

# The Significance of the Conceptualisation of Childhood for Child Protection Policy

*Children are frequently left out of social policy and its analysis. The authors argue that in the specific area of child protection policy, the dominant adult ideological perspective on childhood contributes to the vulnerability of children.*

*In this article, assumptions underlying adultist ideology are analysed, and an alternative paradigm which considers children as having conceptual autonomy and a right to be heard in child protection and social policy forums is discussed.*

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At the beginning of this century child welfare writers and policy makers predicted that it would be marked as 'the century of the child' (Tiffin 1982). Certainly the twentieth century has been notable for the emphasis given to the study and conceptualisation of childhood as a specific stage of life. This conceptualisation has focused on childhood as a period of dependency, requiring protection and the development of state systems to ensure this protection.

As we approach the end of the century the media and researchers in the area of child welfare are highlighting the vulnerability of children in our society and the extent to which child protection systems themselves frequently increase abused children's vulnerability to further abuse (Cashmore et al. 1994; SMH 1996; Mason 1993).

Closely associated with the findings of children's vulnerability to abuse has been the evidence of the extent to which individual children in the child welfare system have been denied the opportunity to have their voices heard and to participate in decision-making. Children, and adults who as children have been in care, have identified the way in which their attempts to speak out and voice their wishes and opinions have been and continue to be ignored or trivialised by their caretakers.

Some of the evidence has indicated that on occasions children have been victimised



within the protection system, as a direct consequence of attempting to disclose abuse (Cashmore et al. 1994; Mason 1993; Owen 1996; Community Services Commission 1995). The exposure of the extent to which abuse occurs within the child welfare system serves to focus attention on the way in which children are subordinated to adult power and challenges the rhetoric that child protection and child welfare policies are implemented in children's best interests.

## Children as a Powerless Group

The powerlessness of children in those systems designed specifically for their protection reflects the powerlessness of children more generally. The difficulty

children have in being heard is not limited to the child welfare system, but is characteristic of other institutions in our society, such as schools.

Children are a muted group, denied participation in major political and legal systems. Moira Rayner (1991:36) has summarised the subordinate position of children within the broader Australian society: children 'are a large uninfluential section of the community. They do not have access to the means of exerting power, or protecting their own vulnerability. They are restricted in the extent to which they can make decisions about their own lives. They do not play any part in the processes which determine the policies which affect them. They, unlike other subjects of discrimination, are peculiarly unable to organise themselves politically.'

Rayner also recognises the way in which the powerlessness of children is institutionalised in social policy when she notes: 'But there is something more at work. Even the concerns of those adults who advocate for children and young people have a low political priority' (p.36).

Children's marginalisation and invisibility in social policy arenas is so complete that their lack of participation is rarely noticed. When children are recognised in social policies it is usually as dependents of adult family members, rather than individuals in their own right.

Writers such as Makrinotti (1994) identify the way in which the ideology of 'familism' oppresses children. Makrinotti employs the concept of 'familism' to describe the way in which policies for children are typically subsumed under other policies. He notes that childhood is fused with the institution of the family, in the process of 'familiarization', so that 'children and their needs cannot be defined independently of those of the family, nor can their needs be realised without the family . . . they

do not exist as a "distinct social entity" but are conceptualised as minors or dependents' (p.283). The assumption that children are dependent 'whatever their age' is basic to the way in which childhood tends to be viewed as 'an undifferentiated category of all those under 16 or 18 years old' (Morrow 1995:224).

In western society, obligations to children and control of children are shared

between family and society, based on the 'mutual interest in the continuation of both family and society'. In the negotiations between family and state which occur in the development and implementation of social policy, children are generally not participants (Shamgar-Handelman

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1994:253). Family policies are an example of the way in which it is assumed that children's needs will be met as dependants within the family context, with adults mediating their needs. Consequently, it is not deemed necessary for children, unlike the elderly, to be ensured of a basic standard of living (Makrinotti 1994:278).

Assumptions about the dependency of children are reflected in and have particu-

lar relevance for those social policies which specifically focus on children. As Skolnick has stated, in child welfare and child protection policies 'the rhetoric of child-centredness obscures the reality of childhood as a dependent and subordinate status' (Skolnick, quoted in Morrow 1995:208).

Child welfare and child protection policies typically reinforce familism in two ways: first, through surveillance of non-normative families; and, second, through the principle of placing children from families which have broken down according to an hierarchal order of policy options that consider alternative familial care as the most desirable and non-familial care as the least desirable, irrespective of children's own attitudes to placement (Mowbray and Mason 1993).

Children are marginalised in social policy and child protection discourse by what Rayner (1991:37) refers to as a 'refusal to take children seriously'. This trivialisation of children is reflected in decision-making

concerning their lives. In cases where children are considered 'at risk' in their own home, child protection experts mediate and transfer parental power between adults, with negligible, if any, participation by the children concerned. Rayner notes that even in the Family Court, where there are provisions for children's wishes to be taken into account, these wishes may be over-ridden. The usual basis for over-riding children's wishes is adult attitudes of distrust of the evidence of children. Children's statements are typically challenged for truthfulness and contamination in a way that rarely occurs with adult statements.

The reasons why children are seldom listened to, or when they are heard why their views are not taken seriously, has been identified by Melton (1987). These reasons are based on the belief that children are 'so incompetent that they do not know what they really want or need' and the perception of children as objects or possessions whose views don't really matter.

## The Adult Ideological Perspective

The marginalisation of children by social policies and the emphasis on their lack of competency as a reason for excluding them from participating in decisions that concern them, can be attributed to the

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dominance of the paradigm which has been referred to by Speier (1976) as the 'adult ideological viewpoint'. According to this view, children are believed to be dependent on adults, as 'part of a natural order', and adults are considered to have a 'natural right to exert power over children' (Qvortrup et al. 1994:5).

This perspective, central to positivist social science theorising and research on

children, has formed the modern western view of childhood and is characterised by the formulation of general rules about child development. These general rules have the effect of objectifying and decontextualising understanding of children.

The key disciplines in propagating the adult ideological perspective have been psychology and sociology. This perspective is also central in other social science disciplines such as

anthropology and education. These disciplines depict children as incomplete beings, or 'becomings'. They are described as society's future, as learners – recipients of adult input, and objects of adult actions and adult research.

Much of the literature of both psychology and sociology considers childhood principally as a stage on the road to adulthood – adulthood having normative status.

The construction of children as 'developing' beings, which has been crucial to theorising within this paradigm, is premised on development as 'an inevitable and invariant process driven by a biologically rooted structure which the child inherits' (Archard 1993:35). Childhood is studied as a state of immaturity, and the immaturity is synonymous with passivity and dependency.

Developmental psychology has explained the nature of children as an orderly, linear progress from incompetence to competence (that is, adulthood). For example, Freud described adulthood as the successful resolution of the psychosexual stages of childhood – the child being 'nothing more than a homunculus, a primitive form of the complex and higher being represented by man' (Freud 1913:107 quoted in Neustadter 1989:209).

More recent writers Newman and Newman (1975:255), in applying developmental theory to the life cycle, expressed the idea that children are lower on the evolutionary scale than adults: 'The emergence of the individual into adulthood represents [the] major transition of life. All that has gone before can be seen as preparation; all that follows can be seen as actualisation.'

Sociological accounts of childhood accepted the 'scientific construction of the "irrationality", "naturalness" and "universality" of childhood dominant in psychological theory' (Prout and James 1990:12). These concepts were translated during the 1950s directly into sociological accounts of childhood in the form of theories of socialisation. This occurred through the incorporation into socialisation theory of the mechanism of internalisation (Alanen 1988).

In sociological literature, children and childhood have essentially been defined in relation to the dominant social institutions – as future citizens to be culturally assimilated by and through these institutions. Parsons exemplifies this approach when he refers to socialisation of children as being about steps towards maturity 'up to the level of adulthood' (Parsons 1965, cited in Neustadter 1989:203). More contemporary sociologists have claimed 'socialisation is an essential part of the process of becoming fully human' (Berger and Berger 1991:6).

Socialisation theories place the responsibility for socialisation on the family, primarily the mother. Social policies based on familism reinforce the emphasis in these theories. There are two associated aspects of the way in which these policies have been implemented.

First, mothers are constantly reminded in a variety of ways of their responsibilities to ensure that their children follow 'normal' developmental patterns. This responsibility is monitored through many of the social

institutions of society, including the school and health systems. Child protection is a critical mechanism for imposing the developmental and thereby adult ideological perspectives, particularly through practices to protect children from neglect. Here, parents are blamed for behaviour which results in lacks or deficits in development possibilities for their children.

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Second, adults are assumed more competent than children to identify children's needs. For example, where children have formally been given the opportunity to participate in decision-making (as in the United Kingdom Children Act 1989), evidence indicates that judges still assert the right to reject children's wishes, and thereby deny their competencies in making decisions, on the basis of a particular adult's construction of what is best for the individual child's welfare (Bell 1993). In this way, conceptualising childhood as a period of dependency, and therefore vulnerability, justifies paternalistic actions designed to promote their best interests.

### **Critique of Adult Ideological Perspective**

Some sociologists have challenged the adult ideological perspective. In particular they have exposed the adultcentricism inherent in the conceptualisation of children as 'incomplete – immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial, acultural', and of adults as 'complete – mature, rational, competent, social and autonomous, unless they are "acting-like-children"' (Mackay 1991:28).

**R**econceptualising childhood in a way which emphasises the conceptual autonomy of children also implies the importance of developing child protection strategies that acknowledge and reinforce children's own strategies, and of identifying and challenging the powerlessness of children.

While most critics accept that physical immaturity of children is a 'biological fact of life' (Prout and James 1990:7), they argue against the positivist reliance on biology, the implied negativity associated with immaturity and the way in which it contributes to a construction of childhood as necessarily a time of incompetency, weakness and passivity. Waksler (1991)

argues that in interpreting immaturity as underdevelopment and a lack of competency, developmental theorists imply a negativity, so that children are considered as incomplete and being precognitive is considered as a lack. In actual fact, as Morrow (1995) argues, physical dependency diminishes during the period typically regarded as childhood. It is replaced

with socially determined dependency, based on economic and other factors. Contemporary social policies explicitly increase the period of such dependency.

The developmental approach, in relying on biology and applying the concept of incompetence in an undifferentiated way to young persons of various ages, ignores the factors which provide a context for individual childhoods. In particular, the developmental model ignores the interconnections between dependency and power associated with social, economic and cultural factors.

The consequences for child protection practice of the conceptualisation of childhood dependency as weakness, are paternalistic responses to children which ignore the significance of power as it is affected by factors of class, race and gender. Further, the focus on childhood as a biologically induced time of vulnerability, deflects attention from the fact that this vulnerability is a response to a context in which there is threat, and increases rather than decreases the opportunity for oppression of children (Kitzinger 1988:81).

When a structural analysis is applied to the construction of childhood, the developmental perspective can be seen to place adults and children in asymmetrical relationships, with the weak child necessarily subordinate to the more powerful adult (Alanen 1988). Alanen redefines this perspective in sociological terms as an elitist perspective, whereby those who have structural power, exercise this power over children through the socialisation process, in order to influence the outcome of reproduction of themselves. She draws attention to the other side of elitism inherent in the adult ideological perspective: 'As a consequence of the viewpoint's inherent elitism and functionalism, the interests of children as participants in their own socialization are effectively excluded, presumably on the assumption that they more or less converge with those of the elites. This models children as passive objects and victims of influences external to them, unable and unwilling to resist. The outcomes of the socialization process . . . can therefore be accounted for merely by referring to constraints in children's environments.' (Alanen 1988:58)

The focus of the adult ideological perspective on children as subject to

developmental principles, abstracts families with children from their social contexts – in particular the context of structural inequalities. The developmental approach, in relying on biology and applying the concept of incompetence in an undifferentiated way to young persons of various ages, ignores the factors which provide a context for childhood. Disregarded is the significance of the interconnections between dependency and power associated with social, economic and cultural factors.

A consequence of this abstraction of children can be seen in evaluation of child protection policy such as that by Thorpe (1994:200), which indicates that child protection functions to 'abstract children from the practical realities of their day to day existence which more often than not are dictated by parental income, housing and the cultural and social practices which are determined by class and ethnicity'.

### An Alternative Paradigm

The alternative paradigm for understanding childhood is based on, first, recognising childhood as a cultural construct and, second, making comparisons between women and children's oppression.

From an examination of the history of childhood literature, childhood emerges as a cultural construct. This examination indicates that while childhood as a concept may be defined and bounded by age, it is otherwise nebulous, changing over time and across cultures and also according to ideological perspectives (Dencik 1989). From historical studies emerges knowledge of modern childhood as a construct, the 'result of decisions and actions of particular historical social actors in their economic, political and cultural struggles' (Alanen 1988:64).

Analysis of childhood as a social construct, highlights the way in which the immaturity of children is understood and made meaningful as a fact of culture. It is these 'facts of culture' in contrast to the

facts of biology which may vary and which can be said 'to make of childhood a social institution' (Prout and James 1990:7). Understanding children's immaturity as a fact of culture challenges the assumption of children being inferior to adults, as implied by developmental theory.

Also illuminating are comparisons between the way in which adults associate children's biological immaturity with their subordination as lesser beings, and the way in which women's biology has been categorised by men as a factor causing women to be defined as necessarily subordinate to men. An analogy can be made with the way in which children's immaturity and incompetence is trivialised in contrast with mature, competent adults, and the way in which women's 'emotion-

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ality' has been trivialised in contrast with men's 'rationality'. As women have focused on gender to challenge their subordination to men, so it is necessary to focus on generation rather than biology to understand children as different from, but not inferior to or lesser than, others.

The new paradigm for conceptualising children, promoted by some social theorists, gives priority to the 'personhood' of children, to their 'lived experience' (James and Prout 1995:92) and to perceiving children as 'human beings' rather than as 'human becomings' (Waksler 1991). This paradigm views children as acting on, as well as being acted upon, by the social world. It posits that they are 'possessed of individual agency, as competent social

actors and interpreters of the world' and that they have 'complex, fractal and multi-subjective selves' (James and Prout 1995:90-95).

In summary, this alternative paradigm considers children as having conceptual autonomy, being subjects rather than objects, and able to contribute actively to decisions. Individual children are placed within contexts which take account of age, gender, class, race and ability.

As a consequence of this paradigm, some policy analysts are beginning to recognise that we need to add children to our thinking and to inform our thinking on social policy by a children's perspective; but the method of doing this is not clear. Unlike women, children do not have access to the arenas in which knowledge is produced, or to the academic

forums in which women's issues received an important focus.

Attempting to listen to children and to contribute to social policy debates from their perspective challenges us as individuals. Our concept of our own adulthood is generally based on recognition of our achievement of this status (that is, our distance from childhood). Also,

as noted by Mandell (1991), taking children seriously is to risk being considered as a fool and being ridiculed by our peers.

### Implications for Child Protection Policy

In questioning that dependency is a satisfactory justification for paternalistic decision-making, the alternative paradigm of childhood challenges child protection policy makers to give direct voice to children. As with giving voice to other oppressed groups, giving voice to children will involve altering adult institutionalised ways of behaving, to accommodate the difference inherent in contributions by children.

## BECOME PART OF THE CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION NETWORK!

The National Child Protection Clearing House at the Australian Institute of Family Studies serves as an interchange point for information, research and initiatives in the child abuse prevention field. It collects and distributes information, and aims for a two-way involvement with the community concerned with child protection.



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In recognising childhood as a cultural construct, the alternative paradigm implies a need to broaden child protection policy to respond to children generally, not just to those children traditionally highlighted (frequently due to severe social disadvantage) as being 'at risk'.

Kitzinger (1990) provides some strategies relevant to implementing the alternative paradigm. She argues that acknowledging all children as oppressed involves recognising that it is the very institution of childhood that makes individual children vulnerable. From this perspective, child abuse is considered not as an anomaly, as a problem for some children, but rather as being built into the very way in which we define childhood – it is considered a 'problem of this patriarchal society' (p.177).

Reconceptualising childhood in a way which emphasises the conceptual autonomy of children also implies the importance of developing child protection strategies that acknowledge and reinforce children's own strategies, and of identifying and challenging the powerlessness of children. This reconceptualisation would promote the redefinition of protective strategies, so that they would be about talking openly with children on issues of power and thinking, in terms of 'oppression rather than vulnerability, liberation rather than protection' (Kitzinger 1990:177).

As Kitzinger says, child protection practice would be about joining with children in a struggle to increase their proactive options and transform the social and political worlds in which the institution of childhood exists.

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