

Childhood sociology

Sociology



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Childhood itself is a slightly ambiguous term, and is not a fixed definite period of life. The book “ AS level sociology” written by Rob webb, Hal Westergaard, Kieth Trobe and Liz Steel defines childhood as “ a socially defined age status” going on to say that there are major differences in how childhood is defined, both historically, and culturally, similarly, Stephen Wagg says of childhood; “ childhood is socially constructed. It is in other words, what members of particular societies, at particular times, and in particular places, say it is. There is no single universal childhood experienced by all.

So childhood isn't 'natural' and should be distinguished from mere biological immaturity” This argues that it is not a natural state, but is socially defined. This however is not a universally accepted definition, for example modern law states that a 'child' is any person under the age of eighteen, so this means the period of childhood is 0-18 years, but the theory that childhood is socially constructed is one which is backed up by several sociologists, such as Phillipe Aries, who in “ centuries of childhood” argues that in medieval society, childhood did not exist, but in fact it did not begin to appear until the fifteenth century.

He argues that straight after the dependant stage of infancy, children were entered into the world of work immediately. His evidence for this argument lay in medieval paintings, as very frequently children were not portrayed as visibly different to adults. However many sociologists would argue that that has greatly changed over time, mainly due to the theory that the idea of childhood changes depending on three things; time, place, culture.

This argument of time, place and culture being vital in the determination of the definition of childhood is one which is evident from Aries' arguments about the children as young as 6 entering the world of work, as it was 'socially acceptable' during the time. Another example of this theory being proven would be the “boy wives”, or Zanli warriors Sociologist Pritchard tells of how the 12 year old warriors to be were made to have intercourse with another male warrior, as almost an initiation.

Anything like this type of behaviour in the modern, western society we live in would be condemned, because it is wrong to the CULTURE we live in, however in the society that Pritchard was studying, it was simply a part of a warriors life. In this culture in particular there is little or no distinction between childhood and adulthood, as these children are allowed to become warriors, and also to have intercourse with a warrior of the same sex.

In the society we live in there is clearly a large distinction between childhood and adulthood, this is argued by sociologists such as Jayne Pilcher, who talks about 'separateness' in regards to separate laws for adults and children. As well as this, legislation such as the childrens' act, and the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are also there to help protect children. While laws such as the legal age to which you must attend school (16 years old) are there to ensure that children get a good education, and give themselves the best possible opportunity to have a successful life.

This has lead some sociologists to argue that children are 'wrapped up in cotton wool'. This is a contributor towards the child-centredness of modern society, this means that almost all aspects of society are at least to a degree specifically aimed at children, for example there are many shops and <https://assignbuster.com/childhood-sociology/>

products uniquely designed for children, such as the shop “ Build-a-Bear” or novelty sweets based on children’s shows. This is a very valuable piece of evidence for childhood being a socially constructed idea, as in the past children would have had a very different experience of childhood.

Sociologist Ruth Benedict argues that that children in simpler, non-industrial societies are generally treated differently from modern, western society. She argues that this is evident in three ways; firstly she argues that they take responsibility from an earlier age, evidence to back this up would be from Samantha Punch's study of childhood in rural Bolivia, she found that from the age of around five, children are expected to take work responsibilities, these are taken on without hesitation.

Secondly she found that less value is placed on the children showing obedience to an older person, as Raymond Firth found that in the western pacific, doing as they were told by an adult, was regarded as a concession granted by the child, not a right of the adults. Finally she found that children's sexual behaviour was viewed differently, as Bronislaw Malinowski discovered that in the south Pacific, the attitudes of the adults was simply “ tolerance and amused interest” toward the children's sexual explorations.

Toxic Childhood is a phrase which some sociologists use to describe childhood which produces children responsible for anti-social behaviour and youth crime. This phrase has been used as a possible reason for the London Riots of Summer 2011. Sociologists such as Charles Murray (a new right sociologist) have used this theory to blame the parents of the young people involved for “ giving rise to the criminal underclass” as he believes it was

purely lower class people with 'dysfunctional' (non-nuclear) families who felt frustrated at being surrounded by wealth, and unable to have it.

This phrase 'toxic childhood' is a phrase which has been invented very recently, and is not one which is used to describe children and childhood in non-industrial countries, where there is little or no child centredness. This in itself is an argument for the idea of childhood being socially constructed. In conclusion, childhood is a sociologically constructed idea, as it differs depending on three main aspects... the time, the place, and the culture. These three things can make massive differences between the understanding of childhood.

As in more western, modern society, generally speaking, there is a lot of child centredness, and the children can be said to be “ wrapped up in cotton wool” while in less developed and industrial countries and societies, there can be a wide variation of what childhood is and involves, from the 'Boy Wives' to children being expected to work from the age of five or six. This universal diversity is the largest piece of evidence to argue that childhood is a socially constructed idea.