# Original Research Paper

## Education

## SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION:

In his attempt to define social constructivism, Andrews (2012) concludes that social constructivism recognizes objective reality and focuses on social practices that individuals participate in as an object of enquiry. Various methods have been used to study the concept of childhood and one of these is the social constructionist approach (Rogers, 2003). Alan and Prout (1997) study childhood as a theory instead of a function and try to show that childhood is a social constructive study to a great extent. This is because we are mainly talking about the early years of human life and these years have been defined differently through history and many other traditional cultures that exist . Wyness, uses theories and practices to understand the sociology of childhood. Dependent on past literature, this paper analyzes the extent to which childhood is socially constructed and explores the idea of children by looking at different conceptions across cultures, societies and time. This paper argues that childhood is socially constructed and this starts making even more sense after the age of 5. It also explores the various parameters that influence childhood.

### Defining "Child"

Age is a standard and universal way of defining "children." The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines child as "a human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". Generally speaking, a child is socially categorized as someone that must go through care and education and there is some universal agreement on the basic differences between children and adults. For instance, most societies can agree that children are physiologically and psychologically immature compared to adults, are dependent on them for biological needs and need assistance from time to time.

Biological factors would be the defining factor in drawing a comparison between adults and children.

However, there are several problems with this over-simplified definition. A child and childhood are a lot more that what is stated above. There are many elements of "child" that cannot be encapsulated in the definitions above, nor be generalized. For instance, all children do not develop physically, socially or psychologically at the same age. There are various factors that play a role such as family, culture and society. Additionally all "adults" do not portrait the same level of development and maturity. James, Jenks & Prout (1998) discuss how a child is viewed with the idea of "imperfection" and adulthood is considered the end to dependency and imperfection. Carsaro (1997) excellently presents a thesis that resonates with Aries's (1982) theory of childhood being a social construct. He questions the idea of children as agents in society and at the same time questions childhood as a social construct. James, Jenks & Prout (1998) further state that "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." So this drives us to the question "when do children stop being children and become adults?" (Rogers, 2003 p. 9) which will help us understand the extent to which childhood is socially constructed.

### Childhood in History and Cultures

The biological human desire to reproduce is a universal fact. However, Postman (1982) argues that it is possible for a culture to exist without the social idea of children. I would like to analyze various segregations that do not exist due to biological factors. For instance, children have cheaper travel, special foods, clothes and toys. There are special areas such as indoor play areas designed for children. In the British and many western societies, social construction of childhood can be observed through the way we separate children and adults through difference in laws, products used by children or places where children go and adults don't.

Bluebond-Langner (1994) discusses children's view of death and provides evidence that children understand that death is final and irreversible as early as the age of 5. However, we know that it's common practice to shun talks about death to children because most adults assume that the child doesn't know enough about it. These segregations exist due to societal and not biological factors. Technically, children do not need special laws, places or products and we as a society decided that they do.

In order to display the extent of social construction of childhood, I would like to compare the idea of childhood through history. Aries (1982) argues that in the Middle Ages (the 10th to the 13th century) 'the idea of childhood did not exist'. Children were not viewed differently from adults as they are today. Aries (1982) studied medieval paintings, literature, and religious letters and concluded that consciousness towards the idea of childhood was absent in that society. According to him, this awareness was critical to determine the extent of social construction. He concluded that people were considered adults as soon as they could live without constant attention from the mother or caregiver, which we can assume would be approximately at the age of five. Aries (1982) also discusses how the law did not make any distinctions for children and even the idea of school was not restricted only to children. In fact, works of art from the period display children as "small adults", who engage in the same activities that adults do. As we established earlier, this is not the case today. While Aries's perspective may be considered extreme, it lets us see children differently and not constrained by the parameters commonly used. Mouritsen (2002, p. 17) argues that the whole idea of childhood is a result of the introduction of formalized education, which was established to make sure that children grow up to be like "well regulated adults". Additionally, parents' attitudes towards their children were different from what they are presently (Shorter, 1975). In the present, mothers prioritize the welfare of their children over everything else but in the past this wasn't their utmost priority, especially once they weren't physically dependent. This could potentially imply that parents have played an important role in constructing the idea of childhood.

Looking from a cultural perspective, the idea of childhood and children is perceived very differently in different societies. Children in traditional, non-industrial societies are generally treated differently from children in modern western societies. In a lot of developing countries, children are sent to work at an age as early as four. They are made to work in farms, homes or sweat shops and are used to support the family income. On the other hand, in societies with higher socio-economic backgrounds, the idea of childhood is taken more seriously. (Hopkins and Sriprakash, 2015) report the level of disparity in the ways "childhood" is interpreted in different countries, particularly in India, United Kingdom, and Kenya. In the analysis, the common phrase "it shouldn't happen here" helps the reader understand the cultural representations of the "poor child". Being from India, and having done a lot of volunteer work in villages, I can testify from personal experience that a lot of times children are still married of at an age as early as 7. Girls are expected to take duties of a wife or mother at a young age. This practice was even more common a few decades ago. For instance, my grandmother conceived her first child at the age of fourteen. Not just culturally, the concept of childhood varies among social classes. In her book "Unequal Childhoods", (Lareau, 2011) studies families from different social classes to determine the impact of social classes on children's lives mainly through parenting styles. For instance, "concerted cultivation" is a style commonly practiced by

middle class families to train their children for middle class careers and the way these children grow is very different from the way working and low class couples bring up their children. These styles help us understand the way different families view childhood, supporting the argument that it is a construct.

In addition to historic and societal evidence, we can see disparity in the concept of childhood even in everyday life. For instance, the age of criminal responsibility is different for every country and ranges from 7 to 18 (Crin.org, 2018). This implies the age when an individual becomes responsible for his/her actions is very subjective. Another common issue related to childhood today is technology and it would be almost uncommon to talk about childhood without mentioning technology. Postman (1981) poses an interesting argument on the "disappearance" of childhood because of advent of technology. He established this authoritative relationship between adults and children and according to him; television compromised that boundary as it exposed children to all sorts of images and knowledge before they were developmentally ready. This indicates that if this "boundary" can be impaired by society, it was probably built by society too.

(Wyness, 2012) argues that expansion of technology in children's social networks has resulted in the idea of children as agents and further categorizes them into consumers and internet cyberflaneurs. Speaking of agency, James and Prout (1997), argue that the generalized framework we use to define the path from childhood to adulthood, hinders children from being recognized as social agents and believe that children's social interactions and cultures should be studied, free from adult perspectives. Interestingly, this focus on children's participation has lead to another unintentional separation of children from adults and leads the two to fall into oppositional categories (Wyness, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

There are some obvious differences between children and adults and this argument in no way tries to shun the concept of developmental psychology. This paper explores various arguments about childhood in order to establish the extent to which it is socially constructed. For instance, Aries (1982) essentially believed that childhood is a societal invention and provides one extreme argument. On the other hand, speculating that the idea of childhood didn't explicitly exist in the past, Wyness (2012) argues that there was a rise of sentiments towards children, giving birth to the concept of childhood. We first explore the various definitions of a "child" and then state the various segregations between children and adults brought by society. Further, we explore the concept of childhood through historical, cultural and societal perspectives.

The evidence and research illustrates that the notion "childhood", as we know it today is a social construction to quite an extent and is tied closely to social circumstances and cultural processes. To quantify, the extent of this social construction, the research above exhibits that this social construction makes even more sense after the age of 5, since the divide between childhood and adulthood becomes difficult to justify biologically after this age. This is influenced by Archard's (2015) difference between the concept and conception of childhood. Archard (2015) too establishes that while the concept may be a universal idea that one may use to differentiate children and adults, the conception is a construct influenced by judgments of various societies. Further research on different dimensions that can be used to differentiate childhood and adulthood and these criteria should be tied together to form a cohesive theory on the definition of childhood. Therefore, it is important to establish that childhood cannot be insulated from other social variables like culture, gender, race and social class etc.

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