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Themes and Issues
in the History of Childhood

Abstract

This paper surveys the central themes and historiographic issues in the history of childhood in the 19th and 20th centuries. By selecting four themes – i) changing patterns of child-rearing, ii) children and youth at work, iii) adolescence in historical perspective, and iv) changing perception and treatment of neglected, delinquent and dependent children – this paper accomplishes two purposes: one, demonstrates that the life-experience of children and youth changed significantly in the 19th and 20th centuries, and two, raises critical questions about our current "ways of seeing" or "making sense" of aspects of children's experience and adult perception of childhood. To illustrate each theme, examples are selected from Canadian, British, and American sources.

This paper surveys the central themes and historiographic issues in the history of childhood in the 19th and 20th centuries. This task is rather complex because historians of childhood are not always certain of the boundaries of their sub-discipline and they adopt different approaches to their subject. At the outset, then, it is important to distinguish a "child-centred" approach which focusses on life-experience of children and youth from a culture historical approach which explores perceptions of childhood as a mirror reflecting central themes in the society (Axtell, 1974; Boas, 1966; Coveney, 1967; Demos, 1971; Sutherland, 1969).

Historians of childhood are very sensitive to the neglect of the history of childhood by mainstream historians. We can set aside the query of some historians who have wondered if age groups do, in fact, have histories (Spitzer, 1973). The main justification, it seems to me, for both a separate

women's (Kelly-Gadol, 1976) and children's history is that sex creates a separate identity and experience for women, and age a separate identity and experience for children and youth. The history of children is both integral to a "total history" and capable of narration on its own.

But is a "child-centred" history practicable? In 1971, after David Rothman examined critically the early work of psycho-historian John Demos (1970) and the culture historian Bernard Wishy (1968), he wondered if a "history of childhood may well be impracticable." His concern was based on the speculative nature of Demos' observations, the thinness and inconclusive nature of his results as well as Wishy's failure to tell us anything about the actualities of childhood experience. But Philip Greven's highly sophisticated work, *The Protestant Temperament* (1977), and the success of historical demographic quantitative methodology in reconstituting the life-experience of ordinary people (Gagan & Mays, 1973), suggests that Rothman's nagging fear can be laid to rest.

By selecting four themes – (i) changing patterns of child-rearing, (ii) children and youth at work, (iii) adolescence in historical perspective, and (iv) changing perception and treatment of neglected, dependent, and delinquent children – I hope to accomplish two purposes: (a) demonstrate that the life-experience of children and youth changed significantly in the 19th and 20th centuries, and (b) raise critical questions about our current "ways of seeing" or "making sense" of aspects of children's experience and adult perception of childhood. To illustrate each theme, examples are selected from Canadian, British and American sources, thereby offering a series of probes and questions.

Theme I: Child-Rearing Practices
in the 19th and 20th Centuries

"Making sense" of changing child-rearing practices

Philip Greven's seminal work (1977) challenged the whiggish model of Bremner (1970), which told the story of the history of child-rearing practices as "the victory of liberty over dictatorship, of opportunity over rigidity, and of initiative over authority." Greven's work alerted us to the complexity of "making sense" of child-rearing practices across time and in different social spaces. His work reveals (i) the inadequacy of a unilinear model of the liberation of the child from the Puritan-Evangelical mode of child-rearing and (ii) the need to recognize the co-existence of conflicting models of child-rearing practice and ideology in any given time period. Greven's controversial notion of "temperament" made us aware of the problem of talking of a dominant mode of child-rearing in a particular time period.

It is difficult to state definitively how Americans actually raised their children in the 19th and 20th centuries. Wishy (1968), for instance, makes the error of inferring actual child-rearing practices from the writings in the child-rearing manuals and children's fiction of the era. However, his lack of conceptual clarity raises the important question of precisely what historians can learn from studying child-rearing manuals and children's fiction in any given period. Writing for children refracts reality through an adult perceptual prism; it reflects adult judgments and anxieties about the state of contemporary society and its future (McLeod, 1975). Literature about and for children can be a useful "cultural barometer". Historians of childhood need to ask (i) to what extent parental confusion and uncertainty are themselves the results of changes in their own situation, and (ii) to ask whose anxieties were being registered in a given period.

We should ask whether parental anxiety over children can be understood as an interplay between a particular social class or group's perception of its situation and that of its children and the structural changes in society's institutional framework. And we still need to explore Sommerville's (1972) suggestion that studying the literature on children and youth is a crucial source of cultural perception, particularly in periods of social stress. Indeed, in times of social stress and conflict, as Emerson observed, infancy does seem to be the "perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen man, and pleads with them to return to paradise" (Strickland, 1969).

Growing up in Jacksonian America: An example of actual child-rearing practice

During the Jacksonian period the boundary betweeen household and workplace changed and women were given enhanced affective and educational roles with young children. Patriarchal authority declined and a "cult of domesticity" appeared. Demographic data suggested a trend toward moderate fertility patterns (Cott, 1977; Lerner, 1969; Sklar, 1973; Welter, 1966). Americans raised questions about their children with great intensity and distraught urgency (Bloom, 1976; Kett, 1977; McLeod, 1975; Rapson, 1965; Wishy, 1968).

The Puritan-Evangelical mode of child-rearing ("break the will"), with its fixed moral prescriptions rooted in a relatively unchanging world, had – in light of economic, political, and cultural changes – to give way to nurturing practices. In Wishy's words, these would "serve the child well in a fast-changing world", win the "life-long love of offspring who in America had no need to remain indefinitely at home", yet produce adults who would not sever their ties with a Christian sensibility.

Thus, within the middle-class between 1840-1880 we see a crystallization of a new set of pedagogical practices stressing the internalization of moral restraints and a new perception of the young child as an innocent being in need of protection and gentle guidance (Kett, 1977; cf. Strickland's [1969] study of the romantic Bronson Alcott). By 1850 the American middle-class was treating its children more gently and their attitudes to their children were less hostile and less repressive than its 18th century counterpart. Working class and poor children still suffered, however, from the sin of being poor. Mary Cable (1972) reminds us that we cannot generalize about *American* child-rearing practices.

Alison Prentice (1977) suggests, too, that in the mid-19th century, middle class Upper Canadians gradually abandoned the Calvinist notion of a strict individual moral responsibility for action and moved, hesitantly and ambivalently, to accept the "progressive" view of human failing which looked to environmental causes for explanation. Prentice points out that 19th century Upper Canadian educators did not believe so much that children were "completely innocent"; more that they were "infinitely malleable". Since malleability implied great potential for evil, children had to be protected from corruption.

"Prolonged dependency" and child-rearing practices

In *Children in English-Canadian Society* (1976), Professor Sutherland noted that English-Canadians showed little awareness of children as individual persons possessing an inner, emotional life until the rural household economy began to break-up. His work points to the crucial demographic underpinnings (decline in child mortality) and economic changes (production leaves the household) that underlay the "discovery of the child" on a mass scale in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I would suggest, tentatively, that the "discovery of the child" – childhood viewed as a distinct and fascinating phase of life – was structurally impossible while most children and youth were integral, productive units in the household economy or, in the early phase of industrial, labour-intensive capitalism, "necessary" units in factories and mills. With the break-up of the household economy and the gradual phasing-out of youth from the labour market, the structural basis for the perception of children as "partially formed" adults disappeared.

Revisionist historians (Ariès, 1962; Gillis, 1974; Katz & Davey, 1978; Plumb, 1971; Schnell, 1979) have argued that the fundamental change in the life-experience of children and youth since the Middle Ages has been their removal from the rigours of adult society. This removal, they say, has limited the liberty of youth. The natural condition of youth ought not to be one of dependence, protection, segregation, and delayed

responsibility. The significance of this historical development for child-rearing practice is that youth, no longer "boarded-out" at an early age, began to spend a longer period of time at home under the watchful parental eye. Two observations became obvious: (i) the relationship between parents and children changed qualitatively, becoming more emotionally intense, and (ii) new tensions were generated as parental scrutiny closed in around youth who lost some of their autonomy. Let me also mention that most historians of childhood have failed to explicate the significance of the fact that women (and not "parents") have always taken the primary responsibility for infant care, spent more time with infants and children than do men, and have sustained primary emotional ties with infants (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976).

Theme 2: Children and Youth at Work

Historians of childhood who write about children at work adopt two approaches: (i) an "institutional-policy" approach which focusses mainly on the reform movement to curb child labour and (ii) a "life-experience" approach which describes children's labour in field, factory, and mill.

The anti-child labour reform movement

The attack on child labour at the turn of the 20th century was part of a general protest against the exploitation of the working class, industrial hazards, and involuntary poverty. Spargo's *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (1904) depicted capitalism as a baby-devouring Moloch and described the employment of children in unhealthful, often wretched, working conditions. Progressive reformers, adherents of the new "child-saving" ideology, organized a crusade against child labour (Bremner, 1970: Vol. II; Gordon, 1977; Trattner, 1969; Wood, 1968). The child labour campaign culminated in the passage of the first U.S. federal child labour laws (1916 and 1919), but these laws were found unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. What was the reason for the fierce opposition to child labour laws? For example: agricultural workers, domestic servants, child labourers in sweatshops, and children in street trades were overlooked by both state and federal laws.

Bremner's survey of child labour legislation (1970: Vol. II) does not account for the relative ineffectiveness of child labour legislation. Osterman (1979) insists that we link events in the labour market to legislation in the public area. Between 1900 and 1930 child labour declined dramatically and number of years of school attendance were considerably extended. The balance between time spent at work and time at school shifted from work as vocation for youth in mid-19th century to school as vocation in the first decades of the 20th century. Thus, it is loss of economic function that

provided the conditions that permitted progressive elements to triumph. Youths were pushed into classrooms by changing the youth labour market, ratified by child labour and compulsory attendance laws, and pulled by new curricula, extra-curricular activities, and expanded facilities (Lazerson & Grubb, 1980; Osterman, 1979; Spring, 1972; Troen, 1976). Any adequate analysis of child labour legislation must link three components: (i) changes in youth labour market, transformation of the high school and emergence of a "child-centered ideology", (ii) reformer initiative for change, and (iii) resulting legislative changes. It is too simplistic to argue that young people became unfit for employment because reformers like F. Kelley, Edith Abbott, and Jane Addams agitated, propagandized, and lobbied for humanitarian child laws. While Gordon's (1977) "career fulfilment" thesis adds a significant dimension to our understanding of reformer motivation, it appears that reformers only got their way because "changing labour market for unskilled workers shifted the balance: and the middle-class decided that it needed to protect its economic position by creating new pathways it could control" (Osterman, 1979).

Children and youth at work

Nineteenth century children stare at us from faded photographs. A little girl in a white smock helps an older woman make lace. A boy in his early teens, dressed in baggy clothes and heavy boots, hammer held awkwardly in hand, pauses from his work as an apprentice wheelwright. Smudged faces of youthful miners peer glumly at us. What were their lives like? How did they see and experience the world? Perhaps we may never know. But we do know from the sensitive works of Early (1980), Horn (1974), Kitteringham (1975), and Parr (1979) that the employment of young boys and girls in agriculture was a "matter of some significance" for 19th century rural households. English country-children weeded, picked stones, planted potatoes, scared birds. They harvested crops and plucked fruit. Parents thought first of economic survival and only second of their children's educational future. Life for all country children who worked the land was monotonous and hard. English children also played important roles in the cottage industries that survived with varying degrees of prosperity to the end of the third quarter of the 19th century (pillow lace-making, straw plaiting, and glovemaking).

Early (1980) explores the cultural assumptions and objective circumstances which influenced Lowell, Mass., French-Canadians to accommodate the family farm economy to an urban-industrial, largely working-class, existence. Without the income of children, she argues, most of whom were gainfully employed by age eleven, the family's "standard of living" would have dropped below "survival" level. Early contends that the cultural tradition of the child's contribution to the household economy enabled French-Canadians to weather difficult times. But this tradition had

its dark side: job training and formal education were devalued at a time (late 19th century) when formal education was becoming more closely tied to social/occupational mobility.

Surprisingly, there are few scholarly works on the experience of child labour in factories and mills. One has to make critical use of works like Spargo's *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (1904) and Hunter's *Poverty* (1904) as well as government reports, commissions, etc. One wonders: how did the child factory workers experience their work? Was their experience radically different from that of older workers in their industries? What options did poor, working class children have? Did children have any choices? Some children, we know, actually chose the factory over the school. But how many?

Work and school attendance

Davey (1978) argues that three factors contributing to poverty and economic insecurity (trade depression and crop failure, transient work patterns, and seasonal employment) largely determined patterns of school attendance in mid-19th century Ontario. The family's welfare took precedence over the child's education, which was not viewed as a necessary component of success in farming. Children did, however, attend sporadically, usually in the winter.

Katz and Davey (1978) analyzed the census data for Hamilton, Ontario, for 1851, 1861, and 1871 in order to measure changes in the key events in the life-course of young people during early industrialization. They showed both how the age of leaving home increased and the way in which leaving home, leaving school, starting to work, and age of marriage are related to each other. They also demonstrated how the configuration varied by social class and ethnicity.

Theme 3: Adolescence in Historical Perspective

Culturist and biological approaches to adolescence

There is perhaps no more controversial theme in the history of childhood than adolescence. In simplest form, historians confront two issues: (i) has a distinct state of life called "childhood" or "adolescence" always existed? and (ii) how malleable is the life cycle? More generally, what effect have historical forces (diet, cultural attitudes, technology, etc.) had on human biology (Tanner, 1973)? Is it reasonable to suppose that stages in human lives are at least partially a product of forces other than biology, that the life cycle itself has a history? Debates in the field are bounded by two polar positions. Ariès (1962) has argued that "childhood"

and "adolescence" are cultural constructs. Adolescence, he contends, was foreshadowed in the 18th century, but it was not until the 20th century that the adolescent was "discovered". Eisenstadt (1963), in contrast, argues that "youth is first of all a biological phenomenon".

Eisenstadt's approach – which assumes that the "basic biological processes of maturation" are probably "more or less similar in all human societies" but that their "cultural definition varies from society to society" – seems the most fruitful. The Ariès-paradigm too easily leads historians to: (i) search in the past for the absence of present-day perceptions and practices and (ii) to confuse cultural constructs with actual experience. Let us look more closely at the two approaches (the culturist and the biological) before attempting a critical synthesis.

Adolescence: Invention of the late 19th and early 20th centuries

Ariès (1962), Bakan (1971), Demoses (1969), Gillis (1974), and Kett (1971,1977) argue that the conceptual origins of adolescence be placed in modern times. The concept of adolescence, as generally understood and applied, did not exist before the last two decades of the nineteenth century. One could almost call it the invention of that period (Demoses, 1969). Statements that adolescence was invented in the late 19th century can be read in two ways: (i) invention of the concept signified a radically altered life-experience for 13-19 year olds, i.e., adolescence as experience did not exist prior to the late 19th century, and (ii) that adolescence in some form existed in the past, but that a new cultural definition of this age-group was synthesized in this period. The above writers do not always distinguish cultural definition from experience.

It is beyond dispute, nevertheless, that the old pre-urban phase of youth as a period of semi-dependency or semi-autonomy was replaced by a more prolonged, regulated and institutionally age-segregated dependency in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One should note here that culturist historians are not agreed on the precise timing of the decline of the semi-autonomous phase. Gaffield and Levine (1978) and Katz and Davey (1978) suggest mid-19th century origins for the experience of adolescence.

G. Stanley Hall saw adolescence as a time of "storm and stress". Youth were perceived as troubled and potentially troublesome. Their "nature" required their removal from the stable, orderly, responsible adult world. For Hall (*Adolescence*, 1904) and Ellen Key (*Century of the Child*, 1909) removal of adolescents from the adult world was the "crowning achievement of an enlightened civilization."

The organizational "architects of adolescence" used Hall's quasi-scientific theories to promote middle-class norms. In their studies of youth

movements, Gillis (1974), McLeod (1977), and Springhall (1977) present three theses: (i) organizations like the YMCA, Boy Scouts, and Boys Brigades conceive of the "model adolescent" as organized, disciplined, and dependent upon adult tutelage. Independence and precocity in adolescents was viewed as delinquent, (ii) youth movements served as vehicles for the transmission of middle-class ideology, and (iii) youth movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were dominated by nationalistic, militaristic, and masculinist ideologies. Gillis (1974) contrasts these conservative developments with earlier traditions of radicalism and rebellion among youth organizations.

The problem of the "self-abuse" of adolescents is a problem closely tied to the modern idea of childhood (Barker-Benfield, 1973; Bliss, 1970; Neuman, 1974; Strong, 1972). Adolescents are to be models of self-control and sublimation. In the few decades before 1914, doctors, educators, and psychologists joined hands to teach youth to sublimate their potentially disruptive sexual energy into pre-packaged, adult-managed cultural, educational, and social activities. The earlier onset of puberty, extended schooling, and longer periods of training were at the root of middle-class parental anxiety.

Critique of the culturist approach

The shift in the "situation" of youth (parental expectations, economic opportunities, conditions of labour and leisure) does not represent a radical break with past experience of all youth (Fox, 1970). At this point it is useful to emphasize that both Nathalie Davis (1971) and Steven Smith (1973) argue that the experience of some youth prior to the 19th and 20th centuries was characterized as: (i) social structural (idea of a transitional period between childhood and adulthood), (ii) behavioural (rebellion against dominant norms and values; fraternal bonding), and (iii) psychological (introspection; search for an identity; questioning of parental attitudes) – features similar to those we associate with the modern phenomenon of adolescence.

Towards a synthesis: Some conclusions

The experience of adolescence is not a product of the modern era. Fox is correct to assert that: "In its most recognizable behavioural features it has been acknowledged and in its psychological manifestations it has been recorded at least since Greek times" (1970). But economic, political, educational, and cultural changes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have radically extended the adolescent life-experience to a wider range of youth and, because of the obsessive adult preoccupation with youth's

sexuality, manners, morals, and politics in the Progressive Era, intensified the experience of being in-between childhood and adulthood. A new cultural definition of the adolescent age-group increased the surveillance of them as a group.

Theme 4: Changing Perception and Treatment of neglected, dependent and delinquent children and youth

Institutional and anti-institutional reformers

Canadian social historian Susan Houston (1975; cf. Mays, 1973; Mennel, 1973; Schlossman, 1977) argues that histories of the common school and penal institutions have been intertwined since the early 19th century when reformers began to find "institutional solutions" to social problems (Katz, 1978). The "patchwork of philanthropic and meagre public facilities" was severely strained under the impact of the Irish famine victim immigration (see Splane, 1965). Reformers turned to common schooling to transform the "street arab". But the common school was not very successful at including neglected and delinquent children. The Penitentiary Commission of 1849 recommended a House of Refuge as the solution. Now we begin to see the blurring of distinction between neglected and "criminal".

In the 1850s Canadian reformers campaigned for the reform of correctional facilities for juveniles. The "family metaphor" was central to reformers' perceptions of how to solve problems of the youthful offender. Penetanguishene Reformatory, which opened in 1859, was to be a specialized institution for delinquent youth. Educative and penal aspects of reformation were to be balanced under the rubric of a home (Jones, 1978). This institution was criticized in 1867 as being indistinguishable from a prison. An Industrial School Movement emerged, to be a more humane institution for treating young offenders. Matters' (1980) study of the Boys Industrial School in British Columbia neatly illustrates how little really changed in the shift from the Reformatory to the Industrial School. The ideology of the reformatory as a surrogate family was not assimilable to a penal institution.

From the 1880s, an "anti-institutional" approach gained currency among Canadian child-savers. One notices parallels in other countries. American evangelical reformers like Brace and Howe sought to detach street children from the corrupting urban environment and to attach them to good American families (Mennel, 1973), and British reformers like Annie Macpherson thought that rescue-home children would be "redeemed" in rural Canadian Christian homes (Parr, 1979). A new discourse emphasizing the quality of empathetic interpersonal relations replaced the old discourse of moral and industrial discipline (Schlossman, 1977). In the late 19th and

early 20th centuries many English-Canadians displayed a "heightened sense both of childhood itself and of the importance of the family in rearing children" (Sutherland, 1976). "Child-centred" reformers like J.J. Kelso believed, quite passionately, that families and not institutions were the best means of caring for neglected, dependent, and delinquent children.

Thus, a new generation of reformers looked to a "rehabilitated natural family or a suitable foster home" (Sutherland, 1976) to reform the delinquent. The Children's Aid Society was formed in 1891 and the Children's Protection Act of 1893 legitimized anti-institutional ideology and practice. Reformers pushed for the reform of the legal treatment of children (see Sutherland, 1976, Part III; cf. Schlossman, 1977, 1978).

"Making sense" of child-centred reform

The "child-savers" (the liberal-humanitarian approach) are presented as selfless humanitarians who discovered the "real child" and tried to translate the "biological model of the caring parent into a program for social action" (Rothman, 1978). The child-saver's self-image was accepted uncritically at face value (Hawes, 1971). Their policies were accepted as emancipating children and youth from the "nightmares of the past" (cf. Calhoun, 1974; deMause, 1974). The liberal-humanitarian interpretation assumes that the "needs" of the disadvantaged were obvious and that the child-savers responded compassionately to the neglected, dependent, and delinquent. The liberal-humanitarian view does not raise any questions regarding the fact that the disadvantaged were viewed primarily as objects of care, that they did not have "rights" that needed protecting. The liberal-humanitarians uncritically accepted the view that the state, acting through innovative, compassionate juvenile courts, for example, was like a parent who knew what was best for its children.

The critical approach exhibits varying degrees of sophistication, methodologically and analytically. But all critical approaches share an analytical commitment to explore the "diversity of motives that lie behind child saving" and the "possible contradictions between the reformers' aims and methods" (Gillis, 1974b). Rothman (1978) argues that the Progressives, deeply attached to a paternalistic model, were not concerned with their program's potential to be coercive or whether their compassion for the lower classes unambiguously benefitted them. The crux of a sophisticated critical interpretation lies not in disparaging reformer motivation (Platt, 1969). At issue for revisionist historians like Schlossman (1977) and Rothman (1978, 1980) is "not so much their definition of what constituted a social problem as the assumptions with which they attempted to ameliorate it that are now controversial" (Rothman, 1978). The basic flaw in the progressive approach to reforming the children, according to the critical approach, was the assumption that institutions could perform both a custodial and a

rehabilitative function, that there was no inherent conflict between guarding delinquent youth and making them better, between incapacitation and reformation (Rothman, 1980).

Conclusion

We must continue to get beneath policy statements of intention and examine the experience of client children, be this experience in families, schools, workhouses, or large orphanages. We need to write a history of childhood that recognizes that children and youth actively plot their social, economic, and cultural strategies in the context of parental expectations, existing economic possibilities, and conditions of leisure and educaton. We must show how the life-experience of children and youth (in household, family, work, school, community) responds to demographic, economic, and cultural changes. Patterns of growing up are profoundly affected by demographic shifts, structural changes in the economy, and cultural changes in adult perception of childhood and adolescence. The social history of childhood has come a long way from Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood*. But we have only begun the task and our explanations remain, for all the bluff at sounding precise, rather tentative and crude.

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