

## A. Introduction.

1. Biologically, we are all young once and, with the passage of time, we will all become old - but the simple empirical statement of these facts hides a much wider and more-complex set of ideas.

- Whilst we are experiencing, have experienced or will experience these biological categories (or "phases") in our physical development, two basic points are clear:
  - a. There is not a precise definition of concepts like "childhood".
  - b. The social significance of such concepts changes in relation to the social context in which they are created and applied.

2. **Mannheim** ("Essays In The Sociology Of Knowledge", 1952), notes:

**"The sociological phenomenon of generations is ultimately based on the biological rhythm of birth and death".**

- The biological fact of human physical development is a significant factor in our understanding of the way labels are created on the basis of categories such as age.
- To understand the concept sociologically we must examine not just the categories themselves (child, youth, adult, etc.), but also the social significance that people attribute to differences based around the concept of age.

3. Because historically and comparatively societies attribute different ideas to similar human forms of human development we need to explore the nature of the process whereby categorizations, interpretations and attributions are socially constructed.

- In this respect, we could note that our society now categorises biological development in terms of such ideas as:
  - Childhood
  - Adolescence / youth
  - Adulthood
  - Old age.

4. The interpretation of such categories depends upon the nature of the society in which they are / are not created (for example, "youth" appears to be a relatively modern categorization in industrial societies. Few, if any, pre-industrial societies appear to categorise people in this way).

- For example, in our society we tend to associate childhood with such characteristics as "innocence / naiveté" and old age with increasing physical frailty, loss of mental faculties and so forth. Not all societies attribute such characteristics to these categories.

5. The process of categorization is relatively arbitrary (when, for example, does childhood end? At what age does a person become old?).
6. The concept of a "biological life-cycle" (the progression from birth to death) can be empirically demonstrated. In physical terms at least, a young baby is different to a fourteen year old; in turn, a fully-grown adult is different to both and so forth.
- However, simply because we can demonstrate something empirically, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is easy to understand either:
    - a. The empirical demarcation of boundaries between "stages" in the life-cycle.
    - b. The social significance of these "stages".
7. To understand this a bit more clearly, think about:
- At what age does childhood end?
- At what age does youth end?
- At what age does adulthood end?
8. In any society, there will, empirically, be broad agreement about the categories noted above.
- This should not be surprising since people will have grown-up in the same society and will have experienced similar levels of cultural socialisation.
  - There will be similarities and differences over the range of empirical evidence that can be used to support the various categorizations.
  - The empirical evidence will probably be social, rather than biological, in origin.
- For example, the idea that adulthood begins when you reach the age of 18 or 21. If you think about it, this is true for our society but there is no logical reason why adulthood should / should not begin at this age...
9. This demonstrates two main things:
- a. Societies develop ideological frameworks about age categories / life-cycle phases. These frameworks help us to interpret not only age differences, but also concepts of "age appropriate" behaviour (for example, whilst it may be considered appropriate for a male child to cry if it burns its hand, crying may not be considered appropriate for an adult male in this situation).
  - b. The evidence we use in relation to the creation / labelling of such categories is both arbitrary and subjective.

## B. Changing Conceptions of Childhood.

1. In these notes we need to consider two main ideas:

- a. Do people have different conceptions about what constitutes childhood?
- b. Do sociologists agree / disagree about conceptions of childhood?

2. To answer these questions we need to look at whether or not major changes have taken place in relation to the way in which children have been treated in both:

- a. The **past** (the **historical dimension**) and
- b. **Different cultures** (the **comparative dimension**).

## C. Childhood: An Historical Dimension.

1. The work of Philip **Aries** ("Centuries of Childhood", 1962) has, for many years, been considered to be the definitive work on the subject of changing conceptions of childhood. Martin **Shipman**, for example, although generally **critical** of Aries argument, has noted that Centuries of Childhood had the status of "holy writ" throughout the 1960's...

- For this reason alone, it is worth considering in detail some of the basic ideas and conclusions contained in this work. Additionally, it is necessary to look at some more-modern research into this area (mainly because in recent years Aries work has come in for a great deal of criticism). In particular, more recent studies have focused not only on Aries work specifically, but also upon a variety of methodological questions concerning such ideas as:

- Research methodology,
- Data reliability and
- Data validity.

2. There are five basic aspects to Aries' overall argument that need concern us here:

- Firstly, Aries argues that, in Western Europe, the concept of childhood is a relatively modern one; one that has only developed over the past 300 or so years. As he argues,

**"In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist".**

In this respect, whilst there were clearly "young people" around, they were not labelled as "children", nor were they treated in ways that we, nowadays, would recognise as "childhood".

- Secondly, the notion of childhood as a specific phase in a person's life-cycle began to emerge, according to Aries, in the 15th century. It is significant that this coincided with the development of both industrialisation and an expressly nuclear family structure.

Aries considers the themes of

a. **Industrialisation** (and the development of Capitalism) and

b. **Changes in the structure of family life**

to be highly significant in the development of a child-centred family which involved a clear and definable concept of "childhood".

- Thirdly, the concept of childhood appeared first amongst the upper classes. Aries argues that, from the 15th century onwards, evidence starts to appear of children being considered separately from adults (until this period, he argues that children were simply seen as "little adults"). This evidence includes such things as:
  - a. The upper classes beginning to dress children "differently" (that is, not as a smaller version of an adult). This he took to indicate a symbolic change in the relative social status of children.
  - b. Ideologically, it was around this time that the Clergy (a very powerful social group in Feudal society) began to popularise the idea of children as "fragile creatures of god" - in effect, childhood as a phase of "uncorrupted innocence" that had to be nurtured and encouraged. Children were not to be seen as little adults, but as something different and perhaps highly vulnerable - human beings who needed the protection of adults...
- Fourthly, the development of the nuclear family and a system of education separate from the family (at least for the upper classes and middle classes) led, according to Aries, to the progressive "removal" of children from adult society. Children began to be treated as "socially separate" and hence conceptions of childhood began to develop around the idea that this was a clear phase in the human life-cycle.
  - Aries noted that, for working class children, the pattern of life remained much the same as in medieval times - children lived closely with their parents, sharing the same living and sleeping space, lacking a concept of privacy and so forth.
  - Willmott and Young's concept of "stratified diffusion" might be useful in explaining why the working classes developed a concept of childhood after the upper and middle classes.

- Finally, Aries saw the process of industrialisation to be a significant factor in changing conceptions of childhood. Industrialisation led to such things as:
    - a. The separation of home from the workplace.
    - b. The progressive removal of the family's economic function / role.
    - c. A marked increase in the sexual division of labour (especially between the home and the workplace).
    - d. The economic marginalization of women.
  - The removal of women's economic role led to an increasing focus on their "natural" role as mother and child-rearer, responsible for primary child care within the family group.
3. Aries argues that as women began to be forced-out of emerging labour-markets, their removal was rationalised ideologically by the idea of "maternal instincts" which made them more-suited to the socially-valuable (but unpaid) role of child-rearer. Around this period that we see the emergence of an explicit ideological framework that sought to conceptualise women in relation to a highly child-centred role in life.

#### D. The Evidence...

1. Martin **Shipman** ("When Childhood Was Discovered") notes that much of the evidence upon which Aries bases his argument comes from:

"...the analysis of images of children in historical sources",

rather than contemporary records or documents (that is, records / documents created by the people involved).

2. All historical / documentary sources need to be treated with care. Artistic representations need to be considered in relation not only to our interpretation of the images involved, but also in terms of contemporary artistic fashions.

- What this means in relation to Aries' work in particular is whether or not it is valid to simply interpret "images of children" in a way that does not take account of the social / artistic context in which they were originally produced. For example, when a medieval artist painted a child dressed in "adult" clothing, is it safe to assume that the representation is simply a true reflection of "the way things really were", or merely an "artistic convention" of the time?
- Consider the work of artists such as Picasso and the Cubist School of art. We know, from contemporary documents, that Picasso's art was not meant to be a faithful reproduction of the things he saw / painted. On this basis, is it valid to simply assume that medieval artists simply "painted the world as it was"?

3. A number of Aries' ideas concerning conceptions about the changing nature of childhood have been challenged over the past 30 years. For convenience, we can group these challenges into two main categories:

a. **Methodological** - questions concerning reliability and validity.

b. **Interpretative** - similar to the above, but challenging Aries' work on the grounds of his interpretation of the available evidence, rather than on strict methodological grounds.

4. In terms of a methodological evaluation, it is evident that Aries' analysis is based upon two basic (and questionable) assumptions:

- Firstly, that artistic images are a reliable guide to people's behaviour in the past.
- Secondly, that past attitudes to childhood were somehow more rational and matter-of-fact than they are today.

5. Aries' work offers a good example of the process whereby the social scientist approaches a study with clear methodological assumptions that subsequently influence both the collection of data and, most importantly, the interpretation of that data. In short, Aries' wanted to prove his hypothesis that childhood is a relatively modern social construct and looked for evidence to support his assumptions...

6. In terms of an Interpretive evaluation, Aries' interpretation of social conceptions of childhood have been challenged by writers such as **Pollack**.

- She argues that the study of first-hand accounts of childhood and parenthood between 1500 and 1900 show a different story to the one put forward by writers such as Aries. Then, as now:
  - Most parents were affectionate and kind to their children.
  - They showed grief when children died.
  - Many resorted to physical violence to control their children.
  - There were serious cases of physical and emotional abuse.

7. **Pollack** concludes that then, as now, there were wide cultural and individual variations in the way that societies viewed and treated children.

### E. The Historical Dimension.

1. Whatever we may conclude about Aries' analysis of the "invention of childhood", it is evident that, as **O'Donnell** ("A New Introduction to Sociology"), notes,

**"...Aries does introduce what has become a central feature of much contemporary social scientific analysis of age - that it is substantially a socially constructed phenomenon, not merely a biological given".**

2. It is evident that, in pre-industrial Britain, the length of "childhood" was considerably shorter than is the norm in contemporary Britain. There are two main reasons for this that we can identify:

- The general life-expectancy of the population:

Where life-expectancy is fairly low (as it certainly was in pre-industrial Britain compared with the situation today), the various stages of physical development become chronologically compressed.

In our society, with an average life expectancy of 60 - 70 years, concepts of childhood and youth are consequently elongated. In a society with half this life expectancy, a compression of "childhood years" might be expected.

- Structural relationship between age and work.

If we assume that in pre-industrial Britain the dominant / main form of economic production was agriculture and that the skills required for work were mainly passed to children through the family socialisation process, there would be little structural need for the elongation of childhood. Two points can be noted here:

a. There was an economic imperative for children to take-on some form of "adult" work as soon as they were physically able to do so.

b. There was no good reason for prolonging childhood.

3. It was only through the progressive separation of work from the family unit that the need for an education system began to arise. The young had to be specifically socialised (educated) to cope with the rising forms of non-agricultural production processes in Britain - and, for this, their entry into adult society had to be delayed.

- In this respect, the development of educational systems seems to have brought about a change in the perception of children. This was mainly through the addition of a "new" phase in the life-cycle ("late childhood" or "youth" - a transition period between childhood and adulthood), rather than a radical change in the nature of childhood itself (considered in terms of the way in which children were treated within the family, for example).

4. We can see the above in relation to the way in which conceptions of childhood changed amongst different classes in the pre / early industrialisation period in Britain.

- A change in the social perception of children developed first amongst the upper / upper middle classes, when the need to educate (male) children for professional forms of employment began to develop (lawyers, doctors and so forth).
- We can express this idea in the following way:

a. The development of a Capitalist mode of production (industrial society) produced a specialised, technical, division of labour:

Scientists,  
Administrators, etc.

b. A technical division of labour required the development of new mental / intellectual skills. This required some form of schooling - educational socialisation that was beyond the means of the family group to provide, hence the development of schools. These were initially only for the upper classes (Public Schools), then the middle classes (Grammar Schools).

c. For an emerging industrial upper / middle class (the bourgeoisie), professional forms of employment allowed them to reproduce the economic leadership (hegemony) they had seized by their role in the development of the "new technology" by the education of their sons. As the technical division of labour became more complex, so too did the length of schooling become longer, resulting ultimately in a change in the perception of "childhood" amongst this class.

d. As Capitalism developed throughout the 19th century, two related structural imperatives developed:

1. The need to educate children to a basic level of literacy / numeracy appropriate to their future roles in the developing, factory-based, production process (it should be noted, however, that the working class were highly-resistant to this process).

2. The progressive introduction of laws restricting and prohibiting certain forms of child labour.



5. The basic point to note here is the way conceptions of childhood - and people's perception of children - began to change as a "forced response" to structural imperatives (the "needs" of a particular form of economic production - Capitalism).

- The State began to take-on an increasing interest in the position of children for a number of reasons:
  - a. Basic levels of education contributed to the productive efficiency of the workforce.
  - b. Education was seen as a way of enforcing moral conformity amongst a potentially volatile working class - the "dangerous classes" of Victorian Britain.
  - c. As labour productivity increased through mechanised forms of factory production, child labour became less important to employers (especially unskilled / uneducated child labour). Employers needed basically educated employees and, whilst child labour must have remained attractive because of the very low wages that could be paid, change had to come about for technological reasons, if not always for moral reasons. We can see this process in contemporary Britain with the increasing emphasis being placed upon post-16 education and the acquisition of the practical and intellectual skills required by a modern industrial State.
  - d. Moral entrepreneurs started to focus attention upon the degradation of children which, coupled with the ideological emphasis upon childhood as a period of "uncorrupted innocence" meant that changes in people's attitudes towards child labour had to come about.

6. Increasingly throughout the 20th century in Britain, the concept of childhood (involving infancy, childhood and a period of youth) has hardened to reflect the division between full adult membership of society and the period in which the child "learns how to achieve full adulthood".

- Both the increased (and possibly increasing) length of childhood and contemporary attitudes towards children and childhood are connected. As childhood / youth hardens into a social categorization that is seen as a normal phase of development in our society, so too have attitudes towards children changed. This, of course, has consequences for both children and adults - especially in relation to the way it is seen as permissible to act towards children.

7. In general, we can characterise current ideological orientations towards children as involving the ideas that they are:

- a. In need of adult care and protection (both physical and moral).
- b. Required to be nurtured and preferred for adult roles and experiences.

8. In many ways, contemporary concepts of children (and childhood) have developed as an extreme reversal of pre-industrial concepts - and moral concerns about the "increasing corruption of childhood innocence" through such things as child abuse and exposure to sex and violence through the mass media, reflect how childhood is seen as a somewhat idyllic period before the cares and responsibilities of adulthood.

- These contemporary concerns (and periodic moral panics) also reflect the way many social theorists / commentators have adopted a conception of childhood socialisation as a more-or-less one-way process. Values and norms are seen to flow from the socialising agency (parents, teachers, the mass media and the like) to the object of that process (the child) in a non-interactive, non-reciprocal (that is, "one way"), uncritical, fashion.
- In short, it would appear that conceptions of childhood have changed sufficiently to almost deny the idea that the socialisation process - both primary and secondary - is a negotiated, two-way, process. One, moreover, in which the child is not simply an "empty vessel" waiting, passively and uncritically, to be filled with whatever ideas "adult society" produces, but in which the child, as an emerging, critical, reflective, human being plays an active role.

#### **F. Childhood: A Comparative Dimension.**

1. It's necessary to consider the second, comparative, dimension noted earlier, since a comparative perspective is useful for three main reasons:

- a. It demonstrates the way in which different societies develop different conceptions of childhood.
- b. It demonstrates the idea that childhood is a social construction that, whilst acknowledging and reflecting basic biological categories, is an extremely imprecise and flexible concept when considered across a various societies.
- c. The "comparative method" is a useful methodological tool in sociology, since it presents what Max Weber calls the opportunity to conduct "natural experiments". By looking at conditions in different societies and observing both regularities and irregularities in people's behaviour we get a clearer conception of the nature of human behaviour (and it's social origins).

2. One advantage of the comparative method in sociology is that people can be observed in their everyday behaviour in a way that does not either:

- a. Take them out of the social context of that behaviour (in the way that "artificial" laboratory-type experiments clearly do) or
  - b. Intrude into their everyday behaviour in a way that, by the presence of the researcher, might change that behaviour.
- Additionally, comparing different concepts of childhood across societies is made easier by the fact that age is a biological phenomenon which gives the researcher something concrete upon which to focus their study / observations and so forth.

3. Comparisons between complex industrial societies (Britain, America, France, etc.) and simple, non-industrial, societies show the widest cultural variations in childhood experiences / different treatment of children.

- Ruth **Benedict** argues there are three basic areas of difference:
  - a. Level of responsibility / lack of responsibility given to children.
  - b. Level of dominance / submission expected of children.
  - c. Sexual roles.

4. **Malinowski's** study of Trobriand Islanders (Papua New Guinea) provides empirical evidence of the three differences noted by Benedict.

- Responsibility: Adults acknowledged that their children had certain personalities and rights. Children learnt through imitation and communication with adults rather than through the simple forms of authority relationships that predominate in modern societies.
- Dominance / Subordination: There were much closer adult / child relationships. These relationships were less authoritarian and far more supportive than is typically the case in modern societies.
- Sex roles: Trobriand children were encouraged to explore and discover their sexuality. There was less guilt attached to "sex play" and adults were more tolerant of sexual discovery through play.

5. British society, on the other hand, tends to be more child-centred, seeing children as the property of their biological parents. Child-rearing is focused on the nuclear family group and parents are responsible for much of the social control of their offspring.

- The Mundugumor of New Guinea, on the other hand, provide evidence of alternative child-rearing patterns, since children are looked after by family relatives or other young girls within a household. The "parent - child" relationship is much looser in this society.

6. Our society places females at the centre of child rearing and socialisation. This gives women status within the family, but also acts as a focal point for blame when things go wrong (the stigmatising of single-parents, for example).

7. In **conclusion**, comparisons of child-rearing practices, conceptions of children and childhood and so forth demonstrate the idea that there is a wide variety of possible orientations developed by human societies. This shows that concepts of childhood and children are cultural characteristics rather than simple biological categories.