TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

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Abstract: The article explores the evolution of the position, role, and status of childhood and children as a social category through the lens of sociological thought. In particular, it examines the religious, economic, political, and social influences that have shaped the historical dynamics of childhood perceptions. The article also analyzes the process by which sociology has come to recognize childhood, especially in the context of the concepts "sociological child" and "pre-sociological child" and discusses the current discourse on the interpretation of childhood from constructivist perspectives. Further, the article reflects on how these evolving perceptions influence decision-making concerning children, the development of child protection policies, and the nature of research conducted on children. The analysis synthesizes the multilayered and polysemous nature of childhood as a shifting social status that is shaped by historical, political, and social contexts. This understanding highlights the need to reframe the "position" of the child as a subject in the broader context of the transition from a vulnerability-based approach to one grounded in children's rights.

Introduction

Perceptions of childhood have undergone significant transformations over time - shifting from understandings rooted in religion and belief systems to constructivist interpretations developed in sociological theories. As a result, fundamental changes have occurred in conceptions of the child's place, role, status, and subjectivity.

Within the scope of this article, the dynamics of the discourse on childhood are examined, highlighting the transition from the idea of childhood as merely a preparatory stage for adult life to its recognition as an independent social category.

The article discusses the body of researches conducted by various disciplines within the broader sociological framework, situated in the context of different stages of societal development. Based on this analysis, the article seeks to identify the factors that have shaped changing perceptions of childhood and to examine their actual impact on both scholarly inquiry and practical developments. Specifically, it explores, on the one hand, the influence of these factors on children's lives and activities during specific historical periods—including parent-child relationships, the protective measures

offered by the state, and the responsibilities assumed by public institutions—and, on the other hand, the conditions that have contributed to the formation of the contemporary paradigm of the sociology of childhood.

Research Strategy and Methods

This study employs qualitative document analysis as its primary research method, focusing on a variety of sources including academic literature, historical texts, policy and international legal frameworks. Document analysis is recognized as an effective approach for examining social and cultural representations within texts, enabling the identification of underlying meanings and power structures (Bowen, 2009). This method allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the shifting discourses surrounding childhood in different historical and institutional contexts.

The study incorporates elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to interrogate the ideological underpinnings and political implications embedded in these representations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001). CDA provides a lens for analyzing how discourses construct social realities and reinforce or challenge power relations, particularly in relation to children's subjectivity, vulnerability, and autonomy.

By combining these methods, the analysis captures both the explicit content and the broader philosophical contexts that inform discursive constructions of childhood. This methodological approach aligns with constructivist paradigms in childhood sociology, which emphasize children's active roles in shaping their social worlds (James & Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2018).

Overall, this research strategy ensures a robust and context-sensitive examination of how the concept of childhood has been transformed across historical periods and social settings.

Historical and Philosophical Understanding of Childhood

Conceptions of childhood have evolved throughout human history, manifesting within various cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. In early periods, children were often viewed as socially unformed beings, with perceptions shaped primarily by adult viewpoints and prevailing value systems. Dominating the discourse of the time was the belief that the child was a being born into sin—or, in other words, inherently "evil"—as a bearer of original sin. This perception implied that a child had to be raised in a strictly disciplined environment, which was considered the only path to redemption (Heywood, 2001; Jenks, 2020: 62–63).

This approach corresponds to the label of the "Dionysian child," in which the child is depicted as a dangerous being in need of control and discipline (Jenks, 2020: 63).

The opposing perspective is represented by the model of the "Apollonian child", which posits that the child comes from a world of innocence and harmony and therefore must be protected from the harmful influences of society (Jenks, 2020: 64–65). Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one of the most prominent figures associated with this view, asserting that the child should be seen as an independent being with intrinsic value in the present moment, rather than as a mere prototype of a future adult (McNamee, 2015: 18).

The third model—the concept of the "tabula rasa" or the immanent child—emerged during the Enlightenment period. John Locke argued that the child is born as a blank slate, and that their future is shaped entirely by adults. In this framework, education becomes the most crucial factor (Locke, 1904: 50–53).

This idea laid the essential groundwork for the development of various theories within developmental psychology, particularly those focusing on age-related progression. Among these, the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are especially noteworthy, as both focused on the cognitive and social aspects of child development (Mooney, 2013: 80–101).

Although these models have made important contributions to the understanding of childhood, they are largely constrained by the temporal and spatial contexts in which they emerged and tend to view the child primarily as a potential adult—that is, as a bearer of traditional conceptions of childhood. This implies that, within the developmental process, the child is mostly perceived as a passive recipient of external influences rather than as an active participant and "creator" in their own reality.

The above-mentioned conceptualizations are challenged by social constructivist approaches, which argue that childhood is imbued with socially and culturally constructed meanings that vary across historical and societal contexts (Pollock, 1983; Wells, 2015). This perspective made it possible to speak of "multiple childhoods" and "multiple types of children" (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 43), thereby rejecting universal and absolutist definitions of childhood.

Thus, the historical and philosophical developments in the understanding of childhood reinforce the idea that childhood has never been a uniform or fixed phenomenon. Rather, it has always been shaped by the dynamics of its temporal and social environment—and, in turn, has exerted influence on those processes—therefore constituting a changing social construct.

The Sociological Recognition of Childhood

The recognition of childhood as a social category is a result of the development of the social sciences and the emergence of new lines of inquiry within them, where children and childhood began to be examined independently of other social institutions—such as the family or education—and broader processes like industrialization. Accordingly, within the discipline of sociology, childhood was, for a long time, regarded as a secondary or outstanding social phenomenon, typically addressed within the framework of traditional studies as a subtheme or subordinate topic.

This was largely due to the fact that science itself has been influenced by the dominant public perceptions described above. Although childhood has always existed, it did not become a subject of significant academic interest until the mid-20th century. This delay can be attributed to the widespread perception of children as passive actors, who are subject to adult authority and therefore only minimally affected by social influences—perceptions that positioned them as subjects with little to no impact on social phenomena (James & Prout, 2015: 12).

This understanding is deeply embedded in functionalist theories. In his theory of the social system, Talcott Parsons presents the child as a kind of societal "mosaic piece" that must be properly shaped to align with the broader structure of society (Parsons, 1991: 80). Davis (1940) identifies four main indicators—sex, age, unit of guardianship,

and nature of guardianship—through which the child is integrated into the social system via socialization. These approaches imply that the internalization of social norms by the child is a prerequisite for becoming a "person." In this framework, the "adult" is equated with the category of the "person," while the child is seen as being on the path to becoming such a "person," and therefore considered incomplete or not yet whole.

However, these theories have been critically challenged by a number of scholars who argue that children must be understood within the context of their own lived experiences, recognizing their capacity for independent action (Jenks, 2020: 19; Corsaro, 2018: 6). A particularly important idea emphasized in this critique is that children are born into pre-existing social conditions, relationships, and power structures (James, 2013: 12–13), which shape their status—not as "potential" members standing outside society, but as fully embedded subjects within the social system.

The understanding of the child's status is further deepened within the framework of theories concerning the reproduction of society members and intergenerational interaction. From this perspective, Karl Mannheim emphasizes the necessity of continuous generational change as a foundational pillar of societal evolution (Mannheim, 1952: 292). Accordingly, childhood is no longer viewed merely as a preparatory stage, but rather as a fundamentally significant period in human life during which identity, relationships, and cultural reproduction are shaped. Moreover, it is a phase that is lived through by all members of society, making it a universal yet socially embedded experience.

The distinction between the "sociological child" and the "pre-sociological child" further illustrates the evolving conceptual frameworks in childhood studies. The pre-sociological child refers to earlier understandings of children—particularly before the mid-20th century—as passive beings, whose social status and experiences were largely seen as derivative of adult society, family structures, or biological development (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998: 26–28). In this view, children were regarded primarily as "becomings" rather than "beings," defined by their future potential rather than their current agency (Qvortrup, 1994: 4–5). This perspective dominated functionalist sociology and much of early social theory during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Aries, 1962: 128–130; Parsons, 1955: 85).

In contrast, the sociological child emerges from contemporary approaches that gained prominence from the late 20th century onward, especially within the New Sociology of Childhood from the 1980s. This perspective emphasizes children's active role as social agents, viewing them as competent participants in social life, possessing their own meanings, interpretations, and capacities for action within their immediate environments and broader social structures. Recognizing the sociological child challenges static, paternalistic frameworks and underscores the importance of children's voices and experiences in shaping the social world (James & Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2018).

This sociological evolution was significantly shaped by insights from developmental psychology. Piaget's (1952) theory of cognitive development emphasized children's active construction of knowledge through interaction with their environment, challenging static notions of childhood as mere socialization. Cooley's (1902) "looking-glass self" underscored the importance of social reflection in forming

self-concept, linking early experiences to broader social dynamics. Erikson (1959) expanded these insights with his psychosocial stages, highlighting how societal expectations shape identity formation during childhood. Freud's (1923) work further influenced sociology by revealing how early childhood experiences within family structures and power dynamics shape psychological and social development. Finally, Kohlberg (1981) contributed by showing how children internalize and negotiate moral dilemmas, connecting psychological growth directly to the social reproduction of values. These frameworks enriched sociological understandings of childhood by highlighting the active, developmental, and socially embedded nature of children's experiences (James & Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2018).

Also relevant here is Gabriel's (2017) perspective, which argues that children themselves define their generational position and the terms by which they are recognized within the adult world. This suggests a reciprocal process—not only one of transmission between generations, but one that also requires the constant redefinition of the relationships between them.

The recognition of childhood as both an independent field of study and a distinct social category opened new avenues for sociological approaches and research, where children are no longer viewed as subordinate or dependent figures, but as active participants (social actors) in social life, contributing through their experiences, the meanings they attribute to life, and their interactions with the surrounding world.

Contemporary Sociology of Childhood: A Constructivist Approach

In contemporary directions within the sociology of childhood, the dominant concept is that childhood is a social construct, shaped by historical, cultural, economic, and political contexts (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998: 25–31). Within this framework, the child is not viewed as a future adult, but as a subject of the present—a competent, active, and independently engaged participant in social life.

A key concept in current studies of childhood is William Corsaro's theory of "interpretive reproduction," which proposes that children not only internalize but also reinterpret their social experiences, thereby creating their own distinct peer cultures (Corsaro, 1992: 166–170). These cultures can, in essence, differ significantly from those of adults. This perspective breaks away from classical models of socialization, in which the child was seen merely as a passive recipient of transmitted cultural knowledge.

These approaches emphasize the diversity of childhood, shaped by gender, class, ethnicity, and cultural contexts (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 43; Wells, 2015). According to this perspective, there is no single, universal notion of "the child" or "childhood"; rather, there exist multiple childhoods, each constituting relatively autonomous social spaces. This implies that analyses of childhood must avoid ethnocentric frameworks and resist viewing children solely through the lens of vulnerability, based on their physiological characteristics or legal limitations. This is because the concept of vulnerability, in practice, stands in contrast to the concept of autonomy in childhood. Moreover, vulnerability is understood to exist only when there is a threat rooted in the dominant social structure (Esser, 2016: 145). As Lee points out, discussions about children's vulnerability— including their dependency on adults - have little or almost no real connection to their physical fragility. Rather, such vulnerability is largely

institutional in nature and, more importantly, codified in national and international legal frameworks (Lee, 2021: 24).

This implies that children should be regarded as citizens - that is, not only as social subjects, but also as legal subjects who possess the rights and the capacities to participate in decisions that affect their own lives. Their status should not be defined solely based on biological maturity, but should also consider their social relationships and potential for influence on social processes (Esser, 2016: 86; Lee, 2001: 1–2). This idea has deeper roots in earlier sociological and interdisciplinary studies. For example, Qvortrup (1994: 4–5) argued that childhood should be conceptualized as a structural category of society, where children have a present, not just a future. Similarly, James and Prout (1997: 8–10) emphasized the social agency of children, positioning them as active participants in social life. Furthermore, Freeman (1997: 28–30) advanced the argument that children should be recognized as rights-bearers and social actors, underscoring the importance of their voices in decisions that affect them. These foundational perspectives collectively highlight that children's citizenship and legal status are not solely determined by biological age, but also by their social and political contexts.

These developments have led to the formation of a new theoretical and methodological foundation, in which children are viewed as full participants in social relationships, and childhood is recognized as a social category imbued with political and cultural significance.

The Transformation of Childhood Discourse and Its Methodological Implications

The consolidation of ideas surrounding childhood as a social phenomenon and the child as an actor has also led to a significant rethinking of research methodologies. While, prior to the second half of the 20th century, the dominant approach was to treat the child as an object of research, subsequent discourses advanced pedagogical, sociological, and anthropological approaches in which the child is recognized as a fully-fledged subject of study (James & Prout, 2015: 69).

The new paradigm relies predominantly on qualitative methodologies, particularly through the use of ethnography, participant observation, and child-centered interviews. These methods facilitate the expression of children's voices, enabling researchers to view children not merely as sources of information, but also as co-authors of knowledge (Spyrou, Rosen & Cook, 2019: 28–29).

These changes have influenced both methodological and ethical practices. There is a growing trend in research to move away from studies conducted "about children" toward those conducted "with children", and even "by children". Such an approach requires a reconceptualization of the researcher's position of authority, and calls for the adoption of interactive, dialogical, and participatory methodologies (McNamee, 2015: 42).

Within the framework of contemporary sociology of childhood, it is widely accepted that children should be viewed as active participants in their own lives, possessing the capacity to interpret and express their lived experiences. For this reason, the concepts of competence, autonomy, and subjectivity in relation to children cannot remain confined to the theoretical realm—they must also be brought to the forefront of the research discourse. In other words, there is a clear shift in approaches to children—

from viewing them as "passive recipients" to recognizing them as "active constructors" (Corsaro, 2018: 7–8).

The transformation of the methodological field in the study of childhood also reflects the evolving nature of social knowledge production, where the emphasis is placed not only on the collection of facts but also on their interpretation within specific social contexts, taking into account the child's own perspective on their lived experience. This approach contributes to the development of a more in-depth, holistic, and contextually grounded understanding of childhood.

The Transformation of Childhood Discourse and Its Impact on Child Protection Policies

The emergence of public interest in children as a social group coincides historically with the intensification of societal concerns about the future (McNamee, 2015: 22). This interest has brought about not only changes within the social sciences but has also raised political and ethical questions, centered on the dual perception of the child—on the one hand as vulnerable, weak, and victimized, and on the other as an autonomous, reflexive individual. This binary understanding becomes particularly evident in ambiguous or controversial contexts, such as the issue of child soldiers (Spyrou, Rosen & Cook, 2019: 31–32). In such cases, political intervention—whether to "rescue" the child or to allow their participation in conflict as an equal—enters the realm of ethical decision-making.

In this context, the child rights-based approach emerges as a counterbalance to the needs-based approach. It breaks away from the paternalistic framework in which children are viewed solely as objects of care and protection—isolated from society and dependent on adults. The fundamental emphasis on rights shifts the focus toward children's entitlement to participate in decisions affecting the course of their own lives (James & Prout, 2015: 69).

Nevertheless, child protection often becomes a source of restriction, justified by prevailing assumptions about children's lack of competence and responsibility. This approach is grounded in a logic of maturation, wherein freedom is granted as a reward following the attainment of a certain developmental stage. Interventions by the state and adults are frequently legitimized through appeals to the child's best interests—a notion that is itself highly contested and multi-dimensional (Schaffer, 1990: 6).

The child's best interests are often invoked to justify various decisions, masking the ideological and political choices involved—choices that do not always align with, or serve, the actual interests of the child. At the same time, unlike needs, interests cannot be considered objective or natural; rather, they are the product of cultural interpretations, shaped by context and the worldview of the decision-maker (James & Prout, 2015: 68–69). This issue reveals that even within a rights-based framework, decisions can still be shaped by dominant ideological influences.

However, it is precisely such discursive shifts that have brought children into the realm of the international political agenda, grounded in the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet this recognition remains inherently ambivalent. Despite being protected under international law, children continue to be perceived as dependent individuals, whose interests may not necessarily align with the goals of the state or their parents (Lee, 2021: 33). Accordingly, the responsibility to

protect children's rights and interests is often coupled with mechanisms of control and limitations on their participation in decision-making processes—such as the imposition of age- or maturity-related conditions that define when and how children may be included in decisions affecting them.

At the same time, the ideal of a "happy childhood" continues to shape dominant perceptions of childhood—an ideal closely tied to the notion of protecting the child and associating them with dependency and passivity. In contemporary societies, adults have become increasingly aware of children's vulnerability and exposure to risk, and as a result, happy childhood is often framed through the creation and regulation of protective environments—even when such measures may limit children's opportunities for autonomy (Cunningham, 2006: 4375–4376).

The shift in responsibility for child-rearing—from the family and community toward the state—also reflects the transformation of discourse surrounding the child and childhood. Parental autonomy is increasingly presented as a mechanism of neoliberal regulation, through which the process of societal reproduction is reframed within the realm of individual choice and personal responsibility (Qvortrup, 2005: 9).

Taken together, all of these elements demonstrate that the transformation of childhood discourse is a political, ideological, and cultural process—one that redefines the child's place and role within society.

Conclusion

The transformation of childhood discourse within historical and social contexts has led to a shift in how childhood is perceived—not merely as a biological stage or a preparation for the future, but as a fully recognized social status, endowed with distinct rights, responsibilities, and capacities for action. This redefinition has prompted a reconsideration of both theoretical understandings of childhood and research approaches, which increasingly emphasize children as active participants in social life.

This analysis demonstrates that childhood is a multifaceted, diverse, and socially constructed phenomenon. At the same time, children possess their own worldviews, value systems, and pathways of engagement in society, which cannot be fully understood through the prism of adulthood alone. This new perspective calls for an approach to childhood as an institutional domain shaped by political and social conditions, where children's voices must not only be heard, but also should be influential and consequential.

These developments open up new theoretical and practical perspectives for the study of childhood and the development of child-related policies. This implies that childhood should be understood as a category that requires continuous inquiry, and that the knowledge produced around it must incorporate not only external observations but also the perspectives of children themselves—as individuals who generate and embody unique lived experiences "here and now."

However, recognizing children as rights-bearing and autonomous actors also requires certain reconfigurations on the part of other stakeholders, such as the state and parents—an adjustment that appears to be still only partially acknowledged and therefore only partially realized.

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The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.