Marvin R. Koller / Oscar W. Ritchie

Sociology of Childhood

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Sociology
of
childhood

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Dedicated

to the memory of

OSCAR W. RITCHIE

There is an old legend that says that ten righteous persons appear every century to remind humanity of the directions it should take. Surely, those of us who were privileged to know him best would nominate Oscar W. Ritchie to this select circle. His untimely passing makes only more poignant his memory. It is altogether fitting that Oscar was sensitive to the beginnings of life and so invested his energies in the interests of the very young.

His compassion for children carried over into his teaching, study, work, and efforts on behalf of the powerless, subjugated, deprived, and rejected. Oscar transformed difficulties into challenges and opportunities to grow. To be numbered among his students, colleagues, friends, or family was and is honor, indeed. If this volume, originally conceived, initiated, and coauthored with him captures a fragment of his sweet nature and purpose in life, it merits attention.

Preface

Some fourteen years have elapsed since the publication of the first edition of *Sociology of Childhood.* In that time, the nature of the world and American society, in particular, has changed drastically. The postwar years of World War II with the remarkable promise of the Kennedy Administration were ending tragically with the loss of a charismatic leader and with losses of other inspirational leaders such as the revered Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Three short years later, Oscar W. Ritchie passed away and left the sadness felt for a warmhearted brother and colleague. The Vietnam conflict escalated and brought student confrontations to a climax in deaths and woundings on our home campus of Kent State University on May 4, 1970. The nation witnessed the withdrawal from Vietnam only to be further tested in the Watergate conspiracies and the resignation of its President. A healing process seems to have been operating throughout the land as Americans continue to confront the pressing domestic issues of achieving a healthier economy, environment, energy system, and rekindling of ethical efforts in behalf of human rights.

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Childhood: a multidimensional status

The first twelve years of life for an individual are filled with significance whether judged from the perspective of that individual, the groups, organizations, or associations with whom that individual is related, or from the collective viewpoint of the society in which the individual spends his or her lifetime. In these early years, it is quite clear that the foundations of unique personalities are laid down, that the general directions that lives will take are given orientation, and that the social futures of generations are begun. To treat these momentous years of any given life in terms of their personal-social dimensions in some sensible, systematic, and sufficiently satisfying manner is a task of enormous proportions. Nevertheless, it is one to which we dedicate ourselves because it is an effort that should give us "understanding." With understanding can come thoughtful actions, which prevent the pitfalls that shatter lives and lead to those alternatives that enhance lives.

A distinction should be made from the beginning between *childhood* and *children*. Childhood is held to be a status, a position in a

society relative to other age groups older than twelve years of age. Essentially, childhood is a universal phenomenon involving ascription or an assumption on the part of others that children are to behave in some "approved," acceptable manner. Children, however, are young individuals just acquiring the ways of the persons who are older than themselves. How readily or reluctantly children acquiesce to their ascribed behavior, the expectations of others, becomes a complex question with which our study deals.

In a sense, we should be free to examine childhood and children everywhere and throughout history. Further, it would be profitable to draw upon every discipline that bears upon childhood and children. But there are practical limits to what can be accomplished within the confines of a single text, a single course of study, and a single quarter or semester of an academic year.

We limit our concerns with childhood and children, therefore, to America and to the years ending the twentieth century and beginning the twenty-first. Where childhood and children in other parts of the world or in other historical times can be instructive, however, we do not hesitate to draw upon such useful and illuminating information. Finally, the key discipline from which we draw our analyses and syntheses of childhood and children is sociology.

In our stress upon the sociological, however, there must be recognition of the values insights of other fields of study. Because childhood and children are multifaceted and not the exclusive topics of interest in any one discipline, we need to consider the multiple approaches available to students.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF CHILDHOOD

General Background

Each approach to the study of childhood has its advocates as well as its skeptics. Further, within any single approach, there are "schools of thought," factions that maintain that certain aspects should be emphasized or made paramount.

Within sociology, for instance, there has been prolonged debate about being neutral, detached, or uncommitted to any single value-stance. Students being trained in sociology have long been cautioned to be objective, to stand "outside" the subject matter and diligently consider all possible data before arriving at "tentative" conclusions. The one allowable value was to use the scientific method as rigorously as possible before deciding what the facts really are.

Such a stance, however, is most difficult to maintain in the face of a value-laden, value-generating world. Consequently, it is not heretical to identify, acknowledge, or be aware of one's own set of values. Sociologists and students of sociology have begun to state their values and so let others know why they believe something is "good" or " bad." We, obviously, believe that children are precious beings in their own right or we would not devote so much time and energy to pulling together sociological data or thinking about children.

Historical Approach

An approach that should yield great insight is one that makes use of historical materials. There is sound logic to the premise that in order to understand the present, there is need to understand the past. Treatment of children and childhood has varied in time, and a tracing of the earliest interest in youngsters from prehistory through the recorded history of ancient, medieval, European, African, Asian, and American periods would be a rewarding venture. Of particular value to students of childhood would be the historical changes and consequences of transforming contemporary societies into urbanized, industrialized, high energy consumption enclaves that rapidly dissipate limited resources.

An historical approach, at best, should prove to be an effective antidote to the all-too-common bias of *temporocentrism*.[1] This bias stresses the present as the most important of all times, a perspective that does not square with the reality of the infinite time-slices that came before the present and will occur into the distant future.

One fascinating finding in historical study is that behavior considered quite modern and unique is really quite ancient or long-established. The ancient laments of children in their reluctance to devote long hours to their academic studies have, for example, a familiar and modern ring. One ancient Egyptian pupil wrote to his former tutor, "I was with thee since I was brought up as a child. Thou didst beat my back and thy instructions went into my ear."[2] This was in keeping with the ancient Egyptian maxim that "a boy's ears are on his back and he harkens when he is beaten."[3] Such a maxim came from one of numer-

[1] Robert Bierstedt, *The Social Order*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), pp. 177–179.

[2] Adolf Erman, trans. by Helen M. Tirard, *Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1894), p. 329.

[3] James H. Breasted, *A History of Egypt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 99.

ous "morality" books written by childhood "experts" of antiquity.[4] Undoubtedly, such advice reflected the needs of adults to bring children under control, but it did not consider the needs of the children themselves. Positive or negative sanctions, rewards or punishments, the familiar "carrot-or-stick principle" continue to be debated among those who seek conformity to norms whether it be in the context of family, school, church, prison, or employment.

There have been changes, of course, and these have evolved slowly, laboriously, almost imperceptibly throughout human history. One such change would be *the increasing value placed upon children.* Far back in the past, children were not particularly esteemed or accorded special attention; little was required of them other than general service and obedience to their elders. Children were to be subdued, subordinate, and servile. The dominant themes expressed by the "speak-when-spoken-to" and the "be-seen-but-not-heard" precepts for yesterday's children come to mind, as well as the exploitation of children in mines or factories.

Otto Bettmann has written a most revealing history of America's disregard for children in times well within the memories of living elders.[5] Bettmann reminds us that in this "land of the free," children were put into hazardous mills, mines, and factories to earn twenty-five cents for a twelve to fourteen hour day. Parents would be paid one dollar to release a company of all claims when a child was injured or handicapped for life. "Charitable" employers volunteered a single payment of five dollars for an injured child.[6]

It would take many years before a turnabout could occur, but eventually child-labor laws were made part of the legal codes. Children were to attend schools to prepare themselves for adult roles. The *extrinsic* value of children for what they could *produce* was gradually abandoned in favor of the *intrinsic* value of children for what they *are.* Childhood viewed as preparation rather than an opportunity for exploitation was a profound shift for adult Americans to make.

Some would take the position that the swing of the historical pendulum went too far. American society has been held to be a "youth-oriented" or "youth-centered" society. It is the adults, rather than the young, who have to be defensive, and a countervailing movement has begun. This is the central concern of the gerontologists who seek ways

[4]Margaret Murray, *The Splendour That Was Egypt* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1949), p. 107.
[5]Otto L. Bettmann, *The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible!* (New York: Random House, 1974).
[6]Ibid, pp. 77–78.

and means to integrate or incorporate older persons into ongoing society rather than dismissing them as inconsequential and expendable, a status once accorded children.[7]

A third result of historical study of childhood is to discover neither stability of patterns nor complete reversals of established treatment of the very young. Instead, children have experienced uncertain, cyclical strategies of "bringing children up." Children, we have noted, have been treated as slothful, as subhumans who are sorely in need of discipline. If this discipline grows too harsh, the unconscionable conditions found among children lead to remorse and dissatisfaction. Modifications are begun to help children enjoy their childhood and so grow in whatever directions they see fit. When and if this "self-actualization" culminates in discord and disregard for the needs of others, new adult controls are instituted and the cycle begins again. In brief, the *run of attention* in child rearing seems to be more in terms of *fads and fashions.* One bit of evidence supporting this emphasis-deemphasis-reemphasis thesis is found in *Infant Care,* a booklet issued by the Children's Bureau of the Federal Government for many years.[8]

In sum, the historical approach to the study of childhood does yield valuable insights in terms of the evolution of conditions that affect children. Further, those patterns that are unaffected by the passage of time or those subjected to rapid changes are brought under observation. Some relationships concerning children will be linear or accumulative while others will display the characteristics of cyclical growth-decline-return to growth.

In the course of this book, we need not apologize for drawing upon social historians when they furnish us with illuminating examples of childhood. But the more comprehensive analysis and synthesis of historical data as it relates to childhood will not occupy a central place in this discussion. It will remain in the well-qualified hands of our fellow social scientists, the historians.[9]

[7]There are numerous publications in the burgeoning field of Social Gerontology, but a few sources that would help ground a person in this field would be: Matilda White Riley, Director, *Aging and Society,* Vol. One; *An Inventory of Research Findings,* Vol. Two; *Aging and the Professions,* Vol. Three; *A Sociology of Age Stratification* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1968, 1969, 1970); Robert C. Atchley, *The Social Forces in Later Life, An Introduction to Social Gerontology* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1972); and Douglas C. Kimmel, *Adulthood and Aging* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1974).

[8]*Infant Care,* Washington, D.C.: Children's Bureau, Health, Education, and Welfare Department.

[9]A useful source that gives a useful perspective on the historical treatment of children is Stuart A. Queen and Robert W. Habenstein, *The Family in Various Cultures,* 4th ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1974).

Developmental Approach

One of the most appealing frames of reference concerning childhood has been that which emphasizes the various phases of developing children, their stages of growth and, at times, their regressions or failures to move beyond certain levels of growth or abilities. The miraculous creation of life in the fertilized ovum, literally a microscopic speck, to its gradual transformation into mature adulthood has fascinated observers for years, particularly those who identify closely with this growing organism from the stages of foetus, infant, child, and adolescent to that of mature adult. As both the *object* and the *subject* of attention, each individual has a deep investment in his or her own growth-stages and, generally speaking, looks forward to "growing up some day."

The developmental approach to the study of childhood, then, could be said to rest upon biological, physical, and physiological processes that occur involuntarily in response to inherent genetic codes. The increasing refinements of musculature, neural, glandular, and other body systems form the foundation for what is known as "age-grading" of children in numerous cultures.[10]

Little is expected of such a helpless, vulnerable, dependent creature as the infant. Indeed, the general treatment most accorded babies is *acceptance* of their lack of control over body functions. Some would express this as a state of voluntary *resignation* to the need of infants for attention almost every hour of the day or night.

Newly arrived babies in their very state of utter dependency are, figuratively speaking, "kings or queens" of households. Note the numerous preparations anticipating the arrival of these "royal" creatures, the careful, meticulous marking and celebration of birthdays and the seemingly endless years of nurturance, support, protection, and encouragement given "little ones." All unknowingly, unconsciously, babies must be taken into account by the more mature, independent adults and so, in a real sense, control situations.

Of course, there are notable exceptions to what we would expect as a normal response to infants or very little children. One such exception that has aroused public furor is apparent in cases of abused or battered children.[11] We will have occasion to return to this venting of aggression against defenseless infants or young children. For the present, suffice it to note that child-abuse is an extreme form of reject-

[10]See for example, Monica Wilson, *Good Company, A Study of Nyakyusa Age-Villages* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).
[11]See Jerome E. Leavitt, ed., *The Battered Child, Selected Readings* (Morristown, New Jersey: General Learning Corporation, 1974).

ing, resenting, repudiating the presence of lives in development. Milder, subtler, but nevertheless highly meaningful reactions of gradually withdrawing support so that children may stand, walk, talk, eat, sleep, play, dress, and control elimination with increasing facility still seems threatening from the perspective of little children.

The relationship between parents and children is inverse. As children develop and gain, thereby increasing abilities to attend to their own needs, adults gradually pull away, diminish, their attentive, hovering, ever-present supports and place children "on their own." This is the *weaning process* that occurs among other species, but is socially significant for children and for those who are closest to them. Parents, siblings, relatives, friends, or their surrogates comment on how well children are progressing in terms of this displacement of physical dependency by physical autonomy

Something else, however, is also going on as this type of shifting occurs. This is the *nonacceptance* of childish behavior because children have supposedly acquired or developed enough personal control of their minds and bodies "to do better" than they have in the past and so release others from certain responsibilities. Pressures mount upon children in these stages of development. Persons attending children ask more and more of them. Baby-talk or other childish behavior must give way to adult behavior. If, for instance, something happens that seems to suggest that children are arrested, retarded, or handicapped in their normal growth and development, then parents may be sorely tested to continue to sustain their offspring. Such "special children" are discussed in a later chapter.

The internal changes, the changes in organs, systems, and coordinating mechanisms, of the human body are the special province of pediatricians and other medical specialists. These are accompanied by the external, easily seen changes that occur with developing children. These latter changes seem to excite the greatest comment from observers. Children's increasing heights, weights, skills in manual dexterity, and communicating their needs are a constant source of amazement to proud parents and relatives. Most of us can recall numerous instances in our childhood when relatives or friends exclaimed, "My, how you have grown!" Under our collective breaths, we might have said to ourselves, "What did you expect?," but if we were cautioned to deal with such moments, we politely thanked them for their interest in our normal development.

These developments are greeted with approval and acclaim because they have social significance in terms of the child soon to be a participant in the social order. Reaching one level, stage, or plateau in development means that the next "higher" levels of accomplishment

are within the individual's grasp. The work of Gesell and associates laid the foundation for this type of thinking.[12] Children under observation simply were expected to demonstrate increasing control of their bodies in some progressive fashion.

The error in this developmental theory is that children are expected to perform in some lockstep manner as they reach a particular age. Failures to perform at progressive levels as anticipated alarm some parents. If, on the other hand, children perform far better than anticipated, parents bask in the reflected glory of their "precocious" children. It is the assumption of a fixed series of developmental stages that brings on undue fears or overbearing pride on the part of parents. Such reactions are magnified still further when they are communicated to growing children who may also doubt their abilities or acquire a scornful conceit of others. *Invidious comparisons* have left scars of envy, hatred, and resentment that mar the personalities of children for the remainder of their lives.

One last observation should be made concerning the developmental perspective. It is that untold numbers of children in the world do not have "an equal chance" to develop physically and physiologically. Rather, there are wide differences in children's development because of social circumstances and these social limitations (nutrition, sanitation, and physical care) prevent optimal growth. Because these social circumstances are not immutable, there is reason to believe that they will yield to persistent efforts to exchange vital medical or health knowledge and skills.

Outstanding medical professionals such as Albert Schweitzer, Tom Dooley, and Gordon Seagraves have taken their expertise to remote regions of the world and so earned worldwide acclaim for their humanitarian efforts. Not many years ago, the *U.S.S. Hope*, a floating hospital, cruised world ports providing a teaching function for medical practitioners. Project Hope continues in a wide variety of land-based operations to diffuse the necessary knowledge to give children a healthy start in life. Arthur Goodfriend's *The Only War We Seek* dramatized the need in a photographic essay that urged "a war" against the ancient enemies that attack all humanity, namely, poverty, disease, hunger, and illiteracy.[13] The work goes forward on multiple fronts to this day to

[12]See Arnold L. Gesell, *Infancy and Human Growth* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928); Arnold L. Gesell, *Atlas of Infant Behavior* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934); Arnold L. Gesell, *How a Baby Grows* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1945); Arnold L. Gesell and Frances L. Ilg, *The Child From Five to Ten* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1946); Arnold L. Gesell and Frances L. Ilg, *Child Development* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1949).
[13]Arthur Goodfriend, *The Only War We Seek* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951).