By Zumblick

REVISITING CHILDREN'S STUDIES THROUGH THE LENS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

DANIELLE ALMEIDA[1]

ABSTRACT:

This article aims at presenting the Sociology of Childhood as an innovative theoretical approach to Children's Studies[2], which situates the category of childhood in relation to contemporary society. Having said that, the article introduces the main principles related to a methodological approach supported by the Sociology of Childhood, offers a panoramic view on children's historical condition in society, focuses on issues related to the so-called 'paradoxes of childhood' and children's universal rights and finally, discusses the construction of the notion of childhood within the Brazilian social context.

Key -Words: Children's Studies. Sociology of Childhood. Society.

REVISITANDO OS ESTUDOS DA CRIANÇA ATRAVÉS DA LENTE DA SOCIOLOGIA DA INFÂNCIA

RESUMO:

O artigo em questão visa apresentar a Sociologia da Infância como uma abordagem teórica inovadora aos Estudos da Criança, ao situar, efetivamente, a categoria da infância na sociedade em que vivemos. Deste modo, introduz os principais pressupostos de uma abordagem metodológica amparada na Sociologia da Infância, traça uma visão panorâmica da condição histórica da criança na sociedade, enfoca questões relacionadas aos chamados 'paradoxos da infância'' e direitos universais da criança e por fim, discute a construção do conceito de infância dentro do contexto social brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: Estudos da Criança. Sociologia da Infância. Sociedade.

---

[1] PhD. Danielle Almeida is Senior Lecturer in English Language at the Department of Modern Foreign Languages (DLEM) and at the Post-Graduate Course in Linguistics (PROLING) at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), Brazil. Email: danielle.almeida@gmail.com. Address: Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Centro de Ciências Humanas Letras e Artes - Campus I. Conjunto Humanístico - Bloco IV. Cidade Universitária. 58059-900 - João Pessoa, PB – Brasil.

[2] The referential quotations on Children's Studies and The Sociology of Childhood presented in this article have been translated from their original language, Portuguese. For this reason, the translation into English remains under my responsibility.

The Sociology of Childhood

The emergence of the Sociology of Childhood in the academic milieu occurred during the 90s when researchers proposed to treat childhood and its related issues as an "autonomous social category, analytical in its relations with action and social structure" other than "an investigation confined to the medical, psychological or pedagogical field" (Pinto & Sarmento, 1997, p. 10)

In Sarmento's (2005) words, the Sociology of Childhood is intended at constituting childhood "as a sociological object, rescuing it from the (i) psychological approach, which tends to look at children as individuals who develop independently from (…) their conditions of existence (…)" (p. 362) and from the (ii) biological viewpoint, which reduces childhood "to an intermediate [stage of] maturation and human development" (ibid.). Instead, the Sociology of Childhood is concerned with treating children as objects of sociological investigation *per se*, and childhood as a "generational category that reveals the possibilities and constraints of social structure" (ibid.).

The adoption of a sociological approach to Children's Studies presupposes the consideration of the (1) "adaptations and internalizations of children's processes of socialization" as well as the consideration of their (2) processes of "appropriation, reinvention and reproduction" (Delgado & Muller, 2005, p. 351). Putting it simply, what the referring sociological approach implies is the abandonment of a view of children as receptacles of adults' indoctrination in order to observe "how children negotiate, share and create their own culture among themselves and with adults" (ibid.).

The conceiving of children as 'actors' of their own cultures and 'protagonists' of their specific contexts (Delgado & Müller, 2005) allows for reflection about childhood in the sociological discourse bringing childhood, its ambiguities and complexities to the forefront of a discussion aimed at

474

emphasising studies *with* children and not *about* children (ibid., p. 353, *my italics*).

In effect, a methodological approach based on the Sociology of Childhood does not consider children as real participants of the research itself, but also as "active agents who construct their own cultures, who, in turn, contribute to production in the adult world" (Delgado & Müller, 2005, p. 354,). Taking this into account, in a sociological investigation more than objects of research, children are regarded as researchers of their own contexts wherein adults are encouraged to immerse not until they negotiate with children themselves parameters for research such as the right to penetrate into their world, their permission for data collection as well as for revealing the results of research.

In enabling children to act as "protagonists" (ibid.) of the methodological process, the Sociology of Childhood not only offers a different perspective in conducting academic research but also gives children voice and recognises them as authentic resources of their own universe, a contemporary view which ruptures with some traditional theoretical perspectives, detailed as it follows.

Perspectives on Children's Studies: An Overview

Prior to the implementation of the Sociology of Childhood in academic milieu, the traditional contributions to Children's Studies had been the pedagogically-centred perspectives advocated by thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau (cited in Pinto, 1997, p. 40), whose view on childhood was connected with education.

Locke, for example, proposed the '*tabula rasa*' theory which compared a newly-born child with a blank page or a malleable wax surface where parents and teachers could 'write' whatever they judged necessary to develop

475

children's abilities. Rousseau, on the other hand, defended that men were inherently good in nature and for that reason, adults should make an attempt to preserve children's innocence and spontaneity by trying neither to teach them to correct answers nor to facilitate the resolution of their problems. He believed that adults should solely intervene in children's education in order to keep their "heart away from addiction and their spirit away from mistake" (Pinto, as cited in Belloni, 2004, p. 577). The convergence between what has been regarded as Locke's 'ambientalism' and Rousseau's 'romanticism' (Pinto, 1997) is the recognition of adults' intervention – albeit subtle – in children's education as essential to their development.

Other traditional contributions to Children's Studies have also stemmed from the psychologically-sustained theories proffered by Freud and Mead (cited in Pinto & Sarmento, 1997). Instead of sharing with Locke the notion of children as '*tabulas rasas*', Freud drew attention to children's psychical system, their instinctive impulses as well as their capacity to deal with obstacles whereas Mead advocated that children's perceptive development – the *self* – and their perception of others should be considered social products of a cognitive nature (Pinto & Sarmento, 1997, p. 42).

Casting a different light on the subject, as one of the main advocates of the Sociology of Childhood, Pinto (1997) drew on Ariès'[3] (1986, cited in Pinto, 1997, p. 34) pioneer historical study about the social construction of childhood in Europe to explain that the notion of childhood was actually a modern one, one that only started to "acquire pertinence (…) in social life from late 17th century onwards, especially during the 18th century" (ibid.).

---

[3] Ariès' seminal contribution to Children's Studies includes his pioneer study entitled "A Criança e a Vida Familiar no Antigo Regime", from his book "História Social da Criança e da Família" (1981) (Brazilian translation of L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale dans l'Ancien Régime", 1960) and his article "La Infancia" 1986), originally published in the Italian Encyclopedia Einaudi.

476

Poiésis, Tubarão, v. 4, n. 8, p. 473 – 484, Jul./Dez. 2011.

Before this period, children were viewed as subjects with no self-specificity, being treated and represented as 'adults in miniature', as they used to work, eat, have fun and sleep amongst adults and "had no autonomy, separate status, privileges special rights or forms of social comportment that were entirely their own" (Ariès, mentioned in Kline, 1993, p. 46). Historian J. H. Plumb (ibid.) further illustrates such medieval imagery of children's condition in early feudal society:

> There was no separate world of childhood. Children shared the same games with adults, the same toys, the same fairy stories. They lived their lives together, never apart. The coarse village festivals depicted by Breughel, showing men and women besotted with drink, groping for each other with unbridled lust, have children eating and drinking with the adults. Even, in the soberer pictures of wedding feasts and dances the children are enjoying themselves alongside their elders, doing the same things (Plumb, mentioned in Kline, 1993, p. 46).

In view of the inexistence of prerogatives for childhood and children's culture, the concepts of play and work were then used almost interchangeably. Regarded as cheap sources of labour 'owned' by their progenitors, feudal children as young as five years old used to "participate in the household economy as soon as they could walk" (Kline, 1993, p. 46) and handle the same cultural objects that adults had, at the same time that they shared with the whole community work and leisure activities (ibid.).

Children's exclusion from the industrial environment only came with the factory acts of the opening decades of the 19th century (1802, 1816 and 1833), which focused on the complete removal of children from the industrial world (Kline, 1993). Concurrent with these protective acts, the ascension of the

477

Poiésis, Tubarão, v. 4, n. 8, p. 473 – 484, Jul./Dez. 2011.

bourgeois society and the introduction of literacy in the social milieu also contributed to a major revision of the concept of childhood since during this period adults started developing a more tender view of children as 'graceful, naïve little ones' (Corsoni, 2003), which ultimately led to their conceiving of children as "innocent beings in need of formation and learning, to be protected from the harsher realities of industrial society" (Kline, 1993, p. 48).

Contradictorily, the new framework of protection and sense of tenderness for children happened alongside with an emerging sense of 'moralisation' which made adults feel strongly the duty to severely educate their children, originating what Pinto (1997) has referred to as one of the various paradoxes of the social condition of childhood, described in the following section.

The Paradoxes of Childhood

The formal introduction of childhood in the social milieu has given emphasis to the 'paradoxes of childhood' (ibid.), namely, the paradoxical way children have been treated by adult society along the decades. One of these paradoxes, Pinto & Sarmento (1997) argue, is the fact that it is only nowadays, when children are statistically less representative in terms of the world's population that society has proposed to investigate the factors related to childhood in the social context.

Belloni (2004) makes her point when she says that the paradoxical condition of children in contemporary society goes further beyond that. According to her, the ambiguity of children's status as a recognised "defined social group, endowed with specific roles and behaviour" (ibid, p. 586) lies in two paradoxical social orders instantiated by (i) their condition of dependence

478

and subordination in relation to adults on the one hand and (ii) their increasing significance as part of the consumer market on the other hand (ibid.).

Still according to Belloni (ibid.), children's condition as a potential consumer market has led to the creation of a visible "universal young culture" (p.578-9), mediated by advertising discourse and characterised by a new process of socialization based on the technological advances of contemporary society. As "objects of action" of institutions such as the publicity industry (ibid., p. 587), children thus become targets of media systems which perpetuate specific "knowledge, techniques, values, social roles and representations through images and behaviour patterns" (ibid., p. 585).

For Sarmento (2005), such 'universal young culture' has been facing a continuous process of change not only instantiated by the "entrance and departure of its concrete actors" (2005, p. 361) but also by the effects of external social actions such as the introduction of electronic games into children's universe. He argues that the representations introduced by the electronically-mediated world have modified the nature of the playing activity through different types of 'toys' and a new understanding of the dichotomy time-space by contemporary children. As a result, apart from fostering new roles, values, and behaviour patterns as Belloni (2005) has contended, the scope of these changes in playing has also affected social structure for it has helped to promote new languages and consumer patterns which are central to a contemporary analysis of childhood (Sarmento, 2005).

The ambivalence between what is said about children's condition in society and what is actually practised has been reinforced by Corsino (2003) who attests to the paradoxical factor that at the same time that children's cultural production specialises in determining age boundaries for their subdivision in graduated ability levels within the educational system, media

479

vehicles, on the other hand, unlimitedly provide children with access to all kinds of information and contents through social and domestic resources.

As a consequence of their unlimited access to media information, children's distinction from the adult world gets diluted in a contemporary process which does not recognise their specificity and consequently relegates them to their previous condition of 'adults in miniature' as in the 14th and 15th century, when children and adults were seen as a single one, "living in the same context, without secrets, feelings of shame or differentiation between the public and the private" (Corsoni, 2003, p.5).

To Pinto & Sarmento (1997), the boundaries that put apart childhood from adult life are themselves paradoxical since they have been conventionally based on either the age limits established by institutional levels of education or by one's legal entrance in the economy of the labour market (ibid.). Taken into consideration that the referring boundaries vary significantly according to one's country, culture, community, social divisions and time period (p. 381), complexity is equally created when one considers that a child is also affected by the values that s/he assimilates in her/his immediate surroundings, which helps construct his/her identity as a social being (Giddens, 1991; Javeau, 2005).

According to Javeau (ibid.) due to so many variables, it is far easier to establish when childhood finishes than to set a limit to when it begins (ibid.). For him, there has been a contemporary tendency in developed countries towards the shortening of the childhood period – in former times finished at around the age of 14 when boys and girls started entering the labour market – to the age of 10 years old when children today are believed to be starting teenage-hood, a period which, in contemporary times, has been extended up to the age of 25, through a social phenomenon regarded as "post-adolescence" (Javeau, 2005, p. 381).

480

Be that as it may, considering the aforementioned variables pointed out by Pinto & Sarmento (1997), supporting the view that "childhood is experienced individually in a rather distinct way" (p.14), it becomes easier to prefigure what Franklin (cited in Pinto & Sarmento, 1997, p. 17) meant when he referred to "the several individual histories that help construct different worlds of childhood" (ibid.).

In a way, Franklin's (ibid) assertion aligns with Fleming's (1996) position that, for some societies, the concept of childhood being discussed here simply does not apply, for the conditions of living in these contexts are beyond any consideration on, for example, the impact that media exerts on children's consumer behaviour or ultimately, the parameters for their insertion in school levels or the labour market. As Fleming (ibid.) himself has underlined:

> (…) three quarters of the world's children are born into contexts in which perhaps a fifth of them will die within a year and of the survivors something close to three-quarters will have no modern medical care throughout their childhood (…) (ibid., p. 77)

Given that the Sociology of Childhood is as concerned with the heterogeneity of factors which compose the various histories of childhood around the globe, as it is with homogenous, universal factors, the next section briefly examines the construction of childhood under a Brazilian perspective.

A Different World of Childhood: The Case of Brazil

Albeit historically relevant, the abovementioned reflections on the social construction of childhood relate much more to a European reality than a Brazilian one (Corsino, 2003). Constructed differently, the notion of childhood in Brazil developed in a non-homogeneous way, whereby social, financial and power discrepancies had their share in our historical tradition (ibid.).

481

The history of Brazilian childhood was neither based on the implementation of literacy in the social context nor on the ascension of the bourgeois society. Conversely, it was marked by a past of slavery wherein poor children shared with adults the responsibility of being labelled as 'productive force', whose economy was used to increment the domestic budget. Regrettably, with the advent of industrialisation, the search for children's labour force continues to be experienced in Brazilian contemporary times through a verifiable regression to children's status of 'adults in miniature' which ends up relegating education to a second rank on these children's lives.

This being the case, the construction of the notion of childhood within a Brazilian perspective has developed on the basis of its diversity for it has been marked by the many histories of childhood which compose the various social, economical, political and cultural contexts of Brazilian children. The Brazilian notion of childhood has above all developed from a historical tradition of slavery, characterized by the distortions and social inequities (Corsino, 2003) which have deprived a great number of Brazilian children from their rights to protection, provision and participation, explicated in the section that follows.

Children's Universal Rights

In further analysing the formal status of children in contemporary society, Pinto & Sarmento (1997) pointed out to what they have called the *three ps*, which encompass children's needs for *protection*, *provision* and *participation* in society (*my italics*). A closer look at the realisation of each of these three children's needs has revealed that it is children's participation in society – viz., their right to take decisions in the institutions where they belong – that has been less practised over the past decades (p.19).

By limiting their participation in society, children's status posit their previous consideration as homuncules, viz., human beings in miniature, deprived of rights as social actors to be receivers of the protective measures of adults, regarded as "inherently wise, rational and mature" (Pinto & Sarmento, 1997, p.20).

The conceiving of children as unable to actively participate in society leads to a view of childhood as both a period and a "condition defined by powerlessness and dependence upon the adult community's directives and guidance" (Kline, 1993, p. 44), which ultimately

generates studies on the 'cultures of childhood' aimed at further understanding the disregard of children's statute as social actors of their own context.

Concluding Remarks

The attempt to capture aspects related to children's culture is believed to reinforce the necessity of creating new points of sociological reflection about childhood. This reflection is what makes it possible to decentralise the traditional, dominating concept of childhood to give place to new ways of recognizing the legitimacy of children's world, through alternative perspectives aimed at interpreting the variability of factors which construct childhood in its social representations and accessing what Pinto and Sarmento (1997) have referred to as the "dynamic social structures of children's discourse" (p. 25).

Bibliographical References

BELLONI, M. L. "Infância, Máquinas e Violência". In: *Educ. Soc,*Campinas, vol. 25, n.87, p. 575-598, Maio/Ago 2004.

CORSINO, P "Pensando a Infância e o Direito de Brincar". In: *Jogos e Brincadeiras: Novos Desafios e Descobertas*. . 2003. Acessado em 17 de fevereiro de 2006. Disponível em http://www.tvebrasil.com.br/salto/boletins2003/jbdd/tetxt.htm.

DELGADO; MÜLLER . "Sociologia da Infância: Pesquisa com Crianças". In: *Educ.Soc.* vol. 26, n.91, p. 351-360, Maio/Ago. 2005.

FLEMING, D. *Powerplay: toys as popular culture.* Manchester: Manchester University Press. 1996.

GIDDENS, A. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Cambridge: Polity. 1991.

JAVEAU, C. (2005) "Criança, Infância (s), Crianças: Que Objetivo Dar a uma Ciência Social da Infância?". In: *Ed. Soc.*, Campinas, vol. 26, n. 91, p. 379-389, Maio/Ago.

KLINE, S. *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*. London: Verso Press. 1993.

PINTO, M. "A infância como construção social". In: *As crianças – contextos e identidades.* Centro de estudos da criança: Universidade do Minho. 1997.

PINTO, M.; SARMENTO, M. J. "As crianças e a infância: definindo conceitos, delimitando o campo". In: *As crianças – contextos e identidades*. Centro de estudos da criança: Universidade do Minho, 1997.

484

Poiésis, Tubarão, v. 4, n. 8, p. 473 – 484, Jul./Dez. 2011.