

The
SOCIOLOGY of
CHILDREN,
CHILDHOOD and
GENERATION

Madeleine
Leonard



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Madeleine Leonard is a Professor of Sociology at Queen's University, Belfast, where she teaches a course on Sociological Approaches to Understanding Children and Childhood for the Doctorate in Childhood Studies. She is particularly interested in creative and participatory approaches to including children in the research process. She employs a range of mainly qualitative methods in her research with children and their childhoods. Her main research interest is in teenagers' everyday experiences of growing up in politically sensitive societies, and she has carried out research into the perceptions and experiences of Catholic and Protestant teenagers growing up in Belfast as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project 'Conflict in Cities and the Contested State' (www.conflictincities.org). She has also carried out research with Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot teenagers growing up in Nicosia funded by the British Council. She is a founder member of the Research Network for Sociology of Children and Childhood of the European Sociological Association's Research Network for the Sociology of Children and Childhood, and she is involved in planning and organising the childhood sessions of the Association's bi-annual conferences. She is also secretary of the International Childhood and Youth Research Network (ICYRNET) based at the European University, Nicosia.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a strong movement towards establishing childhood studies as a multi-/inter-disciplinary subject. Childhood researchers from sociology, psychology, law, education, anthropology, geography, medicine, and the list is ever growing, all subscribe to outlining the complementary fit within and between disciplines and their contribution to enhancing understanding of children and their everyday lives. But it remains unclear whether childhood studies is a newly emerging academic field or simply the gathering together and rebranding of what is already known, albeit in diverse disciplines, about children and their childhood (Kehily, 2008). While the wide-ranging perspectives that characterise childhood studies are laudable, at times, the role of specific disciplines gets somehow lost. The particular contribution of sociology to childhood studies tends to become engulfed within the myriad inter-disciplinary approaches, making it difficult to ascertain the core contribution of sociology to current thinking on children and childhood. Alanen (2012), for example, argues that we need a robust base strongly embedded in existing disciplines such as sociology to effectively contribute to genuine inter-disciplinary understandings of childhood, while Prout (2005) reminds us that inter-disciplinarity does not mean non-disciplinarity, hence prioritising certain disciplines over others becomes a worthwhile exercise.

The purpose of this book is to firmly acknowledge and illuminate the distinctive contribution of sociology to debates on children and childhood. The influential Danish sociologist Jens Qvortrup (2009: xiv) argues that the sociology of childhood continues to pose and debate the following questions: 'should we talk about the sociology of children or the sociology of childhood; how should we balance agency and structure in our analyses; is childhood mainly to be seen as a small-scale phenomenon or are children and childhood interesting also for and as a part of the larger social fabric?'. The aim of this book is to address these questions and outline and critically evaluate the body of sociological theory and empirical research which attempt to answer these questions. While these issues have been individually dealt with by the plethora of books on childhood studies, few have attempted to bring together these questions within the one volume.

This does not mean that the book will simply focus on work produced by sociologists. In an ever-increasing inter-disciplinary climate, such a narrow focus would not take us very far. Hence, the book will draw on work from a range of

disciplines, including development psychology, anthropology, history and geography, but evaluate these contributions through the lens of sociology and privilege accounts which demonstrate the usefulness of sociological approaches to children and childhood. Sociological theories of childhood reflect discourses on children and their childhoods and how these feed into social, cultural, economic, political and legal definitions, and indeed how these discourses are context- and time bound. While childhood is commonly defined by age, various sociologists have illuminated the fallacy of simplistically reducing childhood to chronological age through their comparisons of the competing and contradictory meanings of age across different societies and cultures. As Thorne (2007: 150) puts it, 'age is an embodied form of difference that is both materially and discursively produced and embedded in relations of power and authority'. Hence, age should not be reduced to a biological process. Rather, different societies structure and order age differently and use a range of formal and informal processes to define and regulate acceptable age-related behaviour. For example, the age at which a child can legally smoke, drink alcohol, have sex, get married or commit a crime varies across different societies. The UK has one of the lowest ages for criminal responsibility in the world, as 10-year-old children can be arrested and taken to court if they commit a crime. The age of criminal responsibility is much higher in other European countries, set at age 13 for France, 14 for Italy, 15 for Denmark and 16 for Spain. The age of consent for sex also differs, with Austria, Germany, Portugal and Italy setting the age at 14, France, Denmark and Greece at 15 and the UK, Cyprus, Finland, Norway and Switzerland at 16. These examples suggest that age is as much a social construction as it is a biological process. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, henceforth referred to as CRC), the age range applied to children in this book is 0–18 years. However, for the most part, the research that the book draws on relates to children under 16 years of age. There are a number of terms that can be applied to describe children, including infants, toddlers, tweens, teens and adolescents. 'Children' is a more generic term as is the term 'young people', and these two terms are the ones that will be used most frequently throughout the book, and, for the most part, the term young people will be applied to older children.

The book is structured around three core concepts – children, childhood and generation – and underpinning these conceptualisations is the relationship between structure and agency. In relation to the term 'children', some commentators have put forward the view that there are characteristics common to all children and these universal traits mean that children are broadly similar in a number of core respects. Others argue that there are no normative characteristics pertaining to children, rather these traits take on particular meanings in specific historical, social, economic and cultural settings. Hence, childhood is experienced differently across time and space and indeed it might be more accurate to talk about 'childhoods'

rather than typical children. The term 'generation' draws out the relational aspects of childhood. This concept does not make sense without the associated twin concept of adulthood. Each is defined in relation to the other and each takes on significance because of the existence of the other. Indeed, traditionally, adulthood has been the norm against which childhood has been understood and measured. Children and adults have been commonly portrayed as possessing different traits and capabilities, with children being seen as immature while adults are seen as mature, and children being seen as irrational and closer to nature compared to the cultural, reflective, rational adult.

Understanding children and childhood necessitates unpacking the structural location of childhood in relation to adulthood. This brings to the fore the usefulness of dualisms in understanding children, childhood and generation. The core dualism between structure and agency continues to pose epistemological and ontological concerns within sociology. In relation to education, Shilling (1992) argues that dualistic ways of thinking about structure and agency lead to accounts of the social world that are often framed in terms of being strong on structure and weak on agency or vice versa. Prout (2000: xii) argues that more work needs to be done to bridge the gap between theoretical approaches that divide childhood as a 'large-scale structural order from the small-scale interactions and perspectives of children'. In a later publication, Prout (2005) cautions childhood theorists to move beyond oppositional dichotomies, suggesting that modern childhood is characterised by the weakening of boundaries between adulthood and childhood, rendering dichotomous positions obsolete. While acknowledging that the ongoing positioning of both childhood and adulthood and relationships between the two are likely to be dynamic rather than fixed, nonetheless the core argument adopted throughout the book is that there remains validity in maintaining an interest in the dichotomies that continue to characterise some aspects of childhood and adulthood, provided that these dichotomies are presented as messy, ambiguous, uncertain and interrelated rather than stable, durable and separate. An ongoing problem with dualisms is that, in attempting to critically unpack and question their applicability, there is a danger of reifying their existence. Yet dualisms continue to provide a useful lens for understanding sociology's contribution to childhood. This does not just apply to the ever-present debate between structure and agency but also to other fundamental ways of understanding contemporary childhood. Hence, critically examining dichotomous ways of thinking about children and childhood involves unpacking and outlining a range of dualisms while, importantly, demonstrating their interpenetration, hence rendering these dualisms artificial and questionable. However, in order to discuss the mechanisms and processes which link the two, one needs to acknowledge the presence of these dualisms in the first place. This will be a key feature of the book's overall structure. As Adrian James (2010: 490) puts it, 'Dichotomies are valuable heuristic devices: they enable us to

compare and contrast important structural and theoretical concepts, to highlight their key features and to map out their interrelationships and interdependencies'. But, once again, to re-emphasise my position here, the overall aim of the book is to illuminate how the social construction of childhood and its multiple forms impact on these dichotomies and enable us to see multiple connections between seemingly polarised positions and locations.

All books involve omissions. Decisions have to be made about what to include and what to exclude. The sociology of children and childhood is so vast that some selection is necessary. The spatial focus of the book, for example, draws on children and childhood as they are perceived and experienced in a number of societies located in what has been referred to as the 'developed world' (also referred to as minority countries). Drawing on global childhoods, particularly lived childhoods in so-called 'developing societies' (also referred to as majority countries), brings in further complexities around how childhood is defined, perceived and inhabited by children subject to very different historic, economic and cultural contexts. Even across and within the societies covered in this book, various types of childhood are not included, for example those of children with disabilities, or who are in care and various forms of custody. The intention is not to imply that these aspects of childhood are not important, but in trying to present an overview of sociology's contribution to childhood studies, choices have to be made and this inevitably results in absences. The core strength of the book is its focus on the ongoing relevance of key issues such as rights, citizenship, structure, agency, macro childhoods, micro worlds, and how these are underpinned by notions of generation.

Chapter 2 sets the scene by looking at the somewhat dichotomous relationship between development psychology and sociology. The chapter will review how 'western' developmental psychology promoted a particular construction of childhood linked to the life course and how this influenced sociology through its articulation of socialisation. The chapter will chart how this focus was subsequently challenged by a paradigm shift referred to loosely as the 'new' sociology of childhood. This approach to the sociology of childhood implies a dichotomous relationship between 'traditional' and 'new' ways of thinking about children and their childhood. This 'new' way of conceptualising children and childhood opened up space for asking different questions about children and their childhoods, articulated how the concepts themselves varied considerably across time and space and addressed questions which were overlooked, excluded or marginalised by the focus on socialisation. The chapter will explore how rather than being treated as a focus in their own right, children were largely sidelined in mainstream sociology to areas such as the family, education or deviance. Within these fields, socialisation was the core conceptual framework for thinking about children and their childhoods. Writing in North America, Ambert (1986) argued that children were only visible in sociology in respect of their progress along the

path to adulthood, and that the research agenda largely focused on effective and ineffective processes of socialisation. Similarly, Qvortrup (1994) argued that traditional sociology largely concerned itself with children as 'human becomings' rather than as human beings, focusing on how their future potential could be effectively developed through socialisation while, for the most part, ignoring their lives in the present.

Drawing on theoretical advances from sociologists working in Nordic countries, the chapter will outline how this 'new' sociology of childhood has influenced debates about children and childhood in a variety of European countries and the USA. For example in the UK, James and Prout (1997) produced a range of work which marked a departure point for thinking sociologically about children and childhood, drawing on the perspective of social constructionism and advocating new methodological approaches to the empirical study of children's everyday lives. In the USA, sociologists such as Corsaro (1985) and Thorne (1993) developed and applied social constructionist approaches to the lives of American children, outlining how they apply meaning to their everyday lives and in the process create peer cultures, thus presenting children as active agents who create meaning through their interactions with others. Collectively, social constructionist approaches repositioned children as active social actors and emphasised their capacity for agency. They advocated a renewed research agenda aimed at seeing children in the here and now, rather than in terms of what they would become as adults. They called for more active engagement of children in the research process and advocated a set of techniques whereby children's own experiences of the social world, their own meanings and interpretations should be central to the data collection process. The chapter will review some of the most influential theorists who locate children within this social constructionist approach and whose work frames children as active social actors. This does not mean that socialisation is now rendered obsolete. Baraldi (2010), for example, argues that Italian sociology remains preoccupied with socialisation theory and that Italian social policy continues to fail to engage with children as active agents. The chapter will also present critiques of the claims made by 'new' sociology of childhood theorists. Ryan (2008), for example, argues that a more thorough engagement with the history of children and childhood suggests that there have always been interconnections between the concepts of socialisation and agency, rather than the agency approach being 'newly' linked to the 'new' sociology of childhood. Underpinning these debates are wider sociological concerns about the relationship between structure and agency, and the chapter sets the scene for rendering problematic this relationship in later chapters.

New ways of thinking about children and their childhoods stimulated a flurry of empirical studies aimed at subjecting and extending children's everyday micro lives to academic scrutiny, but this was at the expense of a corresponding focus

on broader structural understandings of childhood. While the focus on the plurality of childhoods and the diversity of children's experiences is justifiable, Qvortrup (2011) reminds us that the idea of childhood developed as a structural form, irrespective of children themselves. Hence, as a permanent, structural form, a focus on childhood necessitates unpacking the manifestations of structural childhood – in other words, the macro processes which interact with and shape how children live their day-to-day lives. Chapter 3 will explore the work of those theorists whose thinking contributes to a broader structural understanding of childhood, including Zelizer in the USA, Qvortrup in Norway and Sgritta in Italy. Adopting a structural approach, Zelizer (1985), for example, illuminates how the modern child became transformed from being 'economically useless' to 'emotionally priceless'; Qvortrup (2011) outlines how compulsory mass schooling changed the landscape of childhood as, for the first time, large numbers of age-specific children were brought together institutionally with the object of transforming them into literate adults; and Sgritta (1994) illuminates how society construes childhood and outlines how children inhabit and interact with institutions differently from adults because they hold a child status. In order to make sense of the impact of macro structures on children and their childhoods, the chapter will focus on four areas: work, family, education and play. The intention is not to provide a comprehensive overview of these four themes but to construct a framework which will elaborate on how macro processes have impacted on children's involvement in the labour market, their family life, their education and their play and leisure. Collectively, these four topics cover a significant part of children's childhoods and will enable the reader to effectively see the extent to which almost every aspect of childhood is influenced by macro forces.

Chapter 4 turns attention to the micro worlds of children. The 'new' sociology of childhood stimulated the development of a rich and multifaceted body of empirical research, exploring and unravelling children's everyday lives in a variety of different contexts. The chapter will review some of the most important contributions in this field, showing how such work uncovers the heterogeneity of children and their childhoods. While the volume of output on the micro worlds of children is vast, in keeping with the structure of Chapter 3, the focus will be on the same four areas: work, family, education and play. Each theme has produced a burgeoning amount of research and one chapter cannot do justice to the quantity available. Hence, as in Chapter 3, the four areas will provide a framework whereby the reader can gain insight into how children interpret, reinterpret, reconstruct and reformulate the various discourses offered to them through multi-dimensional socialisation processes in order to create and categorise their own culture-laden social worlds. These four topics provide a scaffold for illuminating children's active agency. The chapter will draw on a body of work which collectively

demonstrates how, rather than being shaped by adult culture, children actively and creatively appropriate, transform and reconstruct information, processes and practices from the adult world to produce their own understandings of that world. The chapter will outline how children position themselves in particular social contexts and how they attribute meanings to age, gender, class and ethnicity. By drawing attention to the diversity of roles that children construct in daily interactions within various social contexts, the chapter will demonstrate the complexity of children's lived experiences and the diversity of meanings children attribute to recurring social practices. In myriad ways, children make a significant contribution to cultural reproduction and the resulting strategies they implement effectively show how socialisation is not a matter of adaptation and internalisation but an ongoing process of negotiation and reinvention. The chapter will provide a context for demonstrating the agentive role that children play in cultural reproduction.

Chapter 5 highlights how theoretical challenges outlined in the 'new' sociology of childhood paralleled changes in national and international arenas where new spaces were opening up to facilitate and acknowledge children as subjects in their own right. To the forefront of these wider developments was the CRC, which is regarded as a watershed in the movement towards the recognition of children as rights bearers, particularly around the right to be consulted about decisions which directly affect their everyday lives. The chapter will review how children came to be politically positioned, particularly with respect to the increasing emphasis on children's voices and their capacity to be active social actors. This involves examining the background to the CRC, its implications in setting a global framework for improving the conditions of children and exploring the ways in which ratifying countries have (or have not) incorporated its values into their national plans, programmes and legislation. The chapter will also review how this debate has evolved into one on creating an effective balance between rights and responsibilities and how this has been applied to and rendered problematic in relation to children.

Positioning children as rights holders is a fundamental step in advancing their pathway to citizenship. While citizenship may be simplistically defined as being born in a state, in reality it is linked to issues of inclusion and exclusion, including children's core exclusion from voting. Marshall (1950), for example, argued that although children had some social and civil rights, they could not be regarded as full citizens because they had no political rights. The chapter will review key debates on citizenship, focusing in particular on how the lack of voting rights dilutes citizenship, and will review a number of creative proposals for extending voting rights to children. The chapter will also outline how a number of childhood researchers have attempted to define what citizenship might mean for children, including suggestions that citizenship needs to be seen as a 'lived' practice rather than being narrowly reduced to its formal dimensions. The chapter will also articulate

the ways in which many societies prepare young people for exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship through involving them in school councils. Finally, the chapter will review the arguments around creating a complementary balance between children's positioning in society and potential need for protection with their entitlement to be considered as rights-holding citizens, and how this may involve confronting and critiquing how citizenship is commonly defined.

The penultimate chapter turns to the problematic relationship between structure and agency, which is a recurring theme throughout the chapters presented thus far and continues to influence theoretical and empirical articulations of children and childhood. This reflects wider debates in sociological theory whereby the relationship between structure and agency continues to vex social theorists. 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 impact on how individuals produce and reproduce these structures. People's everyday routine, repetitive actions produce and reinforce a set of expectations about these institutional features of society and their location within them. These expectations influence or limit the opportunities available to individuals and indeed the choices they subsequently make. However, society is not just determined by social forces, rather individuals have the capacity to act independently. In other words, individuals are able to reflect on and change their behaviour. People do not passively respond to structures but, as reflective agents, they can act intentionally to change structures and their positioning within these structures. Hence, while the various institutions and positions that make up the structure of society often produce established ways of doing things, these are not effortlessly reproduced. As reflective agents, individuals can consciously alter their place in the social structure and the traditional expectations attached to their positioning. However, a fundamental problem remains concerning the extent to which structures impact on individuals' behaviour and, concurrently, the extent to which individuals' behaviour impacts on structures. While the 'new' sociology of childhood sought to reposition children as active agents, their location within the structural component of childhood calls into question their scope for autonomous action. Hence, childhood is both structured and structuring. Childhood sociologists draw heavily on Giddens' (1984) 'structuration' theory, which emphasises the duality of structure and agency. As James et al. (1998: 202) put it, childhood becomes 'a magnificent testing ground for the dichotomy between agency and structure ... it is adult society which constitutes the structure and the child, the agent'. By revisiting how childhood theorists and researchers treat the relationship between structure and agency, the chapter questions and renders problematic the extent to which children's agency can ever be fully activated by children themselves. While children are undoubtedly agents, nonetheless they continue to be widely

influenced by adults' ideas about childhood, and these ideas and the structural generational framework set limits on children's agency and actions, thereby calling into question their status as autonomous agents. What children can and cannot do continues to be influenced by adults' conceptions of childhood, and this fundamentally dilutes the impact that children have on shaping the societies in which they live their daily lives. The chapter will review how the concept of generational order was an important advance in sociological thinking around adult-child relations. Theorists such as Alanen (1994), Mayall and Zeiher (2003) and Qvortrup (2011) analyse generation as a core element of social structure which is bound and linked to other structural variables such as gender, ethnicity and class. These theorists outline how children can be considered as a minority group conditioned by resilient power relations based on generation. The chapter will elaborate on the body of work which outlines how children and adults are holders of specific social positions that are not only defined in relation to one another but are also defined within specific social structures. The chapter will review these debates and suggest that children's agency needs to be framed within and between generations.

This argument will be developed through the author's conceptualisation of generagency, which is further sub-divided into inter-/intra-generagency. Generagency brings together the mutually reinforcing and interdependent relationship between generation and agency. Inter-generagency 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. Children continue to be located in historically durable, generational relationships based on power, and it is within this framework that their agency is practised. In other words, agency takes place against a backdrop, where existing hierarchies between adults and children structure the conditions under which children practise their agency, calling into question the extent to which participating in these recurring forms of social interaction makes children agents. Yet, recognising the constraints under which agency is practised does not necessitate dismissing the potential impact of agency on social structures and this will be discussed and illustrated in the chapter.

The concept of intra-generagency will also be introduced to suggest 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. These peer cultures do not exist independently of the adult world and, at times, they may become appropriated by the adult world, but they also have the ongoing, ever-present potential of directly and indirectly influencing that adult world. While these arguments are not new, generagency enables the construction of a tighter framework within which to examine and illuminate how structure and agency become activated within relationships influenced by generational positioning.