

..... Ageing and Childhood

Definition Childhood is stage of life that can be said to be a period of growth and physical maturation. The United Nations (UN) defines childhood as the period from birth to 18 years of age (see especially the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)). This is a very broad and sometimes unworkable span of time: it doesn't necessarily fit with the lived realities of people across all social and cultural differences. The UN's intention is to protect the rights of young people who might be seen to be vulnerable because of their age, and who may not enjoy full rights under the law within a society (see also **Youth and Children**). In contrast, ageing is the process of growing older – which might occur at any stage of life although, in practice, it generally refers to the later stages of life. It is often described in terms of bodily decline (see **Death and Dying**) but it can also be seen in terms of 'positive ageing', which focuses on prolongation of the individual's physical activity and social productivity. Both the very young and the ageing or aged are implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, contrasted with the normative adult (generally a white, able-bodied male) and frequently found to be deficient in this comparison.

French social historian Philippe Ariès is famous for being the first to claim, in *Centuries of Childhood*, that childhood as we think of it in contemporary modern societies is a social and cultural invention. He argues that the concept of childhood has gradually taken shape over the past five centuries and most particularly in the past two or three. Ariès' basic argument on childhood is that, in its current form, it is a construct of bourgeois sentimentality that arose as part of the identity formation of the rising middle classes of Europe. He claims that childhood and the differentiation we would understand between infant, child, adolescent, youth, adult and aged infirmity only came into being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the basis of representations in art and in educational manuals, Ariès argues that this evolution of childhood is observable through shifts in the positioning of games, clothing and education that are in turn related to age and social strata. So, the evolution of the idea of childhood took hold through bodily techniques: age-specific



clothing such as skirts for small boys before they could wear breeches (knee length pants); sports intended to train up a body to a specific physique and ideal of health; and education that entailed physical requirements (sitting still) and that involved physical correction when its requirements were not met (corporal punishment). The intertwining of these techniques marked out, using Bourdieu's terms, the habitus of childhood (see **Habitus**). Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, also placed a great emphasis on the controlling nature of education in bringing young bodies into docile agreement with the forces that work through educational institutions, although the focus of his study was on the effects of diffuse power (see **Power**) and its endpoint in adulthood rather than infancy and childhood. Nevertheless, both Foucault and Ariès saw the training up of the young by physical means – whether through sport, manners, or classroom discipline – as being of central importance.

Using medieval and early modern illustrations in support of his thesis, Ariès argues that the major physical differentiations between life-stages are respectively between the infant in the cradle and the neophyte-adult; and the aged and the bed-ridden (imbecilic) infirm who have returned to an infant-like state. The illustrations he provides track life-stages through embodied changes but do not include a period that is recognizable as 'childhood'. First came infancy, followed by a remarkably extended youth or the prime of life, and eventually old age. As he describes it, the idea of adolescence – a period in which one became a social being – did not exist. Rather, '[t]he idea of childhood was bound up with the idea of dependence: the words "sons", "varlets" and "boys" were also words in the vocabulary of feudal subordination' (1962: 26). So, conversely, a 'lad' or 'boy' could be in his twenties. (We can see that the latter term of subordination continued to be used well into the twentieth century, as applied pejoratively to adult African-American males.) Small children, Ariès argues, were considered unimportant because they were likely to die: recognition only came with the likelihood of survival. The shift towards the invention of a sentimentalized childhood is evident in the inclusion of infants in funerary monuments and family portraiture in the seventeenth century (1962: 46–7).

Subsequent historians have criticized Ariès' evidence for his claims and it is quite true that what appears in art or an educational manual is not necessarily good evidence of lived realities. Representations almost always serve other purposes than simply to reflect reality (see **Media and Representation**), and educational manuals might be said to hold up an





ideal rather than be sound evidence of the actual behaviour of children. It is also demonstrably untrue that infants were considered unimportant, both from the evidence of literary sources (memorial poetry) and from legal statutes for the prosecution of crimes such as infanticide. However, few deny his general thesis that our understanding of childhood has changed over time, as has our expectation of what is and isn't appropriate in the treatment of children. Up until at least the seventeenth century, seven was considered the age of rational thought in Western Europe and it was from this age onwards that children might be sent into other households as apprentices, or indentured servants, or, when a little older, into the military forces such as the navy.

Indeed, what Ariès started has flowed outward to many other disciplines and is particularly important in understanding the cultural specificity of ideas of childhood, such as those upheld in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and in the International Labour Organization's (ILO) *Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (1999). In such documents the UN explicitly and implicitly promotes an idea of childhood as a time of innocence and vulnerability, which is a historically and culturally contingent construction that is not necessarily appropriate or helpful in situations where people under the age of 18 can be shown to be agents in control of their lives. The young in Europe were once considered to have the ability to take all that life offered or required of them from a much earlier age than we are inclined to think of now, much as children in developing countries might be active and productive contributors to the family economy today. However, the UN and ILO have shown some understanding of the ability (and need) of children in developing contexts to combine forms of employment with gaining education. (See also **Youth and Children**)

The body in society is not static; it changes over time and can be perceived differently in different contexts (cultural, spatial and experiential). The body is interpreted or experienced at either an individual or social level. This becomes clear in discussions in many of the sections in the current book (for example, **Appearance and Beauty**, **Difference**, **Queer**). When we consider childhood and ageing, these life-stages each bring up particular ways in which power is exerted, autonomy is questioned and control is sought over the body at these times in our lives. Childhood and ageing are the periods in our lives when our bodily capacities are generally considered to be less competent than the 'normative body' that is expected of the life-stages in between: although the





'normative body' is a fiction that quickly falls apart in relation to many of the concepts discussed in other sections of this book (see **Colonialism/Post-colonialism, Difference, Disability/Ability**).

Both childhood and ageing are embodied *processes*. In ageing, at an individual level that process may involve loss of embodied capacities and competencies, either physical or mental, to a greater or lesser degree. Ageing is generally recognized by and through the physical changes that happen to the human body over time such as changes to the quality of the skin and hair, the diminishing capacity to maintain a desired body shape and the gradual degeneration of the major systems of the body (vascular, muscular, skeletal and nervous). Ageing, as understood at a social level, is subject to a range of discourses on ageing (see **Discourse**) that become part of the shaping of an ageing person's identity (Hepworth, 2000). In the developed world those discourses are largely concerned with aesthetics (Twigg, 2006), medical implications and government responsibilities.

In the developed world, these physical signs of ageing are often seen as something to avoid or overcome (Blaikie, 1999; Featherstone and Wernick, 1995). At the simplest level that might involve using sunscreen and make-up or dying one's hair, and at the more interventionist end it might involve complicated cosmetic surgeries. The medical implications of ageing across populations, that is, shifts in the demographics as a result of lower birth rates and longer life expectancies, have led to an increasing anxiety about the likelihood of a rise in the numbers of people living with Alzheimer's disease (along with other age-onset diseases) and how they are to be cared for. Public health messages over the past 15–20 years have become far more concentrated on the prevention of diseases that are likely to occur and become chronic in later life. This has, in turn, led to support for increasingly contentious research into treatment options to combat the processes, not just the logical consequences, of ageing itself. This includes therapies such as stem cell therapy, genetic therapies and nanotechnologies – treatments that are still associated with science fiction, that raise concerns as to their socio-political and ethical consequences (Cregan, 2005), and that are increasingly being applied in clinical practice.

It should be emphasized that these are largely concerns of developed countries, where life expectancies are higher and these specific implications of ageing are more pressing. In developing countries, there are related concerns with ageing but more in terms of people increasingly developing age-onset diseases related to dietary changes (see **Food and**





Eating) where preventable or treatable conditions may affect the whole population (e.g. malaria, tuberculosis, polio) in circumstances of under-resourced medical care and lower overall life expectancy. There are serious issues of inequity inherent in any discussion of ageing and childhood when looked at from a global perspective.

It should also be said that there are more positive stories to be told about ageing. In many non-Western cultures, the aged continue to be revered and cared for in the home within a family and/or community structure rather than that responsibility and duty being relegated to medicalized professional care in institutions like nursing homes and hostels (see **Death and Dying**). Unlike the public health discourse of 'positive ageing' – the underlying message of which is keeping elderly people active, productive and *independent* – in cultures where independence is less important than group allegiance there are more overtly reciprocal understandings of care. The young who were cared for will, in turn, care for those who cared for them, which inevitably includes the most basic forms of bodily care: washing, dressing, toileting. Within sociology, both childhood and ageing have become major areas of inquiry, in which we can see there are basic concerns of embodiment that are specific to life stages.

FURTHER READING

See also readings under **Youth and Children**.

There have been a number of critical responses to Ariès' (1962) work from within history for which Margaret King's *Renaissance Quarterly* essay (2007) provides a sound contextualization, rehearsing the main debates around Ariès' work while acknowledging its enduring worth as well as its shortcomings. There are numerous alternate readings of the history of childhood from feminists such as Pollock (1983) and Luke (1989), through to more recent historians like Heywood (2001). Jenks (1996) and the edited collection by James and Prout (1997) are representative of psycho-social research into contemporary childhoods, that is, underpinned by the modern notion of childhood as conceived within the UN Convention. An early sociological introduction to an embodied approach to ageing in popular culture can be found in Featherstone and Wernick (1995), and in Blaikie (1999) in a more extended form. Arber and Ginn's collection (1995) takes a more concentrated approach to the study of the relationship between gender and ageing, while Hepworth (2000) analyses fictional representations of ageing in relation to identity

