

Understanding the childhood and the state sociology essay



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The aim of this essay is to critically analyse both case studies by Virginia Morrow using arguments from the New Sociology of Childhood. The first part of the essay will discuss the concept of new sociology of childhood by explaining what it is, why it came about and what its main claims are. It will then move on to explore the findings of the above mentioned qualitative research of a group of children between 8 and 14 years of age in relation to their perspective on what they believe families to be.

Children as 'social actors' and 'children's participation' are key notions in what is considered as a modern day discourse. The implications discourses have in the ways in which children are portrayed and treated within society and the influence the actions taken by people and the judgement taken by them are often the subject of social constructionists. It is also well documented that different cultures can also have different perceptions, so can different situations and circumstances.

In recent years, researchers have developed innovative methods for undertaking research with children. It has been customary to carry out research methods which have not directly involved children, for example, the study of children on a large scale and this has led to some disagreement by some sociologists because it is seen as carrying out a survey on children rather than with children. As an alternative, researchers have shifted towards the importance of giving the child a voice as 'social actors' and being central in any research practice.

It could be argued that most sociological policies and theories have in the past regarded children as being totally dependent, incapable, and dependent

on their families to function successfully within a society. However, by adopting a children's right perspective which is compatible with theoretical developments in the new sociology of childhood can mean that children have the power, skills, knowledge and resources to protect them. Children have been identified within the international framework of human rights as deserved of special consideration.

As quoted by J. Eekelar

“ the language of rights performs an important function. It acknowledges that there are certain things which we should provide for children, not just because adults think it would be nice if they had them, but because we are prepared to recognise that children want them, or can reasonably be assumed to want them”.

(J. Eekelar Why Children? Why Rights? - 2003)

According to (James and Prout 1997) children are referred as active social agents and reliable informants of their own experience, who construct and shape the social structures and processes of their lives. Followers to this theory pay much attention to how children perceive the world around them and that they have their own distinctive way of looking at family life whereby the relationship is seen as a two way process with the child and the parent have a shared influence on any decisions taken. The research, by Morrow proposes that the majority of children do not want to make decision but rather would prefer to make a contribution to their decision making process.

None the less, there are some theorists who do not consider children as having sufficient protection even today. One of the sociologists is Melanie Philips who makes a case that the traditions of parenthood in the UK has broken down and that childhood simplicity has been destabilized by those with open mind which in turn could mean that children are given too many powers and rights.

Other would suggest that the concept of new theory of childhood has become much more complicated and that there is an indication that the idea of a traditional childhood is yet again being lost. It is argued that this is not because of lack of understanding but through the lack of economic equality. Combined with the sophisticated and business-like way of living, it could be believed that childhood has somewhat been reduced as a result to the exposure to more adult information creating a child that is much more interested in everyday materialistic objects, and as such “ expelled from the garden of childhood” (Postman, 1983)

According to (Leacock 1981), within the new sociology of childhood, one of the key elements is that children should be considered as ‘ social actors’, and by doing this, children are then taken from the idea of being ‘ objects’, and to be studied on the basis that children’s beliefs and experiences do give insight into the meaning of childhood (Callinicos, 1993).

The research by Virginia Morrow (1998) was undertaken to explore two current phenomena . Firstly, that children of today experience quite varied family settings on their way to adulthood The second phenomena was in relation to the changes that have occurred in recent sociological theories

whereby children should be listened to and importance given to what they have to say.

The study looked at what children's perceptions were on the family unit and how this might differ between cultures and background. It appeared that for many of the children, regardless of their ethnic background, their life revolved around their family or the extended family. One of the main findings was that children's view in the main does not concur to what is considered as stereotypical notion of what a 'nuclear' family is. Another key finding was that all the children included words such as care, support love and respect when describing what characteristics of 'family'. Again this was though regardless of ethnic background, where they came from or their gender.

A difference was found between children of different ages, as younger children saw having children and being in a marriage as the basis to a family and backed this up with examples from their own families. Older children were more ready to look at things outside their own domain.

Many of the children referred to the term 'relations' when describing their family and many were aware that individuals were related in different ways such as through marriage or genetically.

In general, children explained that families were important to them and they saw their own family as any other family in general.

When the question of who was important to them, the answer was parents, especially their mothers because they provide love and care. For some of the

children, their sisters and brothers were seen as important to them. It appeared from their reactions that friendship was very important so some older children, especially girls.

Finally, when asked about being listened to and being able to give their opinion, the children needed to be involved in decision making and have their say in what happens to them. Some considered that they were being listened to by their families while other did not. Some of the older children however, did mentioned that making a decision was not an easy task.

On reflection therefore, the aim of this essay was to analyse the above mentioned case studies taking the new sociology of childhood into consideration. It could be said that discourses offer different and contrasting ways of thinking about children and childhood and as a consequence how they are viewed and treated by society. What this discussion serves to highlight is that there are conflicting thoughts surrounding the concept of childhood and that there is no clear 'right' or 'wrong' way of looking at what childhood conveys.