

# The history of sociocultural education essay



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What they study and how? The historical approach focuses on studying mainly discourse analysis to interpret the lives of children in the past and their influences on current day childhoods. Historians do this by analysing data from archaeological, demographic and visual resources.

Advantage and Disadvantage? A disadvantage of the historical approach is there is not much in the archives about children, a lot of the information is based what adults thought of children not what the children themselves thought. An advantage of the historical approach is that it allows us to see how children and the idea of childhood have evolved.

Who? Historian Lloyd DeMause (1974 cited in Brockliss and Montgomery, 2013) declared that childhood in history was a 'nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken.' (DeMause, 1874, cited in Brockliss and Montgomery, 2013, p. 75) In the past children were treated terribly, abused, neglected and beaten. Many historians disagree with this statement; however it is almost certainly true that most children today are treated better than in history, especially since the introduction of children's rights.

Major Contribution? The historical approach allows us to understand how children and childhood continually change. We can see how it has become what it is today and imagine how it may evolve in the future.

## **Developmental**

What they study and how? The developmental approach studies scientifically through experiments biological and psychological life stages. Developmental theorists, argue that childhood is a period of development from immaturity to maturity where children develop through various common stages.

Research is carried out by identifying normal patterns of children's physical, emotional and cognitive development so that all children can be compared to the norm. They look at what children have in common rather than what sets them apart.

Advantage and disadvantage? A disadvantage of the developmental approach is that it is too general; all children are different and develop at a different rate. An advantage is that this approach allows us to understand the scientific development and biological differences of children.

Who? Jean Piaget (1896-1980 cited in Pound, 2006) focused on the cognitive development of children; he identified four stages throughout childhood, from 0 to 2, 2 to 7, 7 to 11 and 11 to adulthood. He stated that children had to learn and build on their understanding, that unless they had reached the appropriate stage in the process of childhood they would be unable to make sense of certain concepts.

Major contribution? The developmental approach is considered the main platform for developing educational, social welfare and child health care practices.

## **Anthropological**

What they study and how? The anthropological approach focuses on the study of cultures and society through participant observation which is then written up as ethnography. Anthropologists study children within their society and focus on the child's own understanding and views of the world around them.

Advantage and disadvantage? One difficulty of anthropological studies is that it is difficult for anthropologists to study different cultures without judging them. They must remain neutral, without condoning or condemning the behaviour of the people they are studying. An advantage is it allows us to understand how experiences of childhood vary through different cultures and gets to the heart of what children think.

Who? Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1971 [1928] cited in Montgomery, 2013) argued that childhood is not simply a biological state, it's a social construction. Experiences of childhood vary according to the period of time and society in which we live. Childhood is not universal but is affected by our environment and the time in which we live.

Major contribution? The anthropological approach focuses on children's own thoughts, feelings and understanding of the world, a truly child centred approach.

## **Sociocultural**

How and what they study? The sociocultural approach uses a variety of different research methods; ethnography, participant observation and discourse analysis to study how the world around us shapes us as a person. They believe that childhood is not a universal experiences and influences such as culture, class, gender and media can affect the childhood experience. They believe children are valuable members of society in their own right.

Advantage and disadvantage? Similarly to the anthropological approach it is difficult to study cultures without forming judgements. Different things have

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different meanings to different people. An advantage is that it uses many methods and considers children as a unique social group worthy of study.

Who? Alan Prout and Alison James (1997 cited in Gallacher and Kehily, 2013) introduced a new paradigm that changed the features of the sociocultural approach. Some of the important features of the new paradigm are that childhood is a social construction that has many variables, that the study of children's relationships and culture are valuable and that children are not passive subjects.

Major contribution? The sociocultural approach succeeds in making the familiar strange. In making us consider why we do what we do, how we do it and also think about how do we know what we know?

(824 words)

## References

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## **Part B – What is a child?**

The definition of a child according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a person up until the age of 18 years, all of whom require special protection because of their age and emotional development. (UNCRC, 1989 cited in Montgomery, 2013, p. 186) However this chronological definition is often highly contested as being far too universal. In the United Kingdom the law states you can marry at 16 years old, join the army at 16 and drive a car at 17, are these 16 and 17 years old still considered as children? Every adult has personal experience of being a child and therefore people's ideas and views of what a child is can vary wildly according to their particular individual experiences. This essay is going to look at how the concept of 'What is a child?' has changed during the course of history, how the concept differs throughout the world and explain why it is impossible to give a definitive definition as to 'What is a child?'

Historian Philippe Aries (1962 cited in Brockliss and Montgomery, 2013, p. 67) states that in the Middle Ages the concept of childhood did not exist, that as soon as children were able to walk and talk then they were introduced

into the adult world. Children were seen merely as mini adults. He claimed that due to high infant mortality rates, parents did not emotionally bond with children as they do today. Children were considered an economical asset rather than an emotional one. Linda Pollock (1983 cited in Brockliss and Montgomery, 2013, p. 73) after reading personal accounts of parents who had lost children in the middle ages, strongly disputed Aries view and argued that parents did indeed value their children. Because of the high infant mortality rates; they were all too aware that their children were a blessing and did all they could to protect them. In the 16th Century during the reformation children were often considered as being born innately sinful and needed their souls saving. This was done through strict discipline and physical punishment. In the 17th Century, known as the enlightenment period, John Locke (1693 cited in Brockliss and Montgomery, 2013, p. 82) published his prominent book 'Some Thoughts Concerning Education' His theory was that children were born neither innocent nor evil, they were simply 'blank slates' awaiting input from adults. He declared that children required appropriate guidance, education and experience to make the correct life choices. In the Romantic era of the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762 cited in Brockliss and Montgomery, 2013, p. 83) argued in his book 'Emile, or On Education' that children were born innocent then were corrupted by immoral adult influences. He wrote that children should be protected from the suffering of the adult world and allowed to enjoy this special time in life. Although a lovely concept it was not always possible for all children to enjoy this naïve carefree experience of childhood, especially with the dawn of the industrial revolution. During Victorian times many children had to work long hours at gruelling jobs and

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living conditions were far from pleasant. However towards the end of the period, a compulsory schooling law for every child was established by the government. Children were only permitted to work a limited number of hours and had to attend school to achieve a proper education and experience a real childhood. Cunningham (1995 cited in Kehily, 2013, p. 13) maintains that in the 20th century through the introduction of compulsory schooling, better health services for all and rising standards of living our thoughts about 'What is a child?' really began to transform. There was a change in emphasis from children being simply economic investments to emotional ones, a hope for the future. Later in the 20th century children were given increased rights and began to be treated as individuals rather than purely their parent's assets. We now live in a child-centred society, where the wellbeing of the child is a top priority. It is evident that over time the idea of 'What is a child?' has altered immensely. Children have been perceived as simply an economical asset of no emotional value, as mini adults, as sinful and evil needing saving, as blank slates requiring appropriate adult guidance, as innocent and susceptible to corruption, as a source of labour and now in our current time as an emotional investment for the future and as an individual being with rights. Consequently it is impossible using a historical approach to accurately define 'what is a child? '.

The UNCRC defines a child as a person up to the age of 18 years old, but as cited previously this definition is frequently disputed. It does not take into consideration the different cultural variations throughout the world. Different cultures have different thoughts on what/who is considered as a child.

Anthropologists Margaret Mead (1971 Cited in Montgomery, 2013, p. 183)



and socioculturalists Prout and James (1997 cited in Gallacher and Kehily, 2013, p. 226) all agree that culture and society influence an individual's experiences of childhood. They declare that the idea of childhood is a social construction, that it ' is always a matter of social definition rather than physical maturity' (La Fontaine, 1986, cited in Montgomery, 2013, p. 183). Completely contesting the UNCRC's definition of characterising a child by age alone.

The children in Chittagong in India, Oakland in the USA and Cape Town in South Africa all agree that being a child is all about have no significant responsibilities. About having fun and having no worries. About trusting in adults to help them on their journey into adulthood. However the children didn't unanimously agree on the age at which they stop being a child. This very much depends on the culture in which you live. In Chittagong for instance the children believed they are only a child until they are able take responsibility for themselves and know right from wrong. In lower class families, living in poverty, this could be as young as 6 years of age when they may be employed as a paid domestic worker to help support their family. (E212, Activity 1. 1, ' Children on Childhood') (E212, Activity 3. 1 ' Perspectives on Case-Study Locations') In the USA meanwhile 6 year olds are only just starting at school and would never be expected to go out to work to support their family. A 6 year old child working in India is very different from a 6 year old school child in the USA. Twum-Danso (2009, cited in Montgomery, 2013, p. 191) along with other anthropologists concur that majority world childhoods, such as the ones in lower class India are far cry

from the ones in the majority world, both cultural practices and adult-child relationships differ hugely between the two.

As well as culture having a major effect on our definition as to what is a child, social class too influences it. Children from middle class families in Chittagong seem to stay childlike and responsibility free for much longer, although both the lower class and middle class children said they sometimes felt under pressure from their parents, the middle class parents focus was on a good education and end up in a lucrative job rather than simply survival as in the case of the lower classes. Similarly in Oakland in the USA, where there is a large economic divide, with 25% of the population living below the poverty line, middle class parent's main aim for their child is a high quality education, to graduate college and have a successful career. In the lower classes however the priority is to protect the child from harm, from becoming involved in gangs, drugs and crime. (E212, Activity 1. 1, ' Children on Childhood') (E212, Activity 3. 1 ' Perspectives on Case-Study Locations')

Social class clearly affects the experience of childhood and as result children, even from within the same culture, can be very different. There is no one standard experience of being a child. What is a child cannot be defined completely by anthropologists or socioculturalists studying children within their culture and society.

In summary a child cannot be simply characterised by age alone, it is essential to also examine various other factors including culture and context. This essay has looked at the manner in which being a child has evolved over time and the way in which only two factors, social class and culture, can have an effect on the incredibly complex perceptions of children and

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childhood. There are many other factors that can affect our view of what is considered a child. It is claimed by some theorists that childhood is a social construction and therefore each culture defines a child differently and to take it even further each individual person within that culture has their own interpretation as to exactly what a child is depending on their own person experience. There is no one single inclusive experience of childhood throughout the world or throughout just one country. A child is many things to many different people.

(1507 words)