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# Growing up beside you: A relational sociology of early childhood

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## Abstract

This article will begin by outlining influential attempts by historians and sociologists to develop a more adequate theoretical understanding of past and contemporary childhoods, focusing on the major problems that stem from the pivotal role that ‘developmentalism’ plays in their arguments. I will argue that sociologists can overcome some of their deepest fears about the role of developmental psychology by developing a relational approach that integrates the biological and social aspects of children’s development. In the development of a relational sociology of early childhood we need to make important connections with closely related disciplines, but at the same time draw on and integrate research findings from relevant areas within the social and natural sciences. An alternative perspective drawn from the writings of Norbert Elias will be put forward and illustrated by discussing some of the key concepts that Elias and Vygotsky used to explain the language development of young children.

## Keywords

biology, developmentalism, early childhood, relational sociology, social constructionism

## Introduction

Since the translation of Philippe Ariès’s (1962) groundbreaking *Centuries of Childhood*, historians of childhood have emphasized the importance of placing children in the centre stage of their analysis, exploring how childhood as a central concept has shaped the way that children are perceived as different from adults (Hendrick, 2003; Cunningham, 2006). This historical context provides an important foundation to understand the major

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contributions that, during the last 40 years, have contributed to the debate about the importance of including children within a sociological perspective. I will first examine the work of Ariès which had a profound influence on the emerging new paradigm, the social construction of childhood. It was the first study to historicize childhood, to suggest that childhood was not a 'natural' or 'universal' phenomenon, but one that varied according to period and place. In taking their inspiration from Ariès, historians gathered together a range of material on past constructions of childhood, interpreting it as either a short period or a long one, or as a stage of life that was either despised or venerated by adults. Based on Heywood (2010), three key arguments from *Centuries of Childhood* will be discussed and assessed in the light of recent historical research.

The first key argument stems from the oft-quoted line that 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' (Ariès, 1962: 125). Before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there was little collective awareness of children as different – from the age of 7 they were considered as smaller adults. Ariès based his argument on an extensive analysis of paintings and iconography, where there were very few representations of the uniqueness of children, 'They have simply been depicted on a smaller scale' (ibid.: 31). He also drew from other sources, notably clothing, games and attitudes to sexuality. He argued that children after the age of 3 or 4 played the same games as everyone else, either among themselves or with adults. Children were to be found gambling at cards and playing tennis and hockey, while adults cheerfully joined in snowball fights or games of blind-man's-buff. Ariès also pointed to the evidence of sexual games courtiers played with the future French king Louis XIII, fondling his genitals and making jokes about his future wife when he was still an infant. For him, this was the most compelling evidence available for the absence of the modern idea of childhood at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The second key argument is that in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries there was the 'discovery of childhood', spread over a long period of at least 4 centuries. It started with the 'coddling' of children during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, taking a delight in their company, moving on to its discovery by a small group of reformers, composed of priests, lawyers and 'moralists', who grasped the innocence and weakness of young children. Notions of children's special nature and needs called for particular attention to their emotional development in the home and for formal education in the school aimed at preparing children for the transition to an adult world. One important consequence was that the very short childhood of the past, ending around the age of 7, gave way to the modern form of childhood – in a British context, Hendrick (1997) has analysed these successive constructions and reconstructions of childhood by emphasizing a number of dominant forms of discourse that include the 'romantic', 'evangelical', 'factory', 'delinquent', 'schooled', 'psycho-medical', 'welfare', 'psychological' and 'family' child.

Ariès's last and third key part of his argument is that with this modern conception of childhood there emerged a new conception of the family: the return of children to their families was a 'great event' of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one that transformed parent-child relations. He discussed a long and complicated shift from the medieval family concerned with problems such as the honour of the line, to the modern family, focused exclusively on the relationship between parents and children. In the medieval period children left their families at an early age, weakening their emotional bond with their parents, but with

middle-class parents becoming more concerned with education they remained at home longer and so were able to develop intimate relationships.

Ariès's thesis was critically scrutinized by other historians in relation to its historical method, its interpretation and the evidence that lay behind his claims, particularly his contention that a historical change in parent–child relations occurred (see the influential study by Pollock, 1983). Early in his book he uses the terms of 'indifference' and 'callousness' in his discussion of attitudes towards children, which he linked directly to the high infant and child mortality of the medieval and early-modern periods. His explanation was that parents could not allow themselves to become attached to children they were most likely to lose. In marked contrast by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the family had become secure in the privacy of its home and the care given to children made it possible for a new emotional attitude to emerge. However, it is important to note that Ariès stated that the absence of a concept of childhood in medieval society was still compatible with affection for children – it did not mean that children were 'neglected, forsaken or despised' (1962: 125).

But does the absence of children in paintings necessarily reflect a lack of care or concern for their welfare? Orme (2001) has shown that from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a growing interest in drawing and painting the young, reflected in examples of children incorporated into scenes of everyday life, as they fell into wells or fires, suffered beatings from parents and schoolteachers, played with their friends, studied in class – or were led away by the Grim Reaper. Shahar (1990) has in a similar way questioned whether a general indifference to children among parents during the medieval period gave way to a warmer emotional relationship in the modern, child-centred family. She has argued that Ariès was incorrect to suggest that medieval society had no concept of childhood as young children could not survive without strong arrangements of child-care from one generation to the next.

Nevertheless, some historians such as Shorter (1977) and Stone (1979) were keen on the idea of a dramatic change in parent–child relations during the early-modern period and had no doubt that the modern approach was an improvement on the traditional one. Influenced by Ariès, both emphasized a warmer, more affectionate family environment as economic interest was replaced by the importance of emotion. E. P. Thompson, the well-known Marxist historian, offered a devastating critique of their approach:

It annoys me that both Professor Stone and Professor Shorter leave their readers to feel so complacent about their own modernity. It annoys me even more that both should indict the poor, on so little evidence, of indifference to their children and of callous complicity in their high rate of mortality . . . But if the lower orders had not formed some kind of affective bonding and familial loyalty, we, their descendants, might never have made our gracious descent. (1977: 501)

Ariès has also been criticized for his 'present-centeredness' (Wilson, 1980), that is, viewing the past exclusively from the point of view of the present. He looked for evidence for our 20<sup>th</sup>-century conception of childhood in medieval Europe and when he failed to find it, jumped to the conclusion that it did not exist. At this point in my argument, it is useful to make the distinction between a *concept* and a *conception*. Archard

(1993) has argued that in all societies there has been *the* concept of childhood, a structural distinction between children and adults that suggests some sort of universal difference. However, *a* conception of childhood means that the way in which this universal difference manifests itself is dependent on the structure of a particular society. Therefore within different societies, there will be contrasting ideas on the key issues of how long childhood lasts, the qualities marking out adults from children and the importance attached to their differences.

The following quotation by the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) aptly emphasizes the difficulties in conducting historical research and demonstrates how issues can be selected and evaluated solely from the standpoint of what is regarded as important by historians in contemporary societies. These contemporary circumstances can determine how and what we see as history:

History is always being rewritten . . . Each period takes it over and stamps it with its dominant slant of thought. Praise and blame are apportioned accordingly. All this drags on until the matter becomes unrecognisable. Then nothing can help except a return to the original evidence. But would we study it without the impulse of the present? . . . Is a completely true history possible? (Ranke, 1925: 52 in Elias, 2006: 6)

## **Towards a new paradigm – social constructions of childhood**

The sociologists Alan Prout and Allison James noted that history was one of the first disciplines to take up new directions in the study of childhood during the 1970s. They emphasized the work of Ariès for the way his interpretation of childhood during the medieval period provided an important example of its variability in human societies. ‘Ariès’ challenge to orthodoxy’, they wrote, lay in his suggestion that the concept of childhood emerged in Europe between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, ‘thus blasting a large hole in traditional assumptions about the universality of childhood’ (Prout and James, 1997: 16). They were aware of the contentious nature of Ariès’s work, but insisted that ‘the particular form of modern childhood is historically specific’ (ibid.: 17).

During the 1960s and 1970s, childhood was seen as a universal process of socialization: it was identified as a range of practices by which the child internalizes the norms and values of the social system, and is transformed from an asocial being into an adult member of society. The aim of socialization theory was to explain the transmission of culture from one generation to another by the key institutions of community, education and the family (see Elkin and Handel, 1972). In the structural-functionalist writings of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the work of Parsons (1951), socialization became defined as a psychological process whereby the child learns the ‘laid-down’ patterns of values that will mould him or her into existing society. Learning to conform to social rules, children gradually acquire knowledge of the roles needed for adult life.

Within child-rearing psychology, what was important was finding ways of turning the immature, irrational and incompetent child into a mature, rational and competent adult. These dominant principles at the heart of developmental psychology have been referred to by Smart, Neale and Wade (2001) as the embryonic model, one where children are considered to be in a state of permanent transition, either within or between stages.

Discourses about ages and stages became linked to developmental norms, encoded in milestones and developmental delay. Within this framework, childhood is viewed as an apprenticeship for adulthood that can be charted through stages related to age, physical development and cognitive ability: groups of children were organized according to their birth dates, institutionalized in age-graded classrooms with their progress tracked according to predefined key stages (Woodhead, 2008).

The emergence of a new paradigm for a social construction of childhood can therefore be viewed as a response to these dominant intellectual trends in ‘developmentalism’, ‘the set of ideas about child and childhood systematized and promulgated by child psychology’ (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992: 37) and structural-functionalist theories of socialization (James and Prout, 1997 and James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). As Wyness suggests,

... what sociologists of childhood argue is that children’s biological differences from adults need to be separated from the cultural components of childhood. The idea that children are commonly believed to be morally and culturally weaker or less significant than adults does not necessarily indicate that this incapacity or subordination is based on their physiological or biological weakness. Children in different historical and cultural contexts are quite capable of actions that belie their physiological immaturity. (Wyness, 2006: 23)

Researchers working in the new social studies of childhood that emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s began to rethink childhood and challenge this view that children were passive recipients of socialization (Richards, 1974). Sociologists of childhood (see in particular James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002) emphasized the present tense of childhood, children’s active participation in constructing their own lives and their relationships with parents and friends. They argued that in the early years of human life a different framework is needed to understand the institution of childhood: ‘*children are not formed by natural and social forces but rather they inhabit a world of meaning created by themselves and through their interaction with adults*’ (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998: 28).

A key aspect in James and Prout’s (1997) framework is their commitment to developing a more sensitive awareness of different versions of childhood and children’s experiences as they construct their own lives. They have criticized the belief that there exists one universal childhood, a ‘standard’ childhood that is based on the experiences of children in developed countries. Childhood is a social construction because of the specific ways in which very young children become socialized in different societies. To overcome the problems of assuming that children are the same throughout the world, it is important to take into consideration the different cultural contexts of children growing up in developing countries. James and Prout (*ibid.*) have pointed out that it is biological immaturity rather than childhood that is a universal feature of human groups. This model of developmental ascent from biological immaturity to adulthood is based on a proposed universality – a fundamental belief in a ‘psychic unity’ that all humans are subject to general laws (Jahoda, 1992). Defining children in terms of their physical growth and psychological development from infancy to adulthood ‘the child’ can represent all children and be studied in the laboratory.

Burman (1994) has similarly argued that developmental psychologists present an impoverished view of what it means to be social. The social is primarily represented by the mother–child relationship, which is further equated with communication and then finally seen as ‘interpersonal’. Developmental psychologists like Bowlby lapse into a form of biological reductionism by dissolving the social into the biological, ignoring other significant relationships that involve infants and young children. Burman believes that, in the attempt to overcome the division between the ‘social’ and the ‘cultural’, an evolutionary perspective once again is reintroduced, one that fragments ‘cultural variation into individual differences’ (Burman, 1994: 43).

According to Woodhead (2008), James, Jenks and Prout (1998) went furthest in their critique of traditional developmental psychology, focusing on the assumptions of one of the most influential developmental researchers in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1970). As immature learners, young children are viewed as a set of ‘potentials’, a ‘project in the making’, researched within an evaluative frame that is mainly interested in their position on the stage-like journey to mature, rational, responsible, autonomous, adult competence. Significantly Woodhead (2008) steers a balanced course and argues that although the rigidity of these developmental stages was rightly challenged, this should be viewed within the context of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century public attitudes towards young children. Developmental approaches did not diminish the status of young children’s thinking, but were used to reform social practices. He believes that researching biological, social and cultural processes of human learning and development is consistent with an agenda for childhood studies.

## The new wave of childhood studies

Sociologists of childhood have tried to resolve some of the important theoretical tensions that emerged with the establishment of the new paradigm by drawing on different philosophers and sociologists. This section will focus on how these tensions are largely based on dichotomies between nature and culture, ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, and the concept of a universal childhood versus a multiplicity of childhoods. I will review how some sociologists have made important attempts at theoretical unification, which, although pointing in the right direction, still contain certain significant problems.

Prout (2005) and Lee (2001), influenced by the European philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1987), argued that the previous established paradigm in the sociology of childhood is situated in a binary logic that examines childhood through the lens of either culture or nature, thus failing to overcome what Lee and Motzkau (2011) have described as the problem of ‘bio-social dualism’. The defining characteristic of the new wave is its attempt to finally break the grip of bio-social dualism in order to clear the way for new ways of sociological thinking about childhood. Prout (2005, 2011) has argued that the narrowness of such dichotomies, including the placing of psychology against sociology, is symptomatic of the modernist agenda in childhood studies. Lee (2001) similarly focuses on the being–becoming dichotomy which is structured by a division between childhood as an unfinished state of ‘becoming’ and adulthood as an order of ‘being’. Using children’s play, Lee questions this being–becoming duality and argues against the psychological conception of maturation as a passage from ‘disorder to order’, suggesting

that ‘if children appear disorderly this is not because their activities lack order. Rather it is because their activities contain a profusion of different orders which they can move between very rapidly’ (2001: 141).

Prout (2005: 62), one of the leading theorists of this new wave in the sociology of childhood, rejects social constructionism for focusing on human action and meaning, while the rest of sociology has been ‘searching for metaphors of mobility, fluidity and complexity’ rather than permanent social structures. Instead, society can be seen as ‘produced in and through patterned networks of heterogeneous materials; it is made up through a wide variety of shifting associations (and disassociations) between human and non-human entities’ (ibid.: 109). Relationships should be considered equally between children and physical materials, spaces and hybrids that do not sharply distinguish between social constructions and nature. Although assemblages bring together and create stability from these heterogeneous elements, each assemblage can change and become something different. In this way, social order becomes an imaginative, creative and open-ended process.

Qvortrup (2005) challenged this increasingly dominant focus within childhood studies on the complexity of childhoods, at the expense of focusing on structural power relations within childhood. His argument was that by focusing on the multiplicity of childhoods, the power of the concept of childhood, which lies in its ability to draw attention to the way in which children are marginalized and made invisible in social and economic policy, was being undermined and weakened. He argued that the plurality of childhoods was obscuring the overriding structural importance of childhood in terms of generation and intergenerational relations:

... the promoters of the plurality thesis typically belong to the social constructionist mood or the postmodernist strands of social research with strong reservations against so-called grand narratives and generalisations and thus against what they see as unitary or even deterministic explanations. They have a strong sense for perceiving the society as complex and therefore for avoiding simple – or in their view simplistic – explanations, which at the end of the day typically leads to a preference for uniqueness. Each childhood, therefore, is a unique childhood with its particular points of reference which cannot fully be shared by others’ childhoods. (Qvortrup, 2005)

The ‘generational perspective’ (Alanen, 2001) added another important dimension to explaining children and childhood. On the one hand, this approach suggests ‘childhood is a permanent social structure, even if its members are continually being replaced’ (Qvortrup, 1991: 12). On the other hand, it acknowledges ‘generationing processes’ (Mayall, 2002) that are both structured and structuring (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990), where the concept of generation can be compared with other structures such as gender and class. Mayall (2002) argues that there are two aspects of the concept of generation which can be very helpful in studying childhood. The first aspect considers the different processes by which childhood is constructed and modified: in relationships between children and adults, in group transactions between teachers and pupils, and in relations between people born at different periods in history. The second aspect examines the extent to which children inhabit a generation, viewing themselves differently from older



social groups. The ways in which children think of themselves can be seen as occupying a common generational location, one structured by adults' beliefs and behaviour.

This generational location can be used to turn our attention to the relational processes between adulthood and childhood, how adults use their positions of power to define differences between adults and children. At all levels of analysis (e.g. individual, group, or cohort) in this generational approach, sociologists should focus on how children and adults negotiate decisions through space and time (Mayall, 2002). It is the structural commonalities that define childhood as a separate generational space, where children are set aside from adults. For example, at school, although rules are enforced and cultural assumptions deeply embedded, there is often some scope for modification by children through discussion and resistance.

Alanen (2009) introduced the concept of generational order to emphasize the power dimensions through which children and adults position themselves: children construct a social position that is situated within other structural processes such as parenthood (Alanen, 2001). An analysis of childhood must be built around the structures and institutions of the particular society in which children live: as a social space, any childhood is situated within a system of social stratification and is part of a set of generational relations with older age groups – 'all children have parents in one form or another and are socialized in one way or another – the details will vary but the process is common' (James, 2010: 493).

I will now summarize some of the strengths and weaknesses of the different contributions that sociologists and historians have made to the sociology of childhood, suggesting some ways of bringing these different areas together to develop a sociology of early childhood. There is no doubt that Philippe Ariès's influential book (1962) inspired a wide range of historical studies that explored the emergence of various versions of childhood in earlier periods. But his claims for the uniqueness of childhood as a historical, western European construction generated heated debates and critiques (see, for example, de Mause, 1991).

In historical analysis, it is sometimes all too easy to be influenced by the partiality of one's own feelings and the values of today's society. Müller (2009) argues that a modern version of an innocent childhood perpetuated a myth about the discovery of childhood in the latter decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: children need special attention, care and protection through the family, schools and legal regulations and therefore childhood is cherished as a natural form of existence with which most adults have lost touch. Discovering a Romantic version of childhood that emphasizes innocence, contemporary historians of childhood have been far too influenced by the ideals of their time.

Frijhoff (2012) argues that the historical entanglement of childhood and the self needs to be kept at a distance because the discovery of childhood can readily evolve into a personal discovery of ourselves – the values of the historical child can easily be transferred to the modern historian and vice versa. He believes that the real problem for the historian of childhood is to remain faithful to the categories of the past as well as the present, but without fully identifying with the child that has been. This is a difficult balancing act, because our own emotions are involved – the great Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) introduced the useful concept of 'historical sensation' to draw attention to the importance of direct contact through the feeling of personal involvement

in a past event, a person's history, or a historical remnant. Despite this rather more nuanced discussion of the influence of emotional values on historians of childhood, Frijhoff (*ibid.*: 28) states that 'any personal story is, of course, singular and not really repeatable'. Once again the uniqueness of historical events is reintroduced and emphasized, without determining how historians of childhood can explain the relationship between the repeatable and non-repeatable aspects of social change. No problem seems more difficult for historians to conceptualize and explain than the direction and structure of long-term change.

In a similar way to these polarized discussions about whether the history of childhood has ruptures or continuities, sociologists working within the new paradigm of childhood studies have struggled to overcome a strong dichotomy between a universal version or multiple versions of childhood. The result has been a historical trajectory that 'zig-zags between the poles of the opposition, now placing childhood at the biological end, now the social' (Prout, 2005: 43–4). Forged along the tracks of a nature and culture dichotomy, childhood has become the object of distinct fields of scientific study that do not communicate. According to Thorne (2007), a 'wall of silence' stands in the way of dialogue between developmental psychology and the new social sciences of childhood.

## Age and development

I now want to focus on age and why it remains one of the most contentious categories that haunt previous and recent attempts to develop a new sociology of childhood, mainly due to its close associations with the developmental model of childhood. A good example is the article by James (2010), a bold attempt to overcome competing theoretical perspectives based on the dichotomy between one universal category of childhood and multiple childhoods. In the development of his argument, other dichotomies, like the adult–child one, keep emerging and encouraging him to take a closer look at age differences between children and young people. Although he mentions that the English language contains important relational terms to distinguish between different aspects of childhood – a newborn, an infant, a babe-in-arms, a toddler, a child – he remains steadfast in his rejection of 'a hegemonic developmental perspective' (James, 2010: 490).

Morrow (2013: 154) similarly remarks that although being an infant or a young person is important, underlying assumptions about age 'run the risk of solidifying developmental thinking', limiting the relational child to a specific chronological age group. However, Uprichard (2008) offers an alternative perspective by arguing that childhood is a stage of the human life-course that chronologically precedes adulthood, part of a biological and irreversible ageing process: 'being' a child *and* 'becoming' an adult is necessarily bound by the 'arrow of time' (Coveney and Highfield, 1990). She attempts to uncover some of the temporal dimensions that lie behind the 'being' and 'becoming' discourses in different constructions of childhood: children are not only aware that older people were once younger, or that they themselves will change as they become older, but also have different views and experiences about what it means to age in a changing world. The children in her interviews negotiated and imagined their future lives – they were constructing themselves as 'being and becomings'. Mona, a 5-year-old living in

York, exclaimed, 'I can't wait 'til I'm seven because then I can go to the shops by myself!' In contrast, Sophie, a 4-year-old child, was not so excited about becoming older because she assumed that being an adult may also involve being 'boring'.

Age is such a contentious issue because it draws attention to some of the unresolved tensions in the relationship between *natural* or biological processes and the *social*. McNamee and Seymour (2012) analysed 320 empirical research articles published between 1993 and 2010 in three of the leading journals in childhood studies, *Children and Society*, *Childhood* and *Children's Geographies*, concluding that there was an over-emphasis on a particular age group. Their analysis of the different articles suggested that 10-, 11- and 12-year-olds are at least three times more likely to be included than a 5-year-old and nearly twice as much as a 17-year-old. The younger age groups (5–7) were less likely to be included in the articles than those at the upper end of the childhood continuum, the 15–18-year-olds. This analysis raises once again a central question for this article – why do we need to distinguish between early childhood and late childhood? Although recognizing that some of the studies on much younger children or teenaged groups may appear in journals concerned with early childhood education or youth studies, McNamee and Seymour (2012) argue that there is still a lacuna in key 'childhood' journals, making it important to question some of the foundational concepts in the social construction of childhood.

Elias suggested a very important way out of this impasse by arguing that we need to define clearly the difference and relationship between *biological evolution*, *social development* and *history*. These three concepts form distinct but inseparable layers in a process encompassing the whole of humanity but each level runs at different speeds. In biological evolution, 10,000 years is a very short period. The changes that have taken place in the biological constitution of our species are relatively slight. Although there were some evolutionary changes in the social relationships of our ancestors, whether they were the ancient Egyptians or the English, we are always concerned with human beings, people like ourselves: 'Whatever the ancestors of humanity may have been, as far as we can see back into the past we see an unbroken chain of parents and children, who in turn become parents' (Elias, 2010: 24).

However, in social development 10,000 years is a considerable period of time because the changes in social organization that have taken place are relatively enormous. What makes history possible is that the structure of our social life takes place without changes in our biological constitution – historical change is possible because the experiences gathered from one generation need to be transmitted to the next. But in terms of the time it takes for young children to grow into old men and women, long-term social developments take place so slowly that they seem to stand still. This gives the impression that developments in the relationship between adults and young children are static, rather than structured changes in social expectations and behaviour. A fully developed relational perspective needs to investigate the inter-generational structures of young children and adults. A key aspect of this inter-generational process is memory. The moon, for example, is a constantly changing form – Elias asks how our ancestors could achieve an integrating concept that would synthesize its different shapes in the sky? His answer is that 'It could only have resulted from a long process of learning, of the growth of people's stock of experiences, some of which recurred again and again and, over the

generations, were *remembered* as recurring' (Elias, 2007a: 55). Young children internalize an enormous social fund of knowledge about the world that is passed on from one generation to the next.

In the next section, I will present the main theoretical argument for a sociology of early childhood, one that develops a flexible and dynamic approach that can understand and explain the early years as a distinctive period of human development, integrating research findings on young children from a range of different, but related, disciplines like biology, psychology and history. Drawing on Norbert Elias's work, I will argue that it is crucial for sociologists to explore different levels of biological and social processes in the development of young children.

### The relational turn in psychology

For Elias (2009), it was crucial for sociologists to determine the relation between nature, culture and society and the unique characteristics that distinguish human beings from other animal species. He made an important conceptual distinction between the term 'evolution', which refers to biological processes that are genetic and largely irreversible, and social 'development', processes which are malleable and potentially subject to change. In the evolutionary process, the biological propensity for learning is one of the main differences between animal and human societies, providing a framework for social development to take place. To identify the universal features of social life that make society possible, the adaptation of a distinctive biological organization of human beings for learning needs to be understood. In terms of social-evolutionary development, the distinguishing, evolutionary breakthrough for human beings was that learned ways of steering behaviour became dominant in relation to unlearned forms. For young children, there are 'natural human structures which remain dispositions and cannot fully function unless they are stimulated by a person's "love and learning" relationship with other persons' (Elias, 2009: 147).

Elias argues here that this 'love and learning' relationship emphasizes that specific experiences must happen at 'the right time', mentioning in particular when children are ready to learn a language. This relational integration of love and learning draws attention to the way in which children's development is both a cognitive and an affective process, one in which biological and social processes are intimately woven together. It is also significantly an important critique of an 'academic' approach to psychology which separates areas into institutional divisions that treat individual psychology as a natural science and social psychology as a social science:

Yet, although the psychological levels of a human person – whether conduct or feeling, conscience or drive – are invariably patterned by learning and thus have natural and social characteristics at the same time, quite a number of individual psychologists proceed in their research as if the persons they study were natural objects pure and simple, unaffected by their social language or any other social patterning. (Elias, 2007a: 116–17)

One of the important consequences of this emphasis on adopting the methods of natural science is that psychologists fall into the trap of methodological dualism, a separation

between behaviour and mind. In so doing, they resurrect for themselves the traditional dualistic ‘problem’ of other minds. These psychological accounts of how people make sense of other people have usually shared a common format:

1. Each is a detached observer, rather than actively engaged with the other in some joint project.
2. The information available to each of us about other people is limited and disorganized, and hence, there is a gulf between what we can actually observe about them, and what they themselves feel, intend, or believe.
3. Each of us, therefore, has to engage in some or other intellectual ‘detour’ to bridge the gap between what can be immediately experienced about the other person and that person’s psychological states. (See Asch, 1952: 144–50)

However, within modern psychology there is a growing trend to criticize what has been termed the spectator theory of knowledge, in which participants are required merely to observe others or think about their mental states rather than participate in social interaction with them (see Reddy, 2008). Schilbach *et al.* (2013) have argued that a second-person approach overcomes the ‘spectatorial gap’ by focusing on emotional engagement as an active process executed by an organism situated in the environment, where people are not isolated from but embedded in the perceived world. Fogel *et al.* (2006) have similarly referred to this emphasis on relationships as relational-historical research which is based on three premises: first, that the developing relationship, not the individual, is the unit of analysis; second, that change emerges from but is not entirely constrained by patterns of the past; third, that the developmental process is best revealed by making observations within a particular case before, during and after a key developmental transition.

The work of Colwyn Trevarthen (2005) and Vasedevi Reddy (2011) is a good starting point for developing this relational approach to human development because they both synthesize a great deal of recent neurological, biological and psychological research to highlight the unique biological equipment of human beings that prepares young babies and children to enjoy and share companionship with others. In a similar way to Elias, Trevarthen emphasizes how the ‘human body and brain’ are adapted for communication: momentary shifts of gaze and ‘gazing reverie’ are made possible by the distinctive white sclera of human eyes and the versatility of human vocalization and sustained phonation achieved by the ‘uniquely adapted human respiratory system’ (Trevarthen, 2005: 60–1). Similarly, Elias (2012a: 105) argues that what makes human societies possible is ‘the adaptation of human biological organization for learning’. In his work, he emphasizes the important role that language plays in human development, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

## Quest for synthesis

So far, I have emphasized how the different strands of early learning and social development need to be integrated into a suitable theoretical framework, one that can be used to explain the distinctive, biological characteristics of human beings. The rest of this article will now focus on one important, universal feature in society, the early development

of language by young children, investigating the relationship between Elias and the Russian developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky.

What can two very different biographical and intellectual careers have in common? Elias was a sociologist who productively worked and lived in various European countries until the age of 93; Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist who was influenced by the Marxist ideas of the Soviet Revolution, dying at the young age of 37 from tuberculosis. First, what is significant is that both were not only attempting a broad intellectual synthesis from within their own subject areas, but also trying to integrate disciplines that were usually considered separate and unrelated: biology, social anthropology, history and psychoanalysis, to name just a few. They argued that previous approaches in psychology or sociology had reduced social relationships to the investigation of isolated concepts, with little consideration of how factors relate to one another. For example, in studies of language development, academic specialists have separated connected processes into independent areas of study; as a result of the application of this form of analysis to verbal thinking, meaning had been divorced from sound. To reflect complex psychological processes as activities, what was required was a significant reorientation of thought, one that would restore the dynamic and interrelated aspects of socio-psychological systems, capturing 'the movement from thought to word and from word to thought' (Vygotsky, 1987: 250). In a very similar way, Elias (2011) emphasized that traditional academic specialists like philosophers have constructed theories of knowledge and language into separate human activities, three different worlds known as language, reason and knowledge. To replace the reduction of processes to static entities, Elias argued that these three different realms should be viewed as symbols whose function is to connect relationships between thinking, speaking and knowing.

Second, another key similarity between Elias and Vygotsky was their integration of a highly sophisticated developmental perspective. Their developmental approach not only attempted to understand the group moulding of individual childhood in existing societies, but also wished to explain this moulding within a wider framework that included the different stages of human development in history. Both emphasized that development is not linear, a straight path of quantitative accumulations, but a dynamic and uneven process that can give rise to new structures or qualitative changes at higher levels of organization. In the 1920s Vygotsky and his colleagues, Alexander Luria and Alexei Leontiev, proposed a human science of psychology to stand alongside the natural sciences. The central thesis of the Russian cultural-historical school was that the structure and development of human psychological processes emerge through culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity. Crucial to this approach was the integration of individual, social and cultural historical levels within the analytic unit of activity:

The growth of the normal child into civilization usually involves a fusion with the processes of organic maturation. Both planes of development – the natural and the cultural – coincide and mingle with one another. The two lines of change interpenetrate one another and form what is essentially a single line of socio-biological formation of the child's personality. To the extent that development occurs in the cultural medium, it becomes transformed into a historically conditioned biological process. (Vygotsky, 1930: 47)

Significantly, Vygotsky argued that these higher processes such as language cannot be reduced to inferior ones: according to Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991), Vygotsky's consistently anti-reductionist perspective can be seen as a major contribution to psychology. He argued that human psychological functions are organized hierarchically, each level needing to be studied in its specifics. As human beings develop, the natural stage is not replaced by later cultural stages, but superimposed like scaffolding on top of the former, changing, restructuring and adapting these natural processes. The biological newborn grows up in an environment composed of cultural artefacts – as a result, two 'lines' of development, the natural and the cultural, merge into a unique form of human development.

When Elias (2009) discussed 'higher psychological functions' such as learning, he used concepts that were very similar in imagery to Vygotsky's. For example, he considered learning as the 'reciprocal processes of the biological and the social' and the 'intimate interweaving of learned and unlearned processes'. Like Vygotsky, Elias argued that evolutionary biology needed to be interwoven into a long-term conception of human development. In his fragments on the 'Great Evolution' (2007b: 179–233), he outlined in a non-reductive way the different stages of integration from atoms to the most highly integrated of organisms – human beings. In trying to explain this developmental process, he emphasized that higher levels of integration must be explained in terms of their stage-specific behavioural and functional properties, which are not reducible to their lower component parts. To explain more complex formations, one needed to know not only the structural properties of lower-level units, but also how they are organized functionally.

I shall now discuss some of the concepts that were introduced by Elias and Vygotsky to understand the development of young children as they move from communicating sounds to learning and eventually mastering a language. For Elias (2011) an important conceptual distinction needs to be made between the term 'evolution', which should refer to biological processes that are genetic and relatively fixed, and 'development', social processes that are more malleable and subject to change. In his attempt to identify some of the distinguishing characteristics of human beings that 'animal psychologists' like Lorenz have ignored, Elias mentions a unique human capacity 'for controlling and modifying drives and affects in a great variety of ways as part of a learning process' (Elias, 2007a: 125). This capacity for developing forms of self-restraint is central to Elias's argument in *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012b): the increasing social constraint towards self-constraint is related to more demanding social standards of self-control. Social pressures lead to more self-control, with the behaviour of individual people being regulated 'in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner' (ibid.: 406).

An integral aspect of civilizing processes is that young children should eventually grow up through their own self-regulation: the long-term movement from 'external control' to 'self-control' can be directly compared with Vygotsky's explanation of the central role of internalization processes in the acquisition of language. In order for children to regulate their own speech behaviour and understand the same symbols, speech is internalized, organizing, and integrating, disparate aspects of children's behaviour, such as problem-solving and memory. According to Vygotsky (1987), inner speech is what makes thinking possible. It is a distinctive speech function, a form of verbal thinking that

mediates between word and thought. Two important processes are interwoven in inner speech: the transition from external communication to inner dialogue and the translation of intimate thoughts into a linguistic and communicative form. This concept of inner speech is a type of speech that is 'mute' and 'silent', involving no vocalization.

Once again, what is highly significant is Elias's (2011) similar use of imagery to discuss internalization in *The Symbol Theory*. In language communication, one of the functions of the term 'thinking' is to refer to the capacity of human beings to put through their paces symbols anticipating a sequence of possible future actions without their performance in reality. At this level, thought is not easily recognizable as a flow of voicelessly produced sound-symbols, an abbreviated version of the audible use of language that can be converted into spoken language. These forms of abbreviated thinking are associated with the manipulation of stored memory images: according to Elias, these do not have to be set out step by step, but can be telescoped, recalled and used when the occasion demands.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that sociologists need to develop a relational sociology of early childhood that focuses on the long-term historical relationship between young children and adults. Alanen (2009) has called for sociologists to develop a consistent sociology of childhood, one that incorporates the theoretical insights of the 'relational turn in sociology' (see Crossley, 2011) and attempts to overcome common dualities such as the individual versus society, structure versus agency, micro versus macro. Such dualities are based on a substantialist approach that conceives the social world as consisting 'primarily in substances or in processes, in static "things" or in "dynamic, unfolding relations"' (Emirbayer, 1997: 281). A range of sociological theory is embedded in rational-actor and norm-based models, functionalism, structuralism, statistical 'variable' analyses – theories in which the entities are seen as prior to relations. Emirbayer (*ibid.*) argues that the alternative is a relational perspective that depicts 'the social' as dynamic, continuous and processual.

A relational sociology of early childhood offers a dynamic analysis of the structural relations of young children's lives, focusing on how children see themselves in relation to their older counterparts, usually teachers and parents, though this should also include the importance of relationships within generations, particularly peer friendships and siblings. To survive, young children need to learn from their elders and this is why the concepts of generation and inter-generational relationships are so important for understanding the relation between past and present childhoods – what we observe is an unbroken chain of parents and young children who in turn become parents. Young children are born into interdependent relationships that existed before them: as they grow up these relationships change but are structured in different societies and in different historical epochs.

Can sociologists identify a long-term trend in the relationships between young children and their parents in different societies? Gabriel (2010) has explored how the concept of 'nature' has been used to inform and shape different historical beliefs about the best way to bring up young children, focusing on one very important area: the 'moral'



upbringing of children and changing patterns of parental advice which have evolved since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He has argued that the child as 'natural', 'pure' and 'innocent' functioned as a basis for the late 18<sup>th</sup>- and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic vision of childhood. The early Romantics drew attention to the ideal of childhood as an area of interior self with a personal history. They believed that to grow up into adulthood and 'civilized' society was a journey away from the source that was the most valuable aspect of ourselves, the child as vital, full of energy and passionate.

This 'inner childhood' became a very important touchstone for later scientific and moralistic developments in child-rearing practices, because it retained the division between the 'good' and the 'bad' child. If children were 'naturally' good, then parents would have to develop skills to meet their needs and educate them. But if they were 'naturally' bad or sinful, then according to the Evangelicals children risked being damned for ever. Their beliefs dominated both the advisory literature available to parents and children's own reading for nearly two centuries (Newson and Newson, 1974).

In contemporary society, there are similar concerns that influence parents' attitudes and behaviour towards child-rearing. Sociologists like Furedi (2008) have argued that there is now a 'plague' of paranoid parenting which can be explained by wider cultural forces such as the loss of parental authority and uncertainties about moral values. However, his analysis tends to be rather focused on short-term changes that need to be both distinguished from and connected to transformations on a larger scale and to underlying developments in the long run. Elias (2008) refers to one such development as an informalizing process, a period of movement from an authoritarian to a more egalitarian parent-child relationship where there is a loosening of barriers of authority in relations between children and adults. He argued that during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the parent-child relationship had lost some of its hierarchical character, with young children being given more autonomy and a greater degree of decision-making. Significantly, this leads to a high degree of self-restraint from adults in their relations with young children: parents appeal more to affection and reflection, teaching their children to control themselves, rather than simply obey the external constraints of adults (Wouters, 2007).

I have also argued that we need a flexible approach that can explain the early years as a distinctive period of human development, integrating research findings on young children from a range of different, but related, disciplines like biology, psychology and history. Norbert Elias's work overcomes traditional academic divisions by identifying the hinge that connects social and biological processes in the long-term development of humanity. From this viewpoint, all young children need to experience 'love and learning' relationships: in every society young children are distinguished from adults in order to ensure the survival of and care for biologically immature human beings, though the particular form of childhood is historically specific.

This was then illustrated by discussing some of the innovative concepts that Elias and Vygotsky used to explain a universal process of humankind, the early development of language. Both provide a sophisticated, developmental perspective that can follow the interweaving of biological and social processes as young children learn from their elders a specific language to survive and grow in their societies. These processes are discussed in highly nuanced relational concepts that are deliberately sensitive and more suitable for integrating the affective and cognitive aspects of social learning and comparing the many

different types of language that humanity has developed. Such processes are crucial for understanding the ways in which young children grow up to become members in their different communities.

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