

Foster care and social analysis

A view from Childhood Studies

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Childhood with Bourdieu. Palgrave Macmillan.



Introduction to the sociology of childhood, with some reflections on foster care research

- Concepts of childhood: from a life stage to a figuration of social relations
- Critiques and the “new” sociology of childhood
- Micro-sociology of *children* (children’s life-worlds)
- Macro-sociology of *childhood*
- Structure/agency polarity in the sociology of childhood
- Moving towards a relational solution
- Thinking *foster care* relationally, with Bourdieu...

Conceptualizing childhood

- The rationale for concepts of childhood:
 - Childhood's difference from its "Other" (adulthood)
- Ambiguity of 'childhood'
 - The child/children vs. childhood
 - Often conflated
- Sociology of childhood (1980s-)
 - Introduced a clear *conceptual distinction* between the child/children and childhood
- Five or six concepts of childhood

Six concepts of childhood

- Childhood as a life **stage**

New concepts through empirical study of children, beginning at the second half of the 19th century

- Childhood as **development** [psychology]
- Childhood as **socialization** [sociology; anthropology]

The “new” sociology of childhood, 1980s ->

- Childhood as a child’s **life-world**
- Childhood as society’s **structural** component
- Childhood as a configuration of **social relations**

1. The stage concept

- The many “Ages of life”
 - Aristotle: *augmentum – status – decrementum*
- Traditional wisdom
 - John Locke: *tabula rasa* (empty nature)
 - Jean-Jacques Rousseau: the ‘authentic’ child
- Scientific investigation in the 2nd half of the 19th C
 - ‘Cultural recapitulation’
 - Ideas of ‘progress’, or ‘development’

2. The developmental concept

- Development
 - Biological and psychological changes
 - Particular direction, improvement (progress) and goal (endpoint) of change
 - Childhood: a child's journey towards the endpoint
- Orderly sequence of progressive change
 - Universal, context-independent stages/phases of development
 - > age-related and group norms and milestones of progress (e.g. Freud, Piaget)
- Critiques/contestation of universalist concepts
 - 1) Development is dependent on context
 - 2) 'Development' (the idea) is a social (cultural) construction

3. Childhood as socialization

- Sociology's counterpart to 'development'
 - focus on the societal (social, cultural, interactional) 'forces' that make children develop/change
- The idea of socialization
 - introduced to sociology, **not** on the basis of empirically studying children, but
 - as a precondition and implication of **theories of social order**: what childhood must be, for (the idea of) social order to be maintained
 - E.g. for Parsons (1951) socialization = the mechanisms by which societies deal with "what sometimes has been called the 'barbarian invasion' of the stream of new born infants". Children are a threat to society, and therefore must be shaped to fit in.

Critiques and new concepts

- Beginning in the 1970s:
 - Critiques of functionalist and deterministic concepts
 - New ideas, inspired by interpretive approaches (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology):
 - socialization takes place in a complicated process of *interaction*
 - children are not passive targets of 'agents' of socialization (family, school), but *active partners*
 - social psychology focus; 'socialization' retained
- In the 1980s-: **the 'new' sociology of childhood:** increasing critique of the 'forward-looking' and individualistic connotations of earlier concepts
 - They present children as 'becomings', not as 'beings'
 - They ignore the innovative and creative aspects of children's **participation in social life**

The 'new' sociology of childhood

- The study of normal, everyday childhood
 - Impetus: not a social policy concern
 - Basic research, on the normality of childhood
- A critique of the socialization perspective
 - To enhance the visibility of children here and now
 - Children 'in their own right'
- Agency and voice for children
 - Children have been reduced to vulnerable persons to be protected, not seeing them also as participants
- Structural constraints on children and childhood
 - Not merely part of a particularistic world (family, locality), but of the larger society, too.
 - Economic, technology, urbanization, migration, globalization...
 - Within such large scale frameworks: children are not only victims but also participants.
- Ordinary methods of social science

4. The life-world concept of childhood

- The concept builds on
 - phenomenal thinking of children's role in everyday interaction, and
 - post-positivist epistemologies, especially social constructionism
- 'Childhood' refers to children's lived and experienced everyday world
 - activities, interactions, interests, perspectives, experiences, beliefs and understandings
- Not one, but a plurality of childhoods
- (Micro)sociology of *children* and their social worlds

A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood. In Prout, A. & James, A. (eds) 1990. Constructing and reconstructing childhood.

The life-world concept in (micro)sociological studies of *children*

- Agenda: *Child-level* research
 - units of analysis: child(ren) in (inter)action
 - child-centered focus
 - agency, visibility and voice -> children's views, identities, experiences, activities, relationships, beliefs etc.
 - children co-construct their childhoods in 'negotiations' with their social and cultural environment
 - discovering and **describing** children's lived and experienced childhoods
- Small-scale studies, mainly using qualitative methods
 - ethnography, interviewing, observational methods
- Uses of knowledge: e.g. to evaluate and develop child policy
 - recognition of children as social actors
 - UNCRC: children's views of their rights, ways of participation

The life-world concept in *foster care research*

- Titles of published articles
 - ‘My life in care: experiences of non-participation in decision-making processes’
 - ‘Whose agenda? Issues of power and relationship when listening to looked-after young people’
 - ‘Listening to the voices of children in foster care: Youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection’
 - ‘Children’s voices: the views of vulnerable children on their service provider and the relevance of service they receive’
- Titles of books and book chapters
 - Kindheit in Pflegefamilien (Braches-Chyrek et als., Hrsg.)
 - Geschwisterbeziehungen bei Pflegekindern
- Papers in this conference?

5. The structural concept of childhood

- “In industrial society the concept of **generation** has acquired a broader meaning than in earlier societal formations as ‘children’ and ‘adults’ have now assumed structural attributes relative to each other.” (Qvortrup 1987)
- Children make a (relatively) permanent **category** in as much as there exists a (socially constructed) distinction between children and (especially) adults
- ‘Childhood’ (singular) refers to the **social space** that is culturally, politically, economically (etc.) constructed and instituted for ‘children’ to inhabit.
- Childhood is a permanent **structural** element of society, comparable to social *class, gender, ethnicity*, etc. with which it intersects

Jens Qvortrup & als. (1994) Childhood matters. Social theory, practices and politics. Aldershot.

Structural sociology of *childhood*

- Agenda: Childhood -level research
 - unit of analysis: childhood (not individual children)
 - focus is on features shared by all (or most of) those who have been *categorized* as 'children', and inhabit a particular childhood, e.g. patterns of daily life, social status, experience of poverty or inequality, well-being, rights, etc.
 - aim: description and explanation of the quality of childhood
 - (1) description: as it is lived in particular time and space (e.g. English 19th century childhood, urban/rural childhood)
 - (2) explanation by way of linking it to macro-level entities and processes deemed influential, such as economy, polity, welfare regime, economic and political transformations and changes in technology, migration, urbanization, etc.

To note: children are not (only) victims of these processes, but also active participants in them (social actors).

Structural childhood research

- Research methods
 - quantitative/statistical methods
 - mixed methods
 - historical methods
- Uses of knowledge
 - monitoring and social reporting on the state of children/childhood
 - comparative studies, e.g.
 - comparing childhood with the state of other generational categories within a society
 - international comparisons of childhood
 - history of childhood
(with an intention to provide explanation)

Structural *foster care research*?

Moving from the structure/agency polarity towards a *relational* conceptualization

- Macro-sociology vs microsociology
 - ongoing debate on *childhood vs childhoods*
 - difference in their grounding ontologies -> is there a solution?
 - which ontology for the social study of childhood?
- Re-emergence of interest in ontological issues
- A “relational turn” in the social sciences
- A long tradition in *relational thinking*: Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Elias, ...

“Society does not consist of individuals; it expresses the sum of connections and relationships in which individuals find themselves” (Karl Marx, in *Die Grundrisse*).

“The real is relational” (Pierre Bourdieu)

The inherently *relational* nature of childhood

Chris Jenks (1982) notes

“the necessity and contingency of the relationship between the child and the adult, both in theory and in common sense. The difference between the two positions indicates the identity of each: *the child cannot be imagined except in relation to a conception of the adult*, but interestingly it becomes *impossible to produce a well-defined sense of the adult and his society without first positing the child.*”

John Fitz & John Hood-Williams (1982):

“If we wish to understand childhood we have to proceed not by studies of discrete phenomena but by *studies of relationships*, since [childhood] is not a function of age but *a social category constituted in relation to, and indeed in opposition to, the category adult* (as is feminine to masculine).”

6. A relational concept of childhood

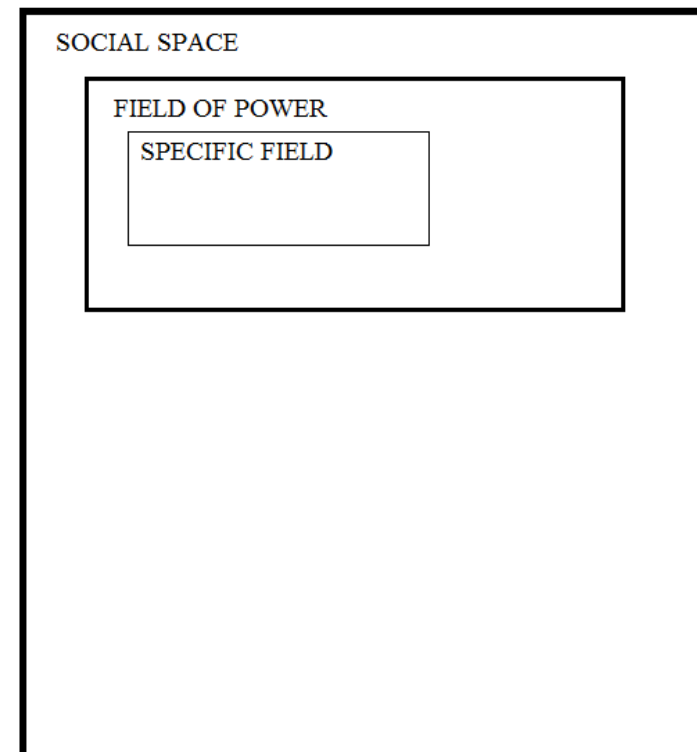
- Grounded on a relational social ontology:
 - the social is in relations -> childhood as a relational configuration
 - It is a *structural* concept
 - childhood is conceptualized as a *position* within a socially generated (inter)generational structure, or *generational order* (Alanen 1994, 2005; also Bühler-Niederberger 2011)
 - child positions – non-child positions (parent, carer, teacher...)
 - Research focus on the relational, intergenerational *practices*
 - within which children co-construct themselves as 'children' and their relational counterparts as 'adults' ('parents', 'teachers', 'carers'...)
 - '*generationing*' practices
- > A dynamic analysis of *generationing practices* within an generationally (and objectively) structured social order

Thinking *foster care*, relationally

- Pierre Bourdieu's theory of structured social fields:
"The notion of field reminds us that the true object of social science is not the individual, even though one cannot construct a field if not through individuals ... It is the field that is primary and must be the focus of the research operations. This does not imply that individuals are mere 'illusions', that they do not exist: they exist as agents (and not as biological individuals, actors, or subjects) who are socially constituted as active and acting in the field under consideration by the fact that they possess the necessary properties to be effective, to produce effects, in this field. And it is knowledge of the field itself in which they evolve that allows us best to grasp the roots of their singularity, their point of view or position (in a field) from which their particular vision of the world (and of the field itself) is constructed."
(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 107)

‘Field’: a relational historical formation

- The concept can be used at different levels of aggregation
 - *global social space* (e.g. cross-national organizations: OECD, World Bank, UN Committee of the Rights of the Child)
 - *national space* (schooling or welfare system, educational policy-making)
 - *local space* (preschool group, peer group, family group)
- The total social space is made up of a number of relatively autonomous social microcosms, (spaces of objective positions)
- Fields, subfields, dominant fields, intersecting fields, and their relations -> complexity
- **Foster care** analyzed as a field



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