

A review of past and present understandings of childhood, with an appreciation that interpretations of the child and childhood are not fixed, differing over time, place, society and culture.

Evans and Goodsir (2016:284) state that interpretations of the ‘child’ and what ‘childhood’ encompasses are “not fixed”. Multiple definitions have been widely debated in history across the world, with many assumptions being made about the “true nature” and crucial requirements of childhood are (Twum-Danso Imoh and Ame, 2012:1). This essay will explore understandings of the ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ from various perspectives over time; including arguments regarding the limited understanding of childhood during pre-modern society (Wyness, 2012); the positivist view of the ‘modern’ child (Penn, 2014) influenced by biological norms and developmental psychology (Stearns, 2011); and the ‘post-modern’ child, influenced by sociology and the challenging resistance movement, social constructionism (Moss, 2017).

The influence and global enforcement of Western concepts of the child and childhood and other historical discourse will be explored, to enable further understanding of both the ‘child’ and childhood. The process of how concepts of childhood vary significantly across history, geography and diverse cultures will be reviewed (Vinovskis, 2014), and the significant ‘power’ these different discourses have on how both society and parents interact with and perceive children (Mac Naughton, 2005).

It is widely suggested previous and current understandings surrounding the child and childhood have been socially constructed and determined by adults from Western, middle-class societies and enforced upon the majority world (Twum-Danso Imoh and Ame, 2012). Mayall (1996) states ‘childhood’ is a concept prominently constructed by adults *for* children, encompassing philosophes of what childhood should involve and how children should live their lives (Dahlberg et al., 2006). Boyden (1997) enthuses these modern understandings have imposed a global understanding of childhood (Twum-Danso Imoh and Ame, 2012); with present and historic understandings formed and enforced by the West, with over-tenacious and over-confident interpretations of childhood (Hendrick, 1997).

Burman (2017) suggests Western ideals provide problematic outcomes for children, especially those in the majority-world, as Western views impose obligatory agendas dictating the natural way to live, act, and develop, in one *universal* way. Alexander (2012) warns that the pressure of Western ideals upon countries possessing contrasting cultures, causes communities to be “stripped” of their own values, norms and social structures, to follow what the West deems

appropriate and ‘normal’ (Alexander, 2012; cited in Moss, 2017:18). Western authoritative power over the majority world enforces universal developmental processes, which the West deems true identifications of childhood (Burman, 2012). Burman (2017:70) states ideologies behind these concepts, that are universalised onto the global south, mostly derive from “white middle-class” features whom assume these concepts apply to all contexts and environments, including non-Western (Twum-Danso Imoh and Ame, 2012).

In nineteenth-century Europe, an increasingly accepted view arose that the concept of childhood is made of one “standardised model”, which incorporates universal standards of child education and development (Burman, 2017:75). Burman (2017) portrays this as Western society taking steps backwards from discovering a diversified nature of childhood, to the conformist and universal notion which ignores both cultural and economy disparities within childhood (Burman, 2017). Jenks (2009) states naturalising childhood in this way inhibits global understandings of children’s individuality and deems cultural differences insignificant. Jenks (2009) further asserts children are unidentical across the world; they are socially constructed and should be understood circumstantially with contextual differences valued and appreciated (Jenks, 2009). Cregan and Cuthbert (2014:33) state children have progressed from physical contributors to “psychologically developed individuals”. These perceptual changes derived from increased appreciations for developmental psychology, a dominant discourse gaining prevalence in the understanding of children (Ingleby, 2013). Western society assume their concepts of the child, developed mainly through science and psychology, are “factual” and “correct” (Mac Naughton, 2005:18). Developmental psychology inclines only what can be measured within children is important (Browne, 2004). However, science cannot measure children’s happiness, which is equally important as children reaching ‘normal’ developmental milestones at what society deems ‘normal’ rates (Stearns, 2017). Developed and applied from the ideas of Foucault (1977), and his ideas of a “regime of truth” and the “art of government” (Mac Naughton, 2015:32), Moss (2017) states these discourses are implemented as truthful and accurate; but condemns the notion that these concepts can be applied across the world universally. Mac Naughton (2005:18) expresses developmental psychology is “partial, situated... [and a] local” concept, so it cannot always be applied to all children, in all countries. As reinforced by Evans and Goodsir (2016), childhood does not comprise one universal truth, but differs and contrasts within different time-periods, societies and cultures.

Developmental psychology is an influential concept for defining the child and childhood that gained popularity in modern-society, and although faced with some criticisms, its dominance is present in many aspects of child development in the twenty-first century (Moss, 2017). For example, within current education framework such as the ‘Early Years Foundation Stage’ (DfE, 2017), which has many aspects of Piaget’s theory on the stages of development in its methods of assessing and developing children (Penn, 2014). However, Penn (2014:14) argues continuous over-presence of psychology in educational practice causes problems, such as “universality versus particularity...[and] objectivity versus subjectivity”. Wyness (2015) concurs that although developmental psychology possesses authenticity in its assessments of biological and psychological growth; children within its theory are represented as incomplete and incompetent, dependent on adult power and authority to guide them to a state sufficient to the rest of society (Bruce, 2015). The approach is over-domineering and oppressive based on the conformity it demands from all societies (Hall et al., 2010). It also fails to represent the contextual diversity and individual circumstances of children, rendering important influential factors such as cultural values and gender “invisible” (Browne, 2004:14).

Post-modernist thinkers, an ever-growing resistance movement of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, challenges modern discourses of developmental psychology (Moss, 2017). Kehily (2009) argues there is no such occurrence of universal childhood or single development pathways that all children of the world can conform to. Postmodernists refute processes of modernist thinking, suggesting a lack of consideration for circumstances such as social-class, culture and non-Western values (Bruce, 2015). Childhood is perceived as a social construct, everchanging over time, varying between different social and ethnic groups (Stearns, 2011). Social-constructionists believe emphasis should be placed on the meanings behind *why* people live a certain way and are sceptical about dominant truths and validity of various knowledge (Penn, 2014). Value is placed on the appreciation of the many types of child, and no value of one society should be deemed more privileged than another (Penn, 2014). Postmodernists and social-constructionists believe there are diverse ways of being a child, and different childhoods are “products of culture” which vary across time and space (Kehily, 2009:8). James and Prout (1997) state whilst developmental psychology and biology have been significant in understanding children’s progression through stages of development, childhood is made more meaningful when immeasurable circumstances, such as the influences of culture, are considered (Kehily, 2009).

An example of a highly influential, successful project channelling post-modernistic thinking is the work of Malaguzzi (1963) and Reggio Emilia schools in Italy (Moss, 2017). These

schools aimed to be one of a new kind; free from discrimination, inequality and rigid curricula (Browne, 2004). Rinaldi (2006) states the Reggio project perceives children as ‘rich’ and capable; each child is unique with their own rights rather than a universal list of needs. The project dismisses Locke’s (1689) view of children as empty-vessels, and sees children as active participants in constructing knowledge, co-producing learning pathways with nurturing teachers (Browne, 2004). The post-modern approach welcomes complexity and diversity; and although post-modern appreciations continue to grow, it is important to recognise that much of society’s educational systems still hold modern values (Hall et al., 2010). Development psychology maintains prevalence in current early-years curricula, spreading further standardisation and conformity across children (Moss, 2017). Modern discourse in the twenty-first century is supported by societal members who have the power to determine what discourses are right or wrong, therefore, unless these perceptions of power are changed, modern values will continue to dominate society (Hall et al., 2010).

To fully comprehend a multifarious perspective on the child and childhood it is important to consider various historical discourses, which provide critical comparisons and appreciations of the assorted understandings of the child and childhood over time (Wyness, 2012). Considered to be one of the earliest understandings of childhood is the work of Aries (1962), whom mainly through observations of family-portraiture, argued that until around the late seventeenth-century (Wyness, 2012), within Europe there was no presence of childhood as a separate phase of life (Stearns, 2011). Children engaged in similar activity to adults, with scarce differentiation between childhood and adulthood once children developed past infancy (Smith, 2009). Aries states children were loved, but after infancy were regarded as “small adults...immersed in all aspects of social and working life”, without specific rights or responsibilities (Wells, 2015:17). Children of this time were mentioned “not at all” or portrayed as “miniature adults” (Sinanoglou Marcus, 1978:3).

Aries’ work has often been criticised for his narrow analysis of using family-portraits as underlying evidence for his philosophy, with specific criticism arising from the use of artwork singularly produced for “elite” classes (Stearns, 2011:10). Historians suggest portraiture Aries reviewed was potentially commissioned by upper-middle-class families, whose perspectives on childhood varied significantly from the lower-working-class (Wells, 2015). The illustrations Aries reviewed also differ profoundly from experiences of children from other geographical locations outside of Europe, especially those who partook in child labour whom are absent from his philosophy (Heywood, 2001).

Although Aries' work lacks consideration for differences in culture and geography, his work did however, identify the mere perceptions of childhood in history (Wyness, 2012). Aries' ideas also evidence significant differences to the perceptions on childhood from the pre-modern period, to observations in the twenty-first century (Smidt, 2013). For example, Children during pre-modern society were deemed adults between the ages of seven-to-fifteen years; and children of this age from the lower-classes carried out extensive physical labour (Smidt, 2013). This is a very different experience in comparison to Western children of the twenty-first century, whom the majority are involved in compulsory, full-time education during this stage of their lives (Tomlinson, 2011). However, pre-modern children are not so different when compared to those residing in the global south, where many twenty-first century children still undertake daily labour within locations such as India and Zimbabwe (Wyness, 2012). Thus, demonstrating continuing contrasting perceptions of the nature of childhood across diverse cultures and societies over time (Wyness, 2012).

Within pre-modern Europe upper-class societies considered children as less-superior; childish mannerisms were considered improper past infancy and more representative of working-class children (Sinanoglou Marcus, 1978). Contrastingly, working-class children of this time were encouraged to focus on work commitments, especially into the eighteenth-century, which saw an age of agricultural production progress to an industrial society (Wells, 2015). Child labour was prominent, which saw very little interest in the education of children, but more so a focus on how children could be most effective assets once physically able (Morgan, 2011).

The upper-class and working-class child demonstrate two disparate experiences of childhood, which are both similarly dictated by adult power and authority (Morgan, 2011). Hanawalt (1986) states that before reaching the 'age of enlightenment' society paid low regard to the full nature of the child, focusing instead on biological factors of child development (Vinovskis, 2014). Once children were at a certain stage of physical competencies they were recognised as adults and expected to support the familial household (Vinovskis, 2014), whether that be undertaking child-labour or fitting in with the "social finesse" of upper-class households (Sinanoglou Marcus, 1978:7). Johnson (2002) refutes this view and states some communities of pre-modern and early-modern periods appreciated other aspects of childhood, such as cultural values and religion, rather than solely biological factors.

Johnson (2002) refers to Puritan communities whom possessed high regard for religion, with adult authority over children overridden by that of God (Johnson, 2002). Somerville (1992) states English Puritans produced an extraordinary amount of literature on children and can be regarded as one of the starting points in history that provided a greater understanding of the child and childhood (Vinovskis, 2014). These suggestions effectively contest Aries' earlier claims that the notion of childhood was non-existent in history (Wyness, 2012). The different concepts of childhood demonstrated between Puritans and Aries, make evident that not only do discourses on childhood differ in time, (Wells, 2015), but also between diverse cultures and communities that possess different societal values from one to the other (Evans and Goodsir, 2016).

The subsequent eighteenth-century saw developments of new interests in the concept of childhood; with growing recognition of developmental psychology in the West, and developing interests in child education (Heywood, 2001:19). The Western-modern ideas of the child and childhood have derived from the philosophies of biology, social-science and developmental psychology processes of measuring and regulating how children develop and grow in to adulthood (Wyness, 2015). This period of 'modernity' gained popularity towards the late eighteenth-century during a period of Enlightenment (Mac Naughton, 2005). This developing era saw changing attitudes to childhood, with more attention focused on social-sciences surrounding the child and childhood (Stables, 2011); rather than the previous pre-modern attitudes which paid high regard to "irrationality and superstition" (Doherty and Hughes, 2014:10). Enlightenment philosophers believed science could offer answers to child-development and provide "further understanding of the world" (Habermas, 1981:22, cited in Mac Naughton, 2005:17).

Vinovskis (2014) highlights changing Western attitudes of childhood development was partly due to the philosophy of Locke (1689) and subsequent contrasting work of Rousseau (1762), whom produced diverse approaches to the child in the Enlightenment age, although both emphasising the importance of a child's early experiences (Doherty and Hughes, 2014). Locke theorised children are born "*tabula rasa...an empty vessel*", of which adults could mould to reach a desired outcome (Bruce, 2015:3). He suggested children are born without innate knowledge (Archard, 2015), and it is external adult-provided experiences which shape children's development, not purely biological factors (Doherty and Hughes, 2014). These external experiences would be adult-determined, using pre-determined collections of valuable knowledge and life-values, which would provide children with a better chance of success in later life (Dahlberg et al., 2006). Therefore, the child would be transformed from one of

“incompleteness...[and] unfulfilled potential”, into an adult who becomes an effective and “economically productive human resource” (Dahlberg et al., 2006:45). Locke’s philosophy was developed during a time of religious commitment, where most of Western society perceived children as “born in to sin” (Morgan, 2011:8). Therefore, Locke embedded in his philosophy that children needed education from an early age, one that was rigidly controlled, structured and teacher-directed (Morgan, 2011); for children to be provided with controlled, positive experiences rather than ‘filled’ with negative ones, which would influence whether the child would develop in to a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ member of society (Bruce, 2015).

Rousseau rejected Locke’s empirical philosophy and stated adults of this period did not know enough about children’s learning for them to dictate and control children’s educational experiences (Morgan, 2011). Rousseau saw childhood as a “time of innocence” (Doherty and Hughes, 2014:10), and instead of regimented education structure, children should be enabled to interact freely with their educators within environments of trust and collaboration (Morgan, 2011). Rousseau’s nativist approach to childhood suggests adults could be more of an intrusion to children’s education if they over-intervene (Bruce, 2015), and stated children needed to be allowed opportunities to experience free-expression through free-play, and self-directed creative activities in early education (Dahlberg et al., 2006). Rousseau advised children are born with innate senses of right and wrong, and adults should carefully guide children, rather than control experiences children engage in out of fear of children making ‘bad’ decisions (Doherty and Hughes, 2014).

However, Dahlberg et al. (2006) emphasises whilst Rousseau’s philosophy encourages children’s creative-expression and acquisition of de-pressurised, child-determined knowledge; it is important to contemplate that societal experience indicates that shrouding children away from the real world turns children into victims of mass-deception, who are consequently disrespected and not taken seriously by society (Dahlberg et al., 2006). This critical interpretation can also be applied to Locke’s philosophy, whom although provided one of the first philosophies on childhood, he removes the child’s individual voice and agency (Dahlberg et al., 2006). Locke also over-focused on nurturing the increasing power of adults over children and developing the child to be a productive source for societal benefit (Archard, 2015). However, this theme is still present in the twenty-first century and early-years-practice; children are perceived as dependent on adults, following adult-determined developmental milestones, which guide them to reach a societal desired, measured outcome (Penn, 2014).

Locke's philosophy was prominent through early-modern society (Morgan, 2011); with his influence accepted mostly amongst Western governments, upper-class wealthy families and the church; these societies had the capital and power to endorse such ideas and invest in education (Morgan, 2011). This is not necessarily the case for children from lower-working-class families and the majority world, whom were still needed to provide labour in ever-growing industrial societies (Humphries, 2010). Societal needs were regarded more important than those of the child-learner (Morgan, 2011); parents and other adults had "absolute authority" and children possessed minimal rights (Archard, 2015:8). The industrial revolution saw significant increases in child labour demands (Humphries, 2010). Hendrick (1997) states towards the end of the eighteenth-century there were few voices from society opposing child labour; and lower-class children had to be accepting of work, as it was perceived labour provided them with rare opportunities to learn trades in a time where education was not easily accessible to them, compared to children of upper-middle-classes (Hendrick, 1997).

In the late eighteenth-century, however, children undertaking gruelling labour within industry such as factory work were increasingly perceived by society as "victims" and "slaves", forced to work within "unnatural" employment which stripped them of childhood (Hendrick, 1997:38). Escalating concern from upper-class societies was directed to the increasing needs of working-class children and poverty (Holmes and Barron, 2007); particularly after increasing reports of the physical punishment taking place in work-placements of working-class children, and the detrimental effects on children's health (Kirby, 2013). Modern society in the nineteenth-century ascertained the abolishment of child labour and school fees, indicating a fast-paced change in the attitudes towards childhood (Baldock, 2011). The 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' introduced Article 32 which aimed to protect children from "economic exploitation" and hazardous work (Archard, 2015:42); which Wyness (2012) states interpreted labour as an unnatural burden on children, inhibiting their overall development. Western-society in the modern-age influenced the 'norm' perspective that all child labour should be abolished (Wyness, 2012). However, some children within the global south make an "independent choice" to work for various reasons which are influenced by their disparate circumstances in comparison to children from more affluent, Western-societies (Beazley, 2015:298). Many children in modern society, who live in the majority world with extreme poverty, work for necessity to support a struggling family home (Beazley, 2015). These drastic differences between children in the global north and the global south demonstrate children in current society do not inhabit one universal childhood; each society, culture and geographical location possess their own notion of the child and childhood (Kehily, 2009).

The concept of the child and childhood continues to be a contested phenomenon, with many societies possessing different dominant discourses about childhood, which impose regimes of truth on their members, effectively determining how members of their society act and how they care for children. Contrasting societies embody diverse values, and how one community embraces family life, will be embraced inversely by another. Children themselves inhabit their families differently across various countries, communities and cultures, and diversities across cultures and class-systems shape children's lives in unique ways. There is no singular, universal definition of childhood, it is widely disputed, with substantive forms of knowledge available in history, and new developments around the concept continuously emerging. Evidence suggests although the discourse of post-modernism is slowly increasing in recognition in the twenty-first century, modern-societal discourse is still dominant across Western-society; practicing developmental psychological approaches that have been deemed conformist, universal, scientifically underpinned, oppressive, adult controlled and developed by the minority and enforced upon the majority world.

In order for society to gain a full, multifarious perspective of the changing notions of the child and childhood, whilst appreciating different contexts such as time, place and culture; it is important that the powers and authority within Western society are more welcoming to the values of diverse cultures, to improve the Western concepts they enforce on the rest of the majority world, ultimately ensuring these conceptions are more sympathetic to individual cultures, societies and communities.

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