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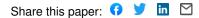
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Abstract

It has been well established within contemporary social studies of childhood that (a) childhood is a social construction, and (b) children are to be considered social agents capable of producing valid data about their own experience. Yet, while these principles resonate with social work scholars on a theoretical basis, there remains a need to consider how social work researchers might better incorporate this theoretical perspective into research methodologies and fieldwork strategies. This discussion paper seeks to address this gap.

This paper is divided into two key sections. The first considers how notions of 'childhood' as a social construction diverges from normative, uniform, and universal ideas of what might otherwise constitute 'the child.' The second part of this paper then considers this discussion in regards to social work research. It considers the extent to which childhood scholarship has been used within the discipline of social work and illustrates this point by drawing upon recent contributions to foster care literature.

Introduction

This paper traces the emergence of how childhood might be understood in relation to what has been called the "new sociology of childhood" (Prout & James, 1997). It considers how such a perspective may inform social work research with young people and it discusses this within the context of children and young people's experiences of foster care. While notions of children's competence and agency are well-rehearsed in the literature, there remains a concerning gap between how childhood is understood in theoretical terms and the research methodologies and fieldwork strategies ultimately employed by social work scholars. This discussion paper seeks to address this gap.

Rejecting "the child"

To be clear, as social workers we recognize the absurdity of the first half of the title of this paper. We do not, of course, have any intention of 'rejecting' any 'child'; to the contrary both authors have a deep and lasting commitment to promoting the wellbeing of young people. With that said, to reject 'the child' is to put forth an argument that is purposefully provocative and intended to stimulate a sense of reflexivity and discussion about what it means to grow up as a gendered young person in a given social and historical context. Rejecting 'the child', then, is to relinquish the universal conceptualisations and normative assumptions about what constitutes the lived experience of being a child. Often, children are considered to be underdeveloped beings, unqualified to have certain rights, and incapable of making decisions that affect their own lives (Boyden, 1997). For example, some perspectives regard children as

the passive recipients of adults' teaching, protection and care, as objects to be shaped and socialized, as the properties of their families, and as incomplete beings who are not yet fully human (Smith, 2007). This is of particular relevance to researchers so that they ensure children's viewpoints about their world are not simply understood to be a reflection of what their caregivers or teachers think (ibid.). This paper argues that children and young people should be at the centre of research that is about their experiences as this is in keeping with social work value base and its commitment to anti-oppression (Dominelli 2002; Rogers 2012). In certain circumstances, for example when researching foster care, it is also good social science to ascertain children's viewpoints as they are at the ones at the centre of the phenomena under investigation.

The mainstream and universal understandings of 'the child' can be largely traced to Western influences (Boyden, 1997; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994; Stephens, 1995). In some cases, theory and research that make sweeping references to 'the child' seem to convey the notion that children's development is somehow uniform, universal, and predictable (Prout & James, 1997). For instance, Woodhead (1997) argues that in the United Kingdom, the framework for assessing the needs of children in public care is based on a model that holds a normative view of childhood, one that would be problematic for practitioners working in different social, political, or cultural social work contexts.

Problematically, children and cultures who do not conform to Western-derived conceptualizations of *the child* run the risk of being cast as *the other* and interpreted as "backward" and "underdeveloped". Stephens (1995) argues that such deviations were then used to expand notions of what modern, Western, childhood should look like. For example, the intellectual genealogy of Western-derived understandings of childhood considered children as evil or innocent, natural or unconscious (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). These understandings consist of two paradigms known as the "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" perspectives. They share a set of common assumptions of childhood as a special time set apart from the adult world, when children are closer to nature than adults, and when children are incomplete and less than adults (Ansell, 2005). In their divergence, the Dionysian view holds children as "little devils" in need of discipline and protection from themselves; by contrast, the Apollonian view holds children as innocent "little angels" in need of play and protection from the world they are born into (ibid., p. 11). This latter view has largely become the dominant perspective since the twentieth century. Ansell attributes the growing presence of the Apollonian view in the West to "a middle-class sentimentalism of childhood partly rooted in adult nostalgia ... [that]... sees children as individuals, more than as a collective future adult society" (ibid., p. 12).

Others have noted that in the west, the economic value of children has largely been replaced by expressive value, whereby the worth of children is mostly psychological and less tied to immediate economic contributions to the family (Scheper-Hughes, 1989; Zelizer, 1994). Western psychology has exerted a particularly profound influence in thinking about children and theorizing childhood today. Grounded within a medical model perspective and its emphases on diagnosis and pathology, this view holds that children's biological development is directly connected to their social development. Children's language, play and interactions come to symbolize important biological and developmental milestones. In this view, children's development is one of ascendance. New levels of development lead

children closer to the adult world, in which "'primitive' concepts become replaced by sophisticated ideas" (Prout & James, 1997, p. 11).

Within sociology, several key criticisms have come to challenge this conventional understanding of the child. These scholars contend that Western psychology has been overly-dependent on stage-based, biological explanations for understanding children (Prout & James, 1997). Stages suggest something of a 'gold standard' for children's development; for those who fail to meet standards there come to be strong implications and repercussions. Take, for example, Piaget's (1954) approach to a stage-based understanding of development. His approach was derived from Europeans but was thought to have universal applicability for understanding children's biological development. Piaget assumed childhood to have a fixed biology, but his model has since been found to be empirically unreliable across different social and cultural contexts (Ansell, 2005). Similarly, developmental psychology frequently considers adolescence as a time period of "storm and stress" in the life of "the child" (Ge, Natsuaki, & Conger, 2006), an assertion now understood to be far from universal (Arnett, 1999). In addition, gold standards leave little non-pathological explanation for "deviant cases" that sit outside of the prescribed stages of children's development. To be sure, humans have biological properties that must be recognized. The fact that children are biologically immature is uncontested. The criticism, however, is when an over-reliance on biological explanations is used to explain human experience. This is done to the exclusion of considerations for how social, cultural, historical, or political-economic factors come to shape lives and structure experiences.

Another concern is that the mainstream view held by developmental psychologists considers children as little more than incomplete persons awaiting to acquire the cognitive skills to enter into the 'real world' occupied by adults (James et al., 1998). We argue that solely focusing on this view of the child as incomplete beings should be rejected, because, as we will explain, it sits in stark contrast to the views and empirical scholarship of many sociologists and anthropologists today. They recognize the biological immaturity of children but also give due weight to the meanings assigned to childhood as subject to external conditionalities (Alanen, 2009; Hart, 2006; James et al., 1998; Prout & James, 1997). However, despite the apparent shortcomings of development psychology and the criticisms made in this section of the paper, it is important to recognize the immense contributions that this body of scholarship has made, particularly in social work. For example, the contribution that Bowlby's (1969) work on attachment has had on understanding the importance of bonds that develop between a child and their caregiver and the influence this had, particularly in the UK, on placement choices for children in public care, which have shifted from institutional to familial settings (Kelly & Gilligan; Fahlberg). However, it is important to acknowledge that an over reliance on a psychological theory such as this is potentially problematic, as Bowlby's theory has been criticised for suggesting attachment needs are innate and universal (Woodhead 1999). It is also particularly important to be critical of normative approaches such as this when one considers the internationalisation of knowledge and how applying universal developmental goals and standards across cultures has the potential to miss the specific nuances of childhood in context. Therefore, in the following section we outline more recent conceptualizations of childhood that are influenced by social constructionist thinking, which we argue not only align more

closely with the commitments and principles of social work, but are also vital in the production of research with children and young people.

Developmental psychology has had a strong influence within the profession of social work. It has been argued that this may be because it offers policy makers and practitioners with clear frameworks to formulate assessment models in order to identify needs (Nybell et al. 2009; Kirton 2009). However, by seemingly privileging psychological approaches, and by neglecting sociological understandings of childhoods, this could result in assessment models that run the risk of making normative assumptions that neglect the social and cultural context of the child's experience. This may cause social work researchers and practitioners to assume universal and objective notions of definitive children's needs when the case may be far more complex (Woodhead 1999). By understanding childhood as a social construction this potential to make normative assumptions is lessened. It keeps with social work practice that has been influenced by ecological perspectives that often frames an individual's needs in the wider context of their social environments (Teater 2010). Yet, we find that the clear synergies between childhood and social work scholarship has not been sufficiently taken up by social work researchers. Graham (2011) observes how not only are children caught up in broader political and economic processes, but so too are social work practitioners and researchers involved in their lives. By actively contributing to the implementation of child welfare policies, there is a dimension of power that serves as a key role for how childhood is constructed and how knowledge is produced. "Indeed," notes Graham (2011, p. 5), "child welfare connects understandings of childhood and changing social, political and economic conditions together as a distinct blend of knowledge to frame theories, research and professional practice."

Embracing childhood

Contemporary sociological and anthropological studies situate their scholarship around the recognition of childhood as a social construction. The scholarship of Alan Prout and Allison James (1997 [1990]) was particularly influential in advancing different principles of what has come to be accepted as the new social studies of childhood. This new perspective does away with the notion of a "universal child" (i.e. "the child") and instead regards childhood as a social construction (James et al., 1998). It acknowledges that biological immaturity is an inescapable shared fact of life – but that it is "the way in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture" (Prout & James, 1997). Qvortrup describes this recognition as childhood having a "permanent structural form" (Qvortrup, Rosier, & Kinney, 2009). By this, he means that all cultures construct parameters for childhood that are occupied by young people until a given point of time before being passed onto new cohorts of children.

Conceptualising childhood as a social construction has influenced how researchers study issues facing children; as it considers ways of learning about the lives of children in such a way that frames them as *human beings* rather than *human becomings.* As Qvortrup explains:

> "Colloquial expressions such as 'children are the future of society', 'children are the next generation' and 'children are our most precious resource' tend to deprive them of an existence

as human beings in favour of an image of them as human becomings, thus underlining the suggestion that children are not authentic contemporaries of adults" (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 5).

Such recognition suggests it is insufficient to learn about children's lives simply by consulting with caregivers or teachers and to the exclusion of children. Children must be viewed as social actors in their own right. Moreover, it means that it is insufficient and inappropriate for scholars to simply draw upon their own personal childhood experience, due to the recognition that the way childhood comes to be understood or experienced are no longer universal. This perspective also aims to explore the constitution of childhood by locating in particular contexts and in relation to the social, political, historical, and economic contexts that children come to occupy. We argue that this theoretical approach has value for social work research with children and young and people across international settings as it examines the experience of childhood in its specific context.

As scholars of social work, a consideration of the new sociology of childhood may lead us to ask questions such as: "How is childhood defined for a particular culture and context?" or "How do cultural and structural forces shape children today?" This view sees children as active agents involved in the construction of their own lives (Hart, 2008, p. 9; Prout & James, 1997; White, 2002) where "images of children as passive and vulnerable are transposed to those which conjure their active agency and participation" (White, 2002, p. 725). Qvortrup writes "[I]t is now shown that it is possible and fruitful to take childhood seriously as a research object in the sociological field – in the sense that children can be counted and accounted for themselves, they have purposes themselves, and they have activities in their own right" (Qvortrup et al., 1994, p. 20). In this view, children can no longer be considered simply objects of research to be studied, but rather subjects whom research is conduct with. This conceptual shift has profound implications for how social work researchers might carry out studies about children. The task then is to develop approaches to research capable of embracing the complexity of children's experiences and to more fully give children the opportunity to share their views in a meaningful way.

Many scholars have found utility in qualitative and ethnographic approaches for working with children. Such approaches might offer children a more direct role in the research process compared with other more standard methods. Ethnographic inquiry is often focused "on the on-going roles which children play and the meanings they themselves attach to their lives" (Prout & James, 1997, p. 5). In this sense, research is often focused as much on what people say as what they do. Ethnographic scholarship has come to produce a growing body of knowledge in a wide range of contexts in relation to the experiences of children and young people (references of ethnographic childhood studies). However, ethnography appears to be utilised to a lesser extent in social work research with children and young people. It is important to acknowledge the potential practical constraints that might prohibit social work scholars from undertaking ethnographic projects, which can last months or even years. However, researchers who are committed to understanding the views and experiences of children can also benefit from specific qualitative or participatory methods that can be used to learn from children's experiences and insights.

For example, Boyden and Ennew (1997) offer a manual for participatory approaches with children. It offers a wide range of practical ideas and examples that hold promise for researching with children in different contexts. These include drawing, dramas, mapping activities, photo elicitation projects, and essays. The volume gives different examples of how these different strategies have been used to explore different aspects of children's lives such as social networks, experiences in different care settings, and engagement with school. These strategies might also help to overcome different challenges of working with young people such as shyness or illiteracy.

The ultimate goal of such activities should be driven by the principle to understand children's unique and valid insights into their own subjective experience. To this end, Christensen and Prout (2002) helpfully advise that research into issues directly affecting children should begin with the idea of 'ethical symmetry'. In this view, the initial approach for engaging with children is the same as that of engaging with adults. "[A]ny difference between carrying out research with children or with adults should be allowed to arise from this starting point, according to the concrete situation of children, rather than being assumed in advance" (p. 482). This may enable social work researchers to avoid demeaning or patronising methods and instead aim at approaches that are participant friendly and empowering (Thomas & O'Kane, 2000; Punch 2002).

The sociology of childhood's impact on social work research

This section of the paper considers the impact that social constructionist approaches to childhood have had on social work research. We illustrate this by examining recent research which has explored children and young people's experiences of foster care in the UK. This section highlights both the benefits and challenges of undertaking research, influenced by a social constructionist perspective, into the field of foster care.

In 1998 Berridge (1998) highlighted a dearth of literature on foster care, in recent years the body of evidence has grown significantly. However, despite this growth it is argued that there is a need for more research that engages directly with children and young people in foster placements (Berridge 2006; Winter 2006; Barber and Delfabbro 2004). Where children and young people, in foster care, have been involved in research this was until recently often as a small part of wider studies. These broader studies often focused on ascertaining views of all the stakeholders, carers, parents and social workers (Hunt et al 2008; Farmer and Moyers 2009; Schofield 2000). The existing literature that has engaged directly with children and young people has also been criticised as it often views them in some ways as consumers of services, which tends to result in them being consulted upon, by use of surveys and interviews that were solely shaped by adults (Winter 2006). Graham (2011, p.1538) explains that this gap in the literature means we know "very little about the daily lives of children and their views about care and how they perceive the welfare services they receive." By utilising social constructionist understandings in research with children in foster care these criticisms could be lessened, as the approach recognises the competencies of children. Thereby, valuing their participation as well as understanding that capturing their experiences of foster care directly from them is important, as they are at the centre of the practice.

Existing research has also been criticised for focusing on outcome measures, and in doing so, often fails to find any positive portrayals of children and young people in care (Winter 2006). Judging children and young people against normative measures is problematic when considering the complex context that has resulted in a child's entry into public care of potentially abusive/neglectful experiences (Schofield 2000; Biehal et al 2010) and then the multiple placement disruptions children often experience once in care (Ofsted 2011). It has also been argued that this predominant focus on outcomes has meant a lack of research that sufficiently engages with theory (Winter 2006; Berridge 2007), something that Stein (2006; p422) refers to as a 'poverty of theory'. Berridge (2007) explains that this means the literature is atheoretical and too descriptive, which as a result lacks nuanced explanations and fails to reflect children's complex realities of growing up in foster care. Given this apparent need for the foster care literature to engage more fully with theory to underpin research we argue that social constructionist understandings of childhood could help capture the complexity of growing up in care and contribute to the evidence base.

It is important to acknowledge that scholars have begun to engage in more theoretically grounded research into this field. For example, Holland (2009) reviewed the theoretical and methodological approaches of forty four peer reviewed articles, across ten nations, which explored the perspectives of children and young people looked after in public care. Holland found reference to theory with varying degrees of rigour in all but six of the studies. As Holland contends this suggests that theoretically informed research is starting to emerge in the field, interestingly seven of the studies made reference to the perspective we advocate in this paper, the sociology of childhood. In order to demonstrate the benefits of applying this approach to childhood in research, we will now discuss two recent studies from the UK that appear to have drawn significantly on this perspective, Winter (2010) and Holland (2008).

Winter (2006) was amongst other scholars who criticised the lack of theoretical explanations in the literature also called for more sociological approaches to research. She put this critique and recommendation into her own research practice and in so doing addressed an important gap in the literature by seeking the perspectives of younger children in foster care. Winter (2010) interviewed four to seven year olds in foster care in the UK, a group whose voices up until that point had been absent in the literature. In this instance it is clear that by adopting sociological understandings of childhood, that recognise competence even in younger children, an important gap in the literature has begun to be filled. This is of particular importance as the findings offer important lessons that really could inform and improve practice with younger children in foster care. For example, Winter (2010; p.186) summarises the following key findings, which 'reveal that they have deeply held views regarding living with risk; removal from their families; unresolved feelings of guilt and loss; and not being listened to".

Holland et al. (2008) undertook a research project in the UK that explored the experiences of children in care they drew heavily on sociological perspectives of childhood and made explicit reference to the sociology of childhood in their title. The study captured the rich complex experiences of growing up in foster care they achieved this by undertaking an ethnographic approach to research. They argued that in order to access children's accounts of their experiences it was important to build a rapport with young

people. This is of significance when you consider that for children in care relationships with adults are often typified by brief interventions and disruptions (McLeod 2007). In order to build a rapport they undertook the data collection over the space of school year and they utilised a range of creative methods to engage the young people. One of the benefits of this approach was highlighted by the researchers when they stated they were able to 'work with the young people's narratives to enable them to 'restory' their lives and plan for positive and practical change (Holland et al 2008; p.94).' This level of ethnographic research needs to be resourced and supported and this may potentially be a barrier for undertaken further studies of this scope.

By focusing on a specific aspect of social work with children and young people in foster care, and by selecting recent research that has overtly engaged with the concept of childhood as a social construction, it is hoped that this has shown the potential of the approach. As well as stimulating thought amongst readers, about where else it may be applied across the professions engagement in research with children and young people, across its wide range of international settings, and diverse cultures and contexts.

Discussion: The way forward

There is a growing recognition in the literature that children's experiences and insights are essential but insufficient by themselves for illuminating a more complete picture about the situation facing young people in a given context. As Hart contends:

> "[B]y positioning children as the experts whose ideas are valued over and above, rather than as complementary to, those of adults significant issues that impact their lives but about which they may have little direct knowledge are ignore. The current reverence for through and 'children's voices' should not cause us to overlook the need for thorough and broad-ranging analysis." (Hart, 2008b, p. 414)

Children's perspectives can offer important insight for understanding issues of importance to them, but that they may also demonstrate limitations in their awareness about how history and politics converge to shape their own experiences (Hart, 2008a; James, 2007). Children may speak knowledgeably about their engagement in school, for instance, but it would be also important to locate their subjective experiences within a broader context to examine how education policy, donor funding, and caregiver views may converge to shape children's experiences.

Inclusion of children's perspectives must also be balanced with concern for ethics and a mandate to do no harm – a principle which must guide social work research and practice, particularly with children. However, it could also be argued that ethical procedures have led to an over protective approach and have become a barrier that serves to exclude children and young people from participating in research. For example, Heptinstall (2000) identified that in the UK challenges exist in accessing looked after children for research purposes, due to concerns about causing harm to a potentially vulnerable group. If children's participation in itself is as an ethical principle then adopting an overly protective approach

that potentially leads to exclusion could to result in a paradoxical situation. To be sure, important information can be gained by speaking with other 'key informants' who can speak to particular issues facing children. At the same time, failure to recognize and engage with children and their particular perspectives also presents a threat to the welfare of children. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that a rights-based approach must protect children. Yet, the Convention also describes the ethical mandate to provide children with the opportunity and space for their voices to be heard. Morrow and Richards (1996) speak to this tension when they note the need to "think about respecting children's competencies and adopt methodological techniques that reflect this while at the same time recognizing that we have responsibilities to ensure that children are not harmed in the process of conducting research". We argue that research with children and young people should be designed in such a way that sees these responsibilities as mutually reinforcing, and aims to promote children's right to protection and participation.

The conceptual and methodological task for scholars who attempt to explore issues facing children by utilizing the framework proposed in this paper is twofold: firstly, to develop an approach capable of engaging with children, in order to understand their ideas and experiences; and secondly, illuminate how cultural, political, economic, and historical forces converge to shape these experiences. This framework for social work research with children offers an approach that has clear synergies with the guiding principles upheld by the disciplinary perspective of social work. For example, in practice social workers should make every effort to empower their clients by allowing them to self-determine to the greatest extent possible, according to the IFSW definition of social work. Saleebey (1997) described this empowerment approach as a 'strengths perspective,' aimed not at 'returning power to people but on discovering the power within people.' These notions of 'empowerment' and 'strengths' are clearly compatible with the perspective offered within the sociology of childhood, which recognises children and young people as active social agents. Despite a growing body of literature in the field of childhood studies there are many different avenues that could warrant further empirical inquiry. For example, much of the existing empirical scholarship on childhood remains in Western settings.

It is apparent that there is a need to explore how the sociology of childhood might be applied in other settings and conditions. For example, in the context of international social work it is also important to acknowledge Stephens (1995) point that scholarship must explore this perspective in relation to processes of globalization and development. Children's voices have been little understood with respect to political and economic processes that are increasingly transnational and interrelated (Hart, 2008a; Stephens, 1995). In this complex situation it is still important for researchers to privilege children's experience and attempt to access accounts directly from them, because as previously stated they are at the centre of the phenomena being studied. However, given the wider context it is also important to recognise there may be a need to supplement their voices with those of the adults that engage in these processes where children's participation is limited or their agency is constrained. This paper has suggested that social work researchers who study issues facing children may benefit from the perspective offered from the sociology of childhood. It may help to inform strategies for scholars for working with children. There is scope to build on the work of those existing social work scholars who have already offered opportunities for young people to express their views and for their views taken

seriously. The paper has helped to advance a practical framework for a methodological perspective that will help to promote children's right to participate, as delineated within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The paper suggests that children's voice should be privileged when undertaking research about their experiences. However, in order to capture the complexity of contemporary society and global political and economic processes that influence children's experiences, they should where appropriate be supplemented with the voices of relevant adults. The meaningful involvement of children in research is not only an important principle, but holds the potential to produce stronger, ethical, and more empirically sound social work scholarship.

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