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Modern Childhoods: Contemporary Theories and Children's Lives

Tim Waller



Key chapter objectives

- To review recent literature and research underpinning the study of early childhood
- To outline the main features of contemporary childhoods and children's lives identified by the literature
- To critically examine the role of child development in our understanding of children's lives
- To consider a range of perspectives on early childhoods
- To develop and discuss five key tenets of modern theory about early childhoods

This chapter is viewed as complementary to Chapter 1 and has been kept as a whole from the version published in the previous (2009) edition of this book, but updated where appropriate. As well as including new theories, this chapter includes further discussion of some of the concepts that are evident in Chapter 1. However, whereas Chapter 1 has a focus on the historical views of childhood, how these views have developed over time and their impact on contemporary childhood, this chapter has its focus on modern childhoods.

The chapter provides an overview of current international literature and research that underpins the study of early childhood. Much of the recent literature has been critical of the central role of 'child development' in theory concerning young children. In order to provide a contemporary account of the young child, the chapter identifies and critically discusses the following five key tenets of modern theory:

1. There are multiple and diverse childhoods.
2. There are multiple perspectives on childhood.
3. Children are involved in co-constructing their own childhoods.
4. Children's participation in family, community and culture makes a particular contribution to their lives.
5. We are still learning about childhood.

Childhood may be defined as the life period during which a human being is regarded as a child, and the cultural, social and economic characteristics of that period (Frones, 1994: 148).

Drawing from a range of sources (for example, Corsaro, 2011; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Kehily, 2009; MacNaughton, 2003; Maynard and Thomas, 2009; Penn, 2008), this chapter identifies five features of contemporary theories about children's 'development' and discusses their relevance to modern childhoods. The explicit purpose of the chapter is therefore to explore alternative, contemporary views and not to repeat traditional texts (of which there are many) that consider children and childhood mainly from a psychological point of view.

Brown (1998), MacNaughton (2003) and Robinson and Diaz (2006), for example, remind us of the importance of equity and the need to examine and question our own assumptions about children and childhood. It is common for adults to underestimate children. It is generally acknowledged that children are unique individuals, who live in a social world, and that there is no such thing as 'normal' development (Donaldson, 1978; Dunn, 1988; Rose, 1989).

Moving towards a contemporary view of the child, the terms 'child' and 'child development' and the whole concept of childhood have been questioned. Drawing on a range of perspectives, including the emerging sociology of childhood, the concept of childhood and the social history of children are examined and discussed and an holistic view is promoted. The chapter considers issues of equality and how they affect children and also focuses on children's participation in the family and community (equality and diversity are discussed in detail in Chapter 5). Insights offered by recent research into early brain development are also evaluated.

There are multiple and diverse childhoods

A contemporary view acknowledges that childhood is not fixed and is not universal, rather it is 'mobile and shifting' (Walkerdine, 2009). This means that children experience

many different and varied childhoods. There are local variations and global forms, depending on class, 'race', gender, geography, time, etc. (see Penn, 2005, 2008, for a detailed discussion of alternative childhoods). Until recently, most of the published research and writing about children, childhood and child development have focused on individual development as a natural progress towards adulthood. This natural progress is conceived as the same for all children regardless of class, gender or 'race' (see MacNaughton, 2003: 73). Much of this considerable body of work, written from the perspective of psychology and developmental psychology, has promoted what Walkerdine (2004: 107) suggests is an 'essential childhood'. This is a traditional, Western, developmental view of the child, which is used to categorise all children throughout the world (Dahlberg, 1985; Walkerdine, 1993). Penn (2005) cites Rose (1989), who makes the point that a 'normal' child is a:

curious mix of statistical averages and historically specific value judgements. The most striking aspect of the 'normal' child is how abnormal he or she is, since there is no such person in reality and never has been. The advantage of defining normality is that it is a device that enables those in control or in charge to define, classify and treat those who do not seem to fit in. (Penn, 2005: 7)

Over 95 per cent of this literature originates from the USA (Fawcett, 2000) and much of it has been written by men, or from a male perspective. Walkerdine (1993: 451) argues that so-called 'scientific' psychological 'truths' about child development 'have to be understood in terms of the historical circumstances in which the knowledge was generated'. For Walkerdine, therefore, this knowledge has been generated in a patriarchal society and the story of child development is one that has been dominated by a male view. She argues strongly that relying on psychology to explain child development 'universalizes the masculine and European' (1993: 452).

Recently, due to the growing influence of a new sociology of childhood, cultural and anthropological studies, an alternative view which argues that childhood is an adult construction that changes over time and place has been put forward (see, for example, Gittins, 2004; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002; Prout and James, 1997). For MacNaughton (2003), the development of the child is not a fact but a cultural construction. When we describe a child's development, we are describing our cultural understandings and biases, not what exists in fact (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

As Penn (2005: 97) reminds us, 'the situation of most of the world's children is very different from those we study in North America and Europe'. The circumstances of the 80 per cent of the children who live in other parts of the world are significantly different in terms of wealth, health and culture (see Penn, 2005: 98–108):

1 in 6 children is severely hungry

1 in 7 has no health care at all

1 in 5 has no safe water and 1 in 3 has no toilet or sanitation facilities at home

Over 640 million children live in dwellings with mud floors or extreme overcrowding

Over 120 million children are shut out of primary schools, the majority of them girls
 180 million children work in the worst forms of child labour
 1.2 million children are trafficked each year
 2 million children, mostly girls, are exploited in the sex industry
 Nearly half the 3.6 million people killed in conflict during the 1990s (45%) were children
 Of the 15 million children orphaned by AIDS, 80% are African.
 (The State of the World's Children, UNICEF, 2004)

Further, the whole idea and usefulness of actually categorising and studying something called 'child development' has been questioned (see Fawcett, 2000 for a more detailed critique). Clearly, change and transformation happen throughout human life, but the argument is about how that change is understood and constituted. Dahlberg (1985) asserts that due to the central and dominant influence of developmental psychology, our view of the child has been constrained to a scientific model of natural growth. Typically, this model of the child defines development in terms of a relatively narrow range of psychological aspects such as social, emotional and cognitive or intellectual and physical development. However, as Riley (2007) points out, these interrelated aspects are complex and developmentalism does not fully account for the complexity nor explain how they operate together in an holistic way. Zuckerman (1993) also argues that theories which suggest regular and predictable patterns of development oversimplify the reality of children's lives and actually hinder our understanding of childhood.

Dahlberg et al. (2007) contend that development itself is a problematic term to apply to childhood because it produces oppressive practices. Walkerdine (1993) and Silin (1995) argue that our perspectives on the child have contributed to their oppression and exploitation in different ways because 'we are in a process of judging their differences to us as inadequacies or weaknesses rather than alternative ways of knowing' (Silin, 1995: 49). MacNaughton (2003: 75) discusses this point and cites Cannella (1997: 64), who asserts that 'child development is an imperialist notion that justifies categorising children and diverse cultures as backward and needing help from those who are more advanced'.

However, while there is an argument for the recognition of the social construction of childhood and the emerging sociology of childhood, as articulated above and in the section below, this is only one of multiple perspectives of childhood. Walkerdine (2004), for example, rightly questions the place of modern accounts of childhood that replace psychological understandings of individual development with sociological interpretations that focus on 'how child subjects are produced' (2004: 96). She argues that this 'dualism' replaces internal views of the child with external views and that child development has a place. Considering childhood as a simple progression through defined stages is, however, too simplistic. There are multiple and diverse childhoods and, in order to study childhood, one has to consider a range of perspectives.

There are multiple perspectives on childhood

A number of alternative and multiple perspectives can be drawn on to explain contemporary childhood (Walkerdine, 2009). These perspectives are culturally influenced and change over time. As Kehily (2004) points out, different disciplines have for a long time developed different ways of approaching the study of children. Recently, however, a growing body of international work – from the perspective of sociology (Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005), early childhood education (MacNaughton, 2003), critical theory and feminism (Walkerdine, 1993) and cultural studies (Cole, 1996) – has been critical of the place of developmental psychology in producing explanations of children as potential subjects, whose presence is only understood in terms of their place on a path towards becoming an adult (Walkerdine, 2009). A current understanding of children's development is, therefore, that it can be approached from a variety of perspectives and that these perspectives are culturally influenced and change over time.

Prout and James (1997: 8) identified the following key features of the 'new sociology of childhood':

- childhood is understood as a social construction
- childhood is a variable of social analysis
- children's relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right
- children are active social agents
- studying childhood involves engagement with the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

They suggest that 'the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture'. For Cunningham (1995: 3), 'childhood cannot be studied in isolation from society as a whole'. In contemporary culture, childhood has become a formal category with a social status, and is seen as an important stage in development. This status has been given boundaries by our society's institutions: families, clinics, early years settings and schools, etc. Jenks (1982) and Hoyle and Evans (1989) infer that this analysis places 'childhood' within a social construct, rather than it being a natural phenomenon.

The idea of childhood as a separate state to adulthood is a modern one. Ariès (1962: 152) argues that very little distinction between children and adults was made until sometime around the 15th century: 'in mediaeval society childhood did not exist'. From the 15th century onwards, children began to appear as children, reflecting their gradual removal from everyday adult society. Then, following the advent of compulsory schooling in the late 19th century (in Europe), the specific category of 'childhood' was produced, constructed (Ariès, 1962) and institutionalised (Walkerdine, 1993).

Alternatively, Pollock (1983) suggests that it is mistaken to believe that because a past society did not possess the contemporary Western view of childhood, that society had no such concept. Even if children were regarded differently in the past, this

does not mean that they were not regarded as children. However, he does acknowledge that the particular form of modern childhood is historically specific. Historical studies of childhood suggest that, in the UK, childhood was re-conceptualised between the end of the 19th century and the start of the First World War (Gittins, 1998). These studies demonstrate a significant shift in the economic and sentimental value of children. Over a fairly short period, the position of working-class children changed from one of supplementing the family income to that of a relatively inactive member of the household in economic terms to be protected from the adult world of hardship (Cunningham, 1995). Zelizer (1985) argues that children's contributions to the family in Western contexts is 'economically worthless' but 'emotionally priceless'. Children's value lies in their ability to give meaning and fulfilment to their parents' lives.

Alwin (1990) points out that the distinct category of childhood arose out of attitudinal shifts that placed children in the centre of the family and encouraged an affectionate bond between parents and their children. Thus, for Alwin, childhood is defined by four criteria: protection, segregation, dependence and delayed responsibility. Further, Gittins (2004) argues that the development of childhood as a concept was class-specific, reflecting the values and practices of a rising European middle class that increasingly differentiated adults and children, girls and boys.

Views of childhood, therefore, *have changed* and *are changing*. The main factors impacting on childhood are: economic, demographic, cultural and political. Since 1945, as a result of economic conditions in the West and the increase of compulsory schooling to the age of 16, a 'teenage' culture involving clothes, music, media and films has been constructed. Teenagers are defined by their potential spending power and targeted by advertising in the same way as adults. More recently, a further group of 'tweenagers' or 'tweenies' have been distinguished (Guardian, 2001). These are defined as 7- to 12-year-olds who already show teenage tendencies – for example, 7- to 12-year-old girls who currently shop for 'designer' clothes, wear make-up and own mobile phones.

As soon as they are born, many children across the world are immersed in a way of life where digital technology is used for a range of complex social and communication practices. These practices, which are constantly changing, include using a range of handheld devices such as mobile phones, tablet computers, multimedia players (iPods) and games consoles, playing interactive games on digital and satellite television and accessing the internet to communicate images and text, hold telephone conversations and play games with participants across the world. Currently, social network websites (shared databases of photographs that facilitate group discussion), short text messages (tweets) and blogging (contributing to online web diaries) are very popular, but as the technology develops, new and different communicative possibilities and practices will evolve (see Waller, 2010b). Although there are concerns about children who are excluded from modern communicative practices and 'digital divides' (Waller, 2010b), there is a growing recognition of the impact of digital technology on many children's

lives. For example, scholars in the USA (Labbo and Reinking, 2003), Australia (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Yelland, 2006) and the UK (Facer et al., 2003; Marsh et al., 2005) put forward the view that electronic media has a significant influence on childhood and suggest that children's early literacy and play experiences are shaped increasingly by electronic media. Marsh (2007) contends that young children are just as engaged in current digital communicative and social practices as the older members of their families and communities.

While Postman (1983) predicted that computer use would lead to greater divisions between children and adults, this has not appeared to be the case. Many children have become experts in using technology and are able to access and use information in different ways as a result (see Facer, 2011, 2012). Yelland (2006), significantly, also argues that we need to take account of the child's perspective of electronic media.

Children are involved in co-constructing their own childhoods

While a child is clearly biologically determined as a young person, a 'child' is also socially determined in time, place, economics and culture. There is debate about the role of adults in this social construction of childhood and the agency of children in their own lives. Mayall (1996: 1), for example, has argued that 'children's lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adults' understanding of childhood and what children are and should be'. Currently, there is an acknowledgement of the significance of the dimension of power in relations between children and adults, and the impact of this relationship on our concept, study and understanding of children and childhood (Riley, 2007). As Connell (1987) points out, power sometimes involves the direct use of force but it is always also accompanied by the development of ideas (ideologies) that justify the actions of the powerful. Cannella and Greishaber (2001) argue that adult/child categories create an ageism that privileges adults' meanings over those of children.

Alderson (2005) draws on gender studies to identify and emphasise the significance of these adult definitions and ideas in the lives of all children. The columns in Table 2.1 relate to what women and men were assumed to be like, and Column 1 can also be applied to how children are perceived and presented in traditional child development literature and adult constructs of the child.

Alderson (2005: 131) argues that:

- children often seem weak and ignorant because they are kept in helpless dependence
- children who try to move to Column 2 may be punished
- children are not allowed to gain knowledge and experience
- it suits adults to keep Column 2 for themselves.

Table 2.1 'Half people'

Column 1 – Women	Column 2 – Men
Ignorant	Knowing
Inexperienced	Experienced
Volatile	Stable
Foolish	Wise
Dependent	Protective
Unreliable	Reliable
Weak	Strong
Immature	Mature
Irrational	Rational
Incompetent	Competent

Source: Alderson (2005: 129). Reproduced with kind permission of the Open University Press

While there are many recent examples of literature that promote positive views of competent children, Alderson argues that there is a problem, especially with older approaches, that emphasise negative stereotypes of children (based on Column 1) because of their age.

A modern view of the child acknowledges agency, that is, children's capacity to understand and act upon their world. It acknowledges that children demonstrate extraordinary competence from birth. 'Agency' and 'participation' are two key features of the new sociology of childhood, which have influenced policy and practice in early childhood education and care, as well as contemporary understanding. These are now discussed in turn.

Agency

'Agency' involves children's capacity to understand and act upon their world, thus demonstrating competence from birth (e.g. James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002; Wyness, 2000). In addition, children are perceived as actively involved in the co-construction of their own lives. From this perspective, children are viewed as active agents who construct their own cultures (Corsaro, 2011), and have their own activities, their own time and their own space (Qvortrup et al., 1994). It seeks to understand the definitions and meaning children give to their own lives and recognises children's competence and capacity to understand and act upon their world. This perspective, therefore, sees the child as actively participating in her own childhood in accordance with Malaguzzi's (1993) concept of the 'rich child' – the child who is 'rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent' (1993: 10). For example, a child who may start to walk unaided at 11 months old is seen as playing an important role in influencing the development of this skill in

the particular context of experiences within her family and community from birth, as opposed to an alternative view which suggests that the new found skill is the result of 'normal maturation'. The new sociology of childhood has therefore been critical of the place of developmental psychology in producing explanations of children as potential subjects, which classify children and their abilities into boxes, according to their age (Corsaro, 2011), and where the child is studied and tested in an 'individual' way (Cannella, 1999: 37). Despite the fact that children's agency seems to be recognised broadly in the field, there is an ongoing debate about power and the role of adults in the social construction of childhood and the agency of children in their own lives. There is therefore a need for further discussion and illumination of the terms 'agent' and 'actor'.

The fact that children can express their feelings and emotions in their surroundings confirms their ability to act competently. Nevertheless, the term 'agency' embeds a more active role (Mayall, 2002). Children as agents can express not only their desires and wishes but they can also negotiate and interact within their environment causing change. However, Cannella and Greishaber (2001) argue that adult/child categories create an ageism that privileges adults' meanings over those of children. For example, Wyness (1999) states that in practice the school system has failed to recognise the child either as a competent actor or as an agent. Mayall (2002) contends that children are best regarded as a minority social group and she locates children's agency within the restriction of this minority status. However, Hendrick (1997) makes an important point about the agency of the child. He contends that changes in the conception of childhood did not just happen, they were contested, and not least important amongst the contestants were the children themselves, but in the context of joint interaction with peers and adults.

Participation

Following on from the acknowledgement of the significance of children's agency is the recognition that children have the right to participate in processes and decisions that affect their lives. Children's views of their own childhood are therefore particularly significant. In the UK, the Children Act 1989 and the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004c) established the right of the child to be listened to. An important aspect is children's own views of their daily experience (shared with peers and adults – Emilson and Folkesson, 2006). Qvortrup et al. (1994: 2) contend that 'children are often denied the right to speak for themselves either because they are held incompetent in making judgements or because they are thought of as unreliable witnesses about their own lives'. Thomas (2001) suggests that if there is presumption of competence, rather than incompetence, children often turn out to be more capable and sophisticated than they are given credit for. He argues that the advantages of working with a presumption of competence and respect for children and what they wish to communicate are apparent in both childcare work and social research.

Central to developments in policy and services for children is a growing acknowledgement of the legitimacy and value of children's participation in research and decision-making processes. Increasingly, however, there are reservations about whether children's participation actually results in worthwhile changes and benefits for the children involved (Badham, 2004; Tisdall et al., 2004). Hill (2006), for example, discusses the problematic nature of the 'participation agenda', identifying the multiple and sometimes conflicting views of the purposes of children's participation. As Sinclair (2004) asserts, while in principle children's views should always have an impact, it is questionable whether children's views have persistently been allowed to influence the direction of research, policy and services. Hill (2006) argues that adults' views, including the underestimation of children's capacities and a desire to protect their position of power over children, are significant barriers to participation. A critical factor, therefore, is the possibility that adults have used and 'institutionalised' the participation process to keep and exert control over children (Francis and Lorenzo, 2002; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Prout, 2003). As Clark and Statham (2005) point out, most 'participatory' research still has an adult agenda.

Notions of 'agency' are also contested by Jans (2004), Kjörholt (2002) and Vandebroek and Bouverne-De Bie (2006), for example. Vandebroek and Bouverne-De Bie (2006) analyse the construction of the participating child at both micro and macro levels. They argue that participatory research and practice may actually be exclusionary because, if children are constructed as a separate but homogeneous category, their age, gender, ethnic or cultural dimensions or inequalities are masked. Vandebroek and Bouverne-De Bie propose reconsidering children's agency with further emphasis on context (i.e. agency has differing forms in different contexts). A key challenge in promoting children's participation therefore is how to ensure children have the space to articulate their views and perspectives beyond the constraints of adult views, interpretation and agenda (see also Chapter 4).

MacNaughton (2004: 46) suggests that 'children make their own meanings, but not under conditions of their own choosing'. MacNaughton (p. 47) identifies four 'conditions of power' that impact on children:

1. The power of pre-existing cultural imagery and cultural meanings.
2. The power of expectations.
3. The power of positions.
4. The power of the marketplace.

MacNaughton argues that children enter a pre-existing world in which each of these conditions of power is already accomplished. As an example, she discusses the children's entertainment and toy industry to show how global capital produces the material culture through which children construct their meanings. However, as Riley (2007) points out, children are powerful consumers in the multi-million-dollar industry of childhood that is focused around clothes, toys, books, and electronic and digital media (see Marsh, 2005).

The Children's Society has published research on children and young people's well-being every year since 2006. A significant on-going concern was disclosed by the Society's Good Childhood Inquiry, which revealed a consensus among adults that increasing commercialisation is damaging children's wellbeing. Eighty-nine per cent of adults felt that children nowadays are more materialistic than in past generations. Also, evidence submitted to the inquiry from children themselves suggests that they do feel under pressure to keep up with the latest trends (The Children's Society, 2008).

Professor Philip Graham (Emeritus Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Institute of Child Health, London, and an inquiry panel member) believes that commercial pressures may have worrying psychological effects on children. Evidence both from the USA and from the UK (Schor, 2004) suggests that those most influenced by commercial pressures also show higher rates of mental health problems. Bob Reitemeier (chief executive of The Children's Society) said: 'A crucial question raised by the inquiry is whether childhood should be a space where developing minds are free from concentrated sales techniques. As adults we have to take responsibility for the current level of marketing to children. To accuse children of being materialistic in such a culture is a cop out. Unless we question our own behaviour as a society we risk creating a generation who are left unfulfilled through chasing unattainable lifestyles' (The Children's Society, 2008).

The most recent *Good Childhood Report* (The Children's Society, 2013) explores the connections between wellbeing and other issues in children's lives in the UK (see also Chapter 12). This report argues that children's levels of wellbeing can be changed and improved by external factors. In particular, the report shows that children in their early teenage years appear to 'fare worse than other age groups. In the eight to 17 age range, 14- and 15-year-olds have lower wellbeing than younger or older children for most aspects of their lives. In addition, whilst children in the UK experienced a rise in wellbeing between 1994 and 2008, this appears to have stalled and may have begun to reverse in the most recent years' (2013: 6).

Although the report acknowledges that 'around four-fifths of children are "flourishing", meaning that they are both satisfied with their lives and find their lives worthwhile', worryingly the report makes a clear link between poverty and low wellbeing and the subsequent impact on children's lives:

Children with low wellbeing are over 20 times less likely than other children to feel safe at home, eight times more likely to say that their family does not get along well together and five times more likely to report having recently been bullied. Children who lack five or more items on our deprivation index are 13 times less likely to feel safe at home and six times less likely to feel positive about the future. (The Children's Society, 2013: 6)

However, whilst it is important to acknowledge the serious effect of external factors on children's lives, such as poverty, there is debate in contemporary literature about the influence of adult power on childhood – here, children are seen as actively involved in the co-construction of their own lives. A modern explanation of childhoods therefore

seeks to understand the definitions and meaning children give to their own lives and recognises children's competence and capacity to understand and act upon their world.

Children's participation in family, community and culture makes a particular contribution to their own life

Much of the recent literature in the field of early childhood argues that there is a need to consider the wider political, social and cultural context of childhood. Bronfenbrenner (1977) acknowledged a range of contextual factors that impact directly and indirectly on the development of a child in his concept of ecological systems (see Berk, 2007 for a more detailed discussion). Ecological systems theory represents the child's development as multi-layered and the benefit of this model is that it places the child and the child's experience at the heart of the process of development. While it is a useful framework, it can be used to imply that context is something that impacts *on* the child, rather than *with* and *through* the child's participation. It does not fully articulate agency and co-construction.

The recent influential work of proponents of the sociocultural or 'situative perspective', such as Rogoff (1998, 2003), will now be briefly considered. The sociocultural perspective has adapted and enhanced the ideas of Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and provided valuable new insights into the collaborative nature of learning and the social construction of knowledge. It has been particularly influential in the field of early childhood. This perspective takes into account not just the child, but the social, historical, institutional and cultural factors in which the child participates and co-constructs. It recognises that human activity is heavily influenced by *context*, which includes artefacts and other people. The sociocultural approach also emphasises the shared construction and distribution of knowledge, leading to the development of shared understanding and common knowledge, (Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Greeno, 1997; Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 1990). As a result, the child is not seen as an individual learner but as a participant in a range of meaningful and instructional social practices. Learning and development are inseparable from the concerns of families and interpersonal and community processes. This is a dynamic and evolving cultural context, in which it is meaningless to study the child apart from other people. Participation, as contrasted with acquisition, is therefore a key concept here.

Jordan's (2004) model of co-construction, where there is equal partnership between the adult and child and the emphasis is on the child as a powerful player in his/her own learning, is particularly relevant here. Rogoff (2003) has argued that communities of learners involve complex group relationships among students who learn to take responsibility for contributing to their own learning and to the group's projects. In these communities of learners, meaning is only established when ideas are jointly understood and enacted within the particular community. For Lave and Wenger (1991), learning therefore involves a deepening process of participation in

a community of practice. This process also involved the development of a range of resources such as tools, documents, routines, vocabulary and symbols that store the accumulated knowledge of the community (Wenger, 1998).

Rogoff (1990) proposed the concept of guided participation to explain the way that children learn as they participate in, and are guided by, the values and practices of their cultural communities. Guided participation involves two basic processes or shared endeavours supported by a mutual structuring of participation (each other's involvement to facilitate engagement in the shared activity), leading to the co-construction of knowledge (Rogoff, 2003: 283). Children experience competence and are recognised as competent (Wenger, 1998).

Theoretically, both Rogoff (2003) and Corsaro (2011) view children's transition into society through the lens of participation in collective mutual communities. What Corsaro et al. (2002) call 'priming events' is similar to Rogoff's notion of 'participatory appropriation' and 'guided participation', while both argue that the personal, interpersonal and institutional should be analysed together, not separately and in isolation. Additionally, they believe that in the process of interpretative reproduction, common and collective activities take place where children construct and produce culture with peers and adults. However, the difference between interpretive reproduction and Rogoff's theory is the fact that the latter does not fully consider 'the importance of socio-economic and power relations' (Corsaro et al., 2002: 323).

For this reason Corsaro et al. (2002), in their study about children's transition from the pre-school to the elementary school in the USA and Italy, focus on the interpersonal, community and individual analysis (as Rogoff, 2003), but they extend the process by also looking at peer culture and how the power of social policies in early years education and care has influenced values and activities. Corsaro (2011) also found that children's participation in adults' initiatives and activities often produces annoyance, confusion, fear and uncertainty due to the power imbalance between the child and the adult. Thus he states that often children's intentions arise as a result of their effort to make sense of the adult's world.

For Corsaro, children's participation in cultural routines is extremely valuable. Daily routines with their vibrancy, predictability, safekeeping and shared understanding provide the habits that make children and adults feel membership of a community, where they can deal with contentious or dubious issues. The process of participation in cultural routines begins from the time that a child is born. It starts as a limited participation based on the 'as-if assumption' (Corsaro, 2011: 19), where the infant is treated as if they are socially competent and goes forward to full participation, not due to the fact that the child learns the rules but due to the security that they feel and control of the activity or the discussion, which the infant then embellishes with new thoughts and activities.

The significant contribution of the sociology of childhood to contesting 'normative', singular and static notions of the child and childhood should be recognised. As James (2009) argues, what is most important is for adults to understand children's contribution

to society and their right for agency, or, as Ratner (2000) asserts, the democratic circumstances under which the child can show the potentiality of agency. However, a number of conceptual tensions in these powerful ideas have recently been identified. Uprichard (2008), for example, suggests that the arguments around the child as 'being' and 'becoming' are problematic. She recommends an alternative concept of the child underpinned by the temporality of the two terms. Uprichard (2008) argues that the fact that children are not always children but are moving towards adulthood creates a temporality.

Further, as Bae (2009) and Ratner (2000) contend, there is an overemphasis on the notion of the autonomous child and the other aspect of 'the child in need' is underestimated. Thus Uprichard (2008) and Corsaro (2011) state that the new sociology of childhood, in an effort to define the child as socially constructed individually, neglects the great contribution of the development of the child through interaction in sociocultural processes. Here, as Smith (2007) states, is the contribution of sociocultural theory – discerning how children are supported in the co-construction of activities (Rogoff, 2003). The role of the adult is to sustain and encourage a child's interest to 'help focus on the goal, draw attention to critical features of the task, and reduce the complexity of the task. But there has to be social engagement before children can learn and gradually take on more responsibility' (Smith, 2007: 154).

As Waller and Bitou (2011) argue, a key challenge in promoting children's participation is how to ensure that children have the space to articulate their views and perspectives beyond the constraints of adult views, interpretations and agendas. There remain reservations about whether children's participation actually results in worthwhile changes and benefits for the children involved (Hill, 2006), the danger that participation has become institutionalised and also the possibility that participatory research and practice may actually be exclusionary (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006).

We are still learning about children and childhood

If children are active participants in dynamic and evolving cultural contexts, as argued above, it follows that we will always be learning about children and childhood. In addition, changes in technology and new methods of investigation and research can also generate new areas of knowledge and understanding. One aspect of young children's progress that has received considerable attention over the past fifteen years is early brain development. Following recent advances in computer technology, leading to the development of brain imaging techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and positron emission tomography (PET) scans, neuroscientists have been able to measure activity in the brain and map the growth of the brain (Blakemore, 2000; Goswami, 2004).

However, there has been considerable debate surrounding the implications of this neuroscientific research for education and care in the early years (BERA SIG, 2003)

which has led to a number of misconceptions and 'neuromyths' (CERI, 2007). Bruer (1997), for example, argued that making links between cognitive neuroscience and education is 'a bridge too far'. Alternatively, whilst Goswami (2004) views some of the popular beliefs about the potential of neuroscience for early education as 'unrealistic', she argues that new brain science technologies can complement rather than replace traditional methods of educational enquiry.

What the research has usefully shown is that there is a very rapid increase in the development of the brain for young children, especially those under 3 years of age (Riley, 2007). The brain appears as early as the third week after conception (27 days) and develops rapidly, so that by the end of the seventh month of pregnancy, the baby's brain has all the neurons of the adult brain and many to spare (Catherwood, 1999). Crucial are the synapses – the connections between cells (neurons) where information is exchanged. Most of the development of synapses occurs after birth, however, at birth, the neonate has approximately half the number of synapses of the adult brain. Very rapid growth then occurs from 2 to 4 months, so that by 6 months a baby has more synapses than an adult. Stimulation from the environment causes 'learning' either by stabilising existing networks in the brain or by forging new ones. The ability of the brain to develop connections (or synapses) is known as plasticity. Recent brain research summarised by the Royal Society (2011) shows that plasticity tends to decrease with age and Blakemore (2000) revealed that, after the age of 3, plasticity continues at a slower rate until the age of 10.

Bransford et al. (2000) review the work of sixteen leading researchers in cognitive science in the USA. Key conclusions from this evidence suggest, according to BERA SIG (2003), that learning changes the structure of the brain; learning organises and reorganises the brain, and different parts of the brain may be ready to learn at different times. Thus, although there are prime times for certain types of learning, the brain also has a remarkable capacity to change.

BERA SIG (2003: 19) also usefully summarises evidence from brain research that matches with psychological research, as follows:

1. Experience – everything that goes on around the young child changes the brain.
2. Everything the baby sees, hears, touches and smells influences the developing network of connections among the brain cells.
3. Other people play a critical role.
4. Babies and young children have powerful learning capacities.
5. Babies and young children actually participate in building their own brain.
6. Radically deprived environments may influence development.

The OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI, 2007) identified a number of 'neuromyths' where scientific findings are translated into misinformation about the benefits of neuroscience for education. In particular, the OECD report focused on myths around 'critical periods' for learning, when plasticity is greatest.

The argument is that if children do not have certain experiences during these critical periods, they will forever miss the opportunity to benefit from the experience, and that the most effective educational interventions need to be timed with these periods (Goswami, 2004). For this reason, some writers (such as Brierley, 1994; Sylwester, 1995) advocate 'hothousing' – for example, starting to teach music to children under 3, because the brain is so receptive to learning early on (see Blakemore, 2000).

It is now argued that while there are optimal 'windows of opportunity' for the development of synapses in the first three years, the brain is extremely flexible (CERI, 2007). An individual's capacities are therefore not fixed at birth, or in the first three years of life (Bransford et al., 2000). Blakemore and Frith (2005) assert that research on plasticity suggests that the brain is well equipped for lifelong learning and adaptation to the environment, and that there is no biological necessity to rush and start formal teaching earlier and earlier. As a result, OECD contends that there are no 'critical periods' when learning must take place, but there are 'sensitive periods' when an individual is particularly primed to engage in specific learning activities (CERI, 2007). Further, it is increasingly recognised that efficient learning does not take place when the learner is experiencing fear or inappropriate stress (Goswami, 2004), and the technology used in neuroscience has helped to demonstrate the effect that inappropriate stress has on both physiological and cognitive functioning. For Blakemore and Frith (2005), the main implication of the current research findings on sensitive periods is that it is important to identify and, if possible, treat children's sensory problems (such as visual and hearing difficulties), because the findings suggest that early sensory deprivation can have lasting consequences. However, they also suggest that even after sensory deprivation, it is possible for recovery and learning still to take place.

There is, therefore, much further research to be done in the field of neuroscience, and into how this research may support our understanding of young children's lives. There is some continued scepticism in early childhood about the limited currency of biomedical explanations of learning. Wilson (2002), for example, discusses how neuroscientific research has provided the impetus for the introduction of early intervention programmes targeting groups who are considered to be 'at risk'. She argues that 'the factors impacting on childhood outcomes are complex and cannot be reduced solely to biomedical explanations. A more effective way to tackle child health and welfare problems would involve a multi-dimensional approach and include the elimination of poverty and the scrutiny of all public policy' (2002: 191). In addition, the Teaching and Learning Research Project (TLRP) (2007: 10) also argue that 'contrary to much popular belief, there is no convincing neuroscientific case for starting formal education as early as possible'. The TLRP also contends that because research based on the fMRI (neuroimaging) is often not appropriate for studies of young children, the literature in this field tells us more about the adult brain than about that of a developing child.

Finally, both the TLRP and the recent Royal Society (2011) report on neuroscience and the implications for education, argue that there is a growing need for a multi-disciplinary approach that involves collaborations between neuroscience, psychology and education. This collaboration could involve the development of a common language, or grammar, in the field of neuroscience and education, but we are still at an early stage in our understanding of the brain.

We also have much to learn about children's lives and childhood across the world, although despite the continued paucity of published research about children from developing countries, we are now much better informed about their (often tragic) circumstances due to the series of detailed reports entitled *The State of the World's Children* published every year by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *The State of the World's Children 2005* focused on children's rights and argued that the promise underpinning the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) already appears broken, as poverty, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS threaten children's survival and development. The report calls on all stakeholders – governments, donors, international agencies, as well as communities, families, businesses and individuals – to reaffirm and recommit to their moral and legal responsibilities to children (UNICEF, 2005).

Since 2005, the reports have shifted focus to make recommendations for action to improve the lives of children that are related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are eight targets to be achieved by 2015 that respond to the world's main development challenges:

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000 (see www.un.org/millenniumgoals/).

The State of the World's Children 2006 (UNICEF, 2006) concerned excluded and invisible children, including those living in the poorest countries and most deprived communities; children facing discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, disability

or membership of an indigenous group; children caught up in armed conflict or affected by HIV/AIDS; and children who lack a formal identity, who suffer child protection abuses or who are not treated as children. The report focused on the actions that those responsible for their wellbeing must take to safeguard and include them. *The State of the World's Children 2007* (UNICEF, 2007a) investigated the discrimination and disempowerment women face throughout their lives – and outlined action that should be taken to eliminate gender discrimination and empower women and girls. *The State of the World's Children 2008: Child Survival* (UNICEF, 2008a) examined the global realities of maternal and child survival and the prospects for meeting the health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for children and mothers in each of the five main sub-regions of Africa. Consequently, in 2008 UNICEF was moved to publish the inaugural edition of *The State of Africa's Children* (UNICEF, 2008b), which identified the urgent need for large-scale investment in health care for Africa to help prevent the deaths of 5 million children every year. This was further emphasised in 2009, when *The State of the World's Children* (UNICEF, 2009a) focused on Africa and Asia, identified the importance of maternal and newborn health in achieving the targets set, and the need for antenatal care and skilled attendants during birth and in the period after birth.

A Special Edition of *The State of the World's Children* was produced in 2010, with a focus on children's rights and providing updates across all eight of the targets set (UNICEF, 2010). Since that special edition, further reports have identified the need to ensure adolescents have access to opportunities to enable them to have fulfilling lives, without fear of abuse or exploitation, and the need to ensure urban children, who represent almost half of all children, have their needs identified and met. The 2013 report of *The State of the World's Children* identified the importance of recognising what disabled children can do, rather than what they cannot achieve (UNICEF, 2013).

UNICEF maintains that meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the broader aims of the Millennium Declaration would transform the lives of millions of children who would be spared illness and premature death, escape extreme poverty and malnutrition, gain access to safe water and decent sanitation facilities and complete primary schooling.

Chapter summary

This chapter has identified and discussed five key tenets of contemporary childhood. The tenets have articulated a complex model of childhood that is fundamentally different from a narrow 'developmental' approach. This model acknowledges that there are multiple and diverse childhoods. There are local variations and global forms, depending on class, 'race', gender, geography and time. This model also

acknowledges that while there are multiple perspectives on childhood, it would be wrong to ignore or disregard developmental insights. Views of childhood have changed and are changing. Students of early childhood need to understand how and why child development theory is a product of certain historical, cultural and economic conditions. Some theoretical perspectives are particularly suited to explaining certain aspects of growth and change over time but the complex and interlinked nature of children's 'development' needs to be recognised. Developmental psychology should be studied alongside sociological, historical and anthropological accounts of childhood.

However, a critical difference between contemporary and traditional views of childhood is that the former recognises the differing contexts of children's lives, children's agency and the significance of children's involvement in co-constructing their own childhood through participation in family, community and culture.

After 150 years of recognised child study, we are still learning about children and childhood, the power of adults and the ability of children to determine their own future. Greater recognition of children's perspectives, the impact of new technology on children's lives and research methods will lead to further insights that will strengthen understanding and articulate new theories of early childhood.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How do children shape their own development?
2. How does change occur?
3. How do children become so different from each other?
4. How can you find out?
5. How should we deal with theories that do not recognise multiple and diverse childhoods and the power relationships between children and adults?

Recommended reading

- Corsaro, W.A. (2011) *The Sociology of Childhood*, 3rd edn. London: Sage.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. and Pence, A. (2007) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation*, 2nd edn. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Harcourt, D., Perry, B. and Waller, T. (eds) (2011) *Researching Young Children's Perspectives: Debating the Ethics and Dilemmas of Educational Research with Children*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Penn, H. (2008) *Understanding Early Childhood: Issues and Controversies*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.
- Prout, A. (2005) *The Future of Childhood: Towards the Interdisciplinary Study of Children*. London: Falmer Press.

Recommended websites



www.goodchildhood.org.uk

The reports of the *Good Childhood Inquiry* on The Children's Society website.

www.unicef.org/publications/index.html

For the UNICEF yearly reports on *The State of the World's Children*.

Want to learn more about this chapter? Visit the companion website at www.sagepub.co.uk/walleranddavis3e to access podcasts from the author and child observation videos.