalization, logico-deductive process, mathematization, and cognitive operations. At the analytic level, however, this rationality reveals the intentional character of Piaget's theorizing and grounds his system in the same manner as did Parsons' transcendent "cultural values." Within Piaget's genetic epistemology, the process of socialization can be exposed as the

analytic device by and through which the child is wrenched from the possibility of difference within the realm of value and integrated into the consensus that comprises the tyrannical realm of fact. Scientific rationality or adult intelligence is thus the recognition of difference grounded in unquestioned collectivity – we are returned to the irony contained within the original ontological question. The child is, once more, abandoned in theory. Real historically located children are subjected to the violence of a contemporary mode of scientific rationality, which reproduces itself, at the expense of their difference, beyond the context of situated social life. The “fact” of natural process overcomes the “value” of real social worlds. And the normality of actual children becomes scrutinized in terms of the norms predicted by developmental psychology. Rose (1990), commenting on the historical context of this oppressive tendency stated:

Developmental psychology was made possible by the clinic and the nursery school. Such institutions had a vital role, for they enabled the observation of numbers of children of the same age, and of children of a number of different ages, by skilled psychological experts under controlled experimental, almost laboratory, conditions. Thus they simultaneously allowed for standardization and normalization – the collection of comparable information on a large number of subjects and its analysis in such a way as to construct norms. A developmental norm was a standard based upon the average abilities or performances of children of a certain age in a particular task or a specified activity. It thus not only presented a picture of what was *normal* for children of such an age, but also enabled the normality of any child to be assessed by comparison with this norm (Rose, 1990, p. 142).

Within Piaget’s demonstrations of adult scientific rationality, the child is deemed to have appropriately adapted to the environment when she has achieved a balance between accommodation and assimilation. It would seem that the juggling with homeostasis is forever the child’s burden! However, although from a critical analytic stance accommodation might be regarded as the source of the child’s integration into the consensus reality, within the parameters of the original theory the process is treated as the locus of creativity and innovation – it is that aspect of the structuring of thought and being which is to be most highly valued. In contradistinction Piaget regards children’s play as nonserious, trivial activity in as much as it displays an emphasis on assimilation over accommodation. Play is merely diverting fun or fantasy, it deflects the child from his true destiny and logical purpose within the scheme of rationality. The problem is that the criteria for what constitutes play need not equate with the rigorous, factual, demands of reality. Treating play in this manner, that is from the perspective of the rational and “serious” adult, Piaget is specifically undervaluing what might represent an important aspect of the expressive practices of the child and her world. Following Denzin (1982) and Stone (1965) I would argue that play is indeed an important component of the child’s work as a social member. And I would argue further that play is instrumental in what Speier (1970) has designated the child’s “acquisition of interactional competencies.” Genetic epistemology willfully disregards, or perhaps just pays insufficient attention to, play in its urge to mathematize and thus render formal the “rational” cognitive practices of adult individuals in their collective lives.

By treating the growth process of the child’s cognition as if it were impelled toward a pre-stated structure of adult rationality, Piaget is driven to concur with Levi-Bruhl’s con-

cept of the “primitive mentality” of the savage but in this instance in relation to the “prelogical” thought of the child. A further consequence of Piaget’s conceptualization of the rational development of the child’s “embryonic” mind as if it were a natural process, is that the critical part played by language in the articulation of mind and self is very much understated. Language is treated as a symbolic vehicle, which carries thought and assists in the growth of concepts and a semiotic system but it is not regarded as having a life in excess of these referential functions. Thus language, for Piaget, is insufficient in itself to bring about the mental operations that make concept formation possible. Language, then, helps in the selection, storage, and retrieval of information but it does not bring about the coordination of mental operations. This level of organization is conceptualized as taking place above language and in the domain of action. This is slightly confusing until we realize that action, for Piaget, is not action regarded as the performative conduct that generates social contexts, but rather a sense of action as that which is rationally governed within the a priori strictures of an idealist metaphysics. Language, for Piaget, itemizes the world and acts as a purely cognitive function. This is a position demonstrably confounded by Merleau-Ponty (1967) in his work on the existential and experiential generation and use of language by children – the classic example being the child’s generation of a past tense in order to express the loss of uniqueness and total parental regard following the birth of a sibling; language here is not naming a state of affairs but expressing the emotion of jealousy. Merleau-Ponty’s work serves to reunite the cognitive and the affective aspects of being which are so successfully sundered by Piaget; he stated:

I pass to the fact that appeared to me to be worthy of mention . . . the relation that can be established between the development of intelligence (in particular, the acquisition of language) and the configuration of the individual’s affective environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 108).

I have attempted to explicate certain of the normative assumptions at the heart of developmental psychology which has held as the orthodoxy up until recent years and I might optimistically suggest that such conventional explanations have been successfully supplanted by feminist theories in relation to the family and what have come to be grouped as “social constructionists’ views” of the child, possibly instigated by this author but subsequently titled and joined by significant company. We do not have a consensus view of the child in social theory: however, a spurious consensus is not necessarily a desirable goal. It is my intention to show that it is the different manners in which theoretical commitments are grounded that give rise to the diversity of views of childhood. At this point let us return to the conceptual bases of sociology.

The Conceptual Grounds of Sociological Thought

Although, in its various guises, sociology emerged as a critical response to the state of its culture and traditionally adopted a radical position in relation to the material constraints wrought through the progress of modernity, it was also, in origin, epistemologically

imperialistic. Durkheim (1938) delineated sociology's peculiar realm of phenomena. He marked out their identifiable characteristics and the conceptual space that they occupied and he sought to devalue all other attempts to explain "social" reality (Hirst, 1975). Thus we arrive at a kernel idea for sociology, that of the "social structure"; it is from this concept that the discipline proceeds. Social structures appear to societal members as "facts" and as such have real and describable characteristics: they are typical, that is, they are a series of normal or taken for granted manifestations; further, they are constraining upon the actions of members either implicitly or explicitly; and finally they are, to some greater or lesser degree, independent of their individual will. As Durkheim put it:

The proposition which states that social facts must be treated as things – the proposition which is at the very basis of our method – is among those which have stirred up the most opposition. It was deemed paradoxical and scandalous for us to assimilate to the realities of the external world the realities of the social world. This was singularly to misunderstand the meaning and effect of this assimilation, the object of which was not to reduce the higher forms of being to the level of lower ones but, on the contrary, to claim for the former a degree of reality at least equal to that which everyone accords the latter. Indeed, we do not say that social facts are material things, but that they are things just as are material things, although in a different way (Durkheim, 1982, p. 35).

The "social structure" then becomes the supra-individual source of causality in sociological explanations, whether it is experienced by members as a cognitive, moral, political, or economic orientation (Parsons, 1968). All sociological worlds seek to build in and analyze a series of constraints that work upon the individual and (however the particular perspective places itself, within the debate over freewill versus determinism) there tends to be a primary commitment to treat the self as an epiphenomenon of the society (Cicourel, 1964; Dawe, 1970; Hollis, 1977; Wrong, 1961) and thus prey to apprehension in terms of epistemological binaries. As O'Neill (1994) put it:

The *tabula rasa* or clean-slate individual of liberal contract theory is as much a fiction as is its counterpart fiction of the many-headed monster state, or Leviathan. Each device serves to stampede thought into those forced alternatives of the under- or over-socialized individual (O'Neill, 1994, p. 54).

Sociology's tradition then makes little claim to provide a strong theory of the individual and this holds implications for our understanding of the child. Ironically the most contemporary sociology of the late- or post-modern scene is even less secure in its explanations of self (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Thus despite the apparent cult of the individual and celebration of the ego in the latter part of the twentieth century, sociological analysis appears increasingly unprepared to formulate the social identity of people, let alone the emergent identity of children.

The problems of structural causality, in relation to a study of the child, are further compounded by the fact that sociological systems of explanation are constructed in relation to the conduct of typical rational "adult" members – children are largely theorized as states of pathology or inadequacy in relation to the pre-stated model of the actor. All sociologies, in their variety of forms, relate to the childhood experience through theories of

socialization whether in relation to the institutional contexts of the family, the peer group, or the school. These three sites are regarded as the serious arenas wherein the child is most systematically exposed to concerted induction procedures. It is here that the child, within the social system, relates as a subordinate to the formalized strategies of constraint, control, inculcation, and patterning which will serve to transform his or her status into the tangible and intelligible form of an adult competent being.

In sociological writings characterized as normative, the term socialization glosses the phenomenon of change from the birth of a child to maturity or old age. To observe that changes take place after birth is trivial, but the quasi-scientific use of the term socialization masks this triviality. In fact, the study of these changes as socialization is an expression of the sociologists' common sense position in the world – that is, as adults. The notion of socialization leads to the theoretical formulations mirroring the adult view that children are incomplete adults (MacKay, 1973, p. 27).

A child's social, and ontological, purpose is therefore, it would seem, not to stay a child. Within this inexorable trajectory any signs of entrenchment or backtracking, like play for example, may be interpreted as indicators of a failure to "develop" (Piaget, 1977).

It is a further irony that were one to confront sociologists with the issue of "development" then their immediate frame of reference would be to consider the modes of transition occurring between the structures of simple and complex societies (Frank, 1971). The concept of development, with relation to persons, is no part of a sociologist's vocabulary. Structures are sociologists' primary realities and the only organism that they might consider in a state of development is that, by analogy, of the society as a whole.

The Concept of Development

"Development," an essentially temporal notion, is the primary metaphor through which childhood is made intelligible, both in the everyday world and also within the specialist vocabularies of the sciences and agencies which lay claim to an understanding and servicing of that state of being. Thus, stemming from this root metaphor all empirical study, social policy, or remedial treatment in relation to the child tends to be longitudinal in character – the idea of time being left inviolable. Given "time" the child will change. More than this, development as the all-pervading source of the location of the child-as-other, has come to be realized as a wholly "natural" process in a manner that more than echoes the determinism of sociology's structural bias. Individuals are largely understood to be realizations of what was biogenetically inherent, with perhaps a surface structure of personality, thought-style, or cognitive breadth being attributable to "nurture" – though even these finite provinces have been invaded by certain theories which sought to explain criminality, racial deficit, or insanity (writers such as Lombroso; Jensen & Esyenc; Kraepelin). Finally, development has certain resonances within the culture of modernity that enable the idea to be conflated with other axial contemporary social metaphors like "growth" and "progress." Within a post-Darwinian framework we are led to relate to development as necessary, inevitable and, essentially, for the good.

Let us now address these central elements in the concept of development. First, in relation to the issue of development as time, philosophers from Plato to the present day have grappled with the indeterminacy or experiential character of this dimension, yet most modern thinking appears locked within a Kantian sense of time as both external and quantitative (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1975). This in itself is a sociologically interesting phenomenon bound up with the scientism and mathematizing urge of contemporary society. However, what such mechanical diachronicity constrains and disfigures is the actual experience of time in social relations; as Durkheim asserted “A calendar expresses the rhythm of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity” (Durkheim, 1968, p. 206). In everyday social life we are quite accustomed to the variability of the “time” experience; time spent with a lover is not comparable to time spent queuing in the supermarket. In similar fashion the existential experience of being a child seems to go on forever, the gap between Christmases seems unimaginable, bedtime is all too suddenly here, and “boring” time, doing usually what parents want to do, is interminable. Parallel with such interior sensation for the child, parents are unified in their sense that children “grow up so quickly” and are no sooner walking than they are asking to borrow the car!

Second, the “naturalizing” of development can be seen to obscure or mystify a set of criteria for change that might be implicit or grounded within a specific network of interests. Thus as examples, to have one’s child designated as “advanced” in relation to Piagetian criteria may be a source of pride to a parent as it signifies rapid or special “natural” development; the criteria for such “development” remain, however, normative and unexplicated – the same parent might experience acute displeasure if their child were defined as “retarded” and thus relegated to an educational identity of a lesser status; the same covert criteria apply. It is often argued that natal induction, viewed as a critical stage of “development,” is necessary for the benefit of the child but it would seem, in many cases, to relate wholly to the politics of hospital timetables. These examples are cited to demonstrate the “social” and embedded character of the “natural” experience of childhood.

Third, the conflation of development with ideas of growth and progress builds a competitive ethic into the process of development itself that supports the ideology of possessive individualism at the root of industrialized capitalist cultural formations. The dominant materialist reduction functions such that not only are mental and manual skills evaluated hierarchically and therefore stratified which, in turn, enables social stratification within the culture, but also manual/physical development is itself realized as internally competitive to generate further modes of stratification and ranking. There would appear to be a justified merit that stems from development. Such processes extend from the comparative parental talk at antenatal clinics, for example, “Is he crawling yet?”; “When did she start to walk?”; “Mine could talk at that age”; to the pinnacles of nationalistic projections in the form of the Olympic Games with collective physical prowess being measured by medal counts (and backward countries sometimes surprising advanced nations with their physical precocity). After all, success should accompany development – naturally!

What I am suggesting is that the concept of development does not signify a “natural” process – it does, however, make reference to a socially constructed sense of change pertaining to the young individual which is encoded within a series of benchmarks relevant to the topical or predominant form of discourse: which can relate to political engagement,

moral and criminal responsibility, sexual consent, and patterns of consumption. Thus different codes move in and out of focus according to which aspect of the person we are attending to – in many senses there is a heterogeneity to these codes that resists the attempts to reduce them to the homogeneity of “naturalness”.

The positive side of this deconstruction of the child experience into an assembly of signifying discourses is to explore certain possibilities within the social character of that encoding. While regarding childhood phenomenologically, in terms of the intentional constitutive practices that facilitate its recognizable form, it is not necessary to pursue such a tradition to the point of the child being wholly disembodied – as Merleau-Ponty (1967) and O’Neill (1973) have both, separately, argued – to do so deprives the child of an ontology.

A crucial aspect of childhood, and a sociological sense of “development,” can be realized in terms of its “contingency.” That is to say that childhood always speaks of a relationship, for example, adult–child, parent–child, teacher–child, etc. (Hambrook, 1987). As Ambert put it:

The discussion is informed by a critical perspective viewing both childhood and parenting as social constructs that evolve with socio-historical changes. . . . discussion of parenting cannot be divorced from perspectives on the nature of childhood. . . . the nature of childhood is fluid, anchored as it is in the prevailing world views supporting societies and created by societies. In most societies, children and early adolescents are viewed within the context of the family. Consequently, as one cohort or one culture defines what childhood is, parenting is constructed, whether implicitly or explicitly (Ambert, 1994, pp. 530–531).

Also, whatever the general condition of childhood in society (treated violently, exploited, pornographized) it may be regarded as an index of the state of the wider social relation, the moral bond in society (Jenks, 1995; Hendrick, 1990).

The concept of development, then, might imply that the child’s “becoming” is dependent upon the reference points or normative structures made conventional within the adults’ world, but we need to pursue this idea further. In the obvious, cultural sense of the attribution, ascription, and assumption of meaning, all people “need” others in order to generate a meaningful environment for change, stasis, or whatever; quite simply, we cannot make sense alone. Any knowledge of self derives from an experience of collective constraint; and being and action, as opposed to being and behavior, is contingent upon the presence of and communication with “other.” Adults, however, are assumed within social theory to operate with a degree of basic reciprocity of perspectives and interchangeability of standpoints in terms of the processes of meaning giving and meaning receiving (Parsons, 1964; Schutz, 1964). On top of this, adult relationships are subsequently stratified in terms of an unequal distribution of power.

The difference that is childhood may well be understood in terms of power (Holt, 1971; Illich, 1971; Postman & Weingarten, 1971), though this would be to treat the grounds of power as purely age-based (in the same way that Marxist feminism attempted to reduce the question of power to an issue of gender), neither argument is adequate nor sufficient. However, childhood might be more instructively theorized in terms of dependency. Children do practically have “need” of their parents and adult companions, a need that is a combination of the material, physical, emotional, and so on, but one that is always realized

within particular sociohistorical, and cultural, settings. This understanding enables us to look toward the contexts of provision, instruction, and care in relation to a fundamental sociological analytic concept, that of “altruism.” Thus the child–adult relation is, in one sense, expressive of “altruism,” a dimension of sociality that is at odds with the dominant image of self and success within modernity, namely the ascendance of egoism (Durkheim, 1933). Perhaps, therefore, we should express the child–adult relation in multidimensional terms. As Gilligan et al. (1988) stated:

The different parameters of the parent–child relationship – its inequality and its interdependence or attachment – may ground different feelings which differentiate the dimension of inequality/equality and attachment/detachment that characterize all forms of human connection. In contrast to a unitary moral vision and to the assumption that the opposite of the one is the many, these two dimensions of relationship provide coordinates for reimagining the self and remapping development. The two conceptions of responsibility, reflecting different images of the self in relationship, correct an individualism that has been centered within a single interpretative framework (Gilligan et al., 1988, p. 5).

But I am not arguing that the altruism or care that the adult feels toward the child is itself a unitary or a “natural” feeling – no, rather I would suggest that it is a social construct. In one sense this construct might be viewed as the embodiment of the affective myth of romanticism that has given rise to the modern nuclear family, and perhaps we should add the “mother,” as the center of all loving sensations – the instrumental accompaniment to the exaggeration and elevation of the autonomous cognitive ego that has followed in the wake of the enlightenment and assisted in the growth of science and capitalism (Williams, 1958). In fact, a feature of its time, no more and no less. Ambert (1994) was instructive in this context when she stated that:

This linkage between what we conceive to be the nature of childhood and that of parenting is based less on the natural unavoidability of parents for children’s survival and well-being as on society’s structure and socioeconomic requisites, which not only place children in the context of family, but “parentalise” and, I will add, “maternalise” them. Thus, when one sees children, one “sees” parents. When one sees children who have problems, one looks for parents, especially mothers (Ambert, 1994, p. 530).

The sociological tradition would, however, attest to altruism as the very core of sociality. All sociologies spring from the Hobbesian problem of order and even if they attend to the conflictual character of social relations their basic commitment is to explain how societies hold together. In this latter sense altruism may be read as ideological, an appearance of care that disguises the true purpose of control. Here the social sense of dependency that accompanies development takes on a sinister form, we have to shake ourselves free of the warm sense of sociality that holds together through spontaneous loving bonds. We are then confronted with a more cynical version of the idea, in fact the mechanisms of dependence that serve to sustain particular versions of the status quo. In this sense the development of the child may now instructively be viewed alongside the development of the Afro American in the United States or the Black South African, or indeed, the development of women’s consciousness in Western Europe. Care, in this sense, itself becomes hegemonic (Gramsci,

1970). Dependence now becomes that feature of social structures which seeks to individualize guilt, pathologize the individual and which further militates to disguise the failures or shortcomings implicit within those very social structures. To this extent all societies demonstrate “dependence” through their members’ adherence to drink, drugs, belief systems, or desires. Development through dependency then becomes an instrument in the processes of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; Jenks, 1993).

Let us now look at certain aspects of the critical mode of social theorizing within sociology that would most systematically espouse this view. Althusser (1971) divides the mechanisms of control in modern societies into two forms, the repressive and the ideological state apparatuses. The latter contains all aspects of superstructure, the cognitive and transmissional aspects of culture, which serve to reproduce the existing oppressive structures of power and advantage without exposing naked aggression. Thus family life, patterns of socialization, schooling – all complementary contexts of a child’s development, are realized as part of the deep structurally unconscious apparatuses whereby the going order is recharged, reaffirmed, and reconstituted. The education system, Althusser told us:

. . . takes children from every class at infant school and then for years . . . it drums into them . . . a certain amount of know how wrapped up in the ruling ideology or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state. Each mass ejected en route is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfil in class society: the role of exploited, of the agent of repression or of the professional ideologist (Althusser, 1971, p. 147).

Marcuse (1965) has attended to the contemporary liberal *laissez-faire* adjustment to, and understanding of, the behavior of others; which we can clearly relate to the socialization process; that he regards as a “repressive tolerance.” It might be likened to a cultural mannerism of acceptance that defuses critique, reaction, or change through its all-pervading quasi-approval. In an efficient, “caring” society childrearing and education liberates the individual into compliance. Marcuse stated that:

A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress (Marcuse, 1972, p. 16).

and sadly concluded that:

To liberate the imagination so that it can be given all its means of expression presupposes the repression of much that is now free and that perpetuates a repressive society. And such reversal is not a matter of psychology or ethics but of politics . . . (*that is*) the practice in which the basic societal institutions are developed, defined, sustained, and changed. It is the practice of individuals no matter how organized they may be. Thus the question once again must be faced; how can the administered individuals – who have made their mutilation into their own liberties and satisfactions, and thus reproduced it on an enlarged scale – liberate themselves from themselves as well as from their masters? (Marcuse, 1972, p. 195).

An utterance redolent with critique of the contemporary adult–child relationship.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), whose work specifically addresses the process of social reproduction, demonstrated that there are intellectual fields of appraisal which surround

any creative endeavor or unique form of expression and both render it meaningful and evaluate it in relation to existing patterns of social stratification. This can apply to the work of art but equally well to the performance of the developing child in significant social contexts like schools. Children, they argue, are differentially endowed with a “cultural capital” according to their original social milieu, their “habitus.”

It may be assumed that every individual owes to the type of schooling he has received a set of basic, deeply interiorised master-patterns on the basis of which he subsequently acquires other patterns, so that the system of patterns by which his thought is organised owes its specific character not only to the nature of the patterns constituting it but also to the frequency with which these are used and to the level of consciousness at which they operate, these properties being probably connected with the circumstances in which the most fundamental intellectual patterns were acquired (Bourdieu, 1967, pp. 192–193).

They are equipped with thought styles, manners, sensitivities, and patterns of relevance and relation that ensure a reproduction of their class position and the ideological framework that supports such a locus. Societies, it would seem, almost inevitably reproduce their structures of hierarchy and power through the processes of the development of self . . . “education serves to transform the cultural heritage into a common individual unconscious” (Bourdieu, 1967).

Finally, the work of Foucault (1977) offers us, at one level, a series of archaeologies of the strategies of control and oppression that have been exercised within modern Western culture. Thus when he informs us of the change and development in penology in Western Europe we find an historical transition from the excessive, explicit symbolic punishment of the seventeenth century to a gradually more subtle, implicit, and intrusive mode of discipline embodied in its finest modern form in Bentham’s “panopticon” – the dream building, the rational correction machine. In this form, which we may parallel with the development of modern techniques of childrearing, absolute surveillance is the key. The developing individual, either within the context of criminal punishment or that of education, is to be watched, monitored, timetabled, regimented, and exposed. The private becomes more and more available to the public. Bodies and minds claim an allegiance to the social through dependency, guilt, and visibility.

Emerging from a different sociological perspective to the above the work of Bernstein (1971–73) has, for over two decades, provided a major source of inspiration for theory and research concerning childrearing, child development, and educational disadvantage. While apparently leaving the grounds of moral consensus within society intact he addresses the causes of differential educational achievement within the population of developing children. He was among the first to sophisticate the “educability” thesis beyond an explanation of child performance in relation to their particular constellations of positively or negatively oriented structural variables. Bernstein does not ignore the effect of social factors on a child’s development but he shows how they become realized as world views and thus courses of action – in this sense he reveals his true concern being not with the issue of educability but rather with the complex relation between the social structure and the symbolic order. His central question is “how does our outside environment become transformed into modes of consciousness?” and this clearly provides a potentially dialectical view of development. Bernstein’s analysis moves from the level of different types of com-

munity structure, through parental control variants, on to the linguistic realization of unique intent. Social stratification, however, remains the dominant implicit dimension.

What this brief summary of sociological theory relevant to child development aims at is not a summation of their central insights, all of which have been injured by the brevity of my exposition, but rather to show that even that large section of the discipline which is clearly critical of any existing form of social relations and thus dedicated to its change, even this body of work seems unable to mobilize the potentiality of the child as an agent of such change. The development of the child seems variously articulated as a process of entrapment. The newness and difference of childhood faces standardization and normalization. Thus all social influences on the developing child are presented and understood as structural constraints.

Sociological Models

During the 1960s in the United Kingdom, which was a time of full employment, economic expansion, growth in public provision, and a liberalizing of previously entrenched attitudes toward human behavior, education became viewed by government and populace alike as a crucial investment in the future collective good. The dominant ideology contained a strong sense of “human capital” that eventually blossomed into the “vocationalism” of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Schooling and university education expanded considerably and efforts were made to improve its quality also. This general attitude of the collective consciousness was reflected within sociology where the sociology of education became a burgeoning specialism. However, even within such a climate of progressive optimism the primary thesis was that, if ability is randomly distributed, how is it that educational achievement is socially distributed? Sociologists produced a plethora of studies which offered explanation in terms of such variables as family size, parental occupation, parental income, achievement motivation, immediate versus deferred gratification, peer group orientation, cultural deprivation, language use, and complexes of these (Banks, 1968; Halsey, Floud, & Anderson, 1961). Again, all of these variables were reducible to indices of social class, but more significantly at an analytic level, all are intelligible as contexts of non-willfulness. Even social theory that is critical seems to depotentiate the young through an intrinsically pessimistic vision. The becoming social actors, who are the developing child, are rendered passive receivers and perpetrators of the accidents of their historical moment. This is perhaps best epitomized in the irony of a study by Willis (1977) when he states that the reason that working-class children succumb to the social and cultural reproduction is because they are complicit in the processes, they are effectively active agents in their own lack of mobility.

The difficult thing to explain about how middle class kids get middle class jobs is why the others let them. The difficult thing to explain about how working class kids get working class jobs is why they let themselves. It is much too facile simply to say that they have no choice . . . There is no obvious physical coercion and a degree of self direction (Willis, 1977, p. 1).

It would seem then that the social factors affecting development are such that they become internalized and expressed as matters of choice!

Development conceived of in these terms speaks not of an unfolding, a project of creativity and inspiration, in fact hardly of the individual child's biography at all. The child continues to be realized as an instance of a category and the concept of development only ever seems to depict the concerted and ultimately omnipotent violence of the social structure to which the individual inevitably succumbs. This is not to argue for the mobilization of the concrete child as a political force in response to these actual constraints as part of a "Children's Rights" movement, but rather to argue analytically for a more radical conception of the child as a vision and as a potential.

Development, though a dominant image in understanding the child, is only one way. Further it is that kind of concept which encourages the stance of looking backwards from within the sociological tradition. But sociology and its address of the child can occupy different spaces; let us take three possible examples. First, the child might be regarded historically, not as a series of evolutionary steps, but rather as a patterning of images that relate to different temporal contexts. In this way Aries (1973), the leading figure in a school of neo-enlightenment historians, looks at visual representations and fashion and shows the emergence of childhood within a particular group and within a particular epoch. History then, is not regarded as a description of a succession of events, rather it is seen as providing the moral grounds of current speech about the child. Second, the child can be approached comparatively, employing anthropological material. Here we might treat different childrearing practices as aspects of culture. Mead's (1954, 1971) work is instructive here in showing us how in different, yet contemporary, societies children assume far more autonomy and responsibility than is familiar within our own world.

It may be said that where we are concerned with character formation – the process by which children learn to discipline impulses and structure their expectations of the behavior of others – this cross-cultural approach is very valuable. It provides insights into such subjects as conscience formation, the relative importance of different sanctioning systems, sin, shame and pride, and guilt, and into the relationship between independence training and achievement motivation (Mead, 1971, p. 219).

If nothing else, such an approach may serve to deflate much of the ethnocentrism that is inherent in a Western sense of maturation.

Finally a phenomenological perspective could enable us to gain insight into an existential and generative sense of sociality that emerges from within the consciousness of the child. Merleau-Ponty (1967), for example, has demonstrated the acquisition of new linguistic forms by the child, due not so much to teaching as to personal, and intentional, affective experience. And Rafky, developing a phenomenology of the child stated that:

. . . the life-world the newborn enters contains more than objects and social institutions. It is also characterized by a complex of legitimations which explain and integrate the various action patterns of a group, a "matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place within this universe" [Berger & Luckmann]. In short, the individual has acquired a set or mode for interpreting the world meaningfully; he perceives it in an ordered and subjectively understandable frame of reference (Rafky, 1973, p. 43).

These three examples: the historical, the comparative, and the phenomenological, are suggestions for alternative and instructive approaches to the study of childhood; they do not in themselves constitute an exhaustive typology of programs for research into childhood.

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