

Sociology 1020

Sociology and the Childhood Perspective

Theoretical approaches to childhood

- Developmental psychology
- Socialization theory
- New paradigm of the social study of childhood (also called social actor theory or SAT)

Main suppositions of the psychological perspective

- Children are 'natural', not 'social' beings
- Childhood is a process towards maturation
- There are key stages in development which all children should meet
- Those not meeting key stages somehow deficient

Origins of developmental theory

- 1800s - growth of science as a discipline
- Could measure and predict natural world
- Therefore possible to measure and predict humans

Wider social context

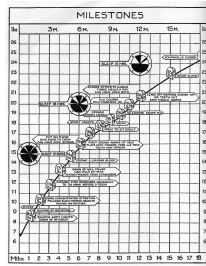
- Concerns with the health of societies
- Led to 'child saving' societies and growth in medical/scientific approaches to ensure health of the nation(s).

Mass education

- What stages should children be at?
- What was 'normal' for children at what ages?

The new science of child study

- You could now chart growth and development
- You could measure and classify children



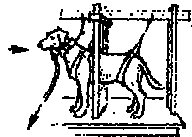
Classical Conditioning – Pavlov's Dogs

Classical Conditioning (Pavlov)

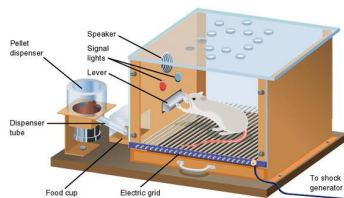
Unconditioned Stimulus
(food) → Unconditioned
Response (salivation)

Unconditioned Stimulus
(food) together with
Conditioned Stimulus
(bell) → Unconditioned
Response

Conditioned Stimulus
(bell) → Conditioned
Response (salivation)



Operant Conditioning – Skinner's box



Skinner's "Baby in a Box"



Sociological approaches: Socialization

- Socialization is the process by which a person becomes a member of a social group
- Mix of developmental psychology and sociology
- A Functionalist explanation

Main suppositions of socialization theory

- Is about explaining how individuals come to make up a functioning society
- If all children in a society receive the same socialization, it is likely that they will share the same beliefs and expectations.
- We internalize the norms of our society
- When socialization doesn't work, individuals are labeled deviant

Socialization

- Is a life-long process
- But, childhood seen as critical period for socialization
- Children are born without culture (like Locke and the *tabula rasa*) – children as 'blank slates'
- Through socialization children learn culture and become functioning members of a society

How does socialization work?

- The child is socialized into norms of a society by carers (parents, teachers etc)
 - 'Big boys don't cry'
 - 'Little girls don't fight'
- We adopt roles which are culturally/socially prescribed

Critique of Socialization theory

- '[socialisation theory] leaves out both what children are doing when others are socialising them, and when others are not. It neglects the worlds that children design by themselves for themselves. It fails to examine children's ideas and activities as their ways of being in the world' (Waksler, 1991:21)

Summary – Socialization

- **Socialization** is the process by which human beings or animals learn to adopt the behavior patterns of the community in which they live
- But, sees children as passive recipients of the socialization process
- Like developmental psychology, children seen as adult becomings

Sociological explanations: Social Construction Theory

- A social construction is an idea which may appear to be natural and obvious to those who accept it, but in reality is an invention or artifact of a particular culture or society.
- The implication is that social constructs are in some sense human choices rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature.

To say something is socially constructed:

- is to say: This thing could not have existed had we not built it; and we need not have built it at all
- Had we been a different kind of society, had we had different needs, values, or interests, we might well have built a different kind of thing
- or built this one differently.

Implications of social constructionism

- For gender
 - Women's roles and norms (as in socialization theory) now can be seen to be social constructions
 - So, it isn't natural that women care for children, or earn less pay simply because they are women
 - These factors are socially constructed

Implications of social constructionism

- For childhood, although children *exist*, what they are or are taken to be is not a consequence of any natural property of the child
 - Alerts us to the understanding that not all children everywhere are the same

Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout

- Architects of new paradigm with these important texts:
 - Jenks book 'Childhood' (1983)
 - James and Prout 'Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood' (1990)
 - James, Jenks and Prout 'Theorizing Childhood' (1998)

Prout (2005)

- Argues that the formulation of the 6 tenets necessarily took place against the background of current 'trends' in sociology, including social constructionism and feminist theory

Legacy of these 'trends' for the study of childhood:

- Social construction – childhood as a concept changes over time and in place
- Feminism – childhood as a minority group which is oppressed by adults in the same way that women are oppressed by men

Sociological approaches 3: The 'new paradigm'

- First – what is a paradigm?
 - the set of experiences, beliefs and values that affect the way an individual perceives reality and responds to that perception
 - A "Dominant Paradigm" refers to the values, or system of thought, in a society that are most standard and widely held at a given time

The 'new paradigm'

The new paradigm of the social study of childhood is a *paradigm shift* because it is a new way of thinking about childhood. It:

- Rejects a view of children as passive incompetent becomings
- Highlights the socially constructed nature of childhood

The 'new paradigm'

- calls for children to be seen as competent social actors who shape, as well as are shaped by, their environment.
- not just take for granted what it means to be a child but question our ideas about it and deconstruct it.

The 'new paradigm'

- moves away from a conception of childhood as an age-bound developmental process
- And away from a view of children as passive recipients of socialisation
- Towards seeing childhood as a time of competence and agency

What is 'agency'?

- *Human agency* is the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices on the world. It is normally contrasted to natural forces, which are causes involving only unthinking deterministic processes.

What is *children's* agency?

- When we talk about children as agents, or as social actors, we are saying that children are not just passive becomings, but are human beings who have the capacity to make choices and to impose their choices on the world.

The 'new paradigm'

- Embraces diversity and difference over universality.
- Argues that we need to go and consciously look at how the concept childhood has been built up (constructed).
- Children not just formed by society or natural forces, they inhabit a world of meaning created by them and in their interaction with adults

Key features of the 'new paradigm'

1. Childhood is understood as a social construction. Childhood is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies

Key features of the 'new paradigm'

2. Childhood is a variable of social analysis which cannot be separated from other variables like class, gender or ethnicity. Cross cultural analysis shows that there are a variety of childhoods, rather than a single universal phenomena.

Key features of the 'new paradigm'

3. Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right

Key features of the 'new paradigm'

4. Children must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.

Key features of the 'new paradigm'

5. Ethnography is a useful methodology for the study of childhood

Key features of the 'new paradigm'

6. Engaging in the study of childhood is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society

- [YouTube - Game Over: Gender, Race & Violence in Video Games](#)
- [YouTube - Violent Video Games: Moral Outrage or Moral Panic?](#)
- [YouTube - ?N64?](#)

Computer and video games: the view from the New Paradigm

- 1998 Study asked children for their views on the ownership and use of computer and video games
 - Not many children preferred violent games, most preferred platform games
 - Found that reasons for liking violent video games included that the games gave children an opportunity to play against friends and to 'have a laugh'
 - Children very well aware that screen violence was not the same as real violence

- Sam Because on 'Doom' I get to use a gun.
- SM Why do you like using a gun?
- Sam Because I aren't allowed to use a gun in real life so when I play 'Doom' I can use a gun.
- SM If you could use a gun in real life what would you do with it?
- Sam I'd get a tidgy piece of paper put it on a stick and see how many holes I can get in it.
- SM Would you kill people with it?
- Sam No.

- Joe I especially like Mortal Kombat 'cos I can win Terry
- and she's 8 or 9... on the dinosaurs world there's blood.
- SM Do you like the blood?
- Joe Yeah, cos Sam thinks its always mine .. when I'm
- always a ninja and we go on that level .
- SM Is the blood real?
- Joe No, it's just on a computer.
- SM Would you make someone bleed in real life?
- Joe No, not on purpose. Blood comes out the people when
- you kick 'em or anything, it comes out the figures on
- the computer, they're only moving plasticine.

Quotation from the study – 14 year old boy (*do not transcribe*)

"computer games are a part of every kids life, they cannot be ignored. If games are over-violent they are censored, like videos. I can't see why parents are so wary about computer games, its simply entertainment and it can improve reflexes and hand-eye co-ordination. TV was all the rage when parents were young, and I'm sure TV is more influential than computers. There is a lot more violence on TV. AND computers CANNOT give kids epilepsy, it only triggers seizures, but so does discos and any other flashing lights. Back to the point about violence, do you see kids beat up others with killer combos, after playing streetfighter? Did Fred West own a gameboy? I think not. If parents restrict their children from video games, they are also boring them to death. Computer games can release stress, which is common in teenagers. Some parents only stop kids playing games because they don't like new technology! Cheers for listening."

Summary

- This lecture has shown different ways of thinking about what childhood is and what children are.
 - a shift from a view of children as becomings to a view of children as beings
 - a shift in understanding of children as being incompetent to competent in their own social lives
 - a shift in seeing children as passive recipients of socialization, to a view of children as active agents
