

The missing third that skews sociology



Thousands of small and large shoes stood in for the banned climate change march in Paris, December 2015, represented in this photograph by Will Alderson.

Priscilla Alderson

The common myth that 'women are half the world' excludes the third of the world aged under-18 years, with over 40 per cent of people aged under-14 in some African states. The median age of Syrians is 21 so that, added to the dimensions of richer, Euro-US, Christian nations waging war on poorer, Middle-Eastern, Muslim people, there is intergenerational war when on average older populations fight generally much younger ones.

Even when minors aged under-18 are wise and responsible, they can seldom vote, or have adult independence, or escape from the authority of their parents or guardians, and their teachers or employers.

Much mainstream 'adult' research in sociology, politics and economics ignores children and young people, while child-centred research tends to ignore 'adult' concerns. Research thereby doubly excludes children from the mainstream world.

Social analysis is then seriously skewed by biased sampling, when one fifth (in the UK), one third (globally), or nearly half of the groups being studied are routinely ignored. Childhood research is also distorted when it excludes the mainstream world, and the social and political structures which so greatly influence, infiltrate and explain children's daily lives.

From around the 1980s, the 'new' sociology of childhood began in critical reaction to biologically-determined child development theory. Researchers now recognise childhood as a conferred social status that emerges from local contexts. They respect children as active agents with valid views, who share in shaping their own and other people's lives. Some researchers hoped the new childhood studies would challenge the oppressions and social exclusions of children, as feminism helped to emancipate women. Instead, childhood seems to be more firmly locked into an illusory apolitical realm.

Mainstream researchers tend to leave children and young people to the childhood specialists, as if childhood is like urban planning, or health inequalities, or any other topic best studied primarily by expert sub-specialists. Yet childhood, like adulthood, is not a discrete specialist topic to be flattened, sliced and squeezed into a distinct sub-sociology. Instead, children and adults exist and interact across practically all social concerns, and are understood through multidisciplinary research.

Childhood researchers tend to be interested mainly in education, care, play and welfare. Although there is also childhood and youth research on many other themes, such as employment, rights, poverty, crime, and the media, each of these specialisms seems to be somewhat detached from one another, from predominant concepts of 'the child', and from related research with adults, such as on criminology.

Whereas research by adults on adults explicitly or implicitly conveys a sense of adults as complex individuals in dense social networks, research by adults on children tends to give thinner, more fragmented impressions of the children within partial social contexts. Research in schools or nurseries, for instance, seldom looks at children's lives outside those institutions.

By default, neglect of children in political and economic research confirms misleading notions of children as apolitical beings and non-economic agents, just as women used to be misrepresented. The neglect skews and weakens the research and, therefore, the information researchers provide to policy makers and the general public. In turn, policies and dominant values and attitudes reinforce the ignoring of children in public life, so that they are still more liable to be overlooked in future research. Just one example of overlooking children is when women are said to be the group most hurt by current financial austerity measures. Yet it is women with children who are at highest risk, and children who are the index group.

To make sense of complex childhoods, besides separate studies in numerous social areas, interdisciplinary research examining the connections between them is also vital. For example, Nikolas Rose's profound study, *Governing the Soul*,⁽¹⁾ examines mothers' anxious preoccupation with keeping their children clean and well-behaved while also stimulating their learning. The mothers have internalised in their souls the present values of correct

mothering and seem not to need to be persuaded or coerced into constantly performing their onerous duties. However, the origins and purpose of the values, their powerful hold on the mothers and children, whose interests are so assiduously being served, and why, are not explored. Is there simply some sinister, mindless, Foucauldian power?

A range of possible habitual, commercial and political pressures helps to make sense of the anxious activity.(2) Overarching politics shift children away from being seen as public goods, when we all benefit from supporting the health, education and happiness of younger generations and future workers. Increasingly, children are seen as costs and burdens, to be supported privately by their parents, who will gain the rewards or bear the blame depending on their investments in the childhood years. The split between the sociologies of public adulthood and of semi-private childhood reinforces this harmful separation of children from mainstream society and economics.

Interdisciplinary, inter-generational analysis is vital to explain seemingly irrational choices. The tax on 'spare' bedrooms in social housing was supposed to get families to move to smaller homes with lower rents. So why do 100,000s of families remain in their slightly larger homes, with mounting rent arrears and debts, while so many of the children are cold, hungry, stressed and unable to concentrate at schools? The dearth of smaller homes prevents many families from moving, but there are other reasons revealed in research on topics ranging from economics to cities, such as by David Harvey, Anna Minton, Majia Nadesan and Loïc Wacquant.

The constant churning, when one third of tenants with private landlords move home at least once a year, tears up the social fabric of neighbourhoods, which is as vital as the built environment. In the inner-London estate of mixed social and private housing built in the 1920s where I live, residents meet in their gardens (parties are great events) and on their trampolines, in the parks, playgrounds and sports fields, as well as in the shops, cafes, post office, pub and surgery. Adults, who have enjoyed the estate's clubs and sports when children, now support and coach new younger members. Many older people have lived here for decades; some care for their grandchildren, others are cared for by younger relatives. A great-great-grandmother runs tea dances.

Central to the community, the primary school draws in all the local children and many adults, helping them to meld together. The peaceful, largely law-abiding, all-age social networks are stitched together strongly and securely enough to receive the constant flow, in and out of the estate, of new residents from around the world. Too often, the high costs of moving home include losing these many benefits, which are main reasons to stay and pay the bedroom tax.

In *The Politics of Childhoods Real and Imagined*,(3) I track the missing children in many aspects of social life and public debate. Although 'future generations' are mentioned vaguely in climate debates, there is less attention to today's children's current and likely future suffering. Small bodies are least able to withstand the present dangers of extreme heat, drought and floods, hunger and disease, forced migration, and armed conflict that mainly occur in parched, water-stressed areas. Lost health and education can have life-long effects. It is estimated that every year up to 500,000 children go blind for lack of vitamin A.

Present harms affect future generations, as epigenetics reveals. Long-term human survival depends on rethinking and reforming countless attitudes and structures, which damage, waste and destroy the natural world that includes children and adults as well as all other species.

Large social structures such as the NHS exist through innumerable working relationships. *The Politics of Childhoods* contrasts predominantly commercial systems with ones based on social justice, comparable to Andrew Sayer's moral economy.(4) I analyse how the systems affect relationships between multi-disciplinary healthcare teams and their relations with the children they care for. The transition towards more commercial, privatised health services especially affects children with emergency, complex and long-term healthcare needs. Philanthropy and its poster child also play a questionable part in moves away from democratic, accountable state services. Deeper political pressures that drive the sale of public services and the commons are reviewed in a chapter on the price (exchange value) economy and its effects on children and young people, illustrated in relation to cities and crime.

Finally, the book begins to map possible solutions, and utopian or at least preferable alternatives to present inter-related social, economic and ecological problems. Since Plato, utopians have tended to confine children into fulltime care centres, either to remove children from the subversive family and turn them into compliant citizens, or to enable adults to escape from stifling family life into utopian freedoms. How might children and young people work with adults to create more just, free, generous and sustainable societies? The question requires sociologists to move beyond disciplinary and age-based boundaries to search for the answers.

Notes:

[1] Rose, N. (1999) *Governing the Soul: Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Free Association Books.

[2] Summarised, for example, in Rayner, G. (2015) **The nudge business**, *Discover Society*, December.

[3] Alderson, P. (2016) *The Politics of Childhoods Real and Imagined: Practical Application of Critical Realism and Childhood Studies*. Volume 2. London: Routledge.

[4] Sayer, A. (2016) *Why We Can't Afford the Rich*. Bristol: Policy.

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