1 Women and Children First and Last: Parallels and Differences between Children's and Women's Studies*

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This chapter considers the emerging field of childhood studies from the viewpoint of the established discipline of women's studies. Women and children are, of course, linked socially, but the development of these specialist academic studies also poses interesting methodological and political questions about the relationship between the status of women and children as social minority groups and their constitution as objects of the academic gaze. Are childhood and women's studies the *same* kinds of activities, or are they essentially different? What is the relationship between them? Are there insights that can be transferred from one to the other? Why are we studying children as a separate social group? Are these the same reasons as were used to justify the development of women's studies? Are they good reasons?

The first part of the chapter discusses in more detail the sociography of women and children's material and cultural position, and how this shapes the form of their personal and social relations with one another. The second part addresses the ways in which children and women have traditionally been constituted as objects of academic study. Lastly, the chapter considers the present phase of studying both children and women: the one in its infancy, the other, as some would argue, past its prime. Here I explore some of the ways in which studying children is like studying women, and some of the ways in which the two activities can be distinguished from one another.

The Social Status and Relations of Children and Women

Children are primarily women's business. Giving birth to children is what women do, though the cultural artefacts of hospitals, medical technology and obstetricians increasingly do not encourage us to remember this. Looking after children is also what women do, whether we call it childwork, or childcare, or childrearing, whether we speak of paid or unpaid work, and whether we frame our observation in the sexually egalitarian, though usually dishonest, language of ‘parenthood’ and ‘parenting’. In these ways children are women’s responsibility, though *childhood,* as I shall argue later, is much less so.

The close alliance of women and children has many different cultural representations. These run from the language of nineteenth century politicians, which spoke of the two groups almost as one (though more because women were regarded as less than adult than because anyone had given any particular thought to the actual competencies of children), through to the multiple, careful statistics of the Childhood as a Social Phenomenon project (Jensen and Saporiti, 1992). But statistics require interpretation; the same statistics can be invested with different meanings. Thus we read, for example, that virtually everywhere the birthrate is declining and virtually everywhere the paid employment of mothers is increasing. The link between these two phenomena can be stated in alternative ways: we may say either that women are choosing to invest less of their lives in mothering because they want to do something else with them, or that children control the form of women’s labour power by winning the battle with employers and potential employers for ownership of women’s time (Oldman, 1991). It seems clear that what frees mothers to work in the capitalist sense is not fathers but schools and other arrangements for out-of-home childcare. Educational and other institutions for children mediate the links between women’s and children’s lives. To be a mother in Switzerland, where school is a morning-only activity for most children, is quite different from being a mother in a country where school hours are regularly seven per day and some schools even make provision for after school care. Another, slightly more complex example of the relationship between women’s and children’s lives is the division of household labour: the fact that women’s housework hours average twenty per week, those of girls six, of boys four, and of men three shows both that children are bound up with women’s domestic oppression and that the development of masculinity can be defined as a progressive project for liberating men from housework (Frones *et al.,* 1990).

Whose Rights?

Children and women share certain crucial social characteristics. In the first place, *children and women are both members of social minority groups.* Membership of a social minority group results from the physical or cultural characteristics of individuals being used to single them out and to justify their receiving different and unequal treatment—in other words, collective discrimination (Hacker, 1969). Women and children are so constituted within a culture dominated by masculine power—in other words, patriarchy. One obvious manifestation of this situation is that both women and children are disadvantaged as citizens. The concept of citizenship, with its associated *de jure* and *de facto* rights and responsibilities, is a patriarchal one. Children did not have rights under the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, which conceived of rights belonging to human beings who are adults; they needed their own codification of their own rights. It was a similar reasoning that caused the eighteenth century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft to write her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798, and others to follow her example. Because these rights and responsibilities are not automatically conveyed to women and children, they will only be able to claim them as a result of consciously directed social change. Thus women in the past, and still now, have fought to be entitled to rights previously regarded as belonging only to men—rights such as the suffrage, participation in the paid labour force, and the right to bodily integrity. In today's children's rights movement, we see the same phenomenon, though complicated by the fact that it is largely not children but adults on their behalf who are claiming these rights. This attributed incapacity of children to act for themselves is, however, more than a complication, as I shall suggest later (see also Lansdown and Alderson in this volume).

Being Childlike

Deprivation of rights is only the most easily graspable aspect of minority group status. There are others which are less obvious but more fundamentally subversive in their effects. The first of these is the social construction of minority group members as less than adult, that is, as incapable of adult competencies and of behaving in adult ways. Over twenty years ago work by Rosenkrantz (Rosenkrantz *et al.,* 1968) and Broverman (Broverman *et al.,* 1970) demonstrated the ways in which cultural norms gender personality attributes so that qualities such as independence, rationality, intelligence, autonomy, and confidence belong to men, are seen as socially desirable, and are taken as standards of normal adulthood, against which gold standard women emerge as distinctly less adult, that is *as more childlike,* than men. This allegation does of course merit serious thought. What does it mean to criticize someone for being 'childlike'? Certainly in English the terms 'adultlike' and 'adultish' are not uttered as condemnations in the ways 'childlike' and 'childish' are.

Another ascribed attribute derived from their minority group status women may share with children is the tendency to adopt negatively critical and even hostile attitudes towards one another. This observation was first made in relation to ethnic minorities (Lewin, 1941), and then extended to throw light on the competitiveness—'bitchiness'—women are noted on occasion to display to members of their own sex (Hacker, 1969; Miller, 1976). This can be seen as a psychological effect of discrimination and of marginality and the need to respect power relations and seek alliances with the dominant group. It may be that one reason for children's competitiveness with one another, represented in later childhood in the phenomenon of 'bullying', particularly at school, derives from *their* sense of exclusion and lack of power and consequent need to prove themselves superior to others of their group. Such an explanation would fit with the observations of Bettelheim (1971) and others about the links between providing children with a collective peerfocussed social environment, such as that available in the Israeli kibbutzim, on the one hand, and the development of personal identity in which peer attachments, rather than competitiveness, are a prominent motif, on the other.

In Their Best Interests

These shared characteristics of women and children—their status as social minority groups, their relative lack of rights and moral construction as non-adult—coalesce in the language which, more than any other, has been used to describe the position of both. That is the language of '*their best interests*', according to which judgments about the welfare of women and children are based not on asking them what they want or need, but on what other people consider to be the case. It is a philosophy of exclusion and control dressed up as protection, and dependent on the notion that those who are protected must be so because they are deemed incapable of looking after themselves.

The exclusion of women and children from the paid labour force is a good example of the way the 'best interests' argument works. While the early excesses of capitalist industrial production in the UK and other countries inflicted long hours and appallingly health-damaging working conditions on factory labourers, the offence caused to the moral sensitivities of the middle-class male social reformers by women's and children's labour took precedence over consideration of the hardship these groups might undergo as a result of the withdrawal of the right to paid work (Hammond and Hammond, 1923). The process of restricting women's and children's labour was subject to cultural variation; in Finland and Sweden, for example, the motivation behind legislation to prohibit child labour was apparently principally that of eliminating the moral scourge of children idling on the streets (without, once again, any consideration of children's point of view) (Alanen and Bardy, 1991; Sandin, 1990). It is interesting to note that essentially the same debate is in progress today over child labour, with a conflict posed between the moral, protectionist perspective of the adult, and the potentially different, self-interested view of the child (Ward, 1990).

The legacy of the Victorian exclusion of women and children from industrial labour is evident today in the requirement that the main activity of children should be play—that childhood should be a time of fun and freedom—and that mothers should not work, that is, their commitment to paid labour is not expected to be the same as men's (though unpaid labour in the home and in caring for the old, the frail and the ill is quite alright, as it is not recognized as work—though here there is some cultural variation, with practices outside the UK generally viewing this more positively).

The Haven of the Home

For women and children, families and home life are the site of work—housework for women, school homework for children. Children and women are culturally represented as living in the 'haven' of the home, whereas men stride out into the marketplace of the world. The association of both women and children's labour with the home results in a similar invisibility (Qvortrup, 1985; and Oldman in this volume). The 'paternalistic marginalization' (Qvortrup and Christoffersen, 1990) of children and women is expressed in terms of temporal and spatial restriction. Thus children have their own institutions and their own timetables, and within homes there are special spaces reserved for the being of a child. The same holds true of women: in their case the special space is the kitchen. Cultural norms prescribe both that each child ideally has her/his own room and that women ideally share bedrooms with men, though this is not the case in upper-class households and is a relatively recent historical invention both architecturally and morally (Oakley, 1974).

But women and children's ideological restriction to the domestic sphere also results in a shared material deprivation. Women are more likely to live in poverty than men, and children are more likely to live in poverty than adults. Families with children are generally the poorest households, and families consisting of a mother and a child or children alone the poorest of all. It has often been pointed out that the realities of many children's lives uncover the empty rhetoric of the *political valorization* of children; children may be precious, worthy of protection, both in themselves and because they represent the future, but in many countries they are clearly not worth the financial and policy investment required to ensure even adequate living conditions. In this respect, the position of children is the same as that of women, who are put on another kind of idealistic pedestal, but not seen as worth the moral and economic investment of equitable living conditions.

Social Problems

Taking these material inequalities of minority groups together with the paternalistic language of 'their best interests', we can see how another common characteristic of women and children is derived: their constitution as a *social problem.* In the nineteenth and early twentieth century politicians and professionals of various kinds were widely concerned with something called 'the woman problem' (O'Neill, 1969). Whilst particular groups of women were variously considered to be a problem—the unmarried or the married, the sexually active or the sexually frigid, the educated or the uneducated, the working or the idle—the range of these categories reveals the fact that it was basically *women themselves* who were seen as the problem. In the same way, particular groups of children are seen as problematic today: those who are abused by their parents, or who might be; those who do not attend school, or who do not meet the standards of behaviour or attainment expected of them at school; those who fail to correspond to the charts of child development and growth beloved of paediatricians and child psychologists; those who eat the wrong food, smoke, drink, consume drugs, have sexual intercourse before they ought to, fail to use contraception, or become parents before they should; those who are not able-bodied or able-minded and who challenge the facile logic of 'integration'; those in care who are not cared for, and those at home who might not be; those whose mental health may be threatened by parental divorce or separation or by its opposite; children antagonistic to, or even criminally subversive of, adult authority. There are, again, so many categories of children who pose problems that we are forced to conclude that it is *children themselves* who are seen as the problem.

The Problem of 'The' Family

A major difficulty confronting those who wish to chart the experiences of being a child is that these are hidden in the ideological apparatus of 'the family'. This is the same for women. Indeed, the development of academic women's studies has very largely been the project of liberating women from 'the' family. But those who want to find out what goes on in families start with the handicap imposed by cultural thinking. According to this, 'the family' really exists and can be seen all around us in the form of idealized clones. 'The' family exists on the backs of cornflakes packets (Oakley, 1982), and in the medium of official statistics, which treat the family as the unit of analysis, and so deny the existence of real differences between *individuals* within families (Oakley and Oakley, 1979). A good example of this is the difficulty of deducing the living circumstances of children from official statistical data on families. It has been shown that using the family as the unit of observation results in an overestimate of the numbers of children without siblings compared to the estimate derived from using children themselves as the unit of observation (Qvortrup and Christoffersen, 1990). Within the rubric of women's studies, the critique of the tradition of studying families rather than people has given rise to a substantial body of work on the ways in which resources in households are actually and unevenly distributed (Brannen and Wilson, 1987). Though such work opens 'the black box' of the family to make *women* visible, it has done little to expose *generational* inequalities, including the experiences of children within families.

Among the most misleading myths of the twentieth century is this one; that everyone lives in families, and that these are happy, successfully functioning, democratic, supportive places, in which we may all retreat to share our secrets and replenish our energies for the harsh realities of the public world. Families may be like this for some people, but these families are the exceptions proving the rule. The rule is that within families power relations are unequal, resources are not equally shared, and frank or covert physical or emotional abuse often takes place. These features of family life affect women and children more than men.

In other words, a comparative sociography of children and women conveys a picture of *mutual dependence* and *interdependence* and *mutual oppression*. The term 'oppression' is a technical one: it describes the position of minority groups within a capitalist and patriarchal structure. The embedded—ness of children and women within *each other's* lives has consequences for their structural and personal relations with one another. These have been studied over the past twenty years in the case of women, for example, in that area of work which goes beyond the moral dogma of the perfect, and perfectly self-denying mother, to ask why women want to become mothers (or not), how mothers experience children, and what their relationships with children are like (Boulton, 1983; Oakley, 1979; Rothman, 1989). But the counter to this—how children experience mothers—has been little explored. Indeed, it is one of many questions few have thought fit to ask them.

Children and Women as Objects of Study

It is important to outline some of these common features of women and children's position because these constitute the *framework* within which women and children are studied. The next section of the chapter considers some of the parallels and differences between women and children as objects of study, and as the focus of the gaze of researchers who may be conscious of the legacy of discrimination but are less sure what to do about it.

Down with Childhood

The academic study of women was born out of the politics of the women's movement. Texts such as those by Firestone, Mitchell and Greer represented the intellectual pole of second wave feminism; the political movement which shifted the argument about women's position from liberal equal rights claims to the more revolutionary aim of liberation and the removal of gender as a factor structuring social life. After these initial texts came a veritable industry of books about women (see Oakley, 1991).

When Shulamith Firestone published her radical text *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972), she included a chapter called 'Down with childhood'. In this she drew on historical work to argue that childhood was invented as an adjunct to the nuclear family, and that both are equally oppressive to women. But if childhood is oppressive, so too, according to Firestone, is childbearing. She characterized this as 'barbaric', and recommended its removal to the laboratory of the IVF specialists. Two years before Firestone, Juliet Mitchell in *Woman's Estate* (1971) contended that reproduction is one of the four structures through which the oppression of women is achieved and maintained; and a year before her, Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) discussed sex and gynaecology but not childbirth or the lived realities of childcare, referred to the child as 'he', and fantasized unhelpfully about a farm in Calabria where the children of clever women like her might be raised by local peasant families to avoid the traps of the isolated nuclear bourgeois family, and so that their mothers would be free to write books and engage in other similarly liberated pursuits.

The role of politics is highly relevant to an understanding of the parallels and differences between women's studies and children's studies because it establishes *a crucial difference*. Women's studies grew directly out of the political movement for women's liberation; it emerged out of the politics of experience. But children's studies are not rooted in the same way in the movement of children to claim their own liberation. Although there are some instances of children acting politically to secure their rights (Adams, 1991), the children's rights movement is not a political movement initiated primarily by children themselves. By and large, it is adults who are making representations on behalf of children—in their 'best interests' to re-use the traditional phrase. Children are coming to the fore in adults' minds, but the danger is that adults may continue to be the protectors of children, the representers of their interests, rather than the facilitators or active seekers out of children's own perspectives and voices. (The work of Priscilla Alderson, in this volume, is a notable exception here.) Because of the power relations involved, it is likely to be men more than women who will defend children's rights. There is a parallel here with the issue of fetal rights, which I shall come back to later.

Stages of Study

The sociologist Sylvia Walby (1988) has identified four stages in the development of academic knowledge relating to the position of women. First, there is the *virtually total neglect of women's position*. This includes their treatment in brief asides and footnotes, and tends to be associated with loose, unscientific attributions to biological factors of social differences between men and women. In the next stage, there is much *criticism* of traditional approaches, particularly of the determinist nature of sex differences, and many observations are restated as assumptions and then as research questions, that is questions which can only be answered by appropriate empirical inquiry. The third stage is the *additive* one: women are added in, or on, as a special case, in order to compensate for their previous omission. In the fourth stage the additive response passes into an integrative one, and there is commitment instead *to integrate the position of women fully* into the central questions and concerns of different academic disciplines.

Walby's schema is an evolutionary one, and has some of the same problems as all evolutionary descriptions. But the parallels with children's studies are clear: children's studies is at stages 1 and 2 as described by Walby. Academics are asking questions about *where children are* in the academic knowledge of social life, and pointing to some of the reasons for their absences, in particular the close links that exist between dominant theoretical and explanatory paradigms and the omission of children as active subjects. If this is where children's studies are at, then perhaps it is possible, by continuing the parallel with how women's studies developed, to identify some of the *critical questions* that are likely to arise in the next stages of work. I shall suggest three, and say a bit about each before moving onto some concrete questions about the activity of studying children, that is, how as researchers we can relate to children as the objects of our study.

'That Strange Ungendered Isolate, the Child'

The first issue is the danger of treating children as a *homogenous group*. The redundant nature of Freud's question about what women want has been clear for some time: women do not all want the same thing, nor can their social positions all be represented in the same way. Class and ethnicity cross-cut systems of sex and gender differentiation, and these are intermeshed with other discriminations relating to sexual orientation and bodily disability. Even feminism itself, once constituted as a monolithic text, has been broken down into 'feminisms' (Barren, 1980). In exactly the same way children are not one group but many. Children are also two groups: male and female. Judith Ennew (1994) speaks of 'that strange ungendered isolate, the child', and some contemporary work in the field of childhood studies, particularly the larger scale quantitative work, speaks of children as an ungendered group (see Qvortrup, 1994), though other studies seek to highlight gender as a necessarily crucial variable (see, for example, James, 1993; Prout, 1987; Bird, in this volume). Carolyn Steedman in *The Tidy House* (1982) uses girls' school stories to isolate some of the ways in which children's knowledge of the adult world is fundamentally gendered. In Sweden, Gunilla Halldén (see Halldén, in this volume) has continued this tradition of work. Gender differences in parenting and socialization practices (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989), and in the constructed subjectivity of children at school (Urwin, 1984) are other themes. However, these works tend to be classed as about women rather than about children; it is as though the very mention of gender signals a preoccupation with the construction of womanhood rather than childhood.

But any ungendering of children is particularly striking by comparison with women's studies, which strives to bring to our attention precisely those ways in which the constitution of femininity is rooted in the gendering of childhood. How else, indeed, was women's studies to contend biological determinism other than by identifying the ways in which the cultural artefact of gender imposed on children's biology to make them little boys and little girls? (Belotti, 1975). There are a variety of reasons why children's studies should tend to neglect the effect of gender at this stage of its work. One reason is the *methodological* requirement imposed by the early stage of the work itself—the necessity of emphasizing children's status as a homogenous group in order to make them visible at all. This is what happened in women's studies. The second reason is slightly more sinister. Because women's studies neglected *children* (Alanen, 1994), there may be a contrary impulse among male academics studying children to neglect *gender*. To go back to the beginning of this sentence, it is not entirely true to say that women's studies neglected children. What happened was that the deconstruction of notions of 'the family', and the uncovering of biases in theoretical assumptions made about women, resulted in an emphasis on *women's* experiences of children rather than on *children's* experiences of women (or of anything else). Children came to be represented as a *problem* to women. This reflected the political concerns within the women's movement to do with freeing women from compulsory motherhood and childcare work. From both an academic and a political point of view, the children-as-a-problem perspective came to be revised later, as it became obvious that women needed to find ways of representing motherhood as a cultural strength rather than a biological weakness and imposed social necessity (Oakley, 1986).

Attention to gender has an important role to play in the 'denaturalizing' of the phenomenon of childhood. Alanen (1994) has pointed out that historical chronicity and relativity, as represented, for example, in Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* (1979), do not really do this adequately. It is perfectly possible for 'the natural child' to exist in all socially changing eras of history.

Theorizing About Children and Childhood

Following the chronology of what happened in women's studies, the second question awaiting the next phase of children's studies is a *conceptual* and *theoretical* one. Put simply, it is this: how far does the available theoretical and conceptual language for discussing and studying children constrain what it is possible to know? Until recently, there has been little genuine *sociological* thinking about children and childhood (Alanen, 1994). The dominant theoretical perspective of most work derives either from psychological notions of individual development, in which children are seen as essentially 'pre-social, or from notions of socialization, in which children's status as 'anti-social' requires the imposition on them of social rules and mores. In both these strands of theories about children, the emphasis is *not on what children are,* but on *what they are not*. Further, the overemphasis on childhood as an individual process unfolded from within has tended to neglect the impact on children and childhood of social and cultural contexts. Grand overarching abstract generalizations substitute for empirical studies of children in their everyday environments (Skolnick, 1975). We learn not about children's perspectives, but about *adults' concepts of childhood*. This is why the assumption of children's non-competence is generic to all such theories, so that it becomes their prime distinguishing feature (May and Strong, 1980). In this sense, most work on the concept of childhood is adultist. As others have pointed out, it is also overwhelmingly classist (Ennew, 1994), and tends to present a masculine (Skolnick, 1975) view of who children are and will become.

If children have no place of their own in theory, and do not give rise to their own concepts, their value is not in *being* but in *becoming*—in their status as would-be adults. The sociologist Ronald Frankenburg has pointed out the derogatory tone of the concept of 'adolescence'. This labels teenagers as people who are *becoming* adults. Frankenburg (1992) suggests that, by analogy with this, adults ought to describe themselves as 'mortescents'. The primary determinant of concepts of childhood and theories about children is the cultural emphasis on adulthood as a project of individual identity. The result of this, from children's point of view, is often an uncomfortable fitting of their experiences into a framework not derived from them. Priscilla Alderson (1993) gives the example of a small boy's love for his mother, which may be transformed from rational personal motive to mindless biological instinct by being given the label of an Oedipus complex—a term which is likely to be pretty meaningless to the child. Many other similar examples could be quoted of this 'Icarus syndrome'—the tendency for people to take a quick look at a few data and then take flight towards general theories which are consequently only tenuously based on the evidence. Indeed, it would seem that theories about children are particularly *unlikely* to be revised in the light of new evidence. Piaget's theories about the unfolding cognitive development of children provide a good example of a relatively inflexible theoretical position which has been challenged by a good deal of evidence (see Morss, 1990), but which continues to survive substantially intact and even to inform important policies regarding children, for instance those relating to the age at which children can meaningfully be said to consent to health care treatments of various kinds (Nicholson, 1986). Similarly Kohlberg's work on children's moral development has been criticized by researchers who do not find children thinking in this way (Kohlberg, 1981). The fact that these moral development theories derive from a particular world view—that of men—has been highlighted by data provided by women about *their* moral thinking and choices (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky *et al.,* 1986)—and half of all children can be described only as little women.

Sociologies Of or For?

A third issue awaiting studiers of children concerns the preposition it is appropriate to use when describing studies in this area. Is what is being done *work about* or *on* children, or is it in some sense *for* children?

Here we key into the debate taken forward within sociology particularly by Dorothy Smith (1988). In an influential paper which is now more than a decade old, Smith pointed out a problem with the simple critical or additive approach to the mixed invisibility and overvisibility of women in sociology. There is, she said, 'a persistent difficulty that does not yield to the critique of standard themes and topics. In any of the many ways we might do a sociology of women, women remain the objects of study…By insisting that women be entered into sociology as its subjects, we find that we cannot escape how it transforms us into objects. As women we become objects to ourselves as subjects' (Smith, 1979, p. 159). In other words, what happens with the entry of women as a minority group into academic sociological discourse is that the centrality of subjectivity is reduced to the function of 'objective' research data. This, in Smith's view, exposes fundamental problems to do with the organization and representation of knowledge in a capitalist social structure. However, it is possible to take remedial action to shift a sociology *of* women into a sociology *for* women. A sociology for women is not simply an ideological position on women's oppression, and the shaping of research data to fit this position. It is a method that 'creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds' (Smith, 1988, p. 107). It is thus essential to preserve 'the presence of subjects as knowers and as actors', and to ensure that subjects are not transformed into objects of study by the use of 'conceptual devices' for eliminating their active presence (*ibid*, p. 105).

Children as the Researched

It is easier to see how Smith's recommendations can be made concrete in certain forms of social research than in others. For example, small-scale indepth studies of women's experiences of academic life, or of power relations in the household, or some other similarly researchable topic, are relatively easily amenable to the injunction to start, continue and end as researchers with the standpoint of those women who form the population being researched (although steps will usually need to be taken to reduce the potential bias of most researchers being white and middle class). But it is much less easy to see how her approach relates to other research areas. For example, research on the effectiveness and appropriateness of different forms of health care requires larger numbers, some method of comparing groups which must of necessity not be based on the preferences of research participants, and some summary quantification of responses in which the finely tuned sensitivities of the subjective narrative can scarcely be represented. However, if it is hard to see how Smith's recommendations would apply to some areas of research on, and for, women, then how much harder it is to see how the same strictures might apply to the study of children. What would it *really* mean to study the world from the standpoints of children both as knowers and as actors? Are there particular problems to do with children's status as research participants, or are they just like adults? Leaving aside the unhelpful rigidity of Piagetian developmental stages, are there nonetheless some *age-imposed constraints* on the extent to which children can become full members of the research process?

We already have the beginnings of the answers to some of these questions. One answer is that children are not a homogenous group. Within the age range 0–16 years, there are important differences from a research point of view. Older 'children' can be treated as adults, and very young children cannot verbally express a point of view. This is a problem for research using spoken words as data. However, in between these ages we need to beware of the tendency to fall back on the argument about biological differences. Children *are* biologically different from adults, but biology is socially constructed. This is, of course, a powerful lesson learnt from women's studies (Birke, 1986). In relation to the notion of children's incompetence as research subjects, the notion that parents have to act as proxy interviewees for children has already been discarded by a good many pieces of research. Berry Mayall (1994) has shown how children as young as 5 can take part in data-gathering exercises concerned with the topic of health care across the settings of home, school and the formal health services. As a result of the information conveyed by these and older children, Mayall has built up a picture of the ways in which what to teachers is a *child-centred* environment—the school—appears to children themselves *adult-centred*. Children have to go to school; they have no choice about it. Through children's eyes schools demand conformity and the abdication of autonomy and control. They are even sometimes described by children as positively health-damaging. These child-centred perspectives on schooling build on the work of others, for example Holt's child-centred critique of adult learning theories (Holt, 1969), or work demonstrating that the amazing perceptual skills of young children actually tend to be wiped out by the imposition (through formal schooling) of more abstract ways of thought (Skolnick, 1975). There are also studies such as Tizard and Hughes' (1984) study of learning at home, which demonstrates on the basis of tape-recorded conversations between 4-year-old girls and their mothers how much of an informal curriculum of knowledge is transmitted in 'ordinary' domestic discourse, and how the active role of children in this as initiator and pursuer of questions they want answered can be contrasted with the more regulated and less autonomous role of the school child.

The idea that children can contribute meaningful research data conflicts with '*adultist*' views of children as less than competent to make sense of the adult world. Of course, one problem is that children, if given the chance, may not make sense of the adult world in the same way that adults would. For example, a study of children's consent to health care (Alderson, 1993) demonstrates both the *resistance* on the part of some professionals and parents to wanting to see children as competent, and the extent to which even young children can show an *understanding* of the balance of benefits and hazards to be considered when deciding to undergo a particular course of treatment. This ability of children meaningfully to consent to treatment extends to research. In the USA in 1976, researchers wanted to test the effectiveness on children of a flu vaccine. They explained to 6 and 9-year-old children at school the study they wanted to do, and invited them to ask questions. In a non-directive question-and-answer session, the 9-year-olds asked all the questions about the risks and benefits of the vaccination and about the study that the researchers had thought of and considered important (and which they would have put into any written document for adults). After having asked their questions, 54 per cent of the children agreed to take part in the study. The remainder either disagreed or were uncertain. The parents of these children were asked to consent on their behalf; on this basis a further 15 per cent of children were enrolled in the study (Lewis *et al.,* 1978). These findings on consent rates suggest that if children are asked for their consent to be research subjects, a considerable proportion may say no, and that if parental consent is taken as a proxy, some children will be enrolled in research against their will. Interestingly, research on medical ethics committees and proposals for research on children show that a policy of asking for children's own consent to research is almost unknown; in one study, 18 per cent of committees did not even require consent from parents (Nicholson, 1986). Furthermore, the presence on these committees of an expert on children such as a paediatrician made it *more* and not *less* likely that research proposals would pass through these committees unchanged. It would seem that experts on children may be precisely that—in other words, advocates of research *on* children, rather than defenders of children's interests in taking part in research which is *for* them. The best way to defend the development of children's studies for children is to enrol them fully in the research process. Again, there are examples of good practice. For example, in Glasgow, Helen Roberts and colleagues have worked with teenagers as sources of information about childhood accidents, both talking with them about their views as to factors affecting these in the present, and asking them to reflect on the safety and danger of their own childhood environments (Roberts *et al.,* 1992).

The consensus that emerges from studies exploring children's perspectives is that the major issues of the researcher-researched relationship are *essentially the same* with children as they are with adults. These issues include the need to be aware of and respect the imbalanced *power relations* of the researcher vis-à-vis the researched, the importance of distinguishing *'private'* from *'public'* accounts, and the need to handle controversial and or personal topics with *sensitivity*. Anne Solberg (1992) has noted the importance, when interviewing children, of *not* using 'parentist' language, that is, not transferring to one's role as researcher the ways that as a mother or a father one would talk to children. Studying primary school children's AIDS-related health knowledge in London schools, Clare Farquhar (1989) noted that attention to the power dimension of research when combined with the disparity in size between children and adults, meant that she had to attend carefully to her *physical position* when talking to children, ensuring, for example, that she and they were on the same level so that the children did not have to look up at her. There may be particular topic areas, for example research on traffic accidents, where taking account of disparities in size is particularly important (Sandels, 1975). But at the same time it is also important to beware of capturing children as research subjects frozen in their biological modes at certain ages. Cross-sectional data on 4-year-olds or 8-year-olds, for instance, can answer certain questions about the perceptions of the social world and capacities to provide research data characterizing these age groups, but we also badly need *longitudinal* studies which allow children to chart their own changing paths through and out of childhood, and thus to document the ways in which their perceptions and research competencies alter with age.

Most supposed differences between children and adults as research subjects disappear on closer inspection. Even as regards size and age disparities, the issues that are highlighted in thinking about research in the area of children's studies are not a particular class of issues: they are questions to which all *good* researchers will attend in conducting their research in both a scientific and a moral manner. We are once again brought back to the parallels with women's studies. Many of the issues to which feminist researchers have drawn attention have simply been insufficiently attended to by masculinist research; that is, mainstream (malestream) research has tended to skirt over, or to ignore, the *ethical* and *social* dimensions of research. Because of this, it has been argued that research in the field of women's studies is likely not only to be achieving *higher ethical standards* than most research, but also to be fulfilling that function on behalf of research in general (Oakley, 1992). Relevant ethical issues here include the need *fully to explain research* to potential participants; the importance of attending to congruencies or discongruencies between the *class, ethnicity and gender* of researchers and researched; the *lack of fit* between the 'mechanical model' of interviews as data-collecting activities and the real reciprocal relationships of researchers and researched; and the desirability, which flows from this, of guarding against the *exploitation of 'pseudo friendship'* developed in the interview situation.

Because of the moral base from which it starts, this attention to the requirements of 'good' research is likely to be extended to children's studies. But there are other practical questions that need to be asked. For example, can children meaningfully be asked *to set research agendas* as well as to answer researchers' questions? Flowing from a commitment to a sociology *for* children, what responsibility might researchers have to take back to children their interpretations of research data, so that the findings of research become a genuinely consultative product? In her book *The Tidy House,* based on the stories told by three 8-year-old working class girls about the families they will live in one day, Carolyn Steedman draws attention to this important aspect of research on children.

> It is extremely important not to confuse our appreciation and understanding of (the children's) text with their consciousness and motivation. The three girls wrote the story because they were expected to and because they enjoyed doing it. They did not *set out* to reveal what we may come to see as the message of *The Tidy House*. In this adult sense, they were *not* motivated to convey something to an audience by use of the written word. We can, I think, with perfect propriety, set the children to one side and examine their text for evidence of the huge mythologies of love and sex that inform our culture and of the way in which working class girls become working class women, just as we might watch children's play and find it revelatory. But it would be a grave mistake to *involve* children in our discoveries and theories.... (Steedman, 1982, p. 120)

But is it a grave mistake, and, if so, then what steps need to be taken to avoid making it? Is a repetitive disclaimer to the effect that this is *our* interpretation rather than *theirs* really sufficient?

Critical Differences: To Conclude

These questions will be critical in the next stages of work in children's studies. This chapter ends by focussing on a few critical *differences* that may exist between children's studies and women's studies.

The Common Experience of Childhood

One difference is that we have all been children somewhere in our pasts, but we have not all been women. Childhood is not only something to be studied, it is something *we all hold within us:* a set of memories, a collection of ideas. Childhood may be a repository of happy, garden-of-Eden memories, in accord with the cultural dictum that childhood must above all be *fun,* and/or it can be remembered as a nightmare of *unhappiness* in line with recent discoveries about the nasty things that are likely to happen to children in even the most ordinary families. Our own childhoods were lived by us and are variously remembered, though usually not in a linear way. Memories are filtered through the lens of how we have learnt as adults to think of childhood. In studying children, therefore, there is a sense in which we are likely to be studying *the child within ourselves.* In his book *The Child in the City* Colin Ward (1990) refers to Ernest Schachtel's essay 'On memory and childhood amnesia' (Schachtel, 1947). In this Schachtel observes that it is difficult for adults to experience the experiences of childhood because by then one's whole way of experiencing things has changed.

For adults many experiences are familiar, even over-familiar. For children everything is new. Schachtel says that he learnt from the anthropologist Ruth Benedict that women recall much more about their lives before the age of 6 than men do. He suggests that the forgetting of childhood is more common when there are radical cultural discontinuities between childhood and adulthood. In Western culture, these discontinuities are more marked for men than for women, who remain, as we have noted, from one point of view, childlike in their sharing with children of the status of a minority group. Historically, boys, and, within that group, upper class boys, had their childhoods long before girls and working-class children (Firestone, 1972). Feminist psychoanalytic theory (Chodorow, 1978) would also suggest that women's continuity with childhood is greater because the gendering of parenting requires no severance for them of their bonds with mothers akin to those boys must make in order to become men. But whether it is true or not, the gendering of childhood memories is both a *testable hypothesis* and a way of reminding ourselves of our own potential *individual* investments in the academic representation of childhood.

A Question of Politics

Another difference between children's and women's studies concerns the link between political activity and academic work mentioned earlier. Both women's studies and the women's movement originated in *a point of rupture* between women's experiences and social forms of consciousness (Smith, 1979). It was a subjective realization of women's material position which turned them into a political force *and* generated the questions of academic enquiry. Is this the case with children? It is certainly true that there is a point of rupture within the *adult* consciousness; *adults* can perceive the dislocation of experienced world and socially formed consciousness on behalf of children, responding perhaps also in some way to their own interior half-remembered childhoods. But it may also be—and this is a common theme in both novels and autobiographies—that children experience the rupture of who they feel themselves to be in their everyday lives and who they are expected to be. This, indeed, is one of the principal dynamics behind what adults perceive as children's naughtiness and bad behaviour. Adult society asks children to conform. In so doing, it effectively defuses the revolutionary potential of children's ways of seeing. Once again, the parallels with women's situation emerge. But in the case of children, such is their oppression that we know little, yet, about what they think. The uncovering of children's own perspectives and positions is complicated by the power relations of those who claim to be working on their behalf. For instance, as David Oldman has argued, any statement about children's rights is likely to be infused by the interests of those who work with, or for, children, and expressed in terms of particular professional ideologies. Oldman argues that the 'clamour' for children's rights is partly 'a cri de coeur from workers in bureaucratic organizations seeking some redress from the alienating consequences of the restrictive and half-understood complexities of their work with children' (Oldman, 1991, p. 48).

This is one of the things that the 'clamour' for children's rights is also about, but there are others. The example of the debate about fetal rights is instructive here. Doctors in North America, in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, are increasingly using the argument about the best interests of the fetus, and the fetus's rights to life and to whatever kind of birth doctors consider best for them, to override the standpoint and wishes of mothers (Rothman, 1989). The fetal rights debate uses the language of paternalism and protection to drive a misogynist wedge between children and mothers as the bearers of children. As most fetuses go on to become children, we may well see the arguments deployed in discussions of fetal rights extended in future to children's rights. Both the argument that fetuses who are not separate beings have rights, and the notion that the rights of children and their mothers may in certain instances conflict, draws attention to the inappropriateness of the traditional language of rights in framing and arbitrating the relative social positions of mothers and children. The language of rights describes a particular way of viewing the world in which human beings *are* seen as separable from one another rather than as joined in some collective whole. It also suggests that general principles can be used to determine the precedence of one person's position over that of another. But these ways of thinking are not the way many people think about rights. As the work of Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982), and of Mary Belenky and others (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) has shown, the way people, notably women, define moral rules is complex and situation-dependent rather than simple, abstract, and easily generalizable.

Who Owns Children?

This leads to another significant difference between children's and women's studies. The issue of who owns women is no longer really contended. At least it has been reduced to theoretical debates about the roles of men in the form of patriarchy and of the state under the guise of capitalism (Barrett, 1980). But the issue of *who owns children* remains a live issue. Oldman (1991) points out how childworkers, in grappling to understand their work with children, speak the language of children's rights, and in so doing lay some claim to the ownership of legitimate and valid knowledge about children. In this sense social workers, health visitors (public health nurses), paediatricians, psychologists, psychoanalysts, nutritionists, teachers, mothers and fathers all have a stake in the business of knowing about children. Each of these group is likely to focus on particular aspects of children. For example, health workers overwhelmingly consider children as a product whose physical and psychological perfection must be strived for, whilst mothers view children as active constructors of their own concepts of childhood (Mayall and Foster, 1989). The medical emphasis on bodily quantification results both in a construction of children as weights and measures who do, or do not, conform to the formulae of growth charts, and an appeal to the moral nature of children as wonderful which is supposed to overlie the ways in which real children are less than this (Davis and Strong, 1976). The point of children's studies is critically to examine these perspectives and measure them against the knowledge about children supplied by children themselves. But it is also essentially for the practitioners of children's studies to consider the *ultimate goal* of their exercise. Is it (to return to the parallel with women's studies) to *provide knowledge* capable of being used *by children* in their struggle for some notion of their civil rights? Or is it to *advance the academic positions* of researchers, who can build on their work in children's studies their own chances of promotion and a claim to be the developers of a new specialism to join all the others that already exist and that segment children's lives and minds and bodies between different professional groups?

The Dialectics of Childhood

In *The Dialectics of Sex,* Shulamith Firestone concludes, not surprisingly, that children and women are locked together in a mutual oppression which does not encourage either group to behave particularly well towards one another. But, whereas women are capable of stating their own political importance, children are usually considered incapable of this. Who then should speak on behalf of children? Firestone (1972) says:

> ...it is up to feminist (ex-child and still oppressed child-women) revolutionaries to do so. We must include the oppression of children in any programme for feminist revolution or we will be subject to the same failing of which we have so often accused men; of not having gone deep enough in our analysis, of having missed an important substratum of oppression merely because it didn't directly concern *us*. I say this knowing full well that many women are sick and tired of being lumped together with children... It is only that we have developed, in our long period of related sufferings, a certain compassion and understanding for them that there is no reason to lose now... But we will go further: our final step must be the elimination of the very conditions of femininity and childhood themselves that are now conducive to this alliance of the oppressed, clearing the way for a fully human condition. (pp. 101–2)

Firestone's forceful words draw attention to something which is very crucial. There is an important sense in which children's rights and adults' rights do conflict. There is also an important sense in which women's rights are at odds with those that men claim. But the critical point here is the social and economic fabric within which the rights of different groups are set against one another. In this, and with so much else, the answer lies in the generation of a different kind of society—one whose structures do not have to deprive some people of freedom in order to give it to others.

Notes

* An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the International Conference on Childhood as a Social Phenomenon Lessons from an International Project, held in Billund, Denmark, 24–26 September 1992, (Qvortrup, 1993).

2 Children's Rights

Gerison Lansdown

Traditionally in our society, as in most if not all others, children are viewed as the property of their parents, who are invested with rights seen as necessary to carry out their duties. However, during the course of this century we have begun to witness a fundamental change in attitudes towards parent/ child relationships. First has been a growing recognition that parents' rights over their children are not inviolable, and that the state has a right to intervene to protect children's interests. Our legislation marks those changes. Until the divorce law reforms in the 1970s, decisions about children were based on the guilt or otherwise of the parent: the guilty partner lost custody regardless of the impact on the child. Now, however, the welfare of the child must be the paramount consideration in decisions taken by the court under the Children Act 1989. We have also seen the growing recognition that parents are capable of harming and abusing their children. This knowledge is now so commonplace it is difficult to comprehend the shock of the Maria Colwell case when it first hit the headlines, shattering comfortable assumptions about the nature of family life. It is now clearly accepted that children have a right to be protected from such harm and that the state has a responsibility to intervene to provide that protection. The other major change has been the recognition that parents do not have sole responsibility for their children. The state is now acknowledged to have a key role to play in supporting parents. The introduction of universal child benefits and full-time education from the age of 5, free health care and, in particular, the provision for children of regular developmental health checks, the school health service, dental and optical care, all attest to a level of concern current in our society for the general well-being and protection of our children. Whether that level of concern goes far enough is a matter for political debate which I will not pursue here. But the central point is that we do have a broad consensus that neither the rights nor the responsibilities of parenthood are total or absolute although there are fundamental differences of opinion about where the lines should be drawn.

It is also important to recognize that our perceptions of childhood undergo constant change and are in many ways ambivalent and contradictory. For