

**Work for Hannah's 2 hour groups- 2<sup>nd</sup> /3<sup>rd</sup> February**

Sorry everyone, I am still not well so will not be able to take your lesson.

You will need to use the Sociology in Focus (edition 2) p.112-115 for the work today. Please complete p.17-19 in your Roles booklet (you can get another copy off Godalming Online if need be). The activity covers sociological views toward childhood.

Please make sure you complete this for next weeks lesson, we will need it for the activity we are doing.

If you have not sent me your conjugal roles essay please could you do this so that I can mark them by next week. If you've written it by hand perhaps you could scan and send it using any of the photocopiers around college.

Any questions please email me

Hannah

## Unit 7 Childhood and children

### key issues

- 1 How have views of childhood changed?
- 2 How have children been affected by these changes?

### The social construction of childhood

Childhood can be seen as a *social construction*. From this point of view, it is not a natural state or a biological stage. Instead, it is shaped and given meaning by culture and society. As a result, the idea of childhood, the types of

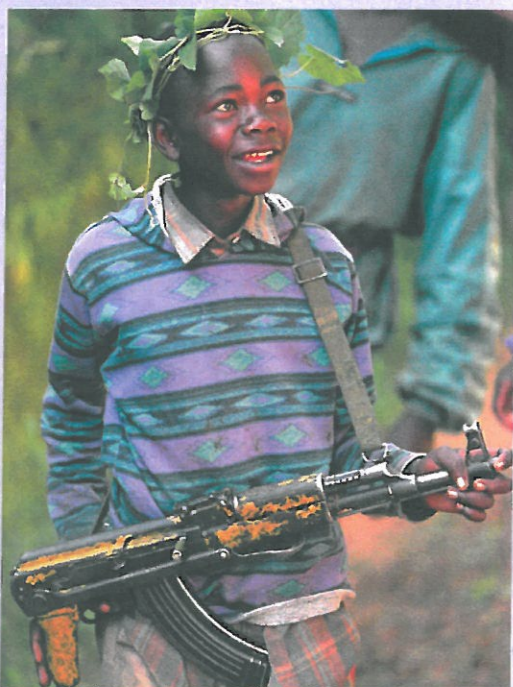
behaviour considered appropriate for children, the way children should be treated, and the length of time that childhood should last, are socially constructed.

**Cross-cultural evidence** Evidence from different cultures provides support for the view that childhood is a social construction. If childhood were simply a 'natural' state, then it would be similar across all cultures. This is not the case.

Anthropological studies show that other cultures treat children in ways which might seem unusual or even unnatural in contemporary Britain. Raymond Firth (1963), in his study of the Pacific island of Tikopia, found that children carried out dangerous tasks such as using sharp

## activity33 childhood across cultures

### Item A Child soldier



A member of a local militia in Zaire

### Item B Blackfoot boys



The Blackfoot Indians lived on the Plains of Western Canada. Children were taught the skills of horse riding at an early age. One of Long Lance's earliest recollections was falling off a horse. He was picked up by his eldest brother and planted firmly on the horse's back. His brother said, 'Now, you stay there! You are four years old, and if you cannot ride a horse, we will put girls' clothing on you and let you grow up a woman.'

Fathers were responsible for the physical training of the Blackfoot boys. They wanted to harden their bodies and make them brave and strong. Fathers used to whip their sons each morning with fir branches. Far from disliking this treatment, the youngsters proudly displayed the welts produced by whipping. Sometimes they were whipped in public and they competed to see who could stand the most pain.

Source: The autobiography of a Blackfoot Indian Chief, Long Lance 1956

### question

How do Items A and B indicate that childhood is socially constructed?

tools and fishing in the open sea. They were allowed to carry out these tasks when they themselves felt ready rather than when adults decided they were competent or safe to do so.

### A brief history of childhood

In *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), the French historian Philippe Ariès argued that the concept of childhood did not exist in medieval Europe. He based his argument on contemporary letters, diaries and other documents, plus the way children were depicted in paintings of the time. Ariès claimed that soon after children were weaned, they were regarded as little adults and treated as such. From an early age, they worked alongside adults in the fields or in cottage industries, they dressed like adults and in many ways behaved like adults.

**The emergence of modern childhood** Ariès sees the modern concept of childhood developing from the

separation of children from the world of adults. This process began in the 16th century when the upper classes sent their children to schools to be educated. In the early years of the industrial revolution, child labour was widespread – children and adults worked side by side. Throughout the 19th century, a series of factory acts banned the employment of children in mines and factories. By the end of the 19th century, elementary state education was compulsory in most European countries. Children were now physically separated from adult settings and had a separate legal status.

This process was accompanied by the development of experts specialising in children – child psychologists, paediatricians (doctors who specialise in children), educationalists and parenting experts. According to Ariès, 'Our world is obsessed by the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood'. Children are seen as different from adults. As a result, they have special needs. Because of this

## activity34 little adults

### Item A Medieval Europe

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist. This is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude (care) of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society.

Source: Ariès, 1962

### Item B Paintings



Family saying grace before a meal (1585)

### question

What evidence do the paintings in Item B provide to support Ariès' statement in Item A?



Group of doctors (right) and men, women and children (left), 15th century

they require treatment, training and guidance from an army of specially trained adults. This is very different from the Middle Ages when 'the child became the natural companion of the adult'.

**Evaluation** Ariès has been criticised for overstating his case. In certain respects, children in medieval Europe were seen as different from adults. For example, there were laws prohibiting the marriage of children under 12 (Bukatko & Daehler, 2001). However, many historians agree with the broad outline of Ariès's history of childhood in Western Europe.

### key term

**Social construction** Something that is created by society, constructed from social meanings and definitions.

### Images of childhood

Wendy Stainton Rogers (2001) looks at the social construction of childhood in 20th century Europe. She identifies two 'images' of childhood – 'the innocent and wholesome child' and 'the wicked and sinful child'. Both images coexist – they exist together. Both have a long history and continue to the present day. They can be seen in a variety of forms – for example, in novels such as Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* with its charming and wholesome children and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* where children descend to their 'natural' savage and barbaric selves.

Each image suggests a particular way of acting towards children. The image of the innocent and wholesome child suggests that children should be protected from everything that is nasty about the adult world, from violence and from the worries and concerns of adults. Childhood should be a happy, joyous and carefree time. By contrast, the idea of an essentially sinful child suggests that children should be restrained, regulated and disciplined.

Both these views of childhood imply that adults should be concerned about children and take responsibility for their upbringing.

**The welfare view** The first view suggests that children are vulnerable and need protection. This 'welfare view' forms the basis of social policy towards children in the UK today. For example, the Children Act of 1989 states that 'When a court determines any question with respect to the upbringing of a child ... the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration'.

**The control view** The second view assumes that children are unable to control their anti-social tendencies. As a result, they need regulation and discipline. This 'control view' is reflected in education policy – children must submit to education and the form and content of their education must be strictly controlled from above.

According to Wendy Stainton Rogers, these images of childhood are social constructions. She argues that 'there is

no natural distinction that marks off children as a certain category of person'. Seeing children as innocent and wholesome or wicked and sinful or a mixture of both is not right or wrong, it is simply a meaning given to childhood at a particular time and place (Stainton Rogers, 2001).

### Childhood in an age of uncertainty

Nick Lee (2001) sees a change in the social construction of childhood towards the end of the 20th century. He claims that for most of the century adults and children were seen as 'fundamentally different kinds of humans'. Adults were stable and complete, children were unstable and incomplete. Adults had become, children were becoming. Adults were self-controlling, children were in need of control.

In the early 21st century, 'growing up' is no longer seen as a journey towards personal completion and stability. This is because adulthood is no longer complete and stable. Adult relationships are increasingly unstable as indicated by high divorce rates. The labour market is changing rapidly and 'jobs for life' are a thing of the past. With new partners and new jobs, adults are in a constant state of becoming. They are living in an 'age of uncertainty'.

Where does this leave children? For much of the 20th century, childhood was defined in relation to adulthood. Adults and children were very different. Children had yet to become full human beings. They were not fully rational, they were not seen as 'persons in their own right', they had to be guided along the path to adulthood by child experts and child trainers such as teachers and social workers.

By the 21st century, adults were becoming more like children. Both were in a continual state of becoming, both were defining and redefining their identities, both were unstable and incomplete.

This growing similarity between adults and children is leading to a new social construction of childhood. Children are seen increasingly as 'beings in their own right'. As such, they have their own concerns, their own interests, and should have their own rights, just like adult members of society. This is reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Article 3 states:

'In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.'

Changes in the social construction of childhood result in changes in the way adults treat children. This can be seen from the 1989 Children Act which stated that in court proceedings, 'the child's welfare must be paramount'. In cases of divorce, the court used to decide which parent had custody of the children. Since 1989, the child's view is taken into account – children have a say in decisions about who they will live with. This is a long way from the traditional view that children should be seen and not heard.

### The end of childhood?

Will the 21st century see the end of childhood? Will new social constructions end up abolishing the whole idea of childhood?

According to Neil Postman (1983) in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, this process is well underway. Postman argues that childhood is only possible if children can be separated, and therefore protected from, the adult world. In his words, 'Without secrets, of course, there can be no such thing as childhood'. The mass media, and television in particular, have brought the adult world into the lives of children. Secrecy has been wiped out by television. As a result, the boundaries between the worlds of children and adults are breaking down. Postman believes that in the long run, this means the end of childhood.

**Dual status** Postman has been criticised for overstating his case. Clearly television and the media in general have brought adult priorities and concerns into the lives of children. But childhood is a long way from disappearing. For example, children in late 20th century Western societies have become a major economic force. Their tastes and preferences, not just in toys and games, but also in information and communication technologies such as personal computers and mobile phones, have a major effect on what is produced and purchased (Buckingham, 2000).

According to Nick Lee (2001), childhood has not disappeared, it has become more complex and ambiguous. Children are dependent on their parents, but in another sense they are independent. There is a mass children's market which children influence – they make choices, they decide which products succeed and fail, though at the end of the day, they depend on their parents' purchasing power.

This is one of the ambiguities of childhood in the 21st century. Things are not clear-cut. Children are both dependent and independent.

## activity35 ambiguities of childhood

### Item A 'Pester-power'

Children can influence what adults buy through 'pester-power'. In the UK, the take-up of satellite and cable television, video, camcorders and home computers is much higher in households with children: 35% of households with children now subscribe to cable or satellite television, for example, as compared with 25% overall; while 90% of households with children have access to a video cassette recorder as compared with 75% overall.

Source: Buckingham, 2000

### question

Why is childhood in the 21st century seen as 'ambiguous'? Make some reference to Items A and B in your answer.

## summary

- Many sociologists see childhood as a social construction rather than a natural state. Ideas about childhood vary between different societies and different times.
- According to Philippe Ariès,
  - The concept of childhood did not exist in medieval Europe. Children were seen as little adults.
  - Modern ideas of childhood as a separate state began with the onset of formal education and the gradual withdrawal of children from the workplace.
- Wendy Stainton Rogers identifies two images of childhood in modern Western society – 'the innocent and wholesome child' and 'the wicked and sinful child'. The first image suggests that children are vulnerable and need protection – the welfare view. The second image suggests children need regulation and discipline – the control view.
- According to Nick Lee, adulthood has become less stable and more uncertain. In these respects, it has become more like childhood. This similarity has led to a change in the social construction of childhood in the 21st century. Children are increasingly seen as having their own rights and interests.
- Neil Postman argues that the media is breaking down the boundaries between the worlds of children and adults, leading to the 'disappearance of childhood'.
- Postman has been criticised for overstating his case. Childhood is a long way from disappearing. For example, children remain a distinct group – they are a major force in the market place. And they remain dependent on their parents.

### Item B Young and sophisticated



Aged 11