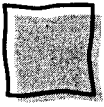


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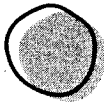
GHENT PAPERS ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS



Understanding



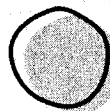
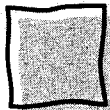
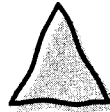
Children's



Rights

Collected papers presented at the first International
Interdisciplinary Course on Children's Rights

University of Ghent (Belgium)
July 1996



Edited by
Eugeen Verhellen

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Preface

Although children's rights are not as a matter of course associated with scientific research and academic activity, the Children's Rights Centre at the University of Ghent was set up (in 1978) to provide an appropriate university environment for studies in children's rights. The Centre's initial primary aims were to contribute to a wider dissemination of ideas and research relating to the concept of children's rights.

The early activities of the Centre consisted mainly of scientific research on motivational and strategic questions related to the children's rights issue. Nowadays, the Centre makes, besides the fundamental research work, an active contribution in terms of education.

In this respect, the Children's Rights Centre of Ghent took a new initiative in the field of education and organised in 1996 for the very first time the "International Interdisciplinary Course on Children's Rights". This Course deals in particular with views and theories on children's rights. It aims to contribute to an intensive study of the background, motivation, strategies and main themes of the children's rights concept.

The International Interdisciplinary Course on Children's Rights took place from June 28th till July 6th 1996. The textbook in hand collects 51 of the 61 lectures that were presented during this course. In the book, you will find the lectures in the chronological order in which they were presented to the participants. By doing so, we follow the same, basic structure of the course and of the children's rights concept that is used by the Children's Rights Centre.

Eugeen Verhellen

Children's Studies and the Arts and Sciences: Recent Trends

GERTRUD LENZER

Traditionally we associate the fields of pediatrics, psychology and education, and more recently social work as well, with concerns for and the study of children and youth. Their history covers the better part of child related research and its applications in practice throughout this century, and it is neither surprising nor without significance that it has been these disciplines that have produced the largest majority of professionals and specialists in child-oriented activities.

In addition to these professionalized academic fields, an increasing number of disciplines in the arts and sciences have begun to manifest an interest in children and youth especially in the course of the last decade or so. In particular, I have in mind, by way of illustration, such areas as "Children's Literature" and the "Philosophy of Children" in the humanities, the emerging fields of study of the "History of Childhood," the "Sociology of Children," (the latter established by myself in the United States as a Section within the American Sociological Association in 1991) and the "Sociology of Childhood" promoted under the auspices of the European research group, "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon." And other disciplines, such as anthropology, political science, and economics are producing in rapidly growing numbers studies on children-related topics *without*, however, having established antecedently a primary focus on children by foregrounding them as a special branch of scholarly discourse and analysis within their special intellectual disciplines, as *has*, by way of contrast, happened in history and sociology.

Such developments are visibly refracted in the first parts of the program for this International Interdisciplinary Course on Children's Rights here at the University of Ghent. By the same token, however, some expectable disciplinary fragmentation is perceptible in the division of topics on what is called here the "Study of the Child." The subjects range from the "History of Childhood," "Cross-cultural Study of childhood," "A Philosophical Perspective," "A Psychological Perspective," to "Sociological Perspective on Childhood," and "Social Work and Children's Perspective." That is to say, a series of reputable experts from different scholarly sub-worlds undertake to report on the current state of the art of their disciplinary perspectives on children - all of which, incidentally,

represent individual fields of study in the social sciences, with the exception of philosophy.

Indeed, and of course, those who have recently turned to the study of children represent a welcome development. But what is, I believe, needed now is a genuinely comprehensive perspective on and analysis of children – that is, a bringing together if not an immediate synthesis of such disparate disciplinary endeavors at a higher level of integration. Children are not fully or solely characterized by psychological developmental processes; they are not exclusively or predominantly readers of children's literature or human beings with certain epistemological, logical or moral faculties; nor are they to be regarded in any particularly privileged sense as human beings who have been treated, imagined and conceptualized differently in different historical periods, or primarily as human persons who are shaped by as well as who shape social and cultural realities. For children also exist in their wholeness as individuals, as a class, and as a generation. The various disciplines, pursuing their own legitimate interests, have inevitably tended to hypostatize and fragment aspects of the individual child and of the lives of children as a group. But the logics pursued by separate, individual disciplines are in point of fact not commensurate with some of the realities they propose to study. We cannot arrive at a comprehensive understanding of children by simply accumulating, aggregating, or adding up the segmented findings of a far-flung variety of disciplines. Moreover, we need to acknowledge the circumstance that as a rule practitioners in most disciplines – and those pursuing research on children and youth are no exception – are not normally aware of each others' endeavors nor do they usually care unduly about what may be developing intellectually elsewhere. The knowledge created in the academic and scholarly worlds is usually produced separately, published separately, and consumed separately by colleagues in the same or closely related areas of research.

More recently, sociologists around and among the group who published *Sociological Studies of Child Development*, as well as the European colleagues in the "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon" project, have clearly developed their own perspectives by way of qualification and modification of and in contradistinction to the virtual monopoly in child research that has been exercised by developmental psychologists. Of course, they were and are essentially correct in their assessment that the prevailing emphasis on psychological processes and mechanisms had established what amounted to a controlling hand upon interpretation and in so doing had unavoidably become one-sided and had indeed begun to reveal manifest shortcomings. At the same time, matters were not to be satisfactorily rectified by simply going to the other extreme and stressing sociological and anthropologically cultural circumstances, to the exclusion of a number of other perspectives, especially those that are practiced in the humanities and psy-

chology. As it were, and in a pattern that is recurrent in the history of the development of scholarly studies in general, one orthodoxy appears for the moment to have replaced previous monolithic orthodoxies.

CHILDREN'S STUDIES

In response to this disciplinary fragmentation and even polarization in Child Research, Children's Studies was conceived of as a genuinely interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary new field of study along the model of Women's Studies or Black Studies.

We started this new field of study in the Fall of 1991 in an attempt to bring to bear knowledge from the different disciplines of the arts and sciences on the topic of children as a class, and as a historical subject and to integrate them on a higher level of understanding and articulation. Children Studies does not aim to achieve simply an addition or sum of findings from different disciplines. By bringing knowledge about children from different studies to bear upon the class of children, a more holistic understanding should emerge which in the end will represent more than the sum of its parts.

At this point, we have established Children's Studies as a minor degree program with its basis in the perspectives and specific methods of a number of the disciplines in the arts and sciences. In this sense, Children's Studies is at the present viewed by us as a course of undertakings that is complementary to those disciplines, and as a subject of study rather than as a discipline itself. At the same time, Children's Studies foregrounds children themselves and makes the various disciplines with their partial and necessarily fragmented research perspectives subsidiary to the subject of study: children; it views those disciplines as a necessary and indispensable context rather than as the primary subject of analysis and understanding. In this supportive and complementary role, the child-research disciplines find one of their genuine missions and objectives being realized through an enlargement of general perspective. The entity that is being investigated - children - takes stage front; and the disciplines take for the moment a second and ancillary place.

More concretely, faculty from different disciplines undertake to attempt in the first place to understand something about what is known in other respective disciplines by way of organized discussion and formal as well as informal exchange of ideas. And in so doing, the most exciting circumstance is that they discover in how many ways their interests and findings intersect, overlap or are even close to identical. This is not particularly surprising when we consider that children represent the focus of their interests and in this way constitute as it were

a "natural" interdisciplinary subject. For a child, and children, are also, among much else, of one organic piece. It is the disciplines that in their historical and familiar course of intellectual development have unavoidably taken them to pieces. So what Children's Studies attempts to do is, at the present moment of scholarly advancement, to render this reality whole again.

The interdisciplinary degree program in Children's Studies at my University, in its initial phase, brings together courses from the fields of Children's Literature, History of Childhood, Child Development, Sociology of Children, Children and Education, Child Health, the Black Child, the Puerto Rican Child, Speech and Children. The following courses are in preparation and should be in place for 1997: a general course on "Perspectives in Children's Studies," "Children's Rights," "Children and the Arts" (with separate modules for Art History, Music and Film), "Children and the Mass Media" (with the Department of Television and Radio), and "Cross-cultural Perspectives of Children." And you might be interested to learn that other colleges and universities have begun to initiate Children's Studies programs as well.

In this sense, the arts and sciences, from the visual and performing arts; music, film, and literature, from philosophy to history, and from the many disciplines in the social sciences, medical sciences and legal studies – all of them together and in their differing focuses on children can be enlisted to bring about new understandings and a new series of multi-perspectival conceptualizations of children.

CHILDREN'S STUDIES AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

We therefore envision the multidisciplinary field or subject of Children's Studies as playing a significant role in the understanding and lives of children in the future. In addition to the rights laid down in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and other children's rights instruments, children can, so to speak, claim that they deserve to be understood and analyzed in the whole of their existence by the research, academic and policy community. We do not find this implicit claim articulated anywhere in the legal apparatuses of our human rights conventions relating to children.

In fact, the separation and fragmentation of concerns about different social areas and problems that intimately involve and affect children, a situation of incoherence that characterizes social and historical reality as well as policies in different societies, are expressed in many child rights documents. They do, in fact, mirror them. There are, to be sure, articles of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the

Child which address general and universal needs, interests and rights of children. But most articles attend to particular and separately specifiable historical problems. And this is precisely how scholars, when they concern themselves with the rights and well-being of children, divide the labor among themselves. There are, of course, the generalists in the new field of Children's Rights. They are addressing such important questions as the history, basic principles, and goals of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other related children rights instruments, their place in the arena of human rights, and the tasks of monitoring and implementing the Convention on a global scale. In addition to the generalists, however, a large number of child rights experts deal with separate articles of the Convention and concentrate on areas such as education, health care, child labor, street children, child abuse, and child soldiers, to name only a few.

In short then, the field of Child Rights has emerged in the 1990s, alongside other child-focussed fields of study in the arts and sciences, as a separate field of study with a wide variety of subspecialties and experts. Given the comprehensive nature of children's rights on a global scale, however, the time appears to have come to enlist and forge intimate relations with the relevant fields of child research in the arts and sciences. It is after all these fields which examine and cover most areas of the individual, political, social, economic and cultural realities of childhood. In order to overcome the disciplinary fragmentation and to achieve a synthesis, we need to aim at achieving a unified representation of children in research and policy, in society and the polity of nations. In the vision of the new and interdisciplinary field of Children Studies, children are human beings with all their capacities, competencies, interests, and needs, and, last but not least, all the rights that attach to them as members of the human community. On this view, Children's Studies and the synthesis in the representation of children, can become an important, if not essential ally in the global project of children's rights.