

Social History of Childhood and Children: A Note on the Cultural and Historical Differences in Child Care

Muhammad Ilias¹, Rubina Akter²

¹ Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, Bangladesh

² Department of Sociology, Rajshahi University, Bangladesh

Abstract: Throughout history, theorists have been fascinated with the distinctive character of human development, unique as compared with other mammals in having evolved a lengthy period of dependency known as childhood. In spite of regional, cultural, and social differences in the experience of being a child and in how childhood is understood, the social-constructionist view of childhood has become the dominant conceptual model. This particular study entirely based on the available secondary data about the development of the concept 'childhood' and 'child care'. Throughout the paper discussions are held to explore how children were treated during their childhood in various stages of human evolution. There are few perspectives which consider the childhood as merely a stage in human physical development. Few regard childhood as the phase when children are source of enjoyment for the adults. In industrial and urbanized area children were considered as a laborer who can support the family economy, hence children were quickly transferred into the young adult age stratum without having full phase childhood. Later on childhood started to receive the concentration of the researcher and was considered salient human psychological development. Few factors effected these changes in the mind-set of those contemporary societies, such as: industrialization, urbanization, changes in the religious views, women's movement etc.

Keywords: Childhood, child care, centuries of childhood, historical differences, kinder culture, parenting, paradigm, psychohistory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Childhood is generally considered to be either a natural biological stage of development or a newly introduced idea of modern era. Theories of childhood are concerned with what a child is, the nature of childhood, the purpose or function of childhood, and how the notion of the child or childhood is used in society. Theories of childhood as a concept shows the development over time of the psychological or emotional significance of childhood as viewed from the state of adulthood. Up until the 1990s, theories of childhood tended to be determined in a "top-down" approach. However, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) created a climate for reconsidering this tendency and a subsequent focus on listening to the views of the child and Children's Rights of expression in general. This has led some scholars to explore the experience of childhood by the children resulting in the use of inclusive research methodologies and more democratic frameworks.

Ever since Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670) published his *Didactica Magna* (1649) and John Locke (1632–1704) produced his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), observers of children have been occupied with attempting to understand, document, and comment on what it is and what it means to be a child. The significance of a state of being after the end of infancy, experienced by all humans in all societies, has produced sometimes contradictory theories from philosophical, religious, and scientific schools of thought as well as from the later established disciplines of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study has been conducted to review the changes in the perception of childhood. There are some specific objectives of the study, which are

- ✓ To understand the concept of childhood.
- ✓ To know the significance of childhood.
- ✓ To find out the perceptions of people and society about childhood in various centuries.
- ✓ To identify the main factors responsible for the changes in perception.

III. METHODOLOGY

Secondary data analysis method has been applied for this entire study. Since it is a secondary data based study, all the data for this study have been collected from various sources like books, journals, articles, e-books, e-journals and different websites.

IV. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT 'CHILDHOOD'

The term *childhood* is non-precise and can indicate a varying assortment of years in human development. It refers to the period between infancy and adulthood. In common terms, childhood is considered to start from birth. Childhood, as a concept of play and innocence, ends at adolescence. In many countries, there is an officially fixed age when childhood ends and a person legally becomes an adult. The age ranges anywhere from 13 to 21, with 18 being the most common. Early childhood follows the infancy stage, and begins with toddlerhood when the child begins speaking or taking steps independently. While toddlerhood ends around age three, early childhood continues through years seven or eight. Middle childhood begins at around age seven or eight, approximating primary school age and ends around puberty. Adolescence, or late childhood, begins around the time of puberty. The end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood varies by country and by function, and even within a single nation-state or culture there may be different ages at which an individual is considered to be mature enough to be entrusted by society with certain tasks. [1]

V. THE WORTH OF CHILDHOOD: WHAT IS CHILDHOOD FOR?

Prevailing literature shows that there are few perspectives which strive to reveal the significance of childhood. One argues that childhood is a characteristic of human evolution designed to ensure the survival and development of the species. This perspective is also known as 'the *biosocial* and *evolutionary* approach'. This perspective has suggested that the strangely fast growth of the brain and the immaturity of dentition and digestive characteristic of the early stages of human life have evolved over time to sustain human society. Others have recognized that social conditions and ecology play a part in constructing the social and cultural response to childhood. The perspective of evolutionary psychology came to regard childhood as directly linked to the evolution of the psychology of 'Parenting'. They suggest that certain universal characteristics of infants and young children, such as relatively large heads and eyes in small bodies, act to activate emotions and responses in adults, thus securing development toward maturity. From this perspective, childhood can be seen as a relationship. The principle relationship of childhood is with adulthood, but more specifically with parenthood.

Psychohistory is a school of thought concerned with the evolution of conscious parenting, which has developed since the 1970s following the work of Lloyd deMause. DeMause and his associates have developed a unique and debated theory of childhood. This position establishes from empirical evidence that childhood has been for the majority of children a time of oppression and abuse. DeMause has argued that the parental response to the infant or child has evolved over time from one which was generally abusive and cruel to one which became nurturing and affectionate. Such a development, according to this theory, not only reflected social, technological, and cultural change but indeed generated those changes.

For Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and psychotherapists who have followed Freud, such as Alice Miller, childhood was of key significance in the tuning of the individual to mature well-being. Freud developed his theories of the sub-conscious partly through considering the fact that early childhood memory becomes lost. Since childhood was regarded as the key stage in the successful, or unsuccessful, development of ego, psychological well-being in adult life is dependent on this period of time and healing might be effected through the recall of repressed childhood experience.

VI. HISTORY OF THEORIES REGARDING CHILDHOOD: A HOLISTIC PICTURE

Historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have suggested that there is no single and universal experience or understanding of what childhood is and where it begins and ends but that this has altered according to time and place. Since 18th century, the dominant paradigm in Western cultures has viewed childhood as a stage of life characterized by dependency, learning, growth, and development. The idea that in the medieval world there was no concept of childhood was first introduced by the French scholar Philippe Aries in his *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). Aries assumed that the evidence drawn from European paintings and texts of the time revealed that children seemed to be viewed as tiny adults. They had no special clothing, food, social space, or time which amounted to a childhood culture [2]. For the first time, in early 20th century, large numbers of children were brought together institutionally with the purpose of transforming them into literate citizens. This fact encouraged the development of learning theory with particular reference to childhood. Jean Piaget (1896–1980) presumes that the child, regardless of social or cultural context, has a certain universal nature which drives it to develop in noticeable stages. This understanding had thoughtful effects on the pedagogy in the contemporary modern schools. During 1920s Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978) challenged Piaget's theory of stages of development. Her research sought to demonstrate that children brought up in different

cultures did not display a replica of the animistic stage that Piaget thought to be universal. Mead studied important differences in child and adolescent experiences according to environmental factors.

Social-constructionist theory argues that children have and actively create their own cultural worlds. Within this perspective, children are viewed as people who are afforded little status in society but who are capable of becoming the agents of their own destiny. Within this framework, the physical and cognitive characteristics of childhood are incorporated within an approach that questions – ‘which denies a voice to the child?’.

Philippe Aries in his book *Centuries of Childhood* argued that childhood is not a natural phenomenon but a creation of society. Aries published a study in 1961 of paintings, gravestones, furniture, and school records. He found that before the 17th-century, children were represented as mini-adults. Since then historians have increasingly researched childhood in past times. During the Renaissance, artistic depictions of children increased dramatically in Europe. This, however, did not impact the social attitude to children much. Based on the ideas of John Locke and other 17th-century liberal thinkers, Rousseau formulated childhood as a brief period of sanctuary before people encounter the perils and hardships of adulthood. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg have constructed a critical theory of childhood and childhood education that they have labeled ‘kinder culture’ [3]. Kincheloe and Steinberg make use of multiple research and theoretical discourses to study childhood from diverse perspectives—historiography, ethnography, cognitive research, media studies, cultural studies, political economic analysis, hermeneutics, semiotics, content analysis, etc.

VII. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT CHILDHOOD AND NATURE OF CHILD CARE: MIDDLE AGES

According to Philippe Aries, the ancient societies did not have a clear mental representation of the child and of the adolescent. Infancy was considered mainly as a period when the child could not take care of itself. As soon as it could understand its surrounding the child was quickly included in the adult circles. He was considered a young adolescent. Foul language, sexual acts, death, and so on were all permitted in their presence. There was the practice of separating the child away from his parents from an early age and inserting into the adult youth group where he learned a number of things like:

- The conservation of goods
- Carrying out ordinary responsibilities or a particular office
- Mutual help in times of crisis
- Protection of honor or of life

The family did not have an emotional or affective function though this did not mean that love was absent. It meant that sentiment was not a vital matter of the family, survival was. For this reason, the emotional or affective relationships and social communication was enlarged outside the family circle, in a strong and affectionate social circle made up of neighbors, masters and servants, children and old people, men and women. Until the end of the middle Ages, children were seen as miniature versions of adults. If we look at paintings of the 15th and 16th centuries, we will notice that the children depicted in family portraits look like telescoped replicas of their parents. Their clothes and their bodily proportions are the same as those of adults. The idea that children deserve special protection and treatment did not exist at that time. Children could be punished, and frequently were, for social disobediences with the same. Incurable disease in the middle ages was quite predominant, and infant mortality rates were extremely high. Young children were not expected to live for very long. People commonly believed, therefore, that if they wanted only a few children, they should have many more. Parents couldn't allow themselves to get too emotionally attached to something that was seen as a probable loss. Some even referred to their infant as "it" until the child reached an age at which survival was likely. During that period, the death of a baby was probably not the emotional tragedy that it is today. In Spain, for example, when an infant died he or she was likely to be buried almost anywhere on the premises, like a pet cat or dog. Even the dead children of the rich were sometimes treated as paupers, their bodies sewn into sacks and thrown into common graves.

VIII. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT CHILDHOOD AND NATURE OF CHILD CARE: 1700 AD-1800 AD

After the end of the 17th Century, the child stopped living with the adults and learning how to work from them. The family was converted into a home in which was found the essential love between the spouses and between them and the children was made necessary. The parents also became very fond in following the child's education. As a result the family began organizing itself around the children. By the 18th century, perceptions of childhood in the west were beginning to change. Children began to be seen as innocent and in need of protection. They were viewed as weak and vulnerable to inducement. Along with the notion of protection came the notion of discipline, as parents taught their children to avoid the enticements of their social world. Severe beatings of children in the name of discipline were common occurrences up until the late 18th

century (and persist in some corners of society even to this day). Such cruelty was often inherent in religious terms. One Dutch theologian offered the theory that God had formed the human buttocks so that they could be severely beaten without causing serious bodily injury. Heaven was sometimes described to children in school as "a place where children are never beaten."

The definitions of childhood have been influenced by social institutions throughout history. Until the late 1800s, for instance, child labor was commonly practiced and accepted. In the early part of the 19th century, perhaps half of all workers in factories were children under the age of eleven. Children worked as long and as hard as adults, sometimes even harder. Because of their small size, they were sometimes given difficult and hazardous jobs, like cleaning out the insides of narrow factory chimneys. In poor urban families, parents often forced their children to engage in scavenging and street peddling. Abandoned children were sometimes recruited by dishonest adults for use in robbery and prostitution. Some had their teeth torn out to serve as artificial teeth for the rich; others were intentionally injured by beggars to arouse sympathy. Although we have little evidence today of complete social approval or tolerance of these kinds of practices, they weren't severely sanctioned either.

The first child protection organizations emerge in 19th century. In 1825 the first House of Refuge in America was founded, an institution whose purpose was to provide sanctuary to children who had been abused or neglected. In subsequent years many similar institutions were established. Even these were not totally sensitive to the welfare of children. Their purpose was not to protect but to prevent children from becoming economic burdens and threats to society. Many people at the time believed that a bad childhood would lead to a bad adulthood. The social value of children was also affected by major economic transformations in society, the shift from a predominantly agricultural economy to an industrialized one in the 19th century. On the farm, families were bound together by economic necessity rather than emotions. Children were a crucial source of labor in the family economy, and they were a source of financial support in old age. Therefore, the birth of a child was welcomed as the arrival of a future laborer who would contribute to the financial security of the family.

IX. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT CHILDHOOD AND NATURE OF CHILD CARE: 20TH CENTURY

Children were no longer seen as economic requirements after industrial revolution. The main source of income was now the parents, or more accurately the fathers, working outside the home. As a result, children became economically "useless," and people began to see them as absolute costly to raise. At the same time, the culture was beginning to recognize their emotional importance. Today's parents are more likely to look to their children for intimacy and less likely to expect anything tangible in return, such as economic support in old age. Social value of children is therefore determined not by their labor potential but by the love and care they are thought to deserve. Hence the most desirable child for adoption today is the newborn baby. A person living in an earlier era would find this preference difficult to understand, just as we today assume that babies bring forth a nurturing instinct in adults.

The perception of the nature of childhood, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, -- its duration, its perceived purpose, its requirements, its quality -- changed rather significantly in the Eurocentric world. Actually, two things seemed to have happened: first, the idea of childhood as a separate developmental stage began to arise; second, the idea of who was deserving of childhood also began to broaden. The pattern was similar in various places of the world, with some minor variations which resulted from geography, religion, etc., but the differences are inconsequential.

X. FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCED CHANGES IN THE PERCEPTION OF CHILDHOOD

The factors which influenced the changes in the perception of childhood are the view of the nature of humankind, the development of industry, urbanization, parents themselves, and the women's movement.

10.1 Perception about the nature of humankind

During the Middle Ages childhood was a concept pretty much limited to members of the upper-class. Children of the lower-classes generally had a rather extended infancy period -- to about age seven -- but were then tossed into the adult world. With the advent of Calvinism, and Protestantism in general the focus shifted, perhaps because of the rise of a middle class, perhaps because of the new religion's focus on the individual. In the Protestant view, men were viewed as innately evil, soiled by original sin, children were also considered moral agents, and therefore in need of shaping. Given this idea, it was sensible to repress children's natural impulses by physically punishing those impulses, to set them in rows in classrooms, to make whatever play they were permitted into moral lessons (Calhoun, 1945, pp. 106-27) [4]. They were perceived as little battlegrounds in the cosmic war of Good versus Evil. And it was considered necessary to, literally sometimes;

beat the devil out of them (Calhoun, 1945, pp. 40-41). Result to this view of human nature, and children's nature, was the Calvinist, or Puritan, "work ethic," which valued hard work as a weapon in the battle against Evil. Given this view of children and work, it is not difficult to understand why, with the seventeenth century development of industries such as coal mining, children would be put to work in them.

10.2. Industrial development

The development of industry had an insightful effect on the history of childhood in the lower-classes. With the development of the factory system, for instance, there was much demand for labor. Given that throughout human history the end of infancy and the beginning of orientation into adult life had occurred somewhere around age seven, it was rather natural that seven year olds should go to work in the factories and mines. What changed for these children was only the kind of work, and perhaps its duration. Instead of laboring in the fields, many now labored in factories and in mines. And instead of laboring with and for family members, the majority now worked with and for strangers for a wage. That is, given the agricultural and frontier nature of America at the time, there were fewer factories. Nonetheless, where there were factories and cottage industries, children experienced the same kind of thing (Calhoun, 1945, pp. 287-8). In fact, child labor was so prevalent that children were kidnapped in Europe and sold as factory workers and laborers in America (Calhoun, 1945, pp. 285-6).

10.3. Urbanization

Urbanization contributed significantly to the shape of childhood. When families moved from rural to urban areas, family economy also used to shift from commodity economies to cash economies. For the lower classes, this generally meant that the entire family, including children, had to produce income. Furthermore, family size increased in response to industry's needs for labor (Cruickshank, 1981, p. 19) [5]. Children became an economic asset (Calhoun, 1946, p. 136). This trend reverses itself as the need for child labor diminishes. As industrial technology advanced, productivity went up and labor requirements went down. As children were needed less in the work force, they became a social problem in the new urban areas, which generated an effort to contain them. As a result, schools were advent. Working children were required to attend Sunday schools, which attended to both their moral and academic needs. These Sunday schools were encouraged by industrialists because they taught the values the employers wanted the kids to have (Cruickshank, 1983, pp. 34-5).

As per the idea of universal schooling was taking hold, the minimum legal working age for children was rising and the maximum number of hours a child could legally work was declining. This particular trend helped to instruct a new idea of the nature of childhood and to extend it to a wider range of social classes. That is, as people became used to a particular legal definition of childhood, they came to consider it the norm.

10.4. Parent's attitude

Parents' attitudes toward children and the nature of childhood are interlinked. Working-class urban parents often opposed the limitations on child labor and the requirements for their schooling.

Harriet Fraad writes,

. . . parents have been other than nurturant in the past and are other than nurturant today. The idea of the nurturant family is a mask for something quite different. Parents in private homes have never been reliable guardians for children. From the beginning of time parents have not only routinely abandoned and neglected their children, but also sexually abused them and battered them (1993, p. 39) [6].

Children of the higher classes have historically been better treated than those of the lower classes. As to the nature of that different treatment, though, some argues that it has been more a function of means than intent, that parents have generally treated children as well as their own circumstances have permitted. Thus, the parental oppositions noted above perhaps result from economic necessity rather than lack of tender feelings.

10.5. Women's movement

Women's Movement has a vital impact on the idea of childhood. The extended term of childhood dependency was enacted on women in order to overpower and restrict them. On the other hand, Anthony Platt argues that in part childhood was created by the feminist movement of the late 1900s, that [t]he child-saving movement was, in part, a crusade which, though emphasizing the dependence of the social order on the proper socialization of children, implicitly elevated the nuclear family and, more especially, the role of women as stalwarts of the family (1982, p. 157) [7].

Platt argues that the child-saving movement had both symbolic and status functions for middle-class, American feminists, that it served both as an announcement of traditional family values (middle-class), by elevating the concept of the nuclear family and confirming women's status therein, and as an instrument of women's emancipation (1982, pp. 156-8). He concludes this particular argument thus: "it is not too unreasonable to suggest that women advanced their own fortune at the expense of the dependency of youth"

(1982, p. 164). These arguments share the idea that an effect of the extension of childhood was to confine and suppress women, but disagree on who motivated it. Haralovich argues that both the post-World War II (re-)suppression of women as housewives and the extension of childhood dependency, and their isolation in suburban homes, resulted from the need for increased consumption (1989, pp. 61-83) [8].

XI. CONCLUSION

Human being is to travel various stages, physical and mental, throughout his life. Childhood is one of those stages. However, in various phases of social development the age range of childhood were not the same, in fact in some societies we can see the almost absent nature of childhood. In the middle ages, according to various paintings, gravestones, furniture, and school records, children were represented as mini-adults. Children were expected to participate in all aspects of social life alongside their parents. Children could be punished in identical way adults were punished, during that time, for the wrong doings. Child was quickly included in the adult circle and hence they enjoyed lesser period of childhood. Later in the 18th and 19th centuries, the perception of childhood started to change. Children were recruited in the factories as labor and were considered economically important in the family. In the late 19th century, child protection organizations emerge and thus a new nature of child care was introduced. The social value of children was also affected by major economic transformation in society. The shift from predominantly agricultural economy to an industrialized one. When industries started to get the advantages of more scientific innovations and thus the number of labor required started low down, then demand of children as labor in the factories were less pervasive. During this period, schooling system was re-arranged in such a way that those children can be made busy in schools as part of the troubleshooting of huge "useless" population. Now childhood was prevailing as a salient part of human development and culture was beginning to recognize their emotional importance.

A number of important forces worked together to change the nature of childhood. One of these is the Calvinist view of the nature of humankind, which characterized children as innately evil and therefore in need of shaping. Also, as industrialization advanced, its managers defined and redefined childhood in self-serving terms: first as workers, then as "scholars," and ultimately as consumers. Too, urbanization, which also resulted, at least in part, from industrialization, required alterations in the perceptions of the nature of the family and family economies. Finally, the women's movement, which resulted in part from the changing view of the nature of humanity, in part from urbanization, and in part from industrialization, also profoundly influenced the perception of childhood. All of these factors were at work at once, intertwining and influencing each other. One of their results was a steadily increasing dependency period for children, expanded to include ever more children of the various classes, that now, in 1993, frequently stretches into the early twenties.

One thing was missing and felt as crucial while conducting the study that most of the data available on this issue are drawn from western literature. There is hardly any research or article which shows the history, especially social history, of childhood and child care in Bangladesh. A number of pure researches on this topic could make the way easier for the policy makers to decide on various issues related to education system, schooling, child abuse, child labor, child rights etc.

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Muhammad Ilias. "Social History of Childhood and Children: A Note on the Cultural and Historical Differences in Child Care." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 22.7 (2017): 54-59.