Childhood as a Social Construction

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Abstract

Based on the notion of childhood as a social construction this paper aims to present and explore theoretically, the ideas and arguments, being offered by central theories within the paradigm of children and childhood research over the years. Using the approach of literature review the paper reinforces that childhood is socially constructed. It differs from society to society and context to context based on differences in cultures and believes. Also childhood differs even in the very same society depending on other social factors for example gender and social class. Not all societies in the world have the same concept of childhood, which proves that childhood is neither universal nor natural. In exploring about childhood as social construction, it has been attempted to explicate certain of the conceptions at the heart of social studies of children and childhood. So the essay begins with the basic conceit of childhood studies: what is a child? The very basic notion of "child" is connected to further through historical perspectives of childhood which further leads to accentuating the importance of childhood as a social construction.

Keywords: child; childhood; childhood as a social construction; childhood and adulthood.

1. Introduction

Different approaches have been used to study children and childhood for example scientific approach, applied approach and social constructionist approach (Rogers 2003). Social constructionism seeks to understand how children and childhood knowledge is constructed, by whom, why and most substantially what purpose it would serve. Social constructionism offers alternative ways to find out about children and childhood. Social construction of childhood is grounded in varying conceptions among different cultures, societies and at different time period in history. It also emphasizes on the diversity of situations and circumstances in which childhood is experienced. James & James (2008) define social construction as "a theoretical perspective that explores the ways in which 'reality' is negotiated in everyday life through people's interactions and through sets of discourses" (p. 122). It is this conceptualization of childhood as a social construct, which forms the substrate for the current paper. Various perspectives on children and childhood, within this approach have emerged.

2. Methodology

One of the ways to approach the social studies of children and childhood is to review literature (Mayall, 2002). This theoretical paper uses the approach of literature review to explore theoretically bout childhood as a social construction. Treating childhood as a social construct, social constructionists have argued that there are many possible answers to the question: what is a child? And some of them will appear here.

3. What is a Child?

3.1 Generic Meaning

In general, everyone 'knows' what a child is as everyone has been a child once in a life and experienced childhood. "Everyone has a childhood in his or her baggage, with the memories, the knowledge, the attitudes, the sensory and cognitive mind-sets this involves…some long for childhood, some are stuck in it, some seek to be rid of it. Whatever the case may be, one does not escape the fact that one has had a childhood" (Mouritsen 2002. P. 37-38). In this way a child

and childhood is not an abstract idea. However this familiarity, as Rogers (2003) deliberates, is a hurdle in order to understand what a child is. He further elucidates that for most of people, a child is simply a matter of physical size and development. Yet a child and childhood is lot more than this. There are many features of a child and childhood which cannot be seen. At its simplest, childhood is considered as the early phase of the human life in all cultures and all societies.

As a word "child" is common term in everyday speech. It is used with the different understanding in different contexts over time. For example sometimes a child is referred as the age when one cannot speak properly. Sometimes it is implied as incapable body and mind (James & James, 2008). The other time it is used as "next generation" (Alanen, 2001). Every so often it is deployed as someone who is naturally dependent. At times the word "child" is also used as term of friendship to greet or flatter someone; adult. For example grandma says "goodbye my child" or sometimes elderly people say my "child" go and get me this and that (Aries, 1982). At one point it is considered privileged to be parents to a child, as an aspect of identity. At other point one must be "child free" in order to be "normal" (Clark, 2013). On one hand, everybody 'knows' what a child is, because we have all been children and experienced childhood (James & James, 2008). On the other hand Jenks (1982) believes that what has been understood about a child and childhood is not actually about a child and childhood at all.

3.2 A journey to adulthood

A child is often viewed as a being to improve in order to reach the point of perfection; adulthood. Qvortrup (2002) suggests that is why even in contemporary industrialized societies, a child emerges as a category with a social position who must go with plan of care and education. James, Jenks & Prout (1998) also concur that a child is banded together with the idea of imperfection and adulthood is seen as the end point to dependency into independency and imperfection into perfection. As Woodhead (2013) states "from social constructionist perspective, developmentalism is a discourse within which children are constructed as not yet adult, as in process of 'becoming' rather than a person in their own right" (p. 144). A child is considered as the one who lacks something. However adulthood can never be considered as a state of stability, perfection and independency then the differentiation between a child and an adult becomes more complex. So the idea of maturity and completeness about adults and immaturity and incompleteness about children fails and the puzzle still remains scrambled as "what is a child?"

In relation to adults, children are viewed as those who are physically weaker, less well-developed, weigh less than adults. Children are considered those who need to get the developmental stages of secondary sexual features in order to be called an adult. Children tend to have less cognitive skills, intellectual abilities, less knowledge, less ability for reasoning. Children are deliberated as those who have less emotional maturity and less socially skilled. Children are contemplated as those with less competence in terms of life-skills and less expressive. Children are perceived as relatively in powerless position in relation to adults. From such distinguishing traits and attributes of adults, both as biological and social aspects, children are defined as children and adults are willfully calculated as "grown-ups" (James & James, 2008). According to Qvortrup (2009) it is not because children are not active that is why they are treated differently from adults but they are not active in the same way adults are active. And it means that children do not lack anything rather adults do not understand and recognize children's praxis. Adults view competence as a faculty defined in relation to adults' praxis. James, Jenks & Prout (1998) agree with the debate and state "childhood, we might venture, is that status of personhood which is by definition often in the wrong place" (p. 37). "The understanding of childhood, the view of children, is very much an "adult" projection; we often unconsciously see them as what we are not, as what we fear and what we miss" (Mouritsen 2002, p. 34).

3.3 Age

Age is used as another key factor to define a "child". Age is widely used as for definitional purposes in many contemporary societies particularly in western societies. It is calculated in terms of years passed in one's life and as rudimentary source of identity. According to United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC) anyone below the age of eighteen is prospected as a child. This is internationally agreed definition of a child. Additionally, there are some other categories for example infants, toddlers, youth, adolescents, tweenagers and teenagers. All these categories are encompassed under the word of 'child'. Such a universalizing age based definition is problematic as it does not consider the context and experiences. It needs to ponder "what, apart from chronological age, do they have in common that enables them to be called 'children' (Rogers 2003, p. 5). Though children share a common course of physical

changes and development over time however considering age as definitional factor to mark what a child is can be problematic in several ways. For example not all children acquire same physical, social and psychological development at the same age. These stages of development are not depended of age but other factors such as physical, social and cultural contexts. Despite of the very fact still age is institutionalized in modern society to define a child. For example age is the fundamental element to group children in different classes for schooling. Age has powerful impact on contemporary institutions which are organized on the principles of age. Children are assessed in all aspects including in their school activities and studies in terms of their age group (Mouritsen 2002, James & James 2008). Yet one may question that why someone should be described in terms of age since it is not fact of being like gender and race etc. In order to answer the question one can strive to apprehend it by what it is and what it is not. So it leads to the question that "when do children stop being children and become adults" (Rogers 2003, p. 9). But then it is vague and challenging to define where childhood ends and from where adulthood begins as it depends where and when a child is born. One would have childhood till the age of 21 if born before 1969. In 1969 the law on the 'age of majority'- the age at which an individual approaches adult status was changed from 21 to 18 in England.

4. Children and Childhood- Past and Present

There is an argument in the history of childhood that childhood is a recent phenomenon. So it is a modern construct which has been given childhood a special space in society. Indeed, according to some historians, the notion of childhood as a distinct phase of life didn't develop until the 16th centuries. Aries (1982) proposed that childhood had undergone the process of social construction. Aries suggests that 'idea of childhood' is related to awareness of specific nature of childhood. With this awareness distinction between a child and an adult can be done. After studying medieval paintings, literature, philosophical and religious tracts and letters, Aries concludes this awareness was lacking in medieval society. In medieval society a child was considered as an adult as soon as s/he could live without continuous attention of mother or caregiver (nanny). While referring to his historical work about childhood, some researchers for example Gittens (2004) and Corsaro (2011) criticized Aries's bold interpretations which are drawn just by studying medieval art and literature. They present the ambiguity and generalization of Aries's work but Aries work served as a great source in the history of childhood. In Dionysian views children were perceived as 'little devils' born with original sins as being inherently naughty, un-socialized and uncivilized beings. Later than Dionysian views, there came Apollonian views which represent children as 'little angles' who are born good and innocent. Childhood is considered as time to play and being happy and enjoy and not time period for work. Aries mentions it was the time when childhood was considered as innocence. Children were valued as a source of enjoyment for adults particularly for women.

The change in perceptions or paradigm shift about children and childhood which James (2009) calls as 'break with tradition' (p. 37) happened in 1970s and 1980s. There were many movements started about position of a child in society for example the launch of international year of child in 1979, emergence of notion about 'world's children' 'child abuse' 'happy, safe, protected, innocent childhood' (p. 37). The traditional perceptions about a child and childhood were also started to problematize in academics. James mentions Donaldson (1978) who dared to challenge Piaget's famous work on child development. At the same time Vygotsky's work started to be recognized as children's self-governing and dynamic role in human development. The Russian psychologist Vygotsksy, contemporary of Jean Piaget, questioned and criticized the notion of developmental process as universal and natural. He suggested that a child's development, thinking, social relationships are dependent on social and cultural contexts. The contemporary understanding about children and childhood emerged with the emergence of modern school and the bourgeoisie nuclear family which assigned distinct roles for children (Mouritsen, 2002). Allanen (2001) and Mouritsen (2002) consider 'Marxist concept of class' as the reason for this emergence. Marxist says the concept of childhood benefits bourgeoisie. Because the bourgeoisie need a well-educated work force to work for them. The modern concept of "childhood is a result of the whole great project of education and institutionalization that the bourgeoise constructed to ensure that children grew up as useful as well-regulated adults" (Mouritsen 2002, p. 17). The emphasis was on the construction and implementation of law that stresses on children must stay at schools for certain period of time in order to learn the required skills. The law has been constructed with parents' and teachers' interactions with the idea that schooling is significant investment for the future of the nation (James & James, 2008). After industrialization, children are supposed to go to school. So they are viewed financially dependent on their parents and this period of dependency shapes the notion of childhood in most of the contemporary societies.

The new notion about children and childhood focused on the collective actions of children with adults and with each other. However the focus was still on adults' perceptions about children and childhood. Adults were in control in

every aspect of children's lives from child rearing to child research. The notion of a child as active social actor and agent was, still, left out. About the emergence of change in perceptions about children, James (2009) traces the date back to 1970s from where after children started to be seen as 'social actor' (p. 34). While describing the key concepts in childhood studies, James & James (2008) stress that the notion of social actors in childhood studies came into being during the 1970s. As James & James state "what childhood studies achieved, through both its theoretical and empirical contributions to the debate, is to demonstrate the agency of children as social actors" (p.27). Mayall (2002) raises a question that to what extent a child can exercise agency and role of actor. Kjørholt (2005) reinforces the question while reflecting on two narrative texts that stemmed from a publication produced by Danish project 'children as fellow citizens' (p.152). She reminds about the important challenges which this construction presents for policy and research. It must be, as Kjørholt suggests, critically explored in relation to the complexities of moral and cultural space which children live in. Otherwise the division between adults and children is marked as 'human beings' and 'human becomings'. The conception of childhood varies from time to time in the very same society. This social category childhood which emerges from beliefs, ideologies, cultures and values changes immensely over time (Aries, 1982; Jenks, 2004).
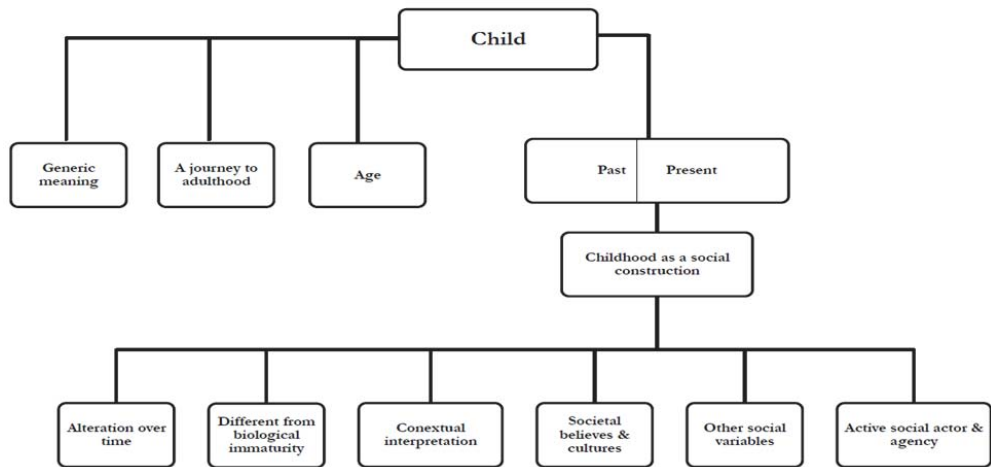
Source: Developed for this paper.

5. Theoretical Discussion

Gitten (2004) describes the three varying approaches of studying about children and childhood. First socioeconomic situation of families second endeavors to understand emotional and psychological changes in a child's upbringing, and thirdly legal and political changes.

The question about nature of childhood: natural or social phenomenon has been raised in social constructionism. By referring to the 6 key features of childhood in sociology of childhood paradigm, Jenks (2004) argues to make a critical reconstruction of common assumptions about children and childhood. He refers to the number of contemporary sociologists who succeeded in problematizing the idea of childhood instead of treating it as a pre-stated with a relatively determined trajectory. According to Prout & James (1990, p. 8-9), the six key features of the new paradigm: sociology of childhood, are as follow

1. The socially constructed childhood is different from biological immaturity. It is contextualized interpretation of human's early life based on societal beliefs and cultures.
2. Childhood is intertwined with other social variables in societies such as gender, class ethnicity etc.
3. Children's own independent perspectives must be considered while studying children and childhood.
4. Children must be viewed as active participants not only in construction of knowledge about them but also in construction of society as a whole.
5. Due to direct involvement of children in construction of knowledge about them, ethnography is useful methodology in science to study childhood.
6. The new paradigm of childhood sociology is to respond to the process of reconstructing childhood.

The idea that childhood is socially constructed refers to the understanding that childhood is not natural process rather it is society which decides when a child is a child and when a child becomes an adult.

The notion of childhood cannot be seen in isolation. It is deeply intertwined with other factors in society. The notion of "childhood is socially constructed and understood contextually" (Jenks 2004, p. 78). For example, as Nilsen (2008) mentions, how childhood of Norwegian children is altered according to the culture of the society. Being out in nature (outdoor life), despite of extreme weather and freezing temperature in Norway, is considered as part of "constructing a national childhood" (p. 54).

Different laws were introduced to reinforce the idea of childhood in modern industrialized societies. In particular, Corsaro (1997) points out how laws regarding 'child labor' were upheld. Corsaro states "these changes brought about sentimentalized vision of childhood in which children were to be nurtured and protected" (p.194). Yet in some societies of today's world children are supposed to earn from early age and they are viewed as economically responsible members of a family and society. And this makes it problematic to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in all countries with same emphasis. In these societies, childhood as a concept is considered totally different from that of modern industrialized societies. It turns childhood as depended not only on context, culture, time but also circumstances.

Further expectations from children of same age group in same society are viewed in terms of situation they live in. A child with poor socioeconomic background can be excused as irresponsible however a middle class child of same age is expected to be more responsible in terms of school homework and other developmental aspects in a very same society. It also refers to children's different life experiences which play an important role in positioning them in society. It is crucial to perceive childhood as an even and unvarying feature of any society. A child when develops into an adult, leaving childhood behind for the next generation, makes childhood as a universal constituent of society. Qvortrup (2009) suggests that the word "childhood" rather than plural term "childhoods" should be used. Conversely the form will change due to change in life and practices over time for example laws, policies and other social activities etc. This recues back to the point that childhood is not universal rather socially constructed which is deep rooted in social, cultural and alternation over time.

6. Concluding Remarks

Brown (1999) highlights "the thinking of a child cannot be derived only from innate psychological factors or from the influence of the physical environment but also be understood as a function of those relationships which are established between the child and the social environment that surrounds him/(her)" (p. 59). Childhood is neither universal nor natural rather it is tied close to social circumstances and cultural process. Though the child and childhood is deemed differently from time to time and context to context, however one thing is common in its all diversity. And that is: children are viewed differently from adults. It means children do not lack anything rather adults need to understand children's praxis. Childhood is viewed differently in different cultures and contexts. The notion of childhood also altered tremendously over time even in the very same society. It is also significant to observe that childhood cannot be considered isolated from other social variables. It is intertwined with other factors of being for example gender and race etc.

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