



## **The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights\***

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### **The problem – why and how to re-think childhood**

#### *Why re-think childhood?*

Children's welfare in the last 100 years has been inextricably woven into women's welfare and women's social condition; to an extent, children's welfare has been subsumed under the composite concept 'women-and-children'. It is hard to peer beyond the tangle of adults who pronounce on children's 'needs' in the context of mother-child relations, and to look clearly at children themselves. It is still more difficult to listen to children seriously. And it is yet more difficult to include children into society rather than excluding them. But these are essential enterprises: we must extricate children, conceptually, from parents, the family and professionals. We must study the social condition of childhood and write children into the script of the social order. Essentially the interlinked reasons for doing this are two-fold. Proper understanding of the social order requires consideration of all its members, all social groups. And children, like other minority groups, lack a voice and have a right to be heard and their views taken into account. It is through working towards better understanding of the social condition of childhood that we can provide a firm basis for working towards implementation of their rights.

Analysis of social reform in the twentieth century has identified the scale and purposes of intervention into childhood (e.g. Hendrick 1994). Children and childhood have become the object of massive interventions. Whole armies of health and social workers work to modify childhood. The concept of children's needs – derived from professionals' concepts, assumptions, priorities and goals – justifies interventions, including the education of mothers, health promotion and social work practice (Woodhead 1997). The perceived

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'need' to monitor children's development has led to unprecedented surveillance of children – both at school and at home; in some Western societies children are virtually excluded as independent actors from public spaces. In most northern European countries, the scholarisation of childhood is well advanced; children attend nurseries, then school, then college. Childhood lengthens as longer apprenticeship, prolonged periods for the acquisition of cultural capital, operate as responses to the demands of modern societies, characterised by affluence, consumerism and 'flexible' employment careers (Zinnecker 1990). The concept of adolescence (itself an adult construction, and not a term used by young people themselves) extends beyond childhood the idea that young people are becomings, rather than people (Erikson 1965).

In Britain, where health and psychological professionals have long aimed to modify mothers' behaviour, educationalists are an increasingly influential set of professionals telling mothers what to do. Building on the well-established view that children's school achievement depends somewhat on 'parental involvement' (for discussion see Finch 1984, especially Chapter 3 and 6), educationalists have upped the stakes. General co-operativeness and obedience are not now enough. Nowadays, mothers are meant to attend 'parenting classes'; to work with their children on literacy, numeracy and other homework assignments; and to promise – via home-school agreements – to co-operate with the school to maximise their children's performance in nationally devised tests. Children themselves not only attend school all day, but are increasingly encouraged to study in after-school centres; at younger and younger ages they are required to do homework.

As one commentator on Ellen Key's influential book *The Century of the Child* (1909 [1900]) put it, 'Instead of the century of the child we got the century of the child professionals' (Stafseng 1993: 77), and, we may add, the discipline which has achieved dominance, as providing authoritative and factual knowledge for such professionals about children is developmental psychology. Like others, I argue that psychological knowledge is relevant but not sufficient (e.g. James and Prout 1990/7). It is also relevant and necessary to come at children and childhood from a new set of perspectives. I think there are two major points to make here. And, as is the way with major points, they are interlinked.

In the first place, childhood is a political issue. Theories about what children need, about how they develop and what input from adults is therefore appropriate, are indeed theories or stories (rather than facts) and practices that derive exclusively from adult perspectives. They derive from adults' study of children, contextualised and structured by adults' social and economic goals in specific societies. Yet in the name of 'scientific' formulas about child development and children's needs we tend to separate childhood off from

politics; we propose, conceptually, that children and childhood operate in an a-political space.

In the second place – an interlinked point – in defining children as inferior, as objects essentially of adult socialisation – we depersonalise children. In proposing that we know best the best interests of the child, we deny children's rights. We deny children the right to participate in the structuring of their childhoods. Though we may work to protect children and provide for them, we find it much harder to take children seriously as contributors to social thinking and social policies.

My emphasis here on 'us' and 'we' is intentional; it is critical to draw attention to us as an adult social group in contradistinction to children as a social group. Ask children how they understand and experience childhood (as I have) and you will find that they divide the social order into two separate (and somewhat opposing) social groups: children and adults. Children are those whom adults have defined as non-adults.

*Why is it difficult to re-think childhood?*

Re-thinking children and re-thinking childhood is difficult. First, because there is a large and powerful body of knowledge on child development and socialisation. Talcott Parsons and Piaget are key figures in establishing its legitimacy (Jenks 1996). In public and private spheres, probably we (we adults) are more accurately informed than ever before about children's development. You could say that the child development industry has cornered the market in knowledge about children. Lawyers, doctors, social workers, educationalists and academics depend on child development theory as a basis for their work on, for and with children. They do so because it has high status, and by so doing they raise its status further. Cornering the market carries dangers of monopolisation.

One example of such dangers is presented by Boyden (1990): the globalisation of developmentalism; how this one discipline dominates the world stage and how its assumptions derive from Western ideas about what it is to be a person. As many people have noted (e.g. Stephens 1995) the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is itself contextualised in dominant Western concepts. The Convention refers to a universal, free-standing, individual child; a child who is on a particular developmental trajectory. It implies that biologically-based relations between parents and children are more fundamental and natural than other sorts of family or community relations. In aiming to limit and regulate child labour, it questions the values of social worlds where children's working lives are intricately involved with adults' and where children's contributions to household economies are essential, as well as providing financial resources for schooling (Woodhead 1998).

The very solidity of knowledge structures itself makes it difficult to move forward. But we need a sociology of childhood in order to draw attention to certain neglected features of childhood, to provide a better account of how the social order works; and to use this knowledge as a basis for righting children's wrongs.

Secondly and more specifically, barriers to re-thinking childhood lie in the pleasing and reassuring vision of childhood that Western psychology proposes. The spaces and times of childhood are proposed as, ideally, protected from politics. Children are to be protected, in an a-political arena of thought and practice. Just as women have been assigned to the private and the domestic, so we are taught to think of children as growing up there too, in a happy domain which enables them to develop, unmolested by the stresses of public life. Children therefore are presented to us as pre-people, outside the polity. The kindergarten – where children grow and where they are grown – is emblematic of that attractive vision. Gardens present an image of a natural – and a-political – environment where plants and people flourish.

And thirdly, perhaps the greatest barrier to re-thinking childhood is the set of labels we are taught to associate with the idea of childhood. To take a few terms applied to them – children are termed incompetent, unstable, credulous, unreliable, emotional. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, we adults ascribe to adults the opposite virtues: that they are competent, stable, well informed, reliable and rational. All the more reason, then, for us reasoning adults to protect children in the kindergarten, until they reach the age of reason. And all the less reason to listen to their views. Durkheim put the case succinctly.

Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. (Durkheim 1922 [in Giddens (ed.) 1972])

Durkheim carries a good deal of responsibility for ensuring that the education industry has relied on psychological rather than sociological knowledge as a basis for its work on children. To this day, mainstream sociologists assume as unproblematic the notion that children are to be understood merely as objects of socialisation at home and school, which will fit them to join society as adults (e.g. Giddens 1997: 24–38). Recent theoretical work on the fashionable sociology of the body, refers to children only as precursors to their adult status (Shilling 1993, Chapter 7; Turner 1992: 34, 40, 51).

#### *Taking a basic step forward*

However, through the recent pioneering work of a number of scholars (e.g. Qvortrup 1987, 1991; James and Prout 1990/7; Alanen 1992; Qvortrup et al. 1994), it has become clear that we need a fuller understanding of childhood than has been available till now. Essentially it has emerged that study

of children and childhood is a political enterprise, not a neutral scientific enterprise. To define children as incompetent, inadequate versions of adults, to individualise childhood and to propose childhood as politically neutral is itself a political act. Further, to do so risks damaging children and childhood. The history of knowledge-acquisition about children exposes political goals and interests. An example is linkages between assessment, including intelligence testing, and social goals. It was to suit the demands of the economy that children were to be sorted by intelligence levels and trained accordingly (Hollway 1984).

The basic step forward is to rescue children and childhood from 'a conceptual space that has been declared a-political (Elshtain 1981, Chapter 6). It is to recognise inter-relationships between knowledge and policy; and to study children as a social group and childhood as a social phenomenon. The proper study of the social order has to include the social condition of childhood, and the contributions of children to it. The sociological project is to work initially on the task of extracting children theoretically from the family in order to study their social positioning as a social group. A next step is to replace children in reciprocal relations with adults, and childhood with adulthood. Thus the sociological enterprise aims to locate study of childhood in study of societies.

This enterprise requires re-considering the division of labour between social groups. Traditional sociology identified and reified two contrasting (and inter-linked) dimensions of society: the public versus the private, and economy versus culture. In this scenario men occupied the public, economically productive sphere; women, naturally, occupied the private sphere and introduced their children to socially accepted norms and behaviours. But as women have pointed out, what women do at home is economically productive: it produces children – new people; and through housework and people-work it provides the conditions through which family members are fit to go out to work. The private is not private – it intersects with the public. What happens to women and children at home is structured by public theories and policies; and what happens in the private domain affects the public domain. Indeed, the conceptual division of the social order into public and private, the economic and the cultural, begins to fall apart once you consider the work of women – and even more so now when you begin to consider the work of children at home and at school.

### **Sociologising childhood**

#### *How the sociology of childhood shifts adult understanding of children and childhood*

The sociology of childhood has begun to shift adult understandings of what it is to be a child, and how this varies across time and across societies. On the one hand, the work is leading to greater respect for children and childhood; on the other hand, it is leading to fuller understanding of the wrongs suffered by children.

Taking children seriously as people leads to shifts in thinking. First, children move from being objects of adult work, to being competent, contributing social actors. Secondly, at a broader level, when facing the age-old debates about agency and structure, we have to consider the extent to which children may be regarded as agents intersecting with the structures surrounding their lives. This can mean, considering how far children reproduce and transform such structures; and how far, therefore, they are effective in altering the conditions of their own childhoods. Thirdly, the idea that adult views are sufficient for defining children's needs has to give way to the understanding that children's own wishes and expressed needs are relevant to the construction and implementation of social policies and practices. So in all these respects, children gain in stature.

But the new knowledge arising from these new approaches to children and childhood also reveals the wrongs suffered by children, and the unacceptably poor condition of childhood itself. For when one studies children as a social group, in any society (that I know about) one is forced to recognise their low status. Childhood as social status is defined within the generational order as inferior to adulthood. How children live their childhoods looks heavily structured by what adults want of childhood. A case in point is schooling, where children's days are largely controlled by adult agendas. Furthermore, adults justify their control over children through a naturalisation of the condition of childhood: it is for the good of children that their school-days are as they are; if children do well at school, the argument goes, jobs, security and happiness lie ahead.

Given this duality in our new-found understandings of childhood, where children emerge both as competent actors and as heavily controlled and subordinated, the rights of children become not only of crucial importance to the quality of childhood, but also problematic. For in order to honour children's participation rights we must establish the conditions in which they can be honoured. That is, we adults have to carry out the work of protecting children and providing for them so that they have a securely based arena within which they may participate in working through issues that affect them

(Wintersberger 1996). The problem then lies in the control elements inherent in protection and provision. For if children are socially controlled, then their ability to participate may be limited.

At the root of the dilemmas faced by adults and children when adults try to honour the three Ps (protection, provision and participation) are valuations of autonomy or of interdependence. Western philosophers from John Locke and onwards through John Stuart Mill have proposed the autonomous rational man as the ideal. Indeed the notion of competence has been regarded in liberal contract theory as a quality of the autonomous man, who is capable of deciding whether to opt into the social order or social contract. He is a man who makes decisions, for himself, in his own interests. These points are criticised by feminists, who note that the man in the ivory tower depends on other people to feed him and keep him clean, and even to keep him company (Grimshaw 1986). As I shall describe later, children themselves respect the principle of interdependence in human relationships. John O'Neill has put it very well, in his proposal for a 'covenant society' (1994: 86–97). In such a society, people respect the principle of reciprocity. This means recognition of civic obligation to each other; that recognition in turn affords us our ideas of our own moral worth. He identifies three kinds of obligation. The norm of reciprocity requires that we repay people on grounds of what they have done for us in the past. The 'no strangers' norm tells us that no-one must be excluded from obligation; the old, the young, female and male, are all part of a reciprocal society. And the norm of reciprocity between generations requires enactment of responsibility by children to parents as well as by parents to children. If we accept children's accounts and O'Neill's formula, we can agree that his covenant society helps to do away with the notion of contracts and conflicts between autonomous individuals. This vision does away with competence as a pre-condition for participation. Then maybe children's rights to provision, protection and participation can be honoured within social relationships which recognise interdependence.

In a covenant theory of the state and community it is recognised that gender, age, infirmity, health, intelligence and strength are the very element of moral and political life and require of us a judicious weighting of the moral contributions of both justice and care in dealing with one another. (O'Neill 1994: 41–42)

#### *Moving on theoretically*

In my view, we can take lessons from the work of another subordinated group, to help us understand the condition of childhood and how to amend it. Women over two centuries and with considerable force in the last thirty years

have counter-balanced men's accounts of women's social position with their own understandings (e.g. Smith 1988). Women have analysed their work as comprising four stages, and we can use these to improve understanding about childhood.

The first step is a critique; this involves describing and analysing how far the lives of a social group – such as women, or in the present case children – fit with dominant accounts. Thus for instance, in the UK, children's normal development is described as dependent on their relationships with a normal father and normal mother. (Yet many children grow up successfully in other family types.) Individual adult-child relationships are regarded as key to development. (Yet children put great stress also on peer relationships.) Most adults assume that children should not only be at school for many hours a day but also that the more schooling the better the outcome. (Yet many children demonstrate that school is counter-productive.)

The second stage of study is deconstruction. Here feminists propose an analysis of what assumptions underlie or underpin the dominant accounts. Key terms that emerge from such an analysis as regards children and childhood are: familialisation, individualisation, scholarisation; and under-pinning all, problematisation. Thus children are understood as individuals within the family (rather than as a social group) and their success is deemed to depend on what the family provides. The child's development is seen as the product of individual relationships (rather than, for instance, of structural factors). The scholarisation of childhood is seen in the assumptions that the proper activity of children is as 'pupils', rather than in other activities – such as, for instance, paid work. Familialisation and individualisation imply that where childhoods go wrong, deviate from norms, the problem and its cure are located at individual case level, rather than at sociol-economic levels.

Underpinning these assumptions are concepts within a given society of the division of responsibility between the state and parents for child welfare and rearing. Thus in some socialist societies, the state takes a major share of responsibility for child welfare, for equalling out children's opportunities; in others much more responsibility is assigned to parents. The level of direct financial support given to children, and the financing of education and health are examples. Another kind of variation between societies might be on ideologies of manhood or citizenship; emphasis on the individual competitive man or on covenant concepts may account for policies on the family and education. It could be instructive to consider how a society which valued interdependence would structure education services; presumably somewhat differently from the institutions we know today. What would the physical geography of societies look like if we favoured community responsibility for children and inter-generational reciprocal relationships? Then, within the

context of industrialised, urbanised societies, childhood itself is commonly problematised: what are we to do with children? Currently we tend to assume they are at a preparatory stage, rather than participatory; so we seclude them in institutions and implement programmes towards conformity.

The third stage in the feminist programme aims to arrive at a key defining concept. Just as gender helped people to understand women's relations to men, so generation can help us understand children's relationships with adults (Qvortrup 1991). Mannheim (1952 [1928]) – who is generally credited with the first comprehensive study of generation (for reviews see Corsten 1999; Pilcher 1994) – analyses the formation of generations as taking place in three stages, called status or location, actuality and unit (*ibid.*: 302–307). People born (or located) in the same period of social and historical time within a society are exposed to a range of social, historical and political events and ideas. They become an actual generation 'in so far as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period' (p. 304). Those who grew up during the UK Conservative government's 18 years to 1997 could be called 'Thatcher's children' (Pilcher and Wagg 1996). Some members of an actual generation may establish a 'concrete bond' – a set of shared goals and projects; such a group forms a generational unit. An example might be the Impressionist painters in nineteenth century France. As the generations move through the life-cycle they carry with them ideas rooted in those early exposures, and these ideas will be more or less defined and refined depending on which stage they as individuals and groups reached (location, actuality, unit).

Consideration of the applicability of generation to the analysis of childhood is a large and attractive topic, and here I should like to draw attention briefly just to a few of its aspects. At individual level, a generational approach allows us to recognise that child-adult relations take place between groups of people subject to differing constellations of social, historical and political ideas; thus a child experiences current education policy first-hand; her parents grew up under other policies. In complement to this set of relations, we can see that at a wider, social level, policies – for instance in education – are devised and implemented by a generation of people whose ideas were formed by different influences, as compared to those of the generation of children now experiencing them.

Study of the concept of generation is also clearly centrally concerned with processes of continuity and change, how the past feeds into the present and on into the future, through the agency of people born and learning at certain periods of time. Corsten (1999) usefully picks up the distinction introduced by Joan Robinson (1963) between logical time and historical time. Logical time is the outline of linear progress of time-points distinctly succeeding

each other; historical time refers to a sequence of social events. Generational experience and understanding comprises intersecting components: the sequence of social events in historical time; the biographical development of individuals, and the coalescence into groups of people who share some orientations and knowledge, but may differ for instance as to birth date, specific experience and response to events. For Corsten, a generation of people have a sense of belonging – they not only share assumptions, they also share a sense that other people share similar assumptions. This argument gets rid of the idea of cohorts based on age and focuses instead on shared assumptions among people of somewhat varying birth dates. This point, it seems to me, resonates well with some aspects of childhood. For whilst children seem to regard themselves as belonging within an age-cohort for some purposes (they identify with their class mates at school); in other cases they understand and belong to childhood defined as stretching across a wide range of people who inhabit a social status called childhood, which is structured by current ideas about what childhood is. For instance they note that legally all under-18s are in the same boat, in some respects.

Thus, the inclusion of historical time into sociological thought helps us understand childhood. The social relations of agency and structure require children to work with and against structures whose character is rooted in past events, interactions and beliefs, such as ideas about childhood, education, parent-child relationships. As a generation, children take on board notions of shared social status and shared experience with people at differing stages of childhood, but all living through childhoods as understood at a specific period of historical time in a given society.

I am suggesting that one route into better understanding of childhood is through generational analysis; this can serve as a basis for considering steps towards improving childhoods. For instance, recognition of the sheer weight of history on adults' concepts of childhood may be an important basis for attempts to shift such concepts.

The fourth stage in re-thinking childhood, as in women's studies, is to develop a standpoint. Work on how to develop a child standpoint includes considering how children's experience of their childhoods can be worked into analysis of the social condition of childhood. Again, standpoint work leads on to the recognition of implications for rights; it means both recognising how things are and working to improve the condition of childhood. Paying attention to what children say in research contexts has become popular in some countries. Initial fears among researchers that children – being incompetent – would not be able to provide good data are being superseded with concerns that interpretation of what they say gives too much power to adults. In the last few years, adults have begun to recognise that children and young

people can carry out their own research. Perhaps in years to come, it will be common for children to design their own research, and disseminate it, perhaps in partnership with adults, and as participants in inter-generational research.

### **Lessons from empirical research**

In this section of the paper, I report on data from my recent study with nine-year-olds in London.<sup>1</sup> I have been doing two things: discussing with them how they understand the social status of childhood, motherhood and fatherhood; and asking them to reflect on their daily lives. The 57 children were situated in two school classes, one from each of two schools. The girls and boys make up a multi-ethnic, mixed social class sample. I note here briefly some of the key findings arising from what the children said.

#### *Social positions and relationships*

- Children regard parents as having ultimate responsibilities, mothers for childcare and fathers for resourcing the family.
- Children accept their low status vis-à-vis adults. They regard themselves as rightly subordinate to adults, one of whose responsibilities is to teach them moral standards.
- Children put family first in their affections, and this includes people who live elsewhere, notably fathers and grandparents. Thus inter-generational relations are key to their happiness.
- Children also emphasise the importance of friendships with other children. These provide opportunities for enjoyment of free time and play. Children also discuss issues and problems with friends, providing support and a body of knowledge about childhood, child-adult relations and schooling. These relationships lead to identification as members of the social group children and as inhabitants of the social status childhood.

#### *Responsibility and free time*

- Children enjoy their freedom from adult responsibility. But their accounts show they take or are delegated responsibility for housework, childcare and school work.
- Children think they have a right to free time for play, for pursuing their own interests. They define 'free time' as time outside the immediate

<sup>1</sup> The study referred to is 'Negotiating Childhoods', funded (1997–1999) as one of 22 projects on the UK Children 5–16 Programme (ref. no. L129 25 1032).

control and supervision of adults. But adult domination of time, at home and especially at school, means they often have to argue for free time.

### *Negotiation*

- As subordinates and dependents, children are dependent on adult provision. They have to negotiate for free time, for goods and services, for adult time, for time with friends, for money, for transport. The principal person with whom they negotiate is their mother, who runs the household.

### *Apprenticeship*

- Children identify the central tasks of childhood as comprising three components:
  - becoming a good enough member of one's family and culture
  - working on the project of one's own life (including getting an education, building friendships, considering the future)
  - negotiating with adults in order to carve out time for oneself and to resist adult demands
 These components include the somewhat differing and at times conflicting concepts of apprenticeship and self-realisation.

### *Moral status and moral agency*

- Children find that their moral status is dubious in the eyes of adults. Children are often not believed, often wrongly blamed. And they are not always accorded respect for their moral competence.
- Children understand themselves as people not as imperfect beings. Their accounts show that they operate as moral agents in constructing and reconstructing relationships with relatives and friends.
- Children's accounts indicate that they contribute to the division of labour; in building and maintaining the social order of the home; in their work at school; in developing social lives in the neighbourhood.
- Children recognise the central importance of child-family relationships and the slightly lesser importance of child-child relations. They emphasise interdependence and reciprocity, rather than lonely autonomy, as central values.

*The 3 Ps: Protection, Provision and Participation*

- Children think they have rights to protection and to provision (and on the whole their parents meet these rights). They also emphasise their participation rights, but find that these are not always respected. Parents only sometimes, and school staff hardly ever respect their participation rights.

**Discussion**

Over the last 10 years, I have listened as a researcher to children's accounts of childhood, child-adult relationships, and the rights and wrongs of children (Mayall 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Mayall et al. 1996; Kelley, Mayall and Hood 1997). I think some major general points emerge from children's accounts.

First, children think sociologically. They divide the social order into two groups of people, adults and those whom adults define as non-adults, that is, children. Children regard childhood as relational. That is, they see that the character and quality of their childhoods is structured through their inter-generational relationships – most importantly with parents and teachers.

Secondly, children's accounts point to a paradox: they agree with adults that childhood is a period of life – an apprenticeship – when people are rightly subordinated to those with more experience and knowledge. Being protected by adults from absolute responsibilities is one kind of right children identify (Hughes 1988). On the other hand, being an apprentice is only part of the story of childhood. Children's accounts forcibly indicate that they are moral agents, who carry out important activities, both in the structuring and progressing of their own lives within relationships, and in making and remaking relationships within the family and with friends.

Thirdly, and this is very disturbing, many children identify conflicting notions about their moral status. Though they act as moral agents, they note that their moral status and in particular their participation rights are constantly in question. Adult conceptualisations of children as incomplete people and adult assumptions that their own agendas matter more than children's lead to them downgrading children as moral agents. The fact that – in the UK – children are regarded as adult responsibilities in public places, further serves to solidify adult views that children are moral incompetents. In turn, children's own subordination to adults leads them to adopt whatever tactics they can in order to assert their rights; these tactics include wheedling, lying, demanding, refusing; and these tactics themselves reinforce adult prejudices. We can see here the working through of historical processes, whereby

this generation of children has been progressively excluded from social participation and, in complement, progressively identified as incompetent.

Fourthly, children make important points on issues of autonomy and inter-dependence. Whilst Western liberal thinkers have regarded the autonomous, independent moral agent as the highest form of life, children regard relationships as the cornerstone of their lives. It is of crucial importance to them to work with and through family relationships, to care about those who live elsewhere as well as those they live with. Children's accounts centre on such matters; on the health, well-being and problems of those they love. And for them the best thing about school is friends; for whilst the formal school agenda is dictated by national curricula and time-tables managed under teachers' authority, relationships with friends provide the forum that allows children to make sense of school, to help each other, to put up with it and even to enjoy it. Thus any account of how the social order works, in terms of values ascribed by varying social groups to dependence, independence, and inter-dependence, needs to take account of children's views.

So children provide us with a unique, specific set of 'takes' on the social order, which both help us to understand how it works, and provided pointers towards ways of improving childhoods. In this paper I have given a brief account of the positioning of children in the social order, and very briefly I have listed how some children themselves understand their childhoods. These larger and smaller perspectives, linked together, suggest relevant ways of thinking about rights. Children see that they are positioned in social relationships, not just as individuals but as group members. They understand that they are required to operate through inter-generational relations – with parents, with teachers. It is through these child-adult relations that they learn. And the character of their daily lives is structured through the goals, control, permission and affection (and sometimes anger) of adults. An important part of what they learn is that other people's happiness depends on their input. Thus it comes as no surprise that these children stressed interdependence and reciprocity, rather than lonely autonomy. Children therefore are adding to the arguments raised by feminist philosophers (such as Grimshaw 1986; Griffiths and Whitford 1988) which challenge the overlong Western European tradition whereby rational man, in lonely autonomy, is the measure of virtue.

Sociology also throws light on issues to do with respecting children's participation rights. For if we understand children not just as individuals but as members of a social group, then we are forced to reflect on that group's rights to participate in constructing the social order, social policies and practices. But sociology also reveals in stark form, the subordination of children as a group to adults as a group – a subordination that children themselves accept. This leads to difficulties. As a subordinate, and marginalised group,

children find they have dubious moral status. Adult visions of adult-child relations are built from the long history of developmentalism, intersecting with ideologies and policies which stress adult socialisation duties and responsibility for protection and provision; adult input rather than child agency are at the forefront of these visions. All these combine to foster adult suspicion of children – to disbelieve them, to blame them, to suspect their moral competence, to assign moral responsibility to adults rather than to children. Under these circumstances, it is hard for children to take the initiative and participate in social affairs, and it is hard for adults to permit them to, and very hard for children and adults to work together on anything like equal terms.

This is an interesting and perhaps important time in the development of recognition of children's rights in the UK. We have lagged behind many other countries, though probably most should do more (Wintersberger 1996). I think there are signs of change. These include, at local levels, increasing recognition of children as social actors, whose knowledge and views are worth investigating and should be included in policy-formation (Alderson 1993; Sinclair 1996; Christensen and James 2000). As regards the education service, where children's participation rights are so woefully ignored, there is some pressure to take action, by, for instance, a statutory framework for school councils which give students a say (e.g. *Guardian* 26.6. 2000: 10). At societal levels, there is increasing and persistent pressure on the UK government to honour the UN Convention, for instance by publicising information about it, by setting up 'Effective Government Structures for Children' (Hodgkin and Newell 1996), including a Children's Rights Commissioner. An Office of Children's Rights Commissioner for London has been established. The UK is forced to pay some attention to the judgments of the European court on abuses of children's rights (notably on physical abuse). The ESRC Children 5–16 Programme, on which I was privileged to work, may also begin to make an impact, through the presentation of data on many aspects of children's lives and the analysis and recommendations arising.

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