

Madeleine Leonard:

The Sociology of Children, Childhood and Generation.

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A book by Madeleine Leonard was created as a response to the fact that in recent years, there has been a strong movement towards establishing childhood studies as a multi-/inter-disciplinary subject, which can lead to losing the role of specific disciplines in these arguments. Thus the purpose of the book is to acknowledge the distinctive contribution of sociology to debates on children and childhood. The book deals with work from various disciplines (developmental psychology, anthropology, history and geography), evaluated through the lens of sociology, thereby demonstrating the usefulness of sociological approaches to children and childhood.

In the first chapter, Introduction, the author points at the misconception of simplistically reducing childhood to chronological age and sets up a thesis that age is as much a social construction as it is a biological process. The arguments for this claim can be found in the fact that different societies structure and determine age differently, as evidenced through comparisons of the contradictory meanings of age across different societies and cultures. In that way age is as much a social construction as it is a biological process.

Chapter 2 brings in the social - constructivist approach to understanding the child and childhood embodied in the thesis of various authors, such as James & Prout, Corsaro and Thorne. The chapter explores the similarities and differences between psychological and sociological approaches to children and childhood, with the focus on key dichotomies in the social sciences around the relationships between biology and society, nature and nurture and the individual and society. Developmental psychology dominated the field of childhood studies for most of the 20th century. It was considered that the child's development occurred through a set of fixed, universal stages which served as a set of benchmarks to determine a 'normal' childhood. Environmental influences were taken into account only in a sense of their positive or negative impact in facilitating or interrupting "normal" development. These concepts of developmental psychology were incorporated into sociological theorising on childhood during the 1950s in the form of socialization. It is considered a process in which children acquire and internalise the norms and values of the society into which they are born, with the family playing the key role as a major agent of socialization, along with some other key agents, like educational system. The dominant paradigm was functionalism with Talcott Parsons as the most influential

exponent. Within this paradigm, children were largely viewed as passive objects unable or unwilling to respond actively to the range of external influences, whereby childhood was regarded as a period of dependency and subordination. This 'traditional' sociological approach was challenged by the 'new' sociology of childhood, which gained gradual academic legitimacy from around the 1980s onwards. Central to this 'new paradigm' is an acknowledgement that children are active agents who are not simply shaped by the world around them but who actively shape and change that world. In that manner sociologists are now focused on how children create meaning to their everyday lives, thus promoting children as active agents who create meaning through their interactions with others. The basic thesis which the new paradigm for the sociology of childhood rests upon is understanding that childhood is socially constructed and therefore varies across time and space.

Chapter 3 presents a structural understanding of childhood, i.e. discusses the impact of macro structures (society, education, institutions) on children and their childhoods, illuminating childhood as a structural form. Social structure, as a key term in sociology, refers to social institutions and the relationships that together form society. In order to explain the impact of macro structures on children and their childhoods, the chapter focuses on four areas: work, family, education and play, elaborating on how macro processes have impacted children's involvement in the labour market, their family life, their education and their play and leisure. Specifically, the chapter explains the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the conception of childhood, the impact of broader structural processes on family life and relationships, and the impact of compulsory education on the position of children in society. It is crucial to note that these macrostructural changes produced changes in childhood, not the other way around. Thus, the driving force lay the economic macro structures and, as the chapter illustrates, they subsequently impacted on other areas of childhood within the family, the education system, and children's play. The basic thesis presented in the chapter is that the childhood is not a universal or natural category, but is constructed differently according to the prevailing economic, political, social and cultural processes. Therefore, some authors suggest that it is more correct to discuss 'childhoods' than childhood. A particularly interesting part of the chapter is the one that debates the reasons for occurrence and consequences of the commercialization and institutionalization of childhood, as well as the impact of digital technologies, especially the Internet, on blurring the boundaries between adulthood and childhood.

Chapter 4 explores how children respond to and cope with broader macrostructural changes described in the previous chapter, in their daily lives in micro settings, thereby demonstrating the complexity of children's everyday experiences in a variety of different

contexts, and the diversity of meanings children attribute to social practices. The main goal of the chapter is to describe how children's agency arises within wider structural processes, providing children and young people with different degrees of action within and upon wider structures. As in the previous chapter, in this chapter the micro worlds of children are viewed through the same four areas: work, family, education and play. The chapter strives to illustrate how children, rather than being passively shaped by adult culture, actively interpret, reinterpret, transform and reconstruct information, processes and practices from the adult world to produce their own understanding of that world. Thus the children are seen as agents who make an active contribution to their everyday lives, while socialization is seen as an ongoing process of negotiation, rather than a matter of passive adaptation and internalization. The concept of agency is introduced as one of the key concepts in contemporary sociological theory, which refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and intentionally. The chapter explores the importance that children attach to their own entry into the labor market through paid employment during their school years, illustrates their experiences of family life and the myriad ways in which they influence family decision making regarding family diet, parental boundaries, family breakdown, parental divorce, custody battle, etc. The chapter further explains how within the education system, children are actively involved in creating and transforming the knowledge they receive and practicing the agency, which challenges school structures (e.g. talk loudly in class, challenge the teachers, refuse to do homework), and finally, views children as active agents who positively engage in the marketplace as buyers and users of consumer products.

Chapter 5 highlights ongoing difficulties surrounding balancing children's rights with their need for protection. It examines the positioning of the child as a holder of his/her own rights in the policies of different countries, portraying how the theoretical reflections of the new sociology of childhood, along with changes in national and international frameworks, have opened new spaces for recognizing and acknowledging children as subjects of their own rights. The chapter is conceived around two key concepts. The first concerns the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is considered a switch in the movement towards the recognition of children as right holders, especially around the right to be consulted about decisions which directly affect their daily lives. The chapter examines the impact of the CRC on adult-child relationships and its implications on shaping state policies to improve children's living conditions, as well as the processes and events that have led to children's political positioning, in terms of increasing emphasis on children's voices and their ability to be active social actors. Articles 3 and 12 are presented and elaborated in particular, as the two most relevant articles of

the CRC regarding children's participation in public decision making. A statement used in Article 3 that "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" is problematized, citing examples of how the best interests of one child may conflict with the best interests of another child. Furthermore, it is elaborated how the best interests of the child can be equated with the rights of parents in the context of making decisions on their behalf, i.e. whether these rights are complementary or contradictory. Concerning Article 12, Archard and Skivenes discuss a number of children's medical cases in the context of applying the Gillick principle, also known as "Gillick competence", regarding the decision of whether a child under 16 is able to give consent to his or her own medical treatment without the need of parental consent or knowledge. It is concluded that hearing the child's voice and balancing the best interests of a child and the child's views are not easily resolved. By locating children as independent holders of rights, the CRC encouraged a focus on children as citizens in their own right, positioning citizenship as another key concept of the chapter. The concept grows on the idea that children, although they have some social and civil rights, are not full citizens because they do not have political, especially voting, rights and therefore do not participate fully in the political life of society. Hence, they are "citizens-in-waiting" rather than child citizens. Therefore, the chapter discusses the relationship between rights and citizenship and provides an overview of key discussions on citizenship and what it means for children. The notion of 'lived citizenship' (Lister, 2007) is introduced, which moves citizenship from beyond a legal status to a practised phenomenon and draws attention to children's own understandings of citizenship and their agency in terms of their ability to exercise participation rights in everyday life. Furthermore, the chapter articulates the ways in which many societies prepare young people for exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and sets out a series of creative proposals (Rehfeld, 2011) on how to extend the voting rights to children, e.g. in a form of fractional voting shares, establishing electoral constituencies by age or the state giving a small political allowance to all children in their jurisdiction to be used to fund non-profit or political organizations. It is stated that children need the knowledge and practice of democratic, decision-making processes before they reach official voting age. Therefore, as one example of initiatives in this area, the chapter presents attempts to transmit citizenship values and to equip children with abilities deemed necessary for effective citizenship through citizenship education and the establishment of school councils, since a range of research has suggested that, in practice, children gain little experience in active decision making. The main idea is to transform schools into democratic arenas where pupils have the opportunity to make decisions regarding everyday school life, school rules and classroom practices. Referring to the theses of some thinkers, the author

concludes arguing that the growing omnipresence of the Internet means that CRC is no longer up – to – date in relation to children’s competency and ways of communicating, where, instead of not having access to information, the problem could be information overload. Therefore, it is necessary in accordance with the changes of childhood, also to change the structures and institutions that represent children and their interests, and one of them is the CRC.

Chapter 6 tries to bridge the messy relationship between structure and agency, and discusses how sociology contributes an understanding of these concepts and their relevance to children and childhood. Structure refers to the recurring patterned arrangements which make up macro society and its various institutions such as the economy, the legal system, politics, religion and culture. Structural variables such as class, ethnicity, gender and age also have an impact on how individuals produce and reproduce these structures. Society is not determined just by social forces, individuals rather have the capacity to act independently. As reflective agents, people can act intentionally to change structures and their positioning within these structures. However, a fundamental problem remains – to what extent structures impact individuals’ behaviour, but also to what extent individuals’ behaviour impacts structures. The chapter begins by suggesting that generation is a fundamental structural device for understanding children and childhood, and outlines the work of core theorists using this approach, as well as critiques that addressed them. These authors state that generation, as a structural feature of society, can be considered similar to other macrostructural components such as gender, class and ethnicity.

The ‘new’ sociology of childhood sought to reposition children as active agents, but the problem is that adult society constitutes the structure, while the child constitutes the agent (James et al., 1998). Children are undoubtedly agents, but despite this, they continue to be influenced by adults’ ideas about childhood, and these ideas and the structural generational framework place limitations on children's agency and actions, thereby calling into question their status as autonomous agents. Thus, some theorists outline how children can be considered as a minority group conditioned by resilient power relations based on generation. The chapter emphasises how children and adults are holders of specific social positions, not only defined in relation to one another but also defined within specific social structures. Thus, children’s agency needs to be framed within and between generations. This argument is further elaborated by introducing the term of generagency, as a potentially useful model for understanding the links between macro childhood and children’s everyday lives. The term is further divided into inter-/intra-generagency, which are further used as a framework for bridging the gap between childhood as a structural entity, with children as active agents. The concepts of inter-

generageny and intra-generageny are introduced in order to contribute to understanding and illuminating the interplay between the macro and micro aspects of children's everyday lives. The first concept refers to relationships between children and adults, while the latter looks at relationships between children. This acknowledges the need to move beyond the simplistic adult-child binary and suggests that continuity and change occur across and within these relationships. More precisely, inter-generageny refers to existing hierarchal, structural relationships between adults and children and thus sheds light on the macro framework within which children's agency is expressed and practised. The term outlines the fact that adults and children do not live in separate worlds, rather they share the same world from different locations, based largely on generation. This means that boundaries do exist between adulthood and childhood but they are not fixed and immutable but porous, fluid and constantly shifting and changing. The concept of intra-generageny suggests that children do not simply internalise adult society but actively select, dilute, contest and challenge aspects of the adult world through creating their own peer cultures. Thus, the concept highlights the heterogeneity of children's everyday lives within the structural location of childhood. Although these arguments are not new, generageny and its forms of inter-generageny and intra-generageny provide potentially useful tools to enable childhood researchers to more effectively understand and illuminate the complexity of children's relationships with adults and with each other. The book emphasises the importance of generation in understanding the relationship between structure and agency and of accounting for the commonality and diversity of children and childhood.

The concluding Chapter 7 brings together the basic themes of the book throughout the chapters, reminding the reader of the main arguments presented. The most significant aspect of the "new paradigm" in the studies of children and childhood outlined in the book, is viewing children as social actors. The traditional relationship between structure and agency is reassessed through the concept of generageny, providing a useful overarching framework for exploring ongoing connections and disconnections between children, childhood and generation – the three central concepts on which this book is based. We conclude that the book presents a comprehensive overview of some fundamental concepts that continue to challenge sociology, highlighting the significant contribution that sociology has made to the increasingly diverse field of childhood studies.

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