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# Introduction:

## The Disputed Child

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### **A ‘working definition’ of childhood**

Childhood is something about which most people have an opinion. We have all experienced it, and this seems somehow to endow us all with a degree of expertise. In addition to the vast pool of ‘common sense’ knowledge of the subject, and almost certainly because of the intense level of collective interest, it is a subject which is very widely researched and contested across a range of academic disciplines. Inevitably, as a consequence, different forms of substantive ‘knowledge’ about childhood have emerged. These do not necessarily coincide, either in the ways we think about childhood or in what we believe to be true about it. As a result, childhood is extensively ‘disputed’.

Ideas and arguments about what it is to be a child are the principal focus of this book, along with the evidence associated with these. As this exploration progresses, it is necessary for us to acknowledge and keep in perspective our own preconceptions about children and childhood. On the other hand, in order to start somewhere, we need to establish a provisional definition of the subject matter. What is a child? Which members of the population are viewed and treated as children? And when? Who are ‘our’ children? (Mine are all in their late teens and early twenties, but I still think of them as my ‘children’.) Who thinks of her/himself as a child? It would clearly be presumptuous at this stage to claim any degree of certainty about the answers to these questions, even if they did not contradict each other. In practice, though, many aspects of daily life are directly informed by assumptions which we take to be ‘good enough for the time

being'. In the same way, in order to engage in the kind of discussion I want to pursue here, it is necessary to make some attempt at drawing up a working definition of the key terms to be used.

First impressions suggest that this is likely to be a fairly fruitless exercise given the huge divergence in children's lives depending on their place(s) in space and time, or characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and even size. In this case, it hardly seems worth considering the question of whether there are any common features or shared experiences connecting them. And yet, there are counter-arguments, as we shall see, which suggest that childhood is a distinct phenomenon, recognizable aspects of which are shared exclusively by all those to whom the term applies. In this case, a core common definition of children and childhood is not only feasible, but absolutely essential to the task of furthering our knowledge and understanding.

The aim of the present book is to tease out the elements of these opposing arguments and, in the end, to reach some form of (tentative) synthesis. By taking an integrated approach to the subject, I hope to offer some potentially fruitful ways of thinking about and dealing with those members of society whom we will no doubt continue to think of as 'children'.

Increasingly, too, we are reminded that children themselves have a vested interest in these discussions. Younger people certainly have their own views about who is a child and what constitutes childhood specifically, which may or may not coincide with those of adults:

First I stayed in a playground, then in a childcare institution, now I am in kindergarten and then I will go to school and then to work, and then I will stop working and I will be free all day because I am growing old.

(Hans, 6 years old, quoted in Eide and Winger, 2005)

This, indeed, is a fairly conventional account of the anticipated life course from one child's point of view. For some though, expected trajectories and relationships are not so easily mapped out:

Young caring transgresses the social construct of 'children' as a group occupying distinctly the realm of 'childhood', where they have the right to physical and emotional sustenance, protection from harm, and where they are allowed to make the gradual transition to 'adulthood'. Indeed, when children undertake caring at what might be deemed an inappropriate age, they occupy a distinctly 'adult' realm simply on account of what they do.

(Aldridge and Becker, 2002, p. 211)

As is clear from this, what being a child involves is not always straightforwardly predictable.

For the moment, though, my aim is rather more modestly to determine where to begin. On what basis might we be able to draw up some kind of criteria which delimit the subject in some way? We could, for example, rely on formal legal definitions, on physiological characteristics, on 'status', or simply on chronological age. Unfortunately, of course, the results do not coincide. For instance, we know that in law and policy the boundaries of childhood are variably defined within and between jurisdictions. The age of criminal responsibility varies substantially, even among the relatively 'developed' countries of Europe, ranging from 8 in Scotland to 18 in Belgium and Luxembourg (Muncie and Goldson, 2006, p. 200). Implicit in these variations are competing judgements about the dividing line between childhood and adulthood and, by extension, about some of the essential characteristics of children themselves.

The need to start with some form of provisional classification does require compromise, then. The most readily available and most widely accepted framework is offered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which incorporates both an age-based definition (those between birth and the age of 18), and an internationally agreed compendium of rights and protections. This, in turn, implicitly incorporates a whole range of assumptions about children's specific characteristics and their 'evolving capacities' (Lansdown, 2005, p. 3). This working definition leaves plenty of space for further examination of the distinct elements of children's 'evolution', and how these may interact, both at the individual level, and in their social and environmental contexts. It does not appear to prejudge unduly the central question of what children share in common, and on what bases they are bound to differ.

As the book progresses, I will develop a series of proposals about the commonalities of childhood based partly on the principle of 'evolving capacities', so this may indeed be a useful place from which to embark on this exercise.

## **The structure of the book**

The book is structured into three parts. Part I presents the initial chapters on theoretical aspects of childhood that offer an analytical framework for the subsequent discussion of childhood 'in context' that appears in Part II. Part III draws on these discussions to

reconsider the question of whether and to what extent aspects of childhood and children's lives are fixed and determined (universal), or whether they are contingent and contextual, or, indeed, whether they are a bit of both. The aim is to provide a clearer basis for further analysis and debate about what it means to be a child.

Chapter 1 sets the ball rolling by critically examining a number of influential 'positions' on the subject which may be identified in historical and contemporary discussions about childhood and what the term entails.

Chapters 2 and 3 reflect further on emerging ideas about children in time and space. In the first of these, we will consider concepts and analyses of childhood in different historical periods, drawing on by now well-known sources such as Ariès (1962), Pollock (1983) and Cunningham (1995). The aim will be to examine what, if anything can be learned about change and continuity in childhood across changing social forms, both in terms of the experiences of children and the ways in which they are and have been conceptualized. It will also be of interest here to reflect on the different ways in which children and young people have experienced 'time' historically (as reflected in changing patterns of education and employment, for example).

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to variations in 'space', including different societies, cultures, classes and communities. While it will be selective, given the space available, use will be made of certain important anthropological sources (Whiting, 1963; Erikson, 1965, for example), which helpfully illustrate the impact on children of different forms of social and cultural organization. It will also be helpful to consider here, as in the previous chapter, how children themselves experience 'space', and how their lives may be influenced by certain assumptions about where they should (and should not be) and how their spaces are managed and controlled (Moss and Petrie, 2002).

Developing these initial discussions further, Chapter 4 revisits the question of how childhood is conceptualized and studied. Drawing on the evidence of the previous chapters, we will be able to gain a fuller insight into the continuing and unresolved arguments over what is natural and constant about children and their development, and what is socially structured and therefore variable across differing 'childhoods'. While the chapter will counter-pose alternative disciplinary traditions for analytical purposes, it will establish that they need not be mutually exclusive. The basis for an effective understanding of children and their experiences may depend on integrating apparently opposing theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Part II of the book will move from this essentially theoretical discussion to consider what we know from contemporary evidence, how childhood is shaped, and indeed, how children themselves make sense of and respond to significant experiences (Smith, 2000a). Chapter 5 reflects on the impact of state and social policies, and their different meanings for children depending on their circumstances and characteristics, including culture, disability and ethnicity, for example. It will be noted that there is a considerable degree of ambiguity in the way in which the state engages with the young. Universalist assumptions are clearly tempered by a range of assessment mechanisms and interventions which create real and substantial differences between children, individually and collectively.

However, the state is not the only powerful influence on the lives of children, or those around them. Chapter 6 broadens the discussion to consider how patterns of consumption (Gunther and Furnham, 1998) and 'marketization' also play a significant part in their experience and emerging systems of belief and patterns of identity. Gender, for example, may be shaped as much by this kind of factor as biological development or genetic influences.

It would also be an omission in the contemporary era not to consider the relationship between children and the media (Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Holland, 2004, for instance). While children are often considered by the media to be passive recipients of broadcast messages, their responses and active engagement with media inputs are also important in helping us to understand the processes of 'development' and construction in which children's lives are constantly engaged. This is the central theme of Chapter 7. One of the 'universal' features of childhood is the constant ability of young people to interpret and reconstruct their worlds in light of the messages they receive.

The final part of the book will return to the underlying question of what is constant in childhood, and what is, in fact, dependent on changing social patterns. The starting point in Chapter 8 will be an examination of the processes by which adult ways of seeing and shaping the world both define, and to an extent problematize, children and young people (Qvortrup, 1994). Children have largely been addressed according to the objectives held for them by adults, rather than as a group with its own interests and body of rights. In this sense, childhood has been seen as a means to an end – a form of preparation or apprenticeship for full adult status. This may be reflected in the ways in which children's bodies are viewed as immature

and incomplete (Prout, 2005). This perspective has resulted in a particular concern with the predictable and measurable attributes of children, ranging from physical characteristics to educational targets. In this sense, certain universalizing assumptions are incorporated into 'common-sense' ideas about normal growth and development at the expense of recognizing and valuing diversity, for instance, in relation to disability.

In Chapter 9, the focus will be reversed, and we will give priority to the child's view. Much recent work has emphasized the child's perspective, both in research and policy (Christensen and James, 2000; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Franklin, 2002b; John, 2003). We will draw on this here, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the depth and variety of children's lived experience, as well as their capacity to make sense of and create their own social worlds (Corsaro, 1997). This does not mean, of course, that there are not common features to their processes of acquiring understanding and making sense, but it will provide a much more nuanced picture of the means by which children achieve these outcomes.

These reflections will enable us in Chapter 10 to return to the underlying question of what are the common (universal) features of the experience of being a child, and what can be clearly identified as differential and largely socially constructed elements. We will consider the question: to what extent is there some constant core to childhood? If so, where might this be located: in the child or in the social processes which conceptualize and classify the distinctive features of childhood? Where universal features are identified, how can we hold these in balance with those aspects of childhood which are variable and reflect wider social diversities? What conceptual frameworks or analytical tools would be most useful in this context? We can draw the conclusion that there are certain 'universal' features of childhood which can be seen as key determinants of children's lives, represented by the terms physical growth; increasing competencies; inexperience; and vulnerability. However we encapsulate these central aspects of childhood itself, it is important that we treat them as organizing principles in relation to which variations of experience and context must also be taken into account. Other features commonly associated with childhood, such as dependence, formative learning and maturation, are more problematic, and incorporate a number of value judgements which may lead to unsustainable assumptions about children's lives and needs.

The concluding discussion summarizes the key themes and findings of the book in order to sketch out an agenda for future attempts to analyse and understand childhood. It is accepted that, for many of the reasons explored here, attempts will continue to be made to categorize and define children for the foreseeable future. It is thus important, also, to set out a number of key (and universal) principles which should underpin such activities, including features such as the recognition of diversity and the crucial importance of appreciating things from children's own point of view.

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