



# Childhood in Sociology and Society

*The US Perspective*

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**abstract:** The field of childhood studies in the US is comprised of cross-disciplinary researchers who theorize and conduct research on both children and youth. US sociologists who study childhood largely draw on the childhood literature published in English. This article focuses on American sociological contributions, but notes relevant contributions from non-American scholars published in English that have shaped and fueled American research. This article also profiles the institutional support of childhood research in the US, specifically outlining the activities of the 'Children and Youth' Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA), and assesses the contributions of this area of study for sociology as well as the implications for an interdisciplinary field.

**keywords:** childhood ♦ children ♦ children's well-being ♦ social inequalities ♦ social policy ♦ United States

## Introduction

My approach to providing a US country report on the sociological study of children takes three forms. I first examine the US context of the study of children since 1980, discussing important research findings and the development of the field. Walkerdine (2004) provides a comprehensive discussion of the earlier debate focused on when childhood became distinguished from adulthood – such as Ariès (1962 [1960]), de Mause (1974) and Demos (1970). I then examine the major perspectives and research initiatives as they inform the empirical lives of American children. Finally, I consider the usefulness of childhood as an interdisciplinary area of study, and present a vision for the future of childhood studies within sociology.

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## The US Context of Childhood Sociological Research

American sociology takes a broad definition of childhood studies – or the study of children and youth – to include researchers who theorize and conduct research on children and adolescents. The US context of the study of children can be divided into two main areas, research and teaching, and the larger social and political climate in which both of these are supported. In both of these areas, European sociologists, interacting through the International Sociological Association (ISA) Research Committee 53 on Sociology of Childhood, have made substantial contributions to the development of the childhood studies field. Europeans administer the two major childhood publishing outlets, *Childhood* and *Children and Society*. In addition, British childhood scholars have published four textbooks for sociology of childhood classes offered by the Open University: *Understanding Childhood* by Woodhead and Montgomery (2003), *Childhoods in Context* by Maybin and Woodhead (2003), *Children's Cultural Worlds* by Kehily and Swann (2003) and *Changing Childhood* by Montgomery et al. (2003). American sociologists have also offered substantial contributions (e.g. Corsaro, 1997) but these generally fall within the confines of traditional academic disciplines, such as sociology and psychology.

Scholarly research and teaching on childhood by American sociologists finds a home in the 'Children and Youth' Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA), which was originally the Children's Section from 1992 until 2000. The 'Sociological Studies of Children and Youth' series (Kinney and Rosier, series editors, Elsevier Science), formerly the 'Sociological Studies of Children' until 2000, stands out as the sole American publishing outlet geared to sociologists who study children. Members of the ASA's 'Children and Youth' Section have published this annual research volume since 1986. For monographs focused on childhood and children's issues, two prominent presses include Rutgers University Press, which has a series titled 'Childhood Studies', and Lynne Rienner Press, which has a series on 'Children at Risk'.

In terms of teaching and curriculum development, early development took place in the disciplines of psychology or education. After 1990, though, sociology courses which focus on children and childhood have begun to be offered by American universities and colleges. The ASA publishes the *Sociology of Children and Childhood Teaching Resource Guide* (editor, Sue Marie Wright, 2003), which offers sample syllabi, assignments and projects for sociology courses focused on children. A few American undergraduate textbooks centered on childhood have been published, including Elkin and Handel's (1988) *The Child and Society*, Corsaro's (1997) *Sociology of Childhood*, Boocock and Scott's (2005) *Children in Contexts* and Handel et al.'s (2007) *The Sociology of Children and Childhood Socialization*. While the Elkin and Handel,

Corsaro and Handel et al. texts take a sociological perspective, Boocock and Scott use a more interdisciplinary approach. In terms of curriculum development, Brooklyn College and Eastern Washington University both offer an undergraduate major in Children's Studies, and Brooklyn College also has an interdisciplinary Children's Studies Center. Rutgers University offers certificates at the BA and MA levels in childhood studies, and houses the interdisciplinary Rutgers University Center for Children and Childhood Studies. Therefore, there has been teaching and curriculum development of childhood studies within the discipline of sociology, but this has taken place within a larger context of childhood studies that encompasses the disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology and education.

### **Major Theories and Approaches in American Childhood Research**

Social constructivist approaches, social structural approaches and demographic approaches all are used to interpret the lives of American children. These approaches allow us to know how it is that children actively construct meaning, how they are constrained by social structure and also how our understanding of children's lives can be used to inform public policy and protect children's rights and well-being.

This section discusses each of these in turn.

#### **Social Constructivist Approaches**

American cultural and social constructivist approaches to childhood studies are informed by theoretical work published in Europe and the earlier anthropological work of Opie and Opie (1969), who argued that children should be recognized separately and autonomously from adults as a community with its own stories, rules, rituals and social norms. In the 1970s, American anthropologist Bluebond-Langner (1978) interpreted dying children's worlds using their words and points of view to explain how these children comfort their parents and doctors. More recently, Clark (2003) explains how humor and play interactions initiated by chronically ill children help families cope. In Europe, Qvortrup (1994) presented childhood as a 'social phenomenon'. Likewise, other European sociologists had begun to use social interaction theory to include the daily activities and wishes of children when interpreting their lives (e.g. James and Prout, 1997 [1990]; Jenks, 2004; Maybin and Woodhead, 2003; Qvortrup, 1993; Stainton Rogers et al., 1991; Woodhead, 1999). Corsaro (1988) contributed to American theorizing by interpreting the meaning of children's lives from their social networks. Gathering data on children's everyday experiences and what these experiences mean to children is in agreement with ethnographic methods that use reflexivity and include children's voices.

Social constructivist research within institutional settings, such as day care centers and schools, finds that young children add meaning to their experiences and create peer cultures. Toddler peer groups have been noted to emerge among two year-olds and they already show preferences for sex and race (Thompson et al., 2001; van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). Play builds upon itself and across playgroups or peer groups, even when the composition of children's groups change. The children develop shared rules and meanings that define how the play activity proceeds and who is welcome to join the play. These rules and meanings exist at the community level for the children's play, so that the play or game continues even when individuals leave or join the group.

Studies done in institutional settings, such as public schools and day care centers, also allow us to analyze childhood (see Adler and Adler, 1988; Corsaro, 1988; Hardman, 1973; Thorne, 1993; van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). Corsaro (1988) uses participant-observation research of children in the playground in a nursery school setting in Italy and a kindergarten setting in the US as the basis for explaining children's lives and perspectives. In the same vein as British anthropologist Hardman's (1973) earlier observations within a primary school, Corsaro (1988) examined the level of children's experience as it interacts with other levels of society's beliefs, values and social interactions, shaping them and being shaped by them. In this way, children are presented as active agents who create meaning through social interactions and their relationships. Similarly, Corsaro and Eder (1990) present young children in free play recreating elements of the adult world in their child-level culture. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) use participant-observation and the social constructivist approach again to show how young children's play patterns and discourse teach other children about race. Their study, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*, finds that not only do children learn how to identify with racial difference, but they also learn that there is a pecking order of privilege and acceptable behavior across different race groups, as well as their relative place in the racial ordering. Adding to this, other studies (Cahill, 1986; Milligan and Brayfield, 2004) explore how adults treat children in public settings and how these interactions provides a framework for give and take, and cultural acquisition and practice.

Patricia Adler and Peter Adler (1988) explain how children create a stratification structure within a middle school setting in *Peer Power*. With *Gender Play*, Barrie Thorne (1993) does a similar type of study of grade-school children. Thorne makes the case that while it is assumed that children's culture is set in an elementary school setting, the children are still active in making the rules and creating social structure. As an example, Thorne explains how children use 'pollution rituals' within the games they create and play to 'enact larger patterns of inequality, by gender, by social class and race, and by bodily characteristics like weight and motor

coordination' (Thorne, 1993: 75). In this way, she contends that children create a stratification structure that is similar to the adult world as they perceive it. Portraying children as actively creating meaning, Lamb's (2002) research documents how children share and communicate knowledge about sex with their peer group using a secretive child culture. Extending this research, British peer culture studies on racism, masculinity and sexism (see Frosh et al., 2002; Hey, 1997; James et al., 1998) and Ambert's (1995) study of the subjects of physical and emotional abuse among Canadian children provide insight into how these sensitive subjects are taught and negotiated within children's peer groups. Across these studies, children are actively interpreting and creating the meanings that define their culture.

### **Social Structural Approaches**

Age as social structure, whether measured as younger children vs older children, or by a generational marker of child and adult, is also used to define and understand childhood. As discussed earlier, Thorne (1987) views age and gender as structures that frame children's lives, but she also views children as social agents affecting these structures and creating their own culture within these structures. Bass (2004) similarly finds that primarily age, and then economic status and gender, together constrain opportunities open to children who work in an open air market in sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, children remain active contesters and participants of their work worlds. Passuth's (1987) research finds that age is more salient than other stratification markers, such as race, social class and gender. Passuth finds that children of five to 10 years old in a summer camp setting sort and define themselves as little and big kids. Other research (Goodwin, 1990; Scott, 2002) suggests again that age should be considered conjointly with race, gender and social class to understand how power and prestige are negotiated within children's peer cultures.

Viewing age more broadly, Foner's (1978) life course work provides valuable early insight into age, and more specifically, generational status, as an analytic tool to understand a generation's outlook on relationships and family formation. According to Foner (1978: 343), 'Each cohort bears the stamp of the historical context through which it flows [so that] no two cohorts age in exactly the same way.' Foner explains that those of each cohort may develop similar attitudes because they have experienced the same larger social and political milieu. More recently, age continues to be useful as a prominent marker as European and Canadian scholars find generational status to be a main factor defining children's lives (e.g. Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2000; Qvortrup, 2000; Walkerdine, 2004).

Putting forth a structural thesis, Zelizer (1994) explains how the modern child emerged from economically 'useless' in the late 1800s to emotionally

'priceless' in the 1930s. She argues that an economic view of life is limited because it fails to include important social, cultural, emotional and moral factors in the marketplace (e.g. children's life insurance policy values). In his social history of the children's clothing industry in the US, *The Commodification of Childhood*, Dan Cook (2004) explains how childhood became associated with products and contends that childhood became *commodified* first with the publication of a 1917 trade journal advertising children's clothing, and then by recognizing a legitimate child consumer acting on his/her own needs and wishes by the 1960s. Cook shows how the consuming child today has a separate children's department within clothing stores that is stratified by age and gender, and that this separate children's consumer sphere was constructed during the 20th century. Other research has examined childhood through the lens of their material world (e.g. Cross, 1997; Lamb, 2002; Zelizer, 2002). More recently, Zelizer (2002) defines children as more active, participating and shaping culture as producers, consumers and distributors. Similar to Cook's thesis, research outside the US by childhood scholars similarly shows how children's consumption defines childhood (e.g. Buckingham, 2004; Jing, 2000; Kline, 1993; Postman, 1982) and may even diminish the power differential between children and adults (e.g. see Tapscott's [1998] internet technology study).

Adding to this, Qvortrup (1993) explains that children inhabit and interact with institutions differently from adults, because they hold a child status. The factors framing the *social structural* child are therefore larger than age status, as they create age status in a childhood process (Qvortrup, 1994). Children are treated differently within the social structure and have certain traits resulting from interaction (as children) with the institutional structure of societies. Generation can, therefore, be viewed as a structural marker that distinguishes experiences, interactions and social meaning. This perspective allows us to understand how the experiences of children within a certain epoch can lead to a change over time in larger social norms and values.

Rather than focusing only on peer influences, Lareau (2002) puts forth a social structural model of socialization as she details how American families of different races and classes provide different childhoods for their children. In her research, different parenting philosophies set within the constraints of parents' different resource levels are used to explain different childhoods by class and race. Lareau focuses on the constraints of race and class, while at the same time recognizing that children and parents construct childhoods in the context of constrained choice. She found evidence of two types of child rearing, *concerted cultivation* on the part of middle-class parents and the *emergence of natural growth* on the part of working-class parents, that then put upper- and lower-class children, respectively, on different roads in childhood that translate into vastly different opportunities in adulthood.

**Demographic Approaches**

Childhood studies in the US has been strengthened by the research of demographers who often take a top-down approach to the study of children, viewing them as being interlinked with a larger family structure. Demographic research concerning children has also addressed pressing public policy issues, making meaningful connections between parent's employment, health insurance, family poverty and family stability, on the one hand, and indicators of child well-being, on the other. In the US context, child well-being indicators may include any number of factors, such as being-on-track-grade-for-age or exhibiting confidence or maturity, on the one hand, to the use of cigarettes, alcohol or drugs, and having emotional problems, on the other. The study of children's well-being in the academy has been fueled by government and private foundation grants and fellowships that seek to monitor the lives of children. Additionally, non-governmental policy organizations, such as Child Trends and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, have fueled the study of children's well-being. Indeed, within social demography, a sizable literature has been developed on what leads to positive and negative measures of child well-being.

Using US decennial census data during the 20th century, Hernandez (1993) argues that several 'revolutions' took place in the American family, such as decreased family size and the emergence of two-earner families. These shifts in the family cause subsequent effects on children's well-being and American childhood. Children from small, high-income family backgrounds generally attain more education and take more lucrative employment, compared to children from larger families and lower incomes. The increase in dual-earner families fuels higher income. Currently, roughly 70 percent of preschoolers' mothers work outside the home (US Bureau of the Census, 2002). This movement of women into the labor market caused what Hernandez calls a childcare revolution, changing the nature and structure of American childhood over the past 50 years. In 1940, just 13 percent of preschoolers had two working parents (US Bureau of the Census, 2002). Other studies document children's increased amount of household chores since 1981 (Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001), the impact of maternal employment on time spent with children (Bianchi, 2000; Cooksey et al., 1997) and children's higher propensity than their fathers in dual-earner families to make up the household labor gap left when mothers work outside the home (Lee et al., 2003). The meaning of childhood is therefore altered as a result of larger family considerations and expectations.

Family life affects children's well-being. For example, when marriages break up, children typically experience subsequent transitions that may include living with one parent, moving to a new home or neighborhood, and changing schools and making new friends. Some studies report negative effects, while others more positive effects, when examining children's

well-being. Research on family structure (Moore et al., 2002) finds that children do better in families with two intact biological parents in a low-conflict marriage. Crowell and Leaper (1994) show that financial support from fathers after a divorce is low, and this serves as a complicating factor in explaining children's well being. Agreeing with this, Coontz (1997) explains that divorce and single parenthood lead to lower financial security. Conversely, other research indicates that children of divorce typically experienced parental conflict and behavioral and educational problems prior to the divorce, so it is difficult to isolate divorce as being the precursor to negative child well-being outcomes (Cherlin et al., 1991). Also, children of divorce report that they are more independent compared with their peers of intact biological parent homes (Smart et al., 2001). Finally, Hetherington (2002) finds that 75 percent of children with divorced parents ranked at the same level on behavioral and educational outcomes as children from intact biological families within six years.

The demographic perspective takes a prominent place in American childhood studies informing family policy. Indicators of child well-being are framed within a changing family context where there are possible consequences for children. The demographic perspective does not fulfill the qualitative requirement put forth by European social constructivist childhood scholars (see James and Prout, 1997 [1990]). Children are accorded little agency, while their well-being remains the focus. In this way, childhood social demographers also provide a valuable perspective to frame and interpret children's lives within American sociology.

## **Public Discussions of Childhood Studies as an Emergent Discipline**

### ***Interdisciplinary Involvement and Implications***

A range of disciplines currently active in the study of childhood helps us understand children's lives and creates meaningful discourse of the underlying methods and theories, which, in turn, create fresh approaches to the study of children. While developmental psychology laid an early foundation of *interest* in children, the field of childhood studies has emerged as a discourse across other disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, which have pushed the field to include a broad range of methods and approaches. The disciplinary make-up of the Center for Children and Childhood Studies at Rutgers University provides a telling example of the breadth of research acceptable for the field: associated scholars hail from sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, library science and religious studies. It is clear that childhood scholars have a great deal to gain from continued conversation and collaboration.

British sociologist Martin Woodhead (2003) offers three models for children and childhood studies to emerge as an interdisciplinary effort. First, he offers a *clearinghouse* model that would include all disciplines and all studies of children as having complementary value. Second, he proposes a *pick 'n' mix* model, where only specific child-centered approaches would be included in the field. Therefore, if some specification is not meant, such as an acceptable method (e.g. the demographic approach not fulfilling the qualitative requirement put forth by European social constructivist childhood scholars, James and Prout, in 1990), then those studies would not be acknowledged as childhood studies. The third model, a *rebranding* model, would allow that researchers collaborate across disciplines on child-centered research, but remain within a traditional discipline such as sociology, anthropology, or psychology. The third scenario is most common in American sociology today.

Prominent childhood scholars contend that the study of children as a field can be compared to women's studies. Myra Bluebond-Langner (2000) contends that childhood studies will have a similar impact on academic life in the 21st century as women's studies programs have had in the 20th century. Likewise, Oakley (1994: 13) asserts, 'Women and children are, of course, linked socially, but the development of these specialist academic studies also poses interesting methodological and political questions about the relationship between the status of women and children as social minority groups and their constitution as objects of the academic gaze.' Much like women's studies, childhood studies can gain ground in the 21st century as a recognized interdisciplinary field which is supported by childhood studies programs in academic institutions.

### **Considering the Discipline of Sociology and Childhood Studies**

Using sociological theories and methods, sociologists make unique contributions to the study of children compared with other disciplines. In the US, the sociological study of childhood has gained considerable momentum since the early 1990s when courses, degree programs and research centers began to be established. Originally established as the 'Sociology of Children' Section in the ASA in 1992, members later agreed to add 'and Youth' to the name to include those scholars who examine adolescents. Similarly, the editorial board of the Section's annual series, 'Sociological Studies of Children' (Kinney and Rosier, series editors, Elsevier Science), modified its title to include 'and Youth' in 2000 to reflect the ASA Section title. The Section has affirmed openness to all methods and theories that focus on children, and maintains a listserv, a newsletter and regular presentation sessions at the ASA annual meeting.

While childhood studies remains interdisciplinary in the US context, sociologists are making substantial contributions. The relationship between the discipline of sociology and childhood studies appears to be symbiotic. Even as sociologists assert that childhood studies is a field of its own (Boocock and Scott, 2005), this does not preclude the development of childhood studies across disciplinary boundaries. Sociologists capture the social position or status of children and have the methods to examine how childhood is socially constructed or situated within a given society. Sociologists can also continue to find common ground with childhood scholars from other disciplines in order to develop better methods and refine theories that explain children's lives. Advances in the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies serves to strengthen the research of sociologists who focus their work on children. Likewise, sociological challenges to the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies since the 1990s have provided useful points of critique and improvement to the study of children's behavior and children's lives.

### **Current and Future Research – Social Policy and Children's Rights**

Current and future research on children can be loosely grouped into two main areas, social policy and children's rights, with some overlap between the two areas. Sound social policy can improve children's lives. Using public policies to pull children out of poverty provides one example. Hernandez (1993) examined poverty in relation to child well-being indicators, and found that poverty fundamentally provides different opportunities for children, some with relative affluence, to others with relative poverty. One study (Costello et al., 2003), which assessed the effect of increased income after a casino opened on a Cherokee reservation, found that Native-American children who had experienced enough increase to be lifted out of poverty had a lower incidence of behavior disorders. Research has also documented the difficulty in isolating the impact of a policy, such as the 1996 Welfare Reform Law (or PRWORA), on children's lives and childhoods (Bass and Mosley, 2001; Casper and Bianchi, 2002). Another public policy example is that the government's recognition of a family form while ignoring others, such as same-sex parent families, affects the children within those families, because the government may fail to address the needs of children within these ignored family forms (Clarke, 1996). Studying children's lives in different family forms provides public policy insight.

Research on children's rights can involve protecting children (generally from an adult perspective) or guaranteeing children civil rights (such as a legal voice or a vote in elections). Protecting children generally posits that

children are immature, so legal protection should be accorded to keep children safe from harm and offer them developmental opportunities. With the civil rights approach, children should be allowed to participate in decisions that affect them (Lansdown, 1994; Saporiti et al., 2005). A complex issue like child labor allows us to view the overlap between the two, as children may be viewed as having the right to learn and develop, while at the same time children may be viewed as having the right to provide for themselves (see Bass, 2004; Nieuwenhuys, 1994).

As children are involved as study subjects, new approaches assert the need to include children's voices and input in the research process (Bass, 2005; Leonard, 2005). As adults, childhood scholars are therefore not on an equal footing with children (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988), so there is still work to be done to create methods that adequately involve children as participants in social research. Future research should build on these findings, and continue to view children actively, even if constrained. Focusing on practical children's issues and using empirical research projects will ground and increase our knowledge of the nature of childhood. Much like the last 15 years of American childhood research, future childhood researchers should continue to bridge disciplines and even continents as they find common ground and forge ahead to build institutions that improve the study of children and childhood.

## Note

This article grew out of a formal paper presentation to the International Sociological Association Research Committee 53 on Children (conference titled 'Marginality and Voice: Childhood in Sociology and Society', Wuppertal, Germany, 23–25 June 2005), and from a chapter ('Sociology of Children and Youth') prepared for Clifton Bryant and Dennis Peck, *The Handbook of 21st Century Sociology* (Sage, 1996).

## Appendix

### **Book Series**

'Childhood Studies', Rutgers University Press.

'Children at Risk', Lynne Rienner Publishers.

'Sociological Studies of Children and Youth', Elsevier Science.

### **Journals**

*Children, Youth, and Environments*, at: [www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/](http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/)

### **Study Programs**

Brooklyn College Children's Studies Program and Center.

Eastern Washington University Children's Studies Program.  
Rutgers Center for Children and Childhood Studies.

### **Scientific Associations**

'Children and Youth' Section, American Sociological Association.

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