Childhood and Child Life. *disClosure* interviews Jo Boyden

Margo Kleinfeld
University of Kentucky

Margo Kleinfeld and Joe Sutliff-Sanders

Childhood and Child Life

disClosure interviews
Jo Boyden
April 1, 2000

Jo Boyden, a social anthropologist, was trained at University College London, Cambridge University, and the London School of Economics. Her initial research interest was the impact of capitalist development on social organization and structure in the central Peruvian Andes. For the past twenty years, Boyden has been working as a social development consultant for a broad range of development and relief agencies, governmental, non-governmental, and inter-governmental, in Southeast and South Asia, the Andean region, and parts of Africa. This entailed a mix of primary and secondary research, advocacy, training, planning, monitoring, and evaluation: the main aim being the development of policies and programs with children and youth living in situations of extreme adversity. She is currently researching the experiences and responses to armed conflict and forced migration among children and adolescents in the impacts of emergency interventions on their agency, resilience, and coping. Boyden is the co-author of *Children in Focus, a Manual on Child-Centred Participatory Research* with Judith Ennew (1997), *Children of War: Responses to Psycho-social Distress in Cambodia* with Sara Gibbs (1997), and *What Works for Working Children* with William Myers and Birgitta Ling (1998).

Boyden participated in the Committee for Social Theory Distinguished Speaker series devoted to the topic "Children at the Millenium" at the University of Kentucky. In her paper entitled "Children's Resilience in Adversity," Boyden presented research concerning children's experiences with labor, poverty, military conflict, and forced migration. We began our conversation by discussing Boyden's notion of "child life" and her experiences with children as an adult researcher. Our conversation then addressed the category of childhood, the political implications of asserting the international rights of children, the meanings of children doing labor, and finally the child as a symbol of the future.

disClosure: Would you explain the difference between childhood and child life? You used those terms in your 1997 article, "Childhood and the Policy Makers."

Jo Boyden: "Childhood" to me is a social construct, a social category, whereas "child life" refers to children's actual experiences, their lived childhoods, if you like. This is often a very different thing from a social category that's imposed on them.

dC: Do you find that it's possible to shed such a construction? Doesn't all human interaction require some kind of constructed representation?

JB: Yes, that's very much the case. Children also have their own constructions. What I'm concerned with is trying to learn more about children's constructions, as opposed to adult constructions. I think that's the great challenge, particularly for adult researchers because as adults we're not automatically privy to children's lives and to their perspectives and experiences. As a researcher, the big challenge is to break through those powerful barriers that separate adults from children to understand more about lived childhoods. That's what participatory research, for example, is all about.

dC: What steps do you recommend or suggest for trying to understand the child's perspective, especially in the field?

JB: There are people that say that you can never cross the barrier entirely, and, I think that's largely true. But it's also the case that a lot of adult researchers don't even make the effort to really listen and understand children's perspectives. A lot of it has to do with how you approach children, the kinds of trust and confidence that you create with children in your research exercise. The methods for capturing children's information are very important because children don't always respond well to adult modes of communication. They've become used to adults imposing modes of communication on them. So, if you use adult modes then they will respond as an adult will expect them to respond. What the researcher should try to do instead, is to encourage them to respond more spontaneously, according to their own interests and concerns, rather than have them try to please you as an adult.

One of the interesting experiences of research with children is that quite often, you're giving them a chance to speak which they have never been given before. Sometimes this can have very dramatic and unexpected impacts. I find, for example, that children become extremely emotional talking about subjects that would seem to be quite straightforward and unthreatening. But, they may often cry and show enormous amounts of emotion. Sometimes it is very distressing to feel that you have opened a Pandora's box. I've realized with experience, however, that you're providing them with a space of trust and openness that they're not used to being given. Sometimes it's very distressing to realize how little children are listened to, in all cultures. But it's much worse in some cultures than others.

For example, once I was in Ethiopia training people who were working in various agencies with children. One of the people I was training held a focus group discussion with a group of children in a community where he was working. He asked them a very simple question, "What activities do you do when you're not in school?" What he was really interested in was children's work responsibilities. As a researcher, you don't use the word "work," though, because that's an abstract term that means nothing to children. Anyway, most people don't think children work, even when they are working. They aren't defined as workers; they aren't supposed to work. He asked these children, and the children started to talk about it. One of the girls got extremely distressed though and started to cry. Feeling very bad about it, he phoned us up and asked, "What have I done?" We talked about it and he explained how he had dealt with the situation. He's a very gentle and responsive person and actually handled the situation as I would have done, allowing the child to express her feelings, reassuring her and so on. But this often happens. When people ask me if it is ethical to ask children really painful questions, especially when you know they've gone through difficult experiences, I always say, one never actually knows what will cause children distress, what it is that makes them anxious, what they're concerned about. Even when

you ask the most innocuous questions, you sometimes find yourself up an alley that is quite scary, and you have to learn to manage the situation. In this case, I think what happened was that a very gentle, senior man, and a very serious person, the sort of person that these children would never normally have access to, was taking time out to listen to them. He was taking them seriously. He was giving them the confidence to speak out. And it was just overwhelming for this particular child.

dC: A lot of your work suggests that there is a gulf or even a wall that separates children and adults, evidenced by how difficult communication is between the two. Even tenderness could be mistaken across this barrier. Sometimes, it seems as if children and adults are from different cultures—almost as if they are different species.

JB: I wouldn't put it that way. But I would agree with some of what you say. I think the point is not that there are enormous barriers between adults and children, but that the relationship between the two is based on power, and that in all known societies, children have less power than adults. There is the rare exception when a particular child becomes a child king or something like that. I think that in most societies, children do engage with adults in a way that is different from the manner in which they treat other children. If we're to understand more about childhood as it is lived by real children, then I think the onus is on us, as adult researchers, to enter that world more. But that's not to say that they're rarified creatures or a different species. Certainly not. In fact, a lot of my work emphasizes the ways children are more like adults than we imagine.

I don't think the power divide is imaginary, however. And, children learn to work with it, as all of us do. We are different people in our homes, at work, with our friends, in all the different contexts of our own lives. It's the same with children. The power dynamics between adults and children is a whole other area of research. In the past, the study of childhood has really been about the study of adult attitudes towards children. There's now an upsurge of researchers who are trying to look at this from the children's perspective. There's an enormous amount of research in the United Kingdom (UK) on this. I don't think so much has been done in the United States. I'm not sure why.

dC: David Oldman (1994) speaks of child-adult relations as class relations that are fundamentally exploitative of the child by the adult. Do you agree with that?

JB: I wouldn't call it exploitation at all, but I do think that there is a denial of children's abilities in many ways. There's a terrible constraint that we put on children as a result of that power imbalance. I think we lose as a result. I feel personally very enriched by the work that I've done with children over the years. Some people think that it's really wacky thing to spend your life researching children. A lot of people think it's a deeply marginal issue and a deeply marginal topic. I couldn't think of anything more exciting and enthralling. I'm learning all the time, from my own children as well. Once given the opportunity to take responsibility and make decisions in the political arena, children are extraordinarily creative and imaginative. They often offer the same strengths that adults do in their ideas and thinking, and we often end up with a far richer process. I don't think it's exploitative, but I do think there's an oppression of some sort which has to do with adults wanting things to be convenient for them, things to be run in their interests. And, although we call ourselves a child-centered modern society, the reality is that populations are aging, there are far fewer children around, and far less child-centeredness. We aren't living up to the rhetoric.

The Category of Childhood

dC: Do you think it is still useful to categorize children as "people under the age of eighteen," particularly with respect to advocacy on behalf of children?

JB: Well, possibly not. I find it very troubling that we're expected to call fifteen-year olds children. I'm sure that fifteen-year olds find it even more troubling than I do. The reason people talk about the child or children and use that category so much is because it has emotive power. It has connotations that one can use for advocacy purposes, and it's quite effective. We use the term to our advantage, recognizing that a focus on childhood will create attention, whether among policymakers or the general public. But I think we ought to move beyond this very restrictive category. As far as I'm concerned, as soon as a child turns ten or eleven—and that may be late—he or she ceases to be a child in so many important ways, while still being a child in other ways. I think that's one of the great challenges for young people who remain in school so long: to be categorized as a child at the age of eighteen. My daughter is eighteen. She's extremely independent and self-assured. I learn from her all the time, and I can't imagine calling her a child.

dC: Do you think there are any universal attributes of childhood?

JB: Do you mean universal attributes in terms of the "category" of childhood, which is imposed? That is certainly a very generic, genderless category. One of the points that I have tried to make about social power is that we rarely talk about girls or boys. People talk about children as if it was a great big, lumped-together category. The reality is that childhood as lived by a girl in many societies is radically different from childhood as lived by a boy. Equally, if you're the oldest sibling, or youngest sibling, that may make an awful lot more difference to you in terms of your life experience than the fact that you're a child.

dC: Are there any attributes of childhood that, in your view, are universal, and that transcend culture, age or birth position?

JB: There are certain biological factors that are universal. Up to adolescence, there is a maturational process which all children go through and which is as universal as anything. I think when you're talking about universals, the more physical the attribute, the more there is a potential for universality. The more one talks about social phenomena, the much less likely that these phenomena will be universal. And while I don't believe in the notion of "stages" in development, there are sequences. Certain things cannot happen in cognitive terms before certain physical developments have taken place. But beyond that, there isn't much that could be considered universal.

dC: You have criticized the developmental model of childhood, which has been esteemed for so long. And yet, many of the anecdotes in your writings refer to what is essentially the passing from one developmental stage to another. Although this seems to be a contradiction, I have the sense that you are more interested in criticizing the ethnocentricity of, say, Erik Erickson's developmental model.

JB: You're absolutely right. It's been fascinating for me. I've done quite a lot of reading on ethnographic research, and I plan to do a lot more. There aren't actually a lot of ethnographic studies, but where they do exist, it is quite clear that a lot of societies have ethno-theories of development that embrace stages of some sort or another. A lot of societies do recognize certain thresholds, and those thresholds seem to be quite common across many different regions in the world. For example, up to age two is very commonly recognized as a period of 'no-sense;' very young children, it is said, don't have sense. This understanding holds in many different societies. Children will be cher-

ished and indulged during the early years. After that, between the ages of two to about five or six, they will be slightly less indulged and they will be given some play-work responsibilities. Between the age of six, and say eleven or twelve, they will take on real economic roles, no longer considered to be play. It's a kind of obligation and they can be punished for not fulfilling it. At age twelve in many societies, a child becomes an adult, not in terms of their reproductive powers but certainly in terms of their economic responsibility. So, there are many stage theories and there is some coincidence between them across cultures. There's a certain patterning that seems to reveal itself.

What I find so difficult about the ethnocentricism of Jean Piaget, Erickson, and others, is the notion that a person must go through certain processes of development in order to move into another stage. That's extremely prescriptive, the notion that development progresses along a linear path. This is deeply problematic to me. There's also nothing about adults in these theories. We know that as adults we're all extremely different and we all have completely different competencies. So why are we trying to imply that children should have a set of uniform competencies through childhood, when we know that once we reach adulthood this is not the case? Also, the competencies acknowledged in those theories, are not necessarily the competencies that are valued and acknowledged in other parts of the world. Children grow, flourish, thrive, and adapt very well in different environments with very different sets of competencies.

You're right that it seems sometimes that there's an inherent contradiction. I think all societies have notions of human development that define in one way or another as a distinct stage. Some societies don't just focus on childhood though. Rather, they see human development as continuing through life and into the afterlife as well. The majority of societies have theories of human development that involve some kind of staging, as symbolized in rites of passage for example. But the thing that's interesting about most other societies is that age is not a rigid criterion, whereas in our world, especially with our education systems, childhood is fixed by chronological age. On the other hand, in many parts of Africa, if you're a man who is not married, you're still a child, even if you're twenty-five years old. It's not age-bound in the way that we are in the West.

dC: I would imagine that it is quite distressing for children affected by war, expecting specific developmental stages or markers, and then to be denied them because of the extremely difficult situation they are in.

JB: Yes, this is very distressing. One of the things that I've observed about armed conflict is that one of the most effective ways the military succeeds is by infantilizing adults in the enemy population. For example, one of the things that I learned from Edith Montgomery (1991), who works with victims of torture, is that torture is not about gathering intelligence. We always assume that people are tortured in order to make them give over information. She says that is a fallacy. In reality, torture has far more to do with rendering the powerful weak, rendering them incapable and like a child. Montgomery says that if you look at who gets tortured, it is very often the leaders, important people, or figureheads. The aim is to make them absolutely helpless and unable to exist effectively, and then return them to the community. They become the child in the family because they can't function and they can't work. The whole family relationship then turns inside out. All of a sudden, the children find that the father who they once respected isn't someone they know anymore, let alone respect.

I learned a lot of things about children in war situations, particularly in Cambodia, where children were recruited to be leaders, to be the torturers, to be the killers, and to be the intelligence gatherers. They were very effective and very brutal. The Khmer still speak of having "a residual fear of children," which I find a very powerful notion. This is something that I observed in South Africa as well. War is about overcoming your foe by weakening civilian power structures and hierarchies. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to reverse the adult-child hierarchy. In a post-war situation, of course, everyone wants to return to normalcy, which necessitates re-imposing previous power relations in which children are the weaker, dependent element. This is one of the reasons why a child soldier who was the hero during the conflict has to become the child again, has to be rendered powerless, after conflict. That's where a lot of the tension lies in a post-conflict situation. You see it in many parts of Africa now. There, children have been leaders of military units and suddenly they're expected to go back to school; of course they're in rebellion in many cases.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

dC: You've been very critical of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as a Northern instrument imposed on the South. Would you revise the CRC in some way, and if so, how? Or, would you rather get rid of it altogether?

JB: No, I think we've got it now and it's part of everyday life and a reality in the world. I would not be at all happy if we started revising it, because I think this will just bring the whole thing back up again. Its purpose is a laudable one. There's no question about that. We want to see a better life for children. We want to see children better provided for, better protected, and so on. I wouldn't disagree with that at all. I also wouldn't disagree with the fact that it highlights the horrendous realities that many children in the world experience. I think it's immoral that children in this day and age have to experience such things.

I hope we can start to get beyond the rhetoric though. What worries me terribly about the Convention is that people give speeches in the name of it, they raise money in the name of it, but I'm not sure that it's always used for the betterment of children's lives. It's certainly a rallying point. But the real issue is how we can make people accountable. How can we monitor implementation of the Convention effectively? Whose values are we talking about when we talk about using it to improve the state of childhood? I'm not convinced that the kind of middle class values that I believe it espouses are actually better for children.

It should be borne in mind that the CRC was drafted almost entirely by lawyers. Lawyers are very good on laws and standards, and laws and standards are important in a moral world. But lawyers don't necessarily know much about the issues at the grassroots level, and they're not necessarily concerned about them either. This may be an extreme view, but I've seen people argue that we can afford to sacrifice generations of children today, in the name of reaching the longer-term goals and standards for the future. So when they say that we should eliminate child labor immediately, I respond that if you do, most children will have to continue working anyway. By banning child labor you are merely putting children into more illegal, less monitorable situations that are likely to be much riskier for them. All the evidence points to that. And they say, yes, but we've got to work toward this long-term goal. We can't compromise the standard just because some suffer in the short term—I think that's an untenable position. I really do. But I've seen it argued in that way quite frequently.

The International Labor Organization (ILO), interestingly enough, has created the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (C182) as an effective alternative to an all out ban on child labor. This convention be-

came necessary because the ILO realized that a ban on child labor could not be imposed. They had to reach a compromise position—which I think is a much more effective position—that is, to focus on hazardous and intolerable forms of child labor. The ILO has seen the light. But no one has yet called for a new Convention on the Rights of the Child.

dC: Who do you think benefits most from the CRC?

JB: If the existence of this Convention leads to the creation of better schools or better health care for children, greater awareness of children, then children are benefiting. I've seen a lot of children's rights training taking place in schools and other settings. This could benefit children quite a lot. Not that I'm convinced, however, that everybody asserting their rights is the solution to social wounds in the future.

There are always children's rights training courses for children. I have seen them in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, in all kinds of places. It's very hard to know what the impact will really be. It's easy to be skeptical and say that children's rights aren't going to make an impact. But I do know that people who work with the police in Egypt and the Philippines, for example, say that they have been able to convince the police, through greater awareness and advocacy, that street children aren't innately criminal or dangerous. They're just children with a particular set of problems. Working at that level can make a big difference in how adults treat and think about children, and how children think about themselves. If, through children rights training, children become more assertive in areas where they need to protect themselves, then that is positive too.

If it means that in orphanages and places like that, people are working to a set of standards and criteria that are protective and supportive of children, then the Convention is working effectively. I don't know whether there's been a lot of research that indicates what changes have actually taken place. The monitoring that's been done by the Committee on the Rights of the Child is not effective. It's based on indicators that measure resource inputs rather than outcomes for children. I've read a lot of the reports submitted by governments to the Committee. It's all about the number of schools created and the number of laws passed. None of that will tell you what changes have been made to children's lives as a result of the Convention. If anything, these reports suggest that somebody needs to be analyzing and monitoring the changes that have and have not occurred.

dC: And resistance? Has there been resistance from governments or non-governmental organizations (NGOs)?

JB: Oh yes. There are some governments that did resist enormously and will continue to resist. And there is the African Charter on Children's Rights. The CRC is not terribly relevant to the African region, and so they developed their own. There were lots of regionally based discussions and the outcome was that "we want something for ourselves." If the CRC generates enough dialogue for people to stand up and say, "no we're going to have our own regional Charter," then that's quite a positive move.

dC: It appears to me that the state has situated itself as the primary champion of the child in this document. Do you agree with that?

JB: Well it has to be that way, because the CRC came through the United Nations system, which is an interstate system. But the CRC also addresses things in a historically European way. If you look at the history of how social welfare developed in the UK, you can see that it started with the family being entirely responsible for children, and so that became a welfarist, private enterprise. But with compulsory education, mass education and the massification of other aspects of services, social provision came to be incorporated within the state. This is the model that our democracies have pursued. But, in many parts of the world, it's entirely unacceptable for the state to intervene in family life. It just isn't done. There isn't a notion of state responsibility in relation to the family. I don't believe that the state is the right organization in many of these cases. I think that private bodies such as grassroots community-based organizations are far more effective in terms of implementation. When it comes to social protection, there are things that are much more effectively done at the local level. And I would like to see a much more diversified and decentralized model than the state-managed model. In terms of thinking about protection of children in adversity, local support groups are often the most effective mechanism of intervention.

I was in Burma, for example, in the Shan State, an area where there has been forty years of conflict. There were several families of orphaned children living in these villages, and the villagers were providing for them. The children didn't get fostered or sent anywhere. They stayed in the homes they were born in and were supported by the village, spontaneously. They were still living as an independent family, but if they needed food, or if they didn't have enough labor to

tend their fields or look after their animals, the other families in the neighborhood would help. Those are the kinds of support mechanisms that we need to be thinking about far more actively, instead of always turning to the state. It's almost an obsession in our society, that the state should be accountable for every aspect of our lives.

Children's Work

dC: What's been your experience with children and work? Are children eager to have more responsibilities and become adults, or would they rather not?

JB: The research, as it stands, shows that most children would like to go to school. They know that when they're at school they're not given any responsibility. But they know they have to work hard in school. Some people call school, "children's work." Most children that I have spoken to and other people whose work I respect, assert that children will always say that they want to go school. One of the aspects of school that they enjoy is the freedom to play and not be doing onerous tasks at home. That said, most children also want to work. Even children who are in quite unpleasant jobs like to work and are quite proud of the work they do.

One thing that is very interesting, is that given the option, most children would prefer to work outside the home, rather than within the home, which is the bulk of the work children do. When I say within the home, I mean on the field or on the farm, not necessarily within the house, but for the family. Where it has been done—I'm thinking of research on Nepal and Indonesia—children prefer not to work for their families (Johnson, Hill, and Ivan-Smith, 1995; White and Tjandraningsih, 1992). They're often ambivalent about it because they recognize the obligations they have toward their family, but working for the family is terribly imposing in terms of the hours children must work. Of course the family doesn't give the children any money. It doesn't change the power relation between the adult and the child. It still keeps the adults, parents, or whoever the caretakers are, in a position of complete control over the children's lives.

One of the reasons why children like to work outside the home for money is because it raises their status within the family. Brazilian street children and street traders talk about not being beaten up at home so much because they're working for themselves and bringing money into the house. Children do tend to want to work more. They

recognize that work is a transition to adulthood. They recognize that it's a way of acquiring status and social integration within the family and community. They know that the denial of work renders them more powerless and more vulnerable. They also know that the denial of paid work is a problem.

This is where the clash of values and cultures is very interesting. One example of this is in Nepal, where the carpet industry, the NGOs, and the international community have been arguing over child labor. Child employees earn less than adults and work very long hours. Perhaps it's also quite bad for them because it's very intricate work; wool gets into the respiratory system, not to mention the chemicals and dyes; and they sit still in the same position for long hours. It's not good for them in a lot of different ways. But, if you interview the children, you find that this is what they want for themselves. Children are leaving the countryside in droves. Where traditionally they would have done agricultural work for their families, now they are by preference taking paid employment in the cities. So yes, children recognize work as an important means of upward mobility. But they also know when they're being exploited at work or badly treated. They talk a lot about individual employers who abuse them and what they lose by being at work. They know that if you're dirty and smell because you've been at work, you'll often get bullied and treated badly at school. They recognize that by comparison with kids who don't work, teachers treat them very badly. Teachers often don't want them in class because they're workers. They arrive late. They need more time. They don't do as well at school because they're more tired. These children are often very articulate about that. Martin Woodhead (1997, 1998) has done a comparative study in five or six countries about children's attitudes toward their work and school and taking on responsibility.

dC: It seems that Western advocates against child labor oppose it wholeheartedly and passionately. How intractable is their position? You mentioned the ILO changing their position. Do you see a change?

JB: I think there are more people now who are prepared to agree that not all forms of work are bad for children. Anyway, it's not realistic to drag all children out of work. Some children may be losing something by giving up work. More people are taking on this line of thinking now than ten years ago. But those people who are opposed to work oppose it for what they believe are very sound reasons. They argue that the CRC and all of the standards and laws that it entails

represent a matter of equity and democracy and equal rights for all children. They frequently say to me, "Well your own children are in school. You're saying this is alright for the poor children of the South, but why aren't your children out working?" They feel that people like myself have a vision of a privileged childhood for "our" children. They argue that allowing children to work is allowing children to live in detrimental circumstances. I don't think that way. I think that our children should be working a lot more and should be going to school a lot less. I also think that we need to be looking very carefully at the hazardous work that children are doing and to try to find ways of making sure that when children are working it is beneficial to them. I've seen no evidence that work is bad for children except when it's dangerous, or badly organized, or exploitative. There are many things that children learn at work that they can't learn at school, and there are many things that our children who don't work are not learning. I'm not so convinced that things they learn at school are superior.

dC: Do you agree with the view that child rights undermine human rights?

JB: A lot of people insist that the whole notion of children's rights is problematic because they feel that this sets up a competitive and conflictual mode with adult rights, and with human rights more generally. This is where one does see points of resistance. One of the fears in the UK when the CRC was under consideration was the thought that children would start to 'divorce' parents. It was in the press, on the radio, television talk shows etc. There was a tremendous disquiet. Does this instrument have the potential for destroying the family? Will we find children walking out of families? There is a potential for conflict there. It is also divisive to focus on a particular social category when the human category as a whole is what human rights are supposed to be providing for. I'm not sure I have particular views on it. I just know that there is that tension.

dC: I'm thinking of Olga Nieuwenhuy's (1998) work on South Asia and her argument that child rights undermines civil rights in that region.

JB: I would agree with that. The concept of rights is based on individuals, whereas in most parts of the world the group prevails over the individual. That's where she is absolutely right. And that's where one of the real tensions lies. How can you call for children to have rights in situations where adults have no rights? How can you call for children to be involved in decision-making when adults aren't involved in decision-making? You also have a situation where in many parts of the world, the family or the community or whatever the social unit is, develops strategies to survive. Some of the strategies will impinge on the individual children very badly indeed: it will put them in great jeopardy. But, by putting one child in jeopardy, they're perhaps sustaining a whole household. I'm not trying to justify that. But we must recognize that there are different worldviews in which individuals don't have that much say and where the group is more important. The perpetuation of the lineage and the continuation of the group are more important than the individual, and individuals do get sacrificed. This is why the notion of separating children out would seem really strange.

dC: One of the issues that's come out of the Elian Gonzalez case is whether or not the child can speak for itself. You have said that authorities should ask the child what he or she wants. But there's a real perception in the U.S., in Cuba, and in the international media that the child can't be trusted to make such decisions. Either the child will be seduced by the capitalist "West," or the child will be influenced by the views of his family.

JB: Yes, there is a notion that we shouldn't trust children's testimony, but we can trust adult testimony. I often get asked about this. But adults also have a problem of identifying their own views in situations of conflict, and in establishing what's in their best interest. The responsibility should not be on children to decide everything for themselves independently without support and advice. The idea that they're going to be manipulated and they're not going to have an independent view is overstated. None of us has an independent view. We're all subject to influence and manipulation. None of us has a clear sense of selfhood. Certainly, children deserve protection because of their lack of maturity; but, also, more importantly, because of their lack of awareness. When children make the wrong decisions it's usually because they're not informed, not because they're unable to distinguish between right and wrong. That's the responsibility that lies with us. So chances are that Elian Gonzalez can't make a very objective decision because he's not party to all the relevant information.

The Symbolic Child

dC: Typically, children are regarded as symbols of the future and a receptacle for societies' fears and hopes about the future. Yesterday,

you mentioned that children also think about the future and that children themselves are future-oriented. In your experience is this true?

JB: Six or seven years ago, some research was done with children to find out about their greatest fears and anxieties. According to that research, the thing they fear the most is nuclear war. I think children have very strong ideas about the future and quite a lot of anxieties about it. They are part of the public realm of knowledge and they're very much aware of the hopes and aspirations thrust upon them by society. That is what school is actually all about, isn't it? It's a kind of nationalist endeavor. That's the way it began—the militarization of schools, the fact that children wear uniforms, sit in rooms, bells bring them to school, and start the school day. Throughout the world, kids will start the school day by singing the national anthem in the playground. There will always be that very close allegiance between children, the childhood institutions that constrain and organize children's time, nationalism, and the future of the nation-state. I think children know a thing or two about that and can talk a lot about it. But, they talk a lot more about their fears of the future and their sense of responsibility, their awareness of AIDS, and drug use. All these sorts of things impinge terribly on children's imaginations.

dC: Is it common for the child to become a focal point or symbol justifying government actions, whichever government that may be?

JB: I think that the CRC is used in this way. And, one often sees symbolism around childhood justifying all kinds of interventions and actions. One of the dangers of the child-centered movement in the twentieth century is that children will increasingly be used in this way, especially with the emotional despair that goes with the diminishing number of children in our societies. I can't imagine what it is going to mean to be a child three decades from now in Germany or Italy. In Germany, a third of all married couples choose not to have children. Historically, people who simply lived together often made that choice, but, normally, people who married tended to want children. Suddenly, we have a new situation where people marry and choose not to have children. I think Italy has one of the lowest birth rates now. There are several countries in Europe where this happening. One wonders what kind of symbol a child will be in a society when there are so few children. It's extraordinary to think of what that might mean for children in the future.

I do a lot of training with people on research methods and issues related to children. I always start by asking them to think about a child

they know well and to think about that child's vulnerabilities and competencies, and about their lives. We usually find through discussion that children are doing far more extraordinary things than people imagine. But the thing that really shocks me is the discovery I often make that lots of adults don't actually know any children personally. I might say, "Think of a child between the age of six and ten." And, they don't know a child of that age. Now that is a scary thought. So, how that might affect the meaning of children and childhood, I don't know.

Works Cited

Boyden, Jo. "Childhood and the Policy Makers: A Comparative Perspective on the Globalization of Childhood," in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Eds. Alan James and Allison Prout. London: Falmer Press, 1997. 190-230.

Johnson, Vicky, Jo Hill, and Edda Ivan-Smith, *Listening to Smaller Voices; Children in an Environment of Change*. London: Action Aid. 1995.

Montgomery, Edith "Psychological Effects of Torture on Adults, Children and Family Relationships." Presentation given at the conference: "The Mental Health of Refugee Children Exposed to Violent Environments." Oxford, UK. Sept. 1991.

Nieuwenhuys, Olga. 1998. "Global Childhood and the Politics of Contempt." *Alternatives*, 23 (1998): 267-89.

Oldman, David. "Adult-Child Relations as Class Relations," in *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*. Eds. Jens Qvortrop, Giovanni Sgritta, Melmut Wintersberger. Aldershot, UK: Avebury. 1994

White, Ben, and Tjandraningsih, I., "Rural Children in the Industrialization Process: Child and Youth labour in 'Traditional' and 'Modern' Industries in West Java, Indonesia," Unpublished, ISS, The Hague & Akatiga Foundation, Bandung, 1992.

Woodhead, Martin, "Children's Perceptions of their Working Lives," report, for Rädda Barnen, Centre for Human Development and Learning, The Open University, UK. April/May. 1997.

———. "Is there a Place for Work in Child Development? Implications of Child Development Theory and Research for Interpretation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, with Particular Reference to Article 32, on Children, Work and Exploitation." Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University, Rädda Barnen, 1998.