

The background of the book cover features a close-up photograph of small, bright yellow flowers with dark green leaves. A solid dark green horizontal band runs across the middle of the cover, serving as a backdrop for the title and author's name. In the bottom left corner, there are overlapping white and green rectangular shapes, and a white rectangular box is positioned at the bottom center.

KEY CONCEPTS

CHILDHOOD
MICHAEL WYNESS

CHILDHOOD

Michael Wyness

polity

Copyright © Michael Wyness 2015

The right of Michael Wyness to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2015 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6234-3 (hardback)
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6235-0 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wyness, Michael G.

Childhood / Michael Wyness.

pages cm. – (Key concepts series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7456-6234-3 (hardback: alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-7456-6235-0 (paperback) 1. Children. 2. Children–Social conditions. I. Title.

HQ781.W958 2014 305.23–dc23

2014016821

Typeset in 10.5/12 Sabon

by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by T. J. International Ltd,
Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Childhood

Key Concepts Series

Barbara Adam, *Time*
Alan Aldridge, *Consumption*
Alan Aldridge, *The Market*
Jakob Arnoldi, *Risk*
Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, *Disability*
Darin Barney, *The Network Society*
Mildred Blaxter, *Health 2nd edition*
Harriet Bradley, *Gender 2nd edition*
Harry Brighouse, *Justice*
Mónica Brito Vieira and David Runciman, *Representation*
Steve Bruce, *Fundamentalism 2nd edition*
Joan Busfield, *Mental Illness*
Margaret Canovan, *The People*
Andrew Jason Cohen, *Toleration*
Alejandro Colás, *Empire*
Mary Daly, *Welfare*
Anthony Elliott, *Concepts of the Self 3rd edition*
Steve Fenton, *Ethnicity 2nd edition*
Katrin Flikschuh, *Freedom*
Michael Freeman, *Human Rights 2nd edition*
Russell Hardin, *Trust*
Geoffrey Ingham, *Capitalism*
Fred Inglis, *Culture*
Robert H. Jackson, *Sovereignty*
Jennifer Jackson Preece, *Minority Rights*
Gill Jones, *Youth*
Paul Kelly, *Liberalism*
Anne Mette Kjær, *Governance*
Ruth Lister, *Poverty*
Jon Mandle, *Global Justice*
Cillian McBride, *Recognition*
Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips, *Development*
Judith Phillips, *Care*
Chris Phillipson, *Ageing*
Michael Saward, *Democracy*
John Scott, *Power*
Timothy J. Sinclair, *Global Governance*
Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism 2nd edition*
Deborah Stevenson, *The City*
Leslie Paul Thiele, *Sustainability*
Steven Peter Vallas, *Work*
Stuart White, *Equality*

Acknowledgements

Some of the material in Chapter 2 draws on Wyness, M. (2014) Children, family and the State: revisiting public and private realms, *Sociology*, 48 (1): 59–74; Chapters 3 and 4 draw on Wyness, M. (2013) Global standards and deficit childhoods: the contested meaning of children's participation, *Children's Geographies*, 11 (3): 340–53; and parts of Chapter 5 draw on Wyness, M. (2012) Children's participation and inter-generational dialogue: bringing adults back into the analysis, *Childhood*, 20 (4): 429–42.

I want to thank my two boys Henry and Alec for their boundless optimism and energy in keeping me balanced when the pressures of work could easily have taken over. I also want to thank Beth for her love and constant support.

The work of some of my childhood colleagues at the University of Warwick needs to be acknowledged and my MA students have been influential in forcing me to clarify and extend my arguments on contemporary childhood.

Finally, I would like to thank Jonathan Skerrett of Polity for asking me to write this book and for his commitment to the project.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
Introduction	1
1 Conceptualizing Agency	7
2 The Recognition and Distribution of Children's Agency	34
3 Childhood, Globalization and Global Standards	60
4 Childhoods: Diversity and Hybridity	87
5 Childhood and Generation	113
6 Childhood, Wellbeing and Multi-Disciplinarity	141
Conclusion: Relocating Children and Childhood	169
 <i>Notes</i>	 176
<i>References</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	203

Introduction

The rise of critical theorizing within the social sciences at the end of the twentieth century has challenged many modernist bedrock concepts. Childhood is one such concept, which underpinned social scientific attempts at understanding, measuring and regulating the process of growing up. However, over the past two decades childhood has emerged as a contested concept, a cluster of critical and complex ideas around the nature of biological, social and psychological growth in the early years. The modernist conception of childhood formed through the theoretical and empirical work of developmental psychologists, and to a lesser extent functionalist sociologists, provided a hugely influential paradigm for the study of children and childhood. Children were viewed as incomplete social apprentices dependent on regulated support from more powerful adults as they progressed along a developmental pathway, carefully negotiating the appropriate stages as they reached the required biological age. Childhood was also underpinned by a range of political and institutional structures and developments in the latter half of the twentieth century, which focused on the regulation of childhood. The childhood studies developed in the late 1980s offer theorizing and research on children and childhood which challenges these earlier 'modernist' arrangements. At the same time, this research picked up on major social and political changes by

2 *Introduction*

both reflecting and shaping the changing nature of adult-child relations and the revisioning of childhood in the twenty-first century. This book will explore this new theorizing and research, setting out a much more complex and contested terrain within which academics, policy makers and practitioners understand and work with children and the concept of childhood.

We can take the example of Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girl who from the age of eleven started writing a blog for the BBC on the difficulties that Pakistani girls have gaining access to regular schooling, and who achieved global recognition at the age of fourteen after being shot by the Taliban for speaking out against their policies on women and education. Malala has become a representation of the desires and commitments of children, particularly girls, in less affluent parts of the world, as they strive for the same resources and opportunities as their more affluent peers in the West. She is also feted as a young heroine both at home and abroad in the way she embodies the agency of children in the twenty-first century who understand their social contexts and make a difference both locally and globally. From the example of Malala, we can distil three critical inter-related themes which form the basis of ongoing debate within childhood studies and are the focal points of the book; children's agency, the relationship between children, childhood and globalization and structural approaches that locate children within generational orders. Discussions of children's agency give prominence to social and cultural rather than biological factors, with the latter arguably limiting our understanding of children's agency. Hitherto, agency has been viewed as a property or disposition that children acquire once they have successfully progressed along a developmental pathway into adulthood. Childhood studies have rejected this developmental approach in favour of recognizing children's capacities as agents very early on in childhood. Agency in many ways has become a given within this research field, particularly within the sociology of childhood. Researchers have drawn on children's agency as a central conceptual device for analysing children's activities in a number of disparate contexts, from young children exercising choice on a routine basis over the food consumed within families through to the economic responsibilities that

Brazilian children have in communities that rely on child labour for their survival (O'Connell and Brannen 2014; Pires 2014). Children are assumed to have the capacity to make a difference within their social environments and this forms the basis of our examination of agency in Chapter 1. The paradigmatic status of agency is also evident across a range of other disciplines within childhood studies. In this chapter I discuss the multi-disciplinary potential of childhood and agency within the disciplines of history, anthropology and geography. While there is considerable analysis of children's agency from a number of different academic disciplines, there is much less on how children themselves view their capacities and agency. In the final part of this chapter I discuss children's own conceptualizations of their agency, particularly with respect to their status and levels of participation within school.

Agency has also been implicit in broader analyses of the twenty-first-century child in political and institutional as well as research terms, with concepts such as children's voice and participation becoming a more prominent feature of policy and practice agendas. In Chapter 2 I locate agency in broader political and institutional terms. A key theme here is change: in what ways has a changing political and social landscape underpinned a shift in the status of children and a reconceptualization of childhood? In what ways does policy and practice within child-related fields take more seriously the assumptions made within childhood studies that children are inherently agentic? Do social workers and teachers acknowledge children's agency by providing them with access to decision-making channels? I will address these questions in the first part of Chapter 2. While the bulk of the first two chapters focuses on researching the heightened profile of children as social agents in general, in the latter part of Chapter 2 I attend to the social distribution of children's agency. I introduce factors that differentiate children and childhood such as poverty, social class and age and in the process explore the differences in the way that different groups of children exercise their agency.

With reference to the second theme, globalization, one of the major shifts in theorizing within the social sciences in the latter decades of the twentieth century is the shift in frame of

4 *Introduction*

reference from national to global concerns. As with any aspect of social life, globalization has had a significant impact on our understanding of childhood and children's social relations. Globalization has had important consequences for children themselves, from the kinds of access that children have to schools, to their ability to engage in ever-more creative ways with a global mass media (Kenway and Bullen 2002). In the first part of Chapter 3 we explore the implications that globalization has for children in economic and political terms. In turning to childhood as a concept or social ideal in Chapter 3 our global connectedness in economic, political and cultural terms has had profound consequences for our understanding of children's lives. What globalization has done is to re-work the structure/agency debate by focusing on global and local issues. In the second part of Chapter 3 and in Chapter 4 we assess the way that childhood can be theorized in terms of a complex relationship between broader global trends and more localized factors. In the process we illuminate a different but parallel antinomy between a unitary model of childhood that emphasizes global uniformity and understandings of childhood that emphasize local diversity. One aspect of globalization is the attempt to generate a standardized model of childhood based on Western affluent world notions of childhood that include compulsory schooling and the development of 'individual' capacities. At the same time the attempts of Western nations and cultures to export this particular conception of childhood generate more critical localized constructions of childhood, with the accent on cultural diversity. While Chapter 3 explores a unitary or standardized global model of childhood, Chapter 4 focuses more on the cultural and political dimensions of globalization and the diverse ways that childhood is constructed at more national and localized levels. It also explores the diverse ways that children from very different political and cultural contexts draw on global media in developing their own identities.

In the final two chapters of the book the focal points are twofold: the position of children within the social structure and, more broadly, the status of childhood studies within the social sciences. In one important sense these two themes are related. The attempt to develop a corpus of theory that locates children and childhood at a more macro or structural level

reflects attempts to establish 'childhood' as a dominant field of study within the social sciences. Chapter 5 focuses on theories that bring childhood in line with other sociological narratives on power, social difference and disadvantage. In exploring the position of children within the social structure, we outline generational approaches to the study of children and childhood. Thus, generation is advanced as a dimension of social stratification that can both complement and supersede more conventional narratives such as social class and gender. However, as with agency the concept of generation is contested. We tease out two approaches to the study of generational relations, the categorical and the relational. The former starts from a priori oppositional differences between 'child' and 'adult', making it easier for childhood scholars to compete with other social structural theorizing within feminism and Marxism. In effect, this approach assumes that the nature of children's lives and the kinds of societal forces on their lives are of a quite different order from the forces impinging on the lives of their parents, teachers and other adults, with adults nevertheless having power over children. An emphasis on action or agency as well as structure, on the other hand, generates questions about the role that children and adults play within these overarching theoretical structures and directs us towards more relational and inter-generational approaches. In setting out the possibilities of a generational approach to the study of childhood, I draw on a number of empirical cases. Thus, the problem of child abuse is subject to an analysis in generational terms, and the question is posed: to what extent are children at risk from abuse and maltreatment from adults due to their structural position within the generational order? We also illustrate the range of interdependent relations between children and adults from current representative research in the areas of children's participation and transnational migration.

In the final chapter we reflect on the position of childhood studies within two broader realms, the social sciences and the political public realm. We discuss the implications of a more interdisciplinary approach in researching children and childhood. The big research questions within the social sciences are now being addressed from a number of different disciplinary vantage points. Childhood is no exception to this

6 Introduction

trend. Arguably, the *raison d'être* of the new childhood studies is the shift away from a mono-disciplinary approach dominated by developmental psychology towards a more multi-disciplinary approach in order to provide broader and richer analyses of children and childhood. This chapter will attempt to move the debate further by exploring possibilities for a more interdisciplinary approach. It will weigh up the possibilities of an integrated disciplinary approach against a more default multi-disciplinary position where researchers from different subject areas tend to work in parallel. In illustrating interdisciplinary possibilities within childhood studies, I will discuss the concept of children's wellbeing, a much contested bundle of ideas but one that nevertheless invites commentary and analyses from a range of disciplinary vantage points. We draw on the examples of child labour and children involved in military conflict in exploring the potential for analysing children's wellbeing from a number of disciplines, including medicine, psychology, sociology and international development. In the final section of this chapter I will link this multi- or interdisciplinary focus to a parallel multi-agency approach in engaging with children within the public sphere. The chapter discusses the relationship between childhood studies and the policy and practice of working with children at political, institutional and professional levels. Thus, the *Every Child Matters* agenda is explored as a political initiative in England with a much stronger focus on supporting children and families through close ties between different 'welfare' agencies and professionals. We explore the parallels between scholars and professionals, both with a mandate to work more closely with children.

1

Conceptualizing Agency

Children's agency has become a direct challenge to hitherto dominant ideas on children's development that effectively define agency as a status assumed by children once they leave childhood. Moreover, a developmental focus on the acquisition of agency privileges biological and psychological factors over social factors. Thus agency has not only been associated with children when they leave childhood and enter adulthood, but biological and psychological growth towards this end point. In the first part of this chapter I explore recent work within the field of childhood studies where agency has achieved almost paradigmatic status. It has become a key assumption in analyses of children and childhood at local and global levels. In challenging the developmental and 'cognitivist' focus, empirical research has drawn on the concept of children's agency within a diverse range of social and cultural contexts, from UK-based children developing religious and spiritual agency through to Indian children of sex workers using their political agency to try to improve conditions for themselves and their families (Hemming and Madge 2012; Sircar and Dutta 2011). Children's agency has thus become an embedded feature of empirical research on children and childhood. However, within sociology, arguably the dominant discipline within childhood studies, there is some conceptual ambiguity over the nature of children's agency. In part this is due to agency's taken-for-granted status, a largely assumed conceptual starting point. The political and moral commitment to agency and its attractiveness as an empirical focus has led to the neglect of a more thorough theoretical

8 *Conceptualizing Agency*

grounding (Valentine 2011). A cursory conceptual inventory of the field identifies an individualist and romanticized strand of theorizing where thinking around children's agency represents the search for the unmediated adult-free voice of the child (Hart 1997; Franklin 1997). Within this framework children are often viewed as being constrained, exploited and controlled by parents, teachers and other adults. Children's agency is hidden, muted or marginalized as adults seek to regulate children's lives. This is set against an emerging social model within sociology where children's agency emerges from ongoing relations between children and adults (Oswell 2013). There is here a more positive inter-generational basis to children's agency. In the first part of the chapter I critically examine the individualist approach to children's agency from a social and relational perspective. The focus on agency here is on three dimensions: agency emerging from inter-generational relations; the embodied and emotional nature of children's agency; and its moral character.

In the second part of the chapter I go beyond sociological thinking and discuss the possibilities of the social nature of children's agency from other disciplinary vantage points including history, anthropology and geography (Rosen 2005; Montgomery 2008; Zeiher 2003). The popularity of children's agency for scholars from a range of disciplines within childhood studies offers further evidence of the shifting ontological and epistemological status of children and childhood. While adult researchers make certain assumptions about children's capacities and competence, rather ironically there is less evidence from children themselves as to what agency means to them. In the final section we discuss children's own conceptions of agency. Drawing mainly on their experience in schools, children provide a distinctive approach to agency in the way that they reflect on how they experience their schooling and understand the implications of having their agency recognized by teachers in school.

Conceptualizing agency

Agency is often assumed to reflect dominant Western liberal values of self-determination, rationality and independence

(Ling 2004; Boyden 1997). Moreover, these are normally seen to be characteristics of fully formed individuals or adults, with children aspiring to this status following carefully arranged and regulated developmental trajectories. Children are viewed as dependants until they grow into adulthood, with their social and moral development closely following their biological and psychological growth. Acquiring independent status, for example, implies that children develop through very specific cognitive stages. According to developmental psychology children move from an early sensory-motor stage where they engage with their environments using their senses to the much later 'formal operative' stage where in adolescence they view the world in more abstract rational terms. The latter is viewed as the embodiment of these Western values of rationality and independence with successful negotiation of these stages a precondition for acquiring agency (Burman 2007). A more recent strand of thinking on the relationship between childhood and agency within childhood studies has tended to ignore developmental thinking and view the child *as well as* the adult as the autonomous independent individual. In Chapters 3 and 4 we will discuss the limitations of this model in terms of globalizing processes. Here I want to focus on this individualist model of childhood and agency where there has been a shift from the individual autonomous adult towards identifying the conditions and the circumstances within which children can become autonomous individuals freed from the regulatory constraints of adults (Lee 2001). I want to pursue the analysis of agency here through a discussion of children's participation, which has both a theoretical and empirical significance, within the field of children's studies. We need to be careful not to conflate agency and participation (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, it is usually assumed that children exercise agency when they participate. Participation has developed out of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and has come to mean 'children expressing their views freely and (having) them taken seriously' (Landsdown 2010, p. 11). Whether we are talking about children in the home, in school or in many cases in the workplace, agency here implies children having the capacity, the space and the opportunity to have some involvement in decision-making processes.

10 *Conceptualizing Agency*

The individualistic strand of thinking has generated an over-romanticized conception of agency. This is evident in a number of ways. Firstly, there is a search for authentic forms of participation, particularly with respect to children's voices. For some the search for authenticity has become a 'fetish', an end at all costs (White and Choudhury 2007). Hitherto, it has been argued that adults have played a dominant, even overpowering role in children's lives (Kitzinger 1997). This argument is extended to participatory initiatives where ostensibly adult involvement and agendas are less prominent. The structuring and regulating of participatory initiatives by adults has led to critical commentary on the artificial and often tokenistic nature of children's involvement (Hart 2008). School councils, for example, are viewed as typical participatory initiatives found in most schools in the UK. They have often been criticized as having little power to advance children's interests, being limited to highly structured discussions about the 'charmed circle of lockers, dinners and uniform' (Baginsky and Hannam 1999, p. iii). Partly as a response to this, researchers and professionals are developing strategies for restricting adult influence from channels of communication within a number of institutional and social settings, granting children a degree of autonomy in articulating their interests from a genuinely child-focused perspective. In more institutional contexts this means that children have more agenda-setting powers, with adults in the background acting as facilitators. Pinkney (2011), for example, analyses children's voices in terms of relations that English welfare professionals have with child clients. One respondent, a children's rights officer, discusses the difficulties of uncovering the child client's 'pure' voice. Pinkney (2011, p. 41) goes on and speculates: 'an impure voice in this scenario might be one that was mediated, muffled, directed, coached, constrained or interpreted'. The 'purity' of the child's voice here is associated with the absence of adult involvement or the limiting of adults' interpretive powers. While there are issues with children's ability to speak for themselves, various authors have taken issue with this idea that the child's voice can ever be free from adult distortion or mediation (Thomas 2007; White and Choudhury 2007; Lee 2001). Children's voices are always mediated or arising out of ongoing dialogue with others.