Current Sociology
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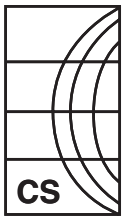
Current Sociology 2010 58: 186
DOI: 10.1177/0011392109354241

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://csi.sagepub.com/content/58/2/186

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
International Sociological Association



Reflections on the Sociology of Childhood in the UK

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abstract: The emergence and development of the sociology of childhood in the UK is strongly connected to the establishment of this area of study in the Nordic countries. However any account of this must also look at the wider context of political and cultural constructions of childhood, children and young people, and intergenerational relationships in the UK. In the early stages of childhood studies there was a synchrony between the orientation of the new social studies of childhood in the UK and changes in how children came to be politically positioned, particularly with respect to an emphasis on children's voices, their capacity to be agentic and their status as social actors. Since then the political status of childhood has become more problematic. In the last few years there has been a notable shift towards the demonization of teenagers (adolescents) along with rising levels of anxiety concerning children generally. This represents something of a divergence between the orientations of UK policy and politics and contemporary orientations of the sociology of childhood.

keywords: childhood ✦ childhood and policy ✦ children ✦ children and research ✦ politics of childhood ✦ sociology ✦ voice of the child

Introduction

As most authors in this collection note, putting together an account of the emergence of a field of study in a national context is at the very least a challenge. Furthermore, while it is not possible to produce a definitive narrative it is also not desirable to do so. To stamp the materialization of a body of work which constitutes the sociology of childhood with some kind of 'official' history would be to impose a linearity on a process which is not necessarily sequential. However, it is possible to reflect on how some

Current Sociology ✦ March 2010 ✦ Vol. 58(2): 186–205

SAGE (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC)
DOI: 10.1177/0011392109354241

key ideas, various sources of academic work, wider policy domains, the pragmatics of higher education and the everyday politics of childhood have come together to create a critical mass of academic activity that can be named as a new area of study and theorization.

In this broad reflection on the current state of the sociology of childhood in the UK that follows, I focus on some specific albeit diverse 'arenas' within which, or through which, the sociology of childhood arises or which provide a context to particular aspects of its development. To do this I start with the more recent 'history' and current concerns of childhood sociology. I then look back to give a brief overview of how British sociology thought about children and young people prior to the new sociology of childhood and explore how this did or did not link to contemporaneous politics of childhood at various periods. I then reflect on and draw out how this connects with contemporary cultural preoccupations about children and young people. In conclusion, I argue that there may be some divergence developing between contemporary popular/political concerns and the direction of childhood sociology.

From Socialization to Agency: Sociology of Childhood in the Academic Domain

In 1986, Ambert drew attention to the way in which children were mainly visible to sociology only in respect of their progress along the path to adulthood, and primarily in terms of questions of socialization. While her focus was on North American studies, this was also the case in the UK. The limited way in which mainstream sociology looked at children had shaped a research agenda which was primarily concerned with questions of why children fail to become the right kind of adult (see critiques of this by Alanen, 1994; James and Prout, 1990; Waksler, 1991). Although earlier work had started the process of opening up the study of children and childhood to other approaches – for example Hardman in 1978 had considered how and why children were constituted as a 'muted' group in anthropological studies, and Jenks had sought to demonstrate that differing theoretical locations produce different ideas of 'the child' in his book *The Sociology of Childhood* (1982), it took a little time for the groundswell to build in academia. In 1988, Alanen published an influential paper questioning the hegemony of socialization, and in the same year a feminist collection of work directed attention to the problem of children being sexually abused in the family domain (*Feminist Review*, 1988). Children were becoming more visible to sociology, or at least to some parts of it, in their own right. In 1990, Mayall published a paper on how children take on a division of labour of care, and at the same time Allison James and

Alan Prout published *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. This book marked a departure point in the UK for a new sociology of childhood. Building on work underway in the Nordic countries, and drawing together a range of empirical researchers from the UK and elsewhere, this book established a UK agenda for how sociology might engage with children and childhood, arguing from the perspective of social constructionism and advocating ethnographic approaches to the empirical study of childhood. James and Prout explicitly called for the study and theorization of children as social actors, with an emphasis on agency, and on seeing children as members of society in the here and now rather than in terms of what they would become when adults. The text itself contained work by a range of authors using just such an approach in their work, demonstrating what this new turn in the sociological study of children and childhood would look like.

This academic challenge paralleled UK national policy and legal changes which were also opening up spaces where children could stand as (limited) subjects in their own right. Notable among the latter were the passing of the Children Act 1989 domestically, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child internationally. Since then, the sociology of childhood has gained a formal presence in academic institutions while ideas of children as social agents in their own right, the concept of child rights and a concern to create spaces for children's voices to be heard have gained a footing in both governmental policy and NGO arenas.

There followed in the 1990s a number of publications (e.g. Brannen and O'Brien, 1995a; Corsaro, 1997; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998b; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 1994, 1996; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Waksler, 1991) which established a body of work that strongly located childhood in social constructionism and framed children as social actors (Goffman, 1959). This symbolic interactionist positioning underpinned empirical approaches to understanding children's lives on the basis of their own experiences, their own meanings and interpretations, and on their own terms. This connected with wider sociological questions at the time about the relationship between structure and agency, although perhaps less attention was paid to structural issues in childhood sociology until much more recently. It also reflected the rise and rise of social constructionism more generally in other fields of sociology, particularly in those fields concerned with what was often thought of as the 'natural' world such as environmental sociology.

The radical nature of the move advocated by James and Prout is most evident when considered in the context of UK sociology's reliance on socialization for thinking sociologically about children. The dominance of socialization was itself a product of the relationship between cultural and political constructions of childhood and the concerns of sociology in the UK.

Politically, children in the UK have a long history of being seen both as dangerous and as in danger. As Hendricks (2005) charts, the emergence of the idea of childhood as a seedbed for adult life towards the end of the 18th century led to an increasing degree of scrutiny and regulation of children's lives specifically. This can be traced into ensuing legislation in the 19th century, which limited children's presence in the industrialized workplace, imposed an institutionalized educational order on their childhoods and sought to give them some protection from excessive violence at the hands of adults (Hendricks, 2005). Alongside this they were identified as potentially dangerous and in danger in terms of criminality, and special judicial processes were established to deal with 'juvenile delinquency' (Cunningham, 1995). However, during the same period, albeit to a more limited extent, children were also rendered visible in their own right by philanthropists with a particularly strong Christian ethic to their reformatory work (Hendricks, 2005). The effect was the generation of a political ambiguity about children and childhood, reflected in an ambivalence in both policy and popular culture (Piper, 2005).

At the opening of the 20th century, children and childhood were largely claimed by the emergent disciplines of developmental psychology and paediatric medicine (Hendricks, 1990; Luke, 1989), as well as by education and the justice system. At the same time, the bourgeois model of the family dominated thinking about the proper place for children to live out their everyday lives (Richardson, 1993). All of these institutional colonizations of childhood consolidated the sense that what was important about children was what sort of adults they became and the process by which they became those adults. The result was a clear focus on the process of children growing up – their status as 'becomings' rather than beings (Qvortrup, 1994: 2). This focus on children in families, and on parents, increased in the post-Second World-War era (Hendricks, 1997), and remains evident in current legislative and political policies. On the other hand, children were present in some professional spheres as individual subjects, particularly in psychological and psychoanalytic terms (Rose, 1985). This, together with moves in the 1960s and 1970s to promote a liberationist agenda for children's rights (Archard, 1993; Holt, 1975), contributed to the continuation of a complex and somewhat ambiguous space for children in British society.

It was in a climate dominated by psychological and medical framings of children as 'becomings' that sociology took up the concept, and question, of socialization, a concept that was the cross-disciplinary translation of the idea of individual development (Burman, 1994). With Parsons' formulation of society as a functioning organism driving sociological thinking about children, questions about how children grew up set the research agenda. These sociological questions were tied to postwar concerns about

how to successfully reconstitute the nuclear family after the social disruption of war (Cooter, 1992) and how to socially organize and support children becoming the right sort of adults. This agenda persisted largely up until the 1990s.[1] Other than that, children were largely invisible in mainstream sociology: any direct interest in them was corralled off to educational sociology and the sociology of deviance concerned with delinquency, and even in these fields socialization continued to hold sway conceptually. Work on the sociology of the family either focused on the family as an entire unit, or on the parents. This was even the case for research into matters that strongly affected the well-being of individual children such as poverty or child abuse (Daniel and Ivatts, 1998).

The use of socialization for understanding young people's lives had not gone entirely unchallenged in this period. The work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham produced notable work which mostly focused on groups (subcultures) of young people seen as troublesome by mainstream society (Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1976) and on working-class youth, particularly boys (e.g. Willis, 1977), although significant work was also published about the lives of young women (McRobbie and Garber, 1976). The work of the CCCS carried an emphasis on the significance of social class and structural explanations (Clarke et al., 1976; Willis, 1977) and rejected simplistic socialization approaches in favour of a dynamic understanding of the agency of the young people concerned. From the 1980s, interest in the age group in which young people were on the cusp of the adult world became more embedded in the work at the CCCS with a shift to a focus on the transitions of young people into adult labour markets and less attention on the cultural everyday lives of youth (Shildrick, 2006). One outcome of the work of the CCCS was a flourishing of youth (cultural) studies but only with respect to the adolescent/young adult years. This left younger children in the domain of socialization and developmentalism until the late 1980s as described.

As I indicated earlier, the rise of the new sociology of childhood paralleled some shifts in public policy concerning children both at the national UK level and internationally. I trace here only those overlaps which are observable, in that as the 1990s brought academic calls for children to be listened to, so too were similar calls made on policy-makers. This was especially so with regard to children who were being abused in their families. Following various swings in public policy approaches to child abuse and child protection (Frost and Stein, 1989), in an era of a roll back of the welfare state under a right-wing Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher (Pilcher and Wagg, 1996), a major reform of childcare law led to the implementation of the Children Act 1989. It was this Act, still in place,

which introduced a more comprehensive legislative recognition of three things which can be associated with seeing the child as an individual agent: a right to be legally represented (separately from parents or the state) in proceedings affecting the child, a right to be consulted about decisions which directly affect the child and a complaints procedure children can take up with respect to any state care they are in receipt of. This Act, however, does not represent a liberal reform of the status of the child, rather it reinforces the familialization of childhood while incorporating some notions of individualism which de facto have to operate as offering a subject position where the exercise of agency is at least possible (even if not often achieved in effect). These three mentioned principles chimed with ideas of listening to children (in particular in relation to child protection [Wattam et al., 1989]), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in terms of the child having a right to be taken into account as an individual and the consolidation of sociological thinking about children as social actors who can be agentic achieved by the publication of the James and Prout book in 1990.

The part played by feminism in the rise of childhood studies in the UK is also important. Feminist sociology provided two key ingredients: theoretical thinking about a marginalized group with which children shared some key characteristics and experiences (Oakley, 1994) and a tradition of emphasizing the absolute importance of the subjective perspective (e.g. Oakley, 1979), which argued for a reflexive approach to research and placed a value on qualitative methodologies. In addition, a number of scholars in feminism became engaged with questions concerning the subjectivities of children not least in respect of sexual abuse (Kitzinger, 1990) and domestic violence (e.g. Mullender et al., 2002). The relationship is complex, however. First, overall the focus on women's experiences led to a lack of attention to children's perspectives (Alanen, 1994; Oakley, 1994). Second, childcare had been understood within feminism as a source of oppression for women (e.g. Mitchell, 1973), or, third, notable feminists had not engaged with questions of intergenerational relationships in their theorizing (cf. Judith Butler's work). However, the value of the linkages that were made between childhood studies and feminism is clearly set out by Oakley (1994), who argues that women and children share many commonalities in terms of material deprivation, a relative lack of rights, problematic presences in public spaces and problematic lives in private spaces marked by violence and patriarchal power relations.

The Contemporary Picture

Between 1995 and 2001, the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council – the main source of independent state funding for social science research

in the UK) funded the Children 5–16 Programme: a comprehensive programme of research which drew heavily on the new sociology of childhood. Twenty-two research projects were funded to 'develop new knowledge about children as social actors, to engage in theoretical and methodological development, and in cross-disciplinary work' (Prout, 2002: 67). This, together with other empirical work, and a steady stream of journal and book publications in the sociology of childhood led to theoretical and empirical work on children gaining ground. A review of publications in *Childhood* and in *Children and Society* over the last five years shows the extent to which empirical approaches to children now draw on 'agency' approaches. In addition, the concept of children as social actors has been further theorized (e.g. James et al., 1998), including developments of initial conceptualizations of agency (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998a, 2001; Lee, 1998), work on the significance of the production of childhood through intergenerational relationships as well as children's understanding of what it is to be a child (Mayall, 1999, 2002; Mayall and Zeiher, 2003), the significance of childhood as an embodied status (Prout, 2000) and wider contexts of late modernity (Lee, 2001).

Key empirical questions have surfaced and resurfaced over the period of the last decade or so which point towards both enduring academic concerns (such as questions of children's rights, and children's participation in society and in decision-making) and recurrent political concerns such as poverty, abuse and general questions of welfare. It is possible to establish the topics that generated some momentum by looking at those which are most highly cited in key journals for the publication of sociology of childhood work.[2] These topics include children's rights and, often linked, decision-making (there are numerous articles in this area but among them are Cockburn, 1998; Devine, 2002; Roche, 1999), children coping with their parents divorcing (e.g. Neale, 2002) and concerns about the practice of researching with children. Other topics such as children and work (Leonard, 2004; Mizen et al., 2001) have at times been popular. In effect here the concerns are with the situations in which children find themselves in their everyday lives, although there is still some sense in which the nature of the research questions addressed in these literatures is not entirely free of the need to be looking at 'a problem' in order to gain research funding.

In terms of quantitative research, a major study was begun in 2000 with a large cohort study of children born over a 12-month period from 1 September 2000 in England and Wales, and 1 December in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It consists so far of four periods of data collection – the first at age nine months, the second with children aged around three years, the third with children when they have reached the age for starting primary school and a fourth sweep in 2008. A total of 18,818 children were in the first sweep of data, and the random sample has been boosted to

ensure adequate representation of children from deprived areas, and from areas with high concentrations of black and Asian (Indian subcontinent/ Southern Asian) families in the UK. The quantitative data have been designed for analyses relevant to questions concerning processes of social exclusion, the role of health in development and attainment and the value of social interventions in the lives of children living in poor or disadvantaged situations. The data generated, and the analyses they provide, reflect governmental concerns about social exclusion and social cohesion. This research sits largely outside the agenda of children as social actors since it strongly positions them in developmental terms. However, it offers a rich resource of structural data about children's lives in certain domains, something that has been lacking recently particularly with respect to children in minority and marginalized groups.

Less visible in previous or current empirical work are questions that address issues of social class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and gender in children's lives, despite some recognition of heterogeneous *childhoods*. Substantive areas such as questions of embodiment and childhood, and the issue of young carers, appear to have slipped off the research agenda at present, although they made a significant contribution to rendering visible these aspects of children's lives at the time.

There is also a substantial body of academic work which focuses on questions with which the academic community itself wrestles concerning the process of researching with/on children (e.g. Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Davis, 1998; Punch, 2002). Attention has been paid to power relations inherent in the research process and how these should or could be addressed in research concerning children's lives (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Cocks, 2006; Komulainen, 2007). In parallel with questions addressed in feminism and other sociologies concerned with oppressed and marginal groups in society, research into children's lives is often conceptualized as a political act which increases the salience of questions about the relationship between researcher and researched. Debates have arisen as to whether, in terms of power relations, certain research approaches are more ethical than others and hence are to be preferred or prioritized. Specifically, this has led to some advocating the value of participatory research with children over and above other types of research relations. This approach is the foundation of the research undertaken at the Children's Research Centre at the Open University.[3] The political dimension primarily at stake is the extent to which children should be empowered through the research process over and above having their voices heard by researchers and represented through the research process to wider audiences. The latter is a goal seen as essential in the UK, where children have little political or public voice; it underpins most qualitative research with any group in the UK and has been extended to include children as commentators on their own

lives and experiences alongside the theoretical construction of them as social actors with agency. However, advocates for participative research methods have questioned whether this is sufficient, throwing into sharp relief the nexus of power and knowledge at the heart of the research enterprise. While such a debate is important, there remains a problem in respect of the limitations that advocacy of a particular approach to research could place on the contribution that other perspectives and insights can make to understandings of childhood and children's social worlds. Similar methodological issues have been debated in regard to feminist research agendas and methodologies.

The issue of ethics is always prominent in research which involves children. In the UK, this is not an unproblematic arena. On the one hand, new research governance frameworks which aim to protect children (and others) as research participants are now in place for health-related research, and for research concerning children and welfare/social care services (DH, 2005). While these governance frameworks are intended to protect the interests of research participants as well as safeguard them from unethical research practices, they can also have the effect of controlling the research topics and questions that may be sanctioned. Given the conventional construction of children in many respects as inherently vulnerable, this may create a situation where certain subjects are 'out of bounds' if a proposal seeks to directly access children's views or accounts. The positioning of children as essentially vulnerable is reflected in the following:

> Care is needed when seeking consent from children and from vulnerable adults, such as those with mental health problems or learning difficulties. Arrangements must be made to ensure that relevant information is provided in appropriate written or pictorial form, and that the role and responsibilities of parents, carers or supporters are clearly explained and understood. (DH, 2005: 7)

On the other hand, attention has been drawn by the work of Alderson (1995) and later Alderson and Morrow (2004) to some of the ethical transgressions that are frequently unchallenged in conventional research with children and which must be addressed: in this respect a robust ethical framework is an essential facet of empirical work with children in the UK.

Research with children also often invokes questions concerning whether special methods or methodologies are needed because the research participants are children rather than adults (Punch, 2002) and debates remain.

Institutional Recognition

Clearly, then, there is a thriving research and theoretical culture in the UK in respect of a sociology of childhood, as shown by the volume of scholarship in this field. Indicators of the strength of this area are also to be found in the extent to which the sociology of childhood is substantially present

as undergraduate and postgraduate-level modules within degrees, as well as forming the basis of entire degree programmes. Modules can be found in many universities as part of mainstream sociology degrees or in applied practitioner/professional-based degrees. In addition there are some degrees in early childhood studies which include sociology of childhood perspectives. Undergraduate modules and degrees in childhood studies may also be combined with other themes such as youth studies. At postgraduate level there are a number of MSc. level degrees in childhood studies which also incorporate an emphasis on research issues, and frequently are orientated to the study of children's rights as well.

At the level of postgraduate training (PhD level), the ESRC[4] has funded a number of studentships in the field of the sociology of childhood and in other disciplinary fields where the same challenges concerning the limitations of socialization and developmental understandings of children and childhood are addressed such as in human geography, critical psychology and sociolinguistics. In addition there have been a number of self-funded and employer-funded PhDs in the same area. Overall, however, these are scattered across the UK and difficult to chronicle.

Alongside award-bearing courses, a number of academic day courses and 'stand alone' modules have been developed; these primarily have a focus on either research skills and issues or on children's rights, although the latter is more often the provenance of the voluntary/NGO sector, or health/welfare training bodies.

The incorporation of social constructionist perspectives concerning children and childhood is evident in an increasing number of vocational training courses, specifically teacher training (mainly primary school level), social work and paediatric health care. There remains, however, sometimes an uncritical presentation of developmental and socialization perspectives in vocational courses.

There are a plethora of approaches which enrich the study of children/childhood such as actor network theory (Prout, 2002), post-positivist approaches, conversation analysis (Hutchby, 2007; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998a, 1998b), as well as other developments specifically within the sociology of childhood including generational approaches (Alanen and Mayall, 2001; Mayall and Zeiher, 2003) and explorations of interdependencies and the production of childhood (Lee, 2001, 2005). Nonetheless, most courses take a social constructionist perspective as a key point of departure in the challenge to conventional sociological positionings of children and childhood.

Childhood Studies in Other Disciplinary Areas

The agenda crystallized by James and Prout in 1990 has gone on to both influence and be influenced by developments in work concerning children

in other disciplinary areas. Family sociology has engaged with childhood through the work of Julia Brannen and Margaret O'Brien (1995b, 1996), and geography, through the work of those such as Holloway and Valentine (2000), but mainstream sociological work seems to have taken little notice of these major developments. For example, the sociology of work neglects the paid and unpaid work of children and young people in the UK, other than to see it as problematic; the sociology of sexuality has little to say on children outside debates about age of consent or concerning intergenerational relationships; and work in the sociology of class and gender generally approaches children through the framework of socialization. There is an emergent literature in race and ethnicity around identity which positions children more dynamically as agentic social actors, notably in the work Ali (2003).

Disciplinary areas which draw on sociology such as health studies have also contributed to, and made use of, the thinking and knowledge in sociological childhood studies. In psychology, long the preserve of the child as an object and subject of scholarly interest, critical psychology has challenged mainstream assumptions, and engagement with the work of Vygotsky in developmental psychology has been of great significance for the sociology of childhood, opening up potential ways of reconciling the tensions between developmentalism and agency.

UK Conferences, Seminars and Networks

There is a thriving network of academics, policy-makers and practitioners in the UK, many of whom are linked through the e-based Childhood Network hosted by the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU) at the Institute of Education.[5] This acts as a dissemination point for conferences, seminars, publications, discussions and events relating to children and childhood in a social context. Conferences and day seminars have also been hosted by a number of universities across the UK. British scholars are also active in international conferences such as the Childhoods conference in Oslo in 2005, the childhood network of the European Sociological Association (ESA) (in Lisbon in 2009 for example), and the International Sociological Association (ISA) RC53 sociology of childhood research committee.

NGO Contribution

A considerable contribution is made to childhood studies through research and knowledge development that takes place in the child welfare/campaigning voluntary sector. As might be expected, the main emphasis of work in this area concerns children's rights: participative work which emphasizes presenting children's own views and perceptions – generally

represented as 'hearing the voice of the child' – and empowering children in participating in social change or innovation. Significant contributions to researching the lives of children in difficult circumstances have been made by the NSPCC, Barnardo's, Save the Children and the NCH, among others.

Sociology of Childhood: Pressures and Opportunities in the Field

There are some important creative tensions at present in the field of childhood sociology. These arise out of the institutional nature and location of the field and the wider cultural context within which research and knowledge are developed, disseminated and applied. First are questions, referred to earlier, concerning who should set the research agenda; how the imbalance of power between adults and children in the research relationship should be considered and addressed; and what ethical frameworks should govern research with children. Second is a more theoretical question concerning the extent to which account needs to be taken of processes of socialization, psychological developmental and physical growth in sociological understandings of children's lives and childhoods. Little has been done in the UK to date to reconcile questions of agency and 'being' (Qvortrup, 1994) with questions of growth, change and the processes by which one becomes a member of a community and/or culture. Finally, the sociology/social studies of childhood faces a challenge concerning its own position in the academic world – to what extent is it part of mainstream knowledge and understandings about the social world or a subject which is popular with students but at risk of being marginal to the main project and concerns of sociology?

Sociology of Childhood and the Policy Domain in the UK

Contemporary academic and empirical work relating to the social worlds of children and childhood takes place in the context of a paradox between a gradual shift towards an enactment of a rights agenda in the UK for children and what at times seems to be a national anxiety about children in Britain. With respect to both the latter and the former, the simultaneous positioning of children as 'in danger' and 'dangerous' mentioned earlier leads to particular approaches to children's rights, on the one hand, and to controlling children, on the other. The death of Victoria Climbié, killed in 2000 by her aunt and her aunt's boyfriend despite social services being alerted to concerns about her, raises again an anxiety about how the state can protect children from harm.[6] Similar anxieties are evident in other domains, for example one key concern recently has been how to protect

children from the risks posed by paedophiles, particularly through the medium of the internet,[7] while there is extensive reporting of the killing of teenagers in gang fights in cities. Less sensationally but equally important has been an increase in the attention paid to children living in poverty in the UK, with the government seeking to reduce child poverty and social exclusion via a number of measures including an increase in educational and care provision for preschool children via the 'Sure Start' programme.[8] This increases the number of children, particularly those from single-parent and working-class families, monitored by the state in their early years.

Finally, there has been a growing concern about the risks posed to children's mental health in contemporary society. While research evidence seems to indicate quite convincingly that there has been an increase in the numbers of children with mental health problems (Green et al., 2005), there has to date been a limited response to this in terms of health and social care provision directly dealing with these issues. Recent government policy in this respect has been directed towards establishing the standards of provision of mental health services for children and adolescents which health and social care/welfare providers have to meet (DH, 2004).

At the same, fears about 'out of control' or uncivilized children and young people posing significant threats to society seem to be high on governmental and media agendas. This is evident in concerns about poor educational performance and rising levels of truancy, often linked in general terms to the comparatively high teenage pregnancy rate in the UK, growing political apathy and increases in juvenile offending. Such children and young people are seen to be on the boundary of disaffection, alienation and marginality, all with implications for the state of society in the future. Generating further concern have been those children and young people already seen to be over the boundary who have become 'out of control'. This has led to the application of legal orders to control the movement and activity of teenagers who are considered to be a threat to the local community or to a particular neighbourhood. These legal orders – Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), and now Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs)[9] – are not limited in application to young people but are disproportionately used to control this social group. They can be used against individuals to impose a curfew or exclude them from being in a specified neighbourhood or prohibit a particular behaviour.

Concomitant with political and popular anxieties concerning children has been a trend in policy developments concerning children and young people which emphasizes a surveillance response as a means of both controlling and protecting children. A government consultation paper was issued as a Green Paper for discussion in 2003, 'Every Child Matters', followed by the passing of the Children Act 2004. Central to the Act are five outcomes:

Be healthy; Stay safe; Enjoy and achieve; Make a positive contribution; Achieve economic well-being. This is partly underpinned by the establishment of a mechanism for ensuring the sharing of information about individual children between networks of health and social care professions via a central electronic database on which encounters between children and professionals can be recorded. Alongside this there has been a merging of education and social welfare services organizationally to facilitate the delivery of 'joined-up' services to children.

Children still have only limited rights under UK law. For example, parents have the right to smack their child as a form of discipline. The Children Act 2004 for England and Wales contains provisions which limit the parts of a child's body that can be smacked and the force of a smack but it does not curtail the right of a parent to use smacking as a form of physical punishment. A review of this provision in 2007 did not lead to any change in it despite extensive opposition, including from the current Children's Commissioner. The Commissioner role itself was created nationally under the Children Act 2004, with separate Commissioners for Scotland and Wales. This post has a focus on listening to children and young people, but does not have a focus on children's rights. At more local levels, Local Authorities (of which there are 450 covering the UK) have established initiatives such as young people's citizenship panels, other consultation strategies and children and young people strategy units to inform local policy-making.

The cultural and policy context for children in the UK poses considerable challenges to the sociology of childhood both in terms of the contribution it should and can make (but see James and James, 2004), and the questions with which it needs to engage, as well as those it needs to raise. At present, there may be a some divergence between the policy and political agendas that are current, and scholarly agendas. Equally, a challenging question arises as to how the sociology of childhood should engage with these political agendas at a time when the capacity to be agentic as a child or young person is not seen in a very positive light in cultural terms (see also James and Jenks, 1996).

Conclusions

In taking a broad overview of the sociology of childhood in the UK it is evident that the field is established and growing in academic settings and to some extent in policy arenas as well. However, impact differs across these domains and is subject to political and cultural contexts in terms of the extent to which the challenges that the sociology of childhood poses to assumptions, presumptions and conventions concerning children and

childhood are taken as legitimate, helpful or convincing. In terms of scholarship, there have been important theoretical developments which create scope for further emphasis on theoretical thinking alongside the current empirical emphasis, and for further effort to impact on mainstream sociological thinking generally.

Notes

I am indebted to Priscilla Alderson (Institute of Education), Berry Mayall (Institute of Education), Virginia Morrow (Institute of Education), Bren Neale (University of Leeds) and Sam Punch (University of Stirling) for their help with compiling this review. However I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions.

1. Ryan (2008) has advanced a critique of the claims of the new sociology of childhood, arguing that a careful history of academic studies of children and childhood shows there to have been an intertwining of socialization and agency approaches since the 19th century rather than the social actor approach emerging only now. However, while the case he makes for this is well evidenced, questions of socialization and of 'becoming' drove social science research into children's lives through most of the 20th century.
2. Sage, which publishes *Childhood*, and Blackwell, which publishes *Children and Society*, both provide listings of top 50 cited and top 50 accessed articles. These two journals are the key locations for UK papers which draw on a sociology of childhood perspective. Here I have reviewed the top 20 articles cited in each.
3. See http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk/ (accessed 28 May 2008).
4. The Economic and Social Research Council is the main funder of PhD studentships and academic research in the UK.
5. Details about the email list network are available via the SSRU Childhood Research and Policy Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London; at: http://ioewebserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=12002&12002_0=12007 (accessed 28 May 2008).
6. See www.victoria-climbie-inquiry.org.uk/ (accessed 28 May 2008) for details of Lord Laming's inquiry report.
7. See, for example, http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/operational-policing/crime-disorder/child-protection-taskforce (accessed 28 May 2008) – the Home Office Policing website which provides pdf files of guidance on protecting children on the internet. The guidance is designed for network providers, parents and for children. A Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre was also established in 2006.
8. See www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/settings/surestartlocalprogrammes/ (accessed 28 May 2008).
9. 'Anti-social behaviour . . . [under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998] is behaviour that causes or is likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more people who are not in the same household as the perpetrator.' This includes graffiti, abusive language, excessive noise, drunken behaviour, dealing in drugs (at: www.

crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/antisocialbehaviour/antisocialbehaviour55.htm – accessed 28 May 2008). 'An Acceptable Behaviour Contract (ABC) is a written, voluntary agreement between a person who has been involved in anti-social behaviour and the police and local services whose role it is to prevent such behaviour. They involve an acknowledgement by the individual that their behaviour is having a negative impact on the community and an agreement to stop that behaviour. ABCs are useful for stopping low levels of anti-social behaviour but their flexibility means they can also be used in more serious situations' (at: www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/antisocialbehaviour/antisocialbehaviour058.htm – accessed 28 May 2008). See also www.respect.gov.uk/article.aspx?id=9066 (accessed 28 May 2008).

Appendix

Book Series

Childhood sociological series or series in which childhood sociologists frequently publish are mostly published by Falmer, later Routledge/Falmer. They produced the series 'The Future of Childhood', edited by Alan Prout.

Journals

Childhood: A Journal of Global Child Research.

Children and Society.

Sometimes childhood sociologists publish in *Sociology*, *Sociological Review* and *British Journal of Sociology*.

Formation, Study Programmes

A wide range of MSc. programmes, often with a focus on children's rights. Incorporation at BSc. level of sociology of childhood ideas generally, or specific modules.

Scientific Associations, Important Research Networks

ESA research network RN04 (Sociology of Children and Childhood); ISA.

Financing

Only competitive funding through usual sources since the ESRC 5–16 programme.

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