Understanding the Child in the mediated World: Perspectives on Studying Childhood

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Abstract

In a media saturated world, children are continuously engaging with an intertextual transmedia context. In this environment, they are exposed to an array of knowledge sources which puts them at par with the unsupervised knowledge sources of the adults. Thus in this environment, where the child stands at the same level as an adult in relation to exposure to mediated knowledge, the question thus arises, on who is the child and how they are being viewed. This paper deals with the following question, what is childhood and further delineates perspectives that help us approach the concept of childhood.

Introduction

For long, Children have been relegated to the background in sociological and anthropological studies. It is of utmost importance to understand why children have not been studied in their own right by sociologists and anthropologists and why it is essential that we do so. The constitution of the child in social theory generates a certain paradox.

"The child is familiar to us and yet strange, she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another, she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a different order of being"[1].

The crux of the ambiguous relationship between the adult and child is the notion of difference. What defines/differentiates a child from an adult- what does the adult do or think differently from the child. This has been the fulcrum point of each of their identity construction in relation to each other. The child cannot be understood or identified without the concept of the adult and vice versa. And it is this differentiation that has directed social theory on childhood for long- by identifying what the child does differently from adult; by seeing the adult as the norm and defining the child by the role he will take when he is an adult, rather than understanding them as they are.

"The child is depicted as pre-social, potentially social, in the process of becoming social - essentially undergoing socialization"[2].

Ideas about childhood, children and the child and the ways in which the child can become an adult, a socialized human being have directed much work in understanding children and their importance in any given society.

Childhood is seen as the wayward station to the destination and path of becoming complete and definitely more desirable adulthood. The underlying image is that children are distinct and different from adults around them. They are however seen as unequal as members of society in comparison to adults around them. They are viewed and located in the transitory phase of cultural competence rather than having mastery and unique understanding of it. In such an orientation, understanding children is transformed into how adults organize the environment in which children develop so as to acquire cultural competence of the society in which they become full and certified members. What has directed most research on childhood till now is the literature on socialization, which sees the child as an adult in making, and thus through the perspective of the adult. All activities of the child are understood and deemed important only if they are related to a characteristic of adult life. Socialization theory which revolves around the idea that adult society and cultural characteristics are achieved only through the control and direction of children's lives by adults, can hinder the recognition of the contribution that children make to the development of culture and society. Studies with regard to children have seen children by not what/ who a child is but what/who shall a child be in later life.

However with the rise of feminist literature and methodology, it was seen that children are associated with the home and hearth and was seen as integral to the woman's exercise of influence and thus have been excluded from a sociological gaze as their mothers. However, "Gender, race, and class" are now seen as social constructions and attention is paid to how they are erected to understand the underlying dynamics of any society. The feminist turn in anthropology is now several decades old. By its methodological contributions, we tend to look at constructions by mainstream sociology and realize that childhood is itself and evidently a construct. Though there has been a burgeoning of

work on women and documentation of their lives, children as a mainstream interest is still nascent. There is a new wave in which children are regarded as best informants about their own life. They were rarely perceived as legitimate areas of study in their own right. But now, with feminist understanding and methodology gaining furor, it is inevitable that children today are taken as valid start points to study society.

Argument

There are a number of substantiate reasons why children should be studied in their own right and as contributors to the evolving culture of a society. The basic premise of our discipline that culture is learned and not inherited is reason enough to relegate scholastic space to the understanding of children themselves. It's another matter that learning and adoption is always seen from the point of view of adults who need to inculcate children into the mainstream. What is elaborately understood is that the bulk of socialization and learning occurs in childhood and by adolescence they display an adherence to set ways of meaning making. By adolescence, children are expected to be involved and socialized participants in a culture and society. Thereby, children stand as valid subjects by going by the socialization theory alone in understanding the society at large.

Another reason for a call for significant orientation towards children's practices and beliefs is that children's lives and experience are unique. Anthropology can be best defined as the study of the ways in which different people deal with circumstances in terms of their action, thought and speech. By that understanding, it is evident that children's behavior is different from that of the adults, thus occupying subcultures of their own making which can be studied and analyzed by anthropologists.

As elaborated, the most common image of the child is that of being a "yet to be" adult. The term "yet to be" showcases a state of Liminality which sees the child as socially and culturally incompetent beings and who are best "appendages to adult society". Rites de passage, age-grades, and notions of linearityadhere to the presence of children and youthand its difference to adults. And by this logic, the concept of childhood should invite mainstream interest. Notions of child, parent, adult and children are cultural constructions and people everywhere have an understanding of what child is and what should be done with them.

There is often a tendency to view childhood as a pristine depiction of the early part of the life course. But one cannot now view childhood, as just a developmental position in the trajectory of becoming an adult. But our academic legacy in this area is such that childhood is often relegated to being a part of the study of structural developmental psychology. Though there is a renewed interest in childhood, thanks to the development of feminist and post structural perspectives, one still has not challenged childhood as a concept in our research questions.

Asher Ben Arieh in his paper, Where are the children argues that the perspective to studying children is changing where children are viewed as entities in their own right and as a group of people unique from the their association with adults, as occupying a phase in the developmental trajectory of 'becoming' an adult. He considers this as a result and consequence of a three fold reasoning. He feels that it is a natural consequence of the fact that the child and child rights is now a reality in many policy decisions made by governing bodies. Secondly he also feels that it is a result of recognizing childhood as a phase where children are seen as perpetuators in society rather than being a ground for concern with regard to their education and socialization. This is very well portrayed by a review of newspaper articles for the past 5 years where the focus has shifted from the child who is liable to be influenced by various social processes and institutions to the child who is an actor who engages actively with the surrounding social and cultural context. For him, then this renewed interest in childhood is a result of a need to look at children subjectively rather than objectively, as stations in the trajectory of becoming adults.

With the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by United Nations in 1989, children became the focus of human rights ideologies. This convention revolves around a full range of rights for children based on economic, social and cultural grounds. The universal ratification of the covenant, the global approach to the issues and its implementation mean that the child is now considered as a viable entity in itself. Children's rights now take center stage in the human rights discourse. Over the past century, children's rights have progressed from rights concerning property to rights concerning protection and nurturance, to partial person status.

However, there are still academic, research and legal circles, which are still reluctant to accept children as persons. And Children are more than often sidelined in studies which concern their own well being, by giving the reasoning of reliability and response rates and establishing their inferior status in relation to adults.

Asher Ben Arieh also surmises that childhood is a phase, which should be considered in its own right. Children are still viewed as future adults. Looking at how children shape up for the future is a legitimate and necessary concern but he argues that one should analyze and understand children as actors in themselves- thereby focusing on activities and experiences of children. This orientation is not easy to adopt, as we are ourselves inculcated with the belief that children are potential and not actual members of a society. By only recognizing children's viewpoints and their active role as interpreters of society would lead to their inclusion in various policy and decision making aspects

"Large-scale social phenomena and small-scale inter-subjective action implicate each other such that the complexity of the social world cannot be expressed through a simple asymmetry of objective social structure and subjective actors"

Yet, much research on children's lives is focused on objective description, treating children as passive objects that are acted upon by the adult world. In order to gain an accurate measure and provide meaningful insights on children, we need to develop means of gathering children's subjective perceptions of their world and insights into their experiences. Perspective of children are important not because they are different from adults but that they are persons in their own right and this viewpoint may help direct policies in relation to children's advocacy.

There is a perpetuation of the understanding that childhood as a pristine concept has been polluted, ended given their existence in places of work, violence and consumption. And many studies are based on the belief that the child's voice has been undermined in cases of violence where they are excluded from civil responsibility and subjected to meanings imposed by adults.

Conclusion

There is a renewed interest in children as a valid and influential social group to be considered. In this vastly chaotic world of post liberalization euphoria, set definitions are now questioned and delved into. Children have come into the purview of academic research due to many reasons. Firstly, their growing presence as a labor force has led to a number of studies on their conditions in various work environments, on debates regarding the question of the consent age for work and on activism concerning their rights as child laborers. Secondly there is a constant focus on education policies and the recent questioning of education practices inside and outside the classroom. Thirdly various factors such as separation, working parents, constrained physical spaces and a growing focus on their opinions in family decision making has led to the visibility of children from the private domain of the family to a more public domain of the social community. The concept of the child, parent and family are not stable concepts in time and space- they are perpetually changing and are dynamic. The family has always been seen as a haven of romantic love which protects its members from an aggressive and dangerous outside world. Family as a concept is also characterized by their charge of perpetuating traditional patterns of socialization among the members and thus seen as safe haven for children, as a learning ground before they go out into the real world. Today, parents are trying to deal with other socializing influences such as peer groups and thus reorienting their roles in relation to the children. The control earlier perpetuated through the family has been diluted. Functional needs of education and care, and their methods of benevolent authoritarianism are still important methods of social control. But now the relations and power dynamics between the adult and child in the family have changed due to the recognition of children's wishes, feelings and reactions. This change in the power differentials is also perpetuated by the presence of a culture of consumption and fun directed at children. Fourthly due to their growing presence as consumers in the past two decades post liberalization, they have become an important target group for many corporate consumer firms and have a growing presence in not only communication strategies but also in their consideration in manufacturing products Hence the following questions gain precedence in childhood studies i.e. concerning their activities, their need, their wants, their possessions, their thoughts and feelings, their relationships and connections and their contributions. This will help to construct a more complete picture of children as human beings and in order to better answer such questions we need to focus on children's daily lives. Children themselves know best what constitutes a child's daily life as parents do not really know what the children are worried about. Hence it is best that we involve children as primary modes of information in our study.

Thus, we are confronted with two perspectives- one, which sees the child as being manipulated by adults, and two, which sees the child as separate from the adult interpretations of themselves. The dichotomy of generational bonding thus exists between the adult's idea of the irresponsibility of the child on one hand and the fact that children have access to their own source of information

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