

The Sociology of Children: A New ASA Section?

Is There Sufficient Interest to Establish a Sociology of Children?

by Gertrud Lenzer, Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, CUNY

In recent years it has become apparent that children have increasingly come to occupy the focus of scholarly as well as social interest and concern. Research data and empirical investigations on the conditions of children in a variety of contexts and perspectives have been rapidly growing. An increasing number of scholars in the social sciences, law and the public health sectors are inquiring into the cultural, social, economic and political circumstances that shape infant development and the lives of children in our societies.

These research interests suggest a strong relationship to a growing awareness in the public at large of the vicissitudes and predicaments of contemporary childhood. Virtually no day passes in which such concerns are not manifested clearly in the national media. The first week in June alone provides a good example of the issues relating to children as they were represented in a variety of public forms. On June 4th, NBC televised the first of five hour long reports by the former United States Surgeon General, Dr. C. Everett Koop, on "Children at Risk" this first program addresses the extreme inadequacies of health care for millions of American children. In the same week, SCIENCE reported on recent sociological and psychological research in England and the U.S. on children and divorce. On virtually every day, the *New York Times* carries a front page article on issues that have children as a primary focus. One of these articles dealt with the social and bioethical implications of the increasing number of children who are conceived for the sole purpose of becoming organ donors for sick family members. Another article reported on sociological research dealing with fundamental changes in American households: according to this report, 15.8 million children (or 25.9 percent) today are living in single-parent households. Other issues and research findings discussed regularly in the media involve the increasing rates of poverty and homelessness among children, the failures of our public school system to educate all children in ways that will maximize their future life and occupational chances, and the particularly severe plight of inner-city Black and Hispanic children.

Even an impressionistic survey of current social science research and public discussions that involve, in a multitude of contexts, the conditions of children suggests that the time may have come when sociologists might wish to take the lead and begin to integrate these various and mostly atomistic endeavors through establishing the Sociology of Children as a theoretical and empirical part of our discipline. To be sure, a variety of special fields in sociology, such as the sociology of the family or the sociology of education, have traditionally dealt with children. In other words, we have, customarily and quite accurately, conceived on children as a social category or group to be understood through its dependencies-upon a variety of social institutions. However, as these social institutions to whose care children are entrusted have themselves undergone fundamental changes or encountered problems of a kind that no longer appear to enable them to adequately discharge their obligations to children, children have clearly emerged as a major social cohort and category who are in need of being taken as the primary focus of analytic and empirical attention. In other words, the social and historical realities of

childhood have undergone such profound changes that such a new approach appears to be both warranted and desirable. (For example, business, advertising and the mass media have fully recognized these new realities in the way they target children and adolescents in their advertising and programming activities.)

The establishment of the Sociology of Children as a new special field of study within sociology would promote new theoretical perspectives, facilitate the synthesis and integration of existing research interests and provide better opportunities for sociologists to contribute to and play a role in the shaping of public policies as they affect children. Moreover, the existence of a Sociology of Children would be a first step in the direction of bringing together research efforts relating to children in other disciplines of the social and medical sciences and the humanities.

At this point, one should perhaps directly address the question as to whether the establishment of a Sociology of Children both as a substantive new field in sociology and a new section within the ASA would unnecessarily duplicate efforts already undertaken in existing sub-disciplines, such as the Sociology of the Family? Conversations with colleagues have led to the conclusion that such fears are unwarranted. The Sociology of the Family, for example, would continue very much as it does now. In fact, a great deal of the sociologically relevant research on children is not specialty-based in the sense that it can be accommodated fully and neatly within any of the existing sociological sub-fields. Moreover, a great deal of sociological work is conducted in the context of multi-disciplinary research projects which, for example, investigate children and poverty, or children and health issues. In such situations, however, sociologists bring their general sociological expertise to bear upon the subject matter without the focus of a more integrated sociological perspective on children. Hence, sociologically relevant research findings in the area of children remain scattered and are less accessible than they should be. The Sociology of Children would allow many colleagues to share their findings and to combine their efforts.

As far as the introduction of courses on the Sociology of Children in our curriculum is concerned, my own experience over the last few years has been very encouraging. Students appeared to be very interested and did splendid work in two seminars with an interdisciplinary emphasis on the topic of "The Sociology of Children: Children and Social Responsibility." Moreover, and in the long run, we can expect that colleagues who will be teaching courses in the Sociology of Children will also be able to join forces with scholars from other disciplines in cross-disciplinary endeavors and courses on children.

The purpose then of this communication is to inquire from colleagues whether indeed there exists sufficient completed or ongoing research on as well as research interests in the topic of children to warrant the establishment of the Sociology of Children both as a special undertaking and a new section within the American Sociological Association. Preliminary discussions with colleagues in sociology and other social sciences have been extremely positive and encouraging and have suggested this first step. The ASA has offered to provide sign-up sheets at the meetings in Cincinnati for all those colleagues who wish to indicate their interest in establishing the Sociology of Children. In addition,

I would like to encourage interested colleagues to get in touch with me directly (39 Claremont Avenue, New York, New York 10027).

□□□□

Addendum

by James S. Coleman, ASA President-Elect

As an addendum to Gertrud Lenzer's communication, I would like to add my encouragement of further discussion concerning the merits of a section on Sociology of Children. I am personally not certain what my own stand on the question would be, because I haven't resolved all the pros and cons. What is clear, however, is that insufficient attention is given to children by sociologists, just as insufficient attention is given to children in society as a whole.

Matilda White Riley Honored

The rank of Meritorious Executive in the Senior Executive Service was conferred on Dr. Riley by the President of the United States at a formal ceremony on April 2, 1991. She was one of nineteen members of the Department of Health and Human Services to be so honored.

Dr. Riley was recognized for her pioneering work in the sociology of age, and the development of an internationally recognized program of social and behavioral research at the National Institute on Aging.

In presenting the Awards on behalf of the President, Secretary Sullivan congratulated the recipients for their "tremendous contributions and leadership." □

Much of my own empirical research has been on children and youth. That choice of research, has been dictated by the fact that a central task of any society is to produce and to shape the next generation, those who will replace its current members. As this task becomes increasingly one that takes place outside the family, it becomes increasingly evident that neither the incentives nor the skills for addressing the needs of children are sufficient. Thus it becomes important for sociologists to provide knowledge that can help repair this deficiency. This includes, of course, educational institutions, but certainly goes beyond research in education.

In short, I believe that the call for increased attention to the sociology of children is well-placed, and it may be that a new section of the ASA is the best way to do that. □



Matilda White Riley

Purdue University Honors Perrucci

Carolyn C. Perrucci, professor of sociology at Purdue University, is the first winner of the Violet Hass Recognition Award given by the Council on the Status of Women at Purdue.

The Council established the annual tribute earlier this year to recognize people and programs of the university that have encouraged and supported activities permitting women to achieve their full potential. It is named in memory of Hass, a professor of electrical engineering at Purdue from 1962 until her death in 1986.

An award plaque was presented to Perrucci at a public ceremony and reception in April.

Perrucci's career has included several initiatives to advance the status of women at Purdue. She was a founding member of the Purdue Committee on Women's Studies and served as the program's first chair during 1980-81. That year, she also worked as a member of the committee that planned and organized a national conference at Purdue, "Women in the Profession: Science, Social Science, Engineering." In addition, Perrucci was co-chair of the Committee on Women's Studies from 1986-88 and has continued to be an active member of the committee.

"I've worked with Carolyn Perrucci since 1972, when I began my doctoral studies," said Dena Targ, associate professor of child development and family studies and Perrucci's nominator. "She was my major professor and a mentor. At a time when 'women's studies' was an unfamiliar term to most university profes-

sors, she encouraged me to give an academic focus to my concern with women's issues."

Perrucci also was cited for being active in projects aimed at building the status of women outside her academic work. She has served as Assistant Equal Employment Officer at Purdue, a member of the Tippecanoe County Task Force on the Status of Women, and founding member of the Women's Center, formerly located near the Purdue campus.

In 1984 Perrucci and Hass were co-editors of a book titled *Women in Scientific and Engineering Professions*. □

Sociologists Named Wilson Fellows

Congratulations to these three sociologists, who will work at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC, on the projects named below.

Jonathan B. Imber, Associate Professor of Sociology, Wellesley College: "A Life's Work: Authority and Vocation in Modern Medicine" (September 1991-June 1992).

Jerzy Szacki, Professor of Sociology, Warsaw University, Poland: "Liberalism in Eastern Europe" (September 1991-May 1992).

Dennis H. Wrong, Professor of Sociology, New York University: "The Problem of Order in Society and Social Theory" (September 1991-June 1992). □