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# The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions

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The theme of the child as a cultural invention can be recognized in several intellectual and social occasions. Ariès' (1962) commentary on the discovery and transformation of childhood has become common knowledge; there is an agitated sense that American children are being redefined by the present times (Lasch, 1978); there is a renewed appreciation of the complexity of all our children (Keniston, 1977); and ethnographic and journalistic reports tell us of the marvelous departures from our own ways of seeing children that exist in other lands (Kessen, 1975). In simple fact, we have recently seen a shower of books on childish variety across cultures and across the hierarchies of class and race.

We could have just as readily discovered commanding evidence of the shifting nature of childhood by a close look at our own history. Consider just three messages drawn haphazardly from the American past. To the parents of the late 18th century:

The first duties of Children are in great measure mechanical: an obedient Child makes a Bow, comes and goes, speaks, or is silent, just as he is bid, before he knows any other Reason for so doing than that he is bid. (Nelson, 1753)

Or to our parents and grandparents:

The rule that parents should not play with their children may seem hard but it is without doubt a safe one. (West, 1914)

Or hear a parent of the 1970s speak of her 6-year-old:

LuAnn liked the school in California best—the only rules were no chemical additives in the food and no balling in the hallways. (Rothchild & Wolf, 1976)

And we cannot escape the implications of an unstable portrait of the child by moving from folk psychology to the professional sort. On the con-

trary, a clear-eyed study of what experts have said about the young—from Locke to Skinner, from Rousseau to Piaget, from Comenius to Erikson—will expose as bewildering a taxonomy as the one provided by preachers, parents, and poets. No other animal species has been cataloged by responsible scholars in so many wildly discrepant forms, forms that a perceptive extraterrestrial could never see as reflecting the same beast.

To be sure, most expert students of children continue to assert the truth of the positivistic dream—that we have not yet found the underlying structural simplicities that will reveal the child entire, that we have not yet cut nature at the joints—but it may be wise for us child psychologists in the International Year of the Child to peer into the abyss of the positivistic nightmare—that the child is essentially and eternally a cultural invention and that the variety of the child's definition is not the removable error of an incomplete science. For not only are American children shaped and marked by the larger cultural forces of political maneuverings, practical economics, and implicit ideological commitments (a new enough recognition), *child psychology* is itself a peculiar cultural invention that moves with the tidal sweeps of the larger culture in ways that we understand at best dimly and often ignore.

To accept the ambiguity of our task—to give up debates about the fundamental nature of the child—is not, however, a defeatist or unscientific move. Rather, when we seriously confront the proposition that we, like the children we study, are cultural inventions, we can go on to ask ques-

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The first form of this article was read as an invited address to Division 7 (Developmental Psychology) of the American Psychological Association during the annual meeting, Toronto, August 1978.

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tions about the sources of our diversity and, perhaps more tellingly, about the sources of our agreements. It is surely remarkable that against the background of disarray in our definition of the child, a number of ideas are so widely shared that few scholars question their provenance and warrant. Paradoxically, the unexamined communalities of our commitment may turn out to be more revealing than our disagreements. Within the compass of the next several pages, I point toward disagreements that were present at the beginnings of systematic child study, and then turn in more detail to the pervasive and shared themes of American childhood in our time, themes that may require a more critical review than we have usually given them.

### *Present at the Birth*

When child psychology was born, in a longish parturition that ran roughly from Hall's first questionnaire studies of 1880 (Hall, 1883) to Binet's test of construction of 1905 (Binet & Simon, 1916), there were five determining spirits present. Four of them are familiar to us all; the fifth and least visible spirit may turn out to be the most significant. One of the familiars was in the line of Locke and Bain, and it appeared later for Americans as John Broadus Watson; the line has, then and now, represented behavior, restraint, clarity, simplicity, and good news. Paired in philosophical and theoretical opposition was the spirit that derived from Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Freud, the line that represented mind, impulse, ambiguity, complexity, and bad news. The great duel between the two lines has occupied students of children for just under 300 years.

The third magus at the beginning was the most fully American; William James can stand as the representative of the psychologists whose central concern was with sensation, perception, language, thought, and will—the solid, sensible folk who hid out in the years between the World Wars but who have returned in glory. It is of at least passing interest to note that the cognitivists participated lightly in the early development of child study; James and, even more, Munsterberg and, past all measure, Titchener found results from the study of children too messy for the precision they wanted from their methods.

The godfather of child psychology, the solidest spirit of them all, was Charles Darwin, foreshadowing his advocates and his exaggerators. His con-

temporary stand-in, G. Stanley Hall, was the first in a long and continuing line that has preached from animal analogues, has called attention to the biological in the child, and has produced a remarkably diverse progeny that includes Galton, Gesell, and the ethologists.

I rehearse (and oversimplify) the story of our professional beginnings to call attention to how persistent the lines have been, how little they have interpenetrated and modified one another, and how much their contributions to our understanding of the child rest on a network of largely implicit and undefended assumptions about the basis of human knowledge, social structures, and ethical ascriptions. The lines of the onlooking spirits are themselves historical and cultural constructions that grew, in ways that have rarely been studied analytically or biographically, from the matrix of the larger contemporaneous culture.<sup>1</sup>

And so to the fifth circumnatale spirit, the one that knew no technical psychology. In the middle 50 years of the 19th century, the years that prepared the United States for child psychology, dramatic and persistent changes took place in American society. I could sing the familiar litany of urbanization, industrialization, the arrival of the first millions of European immigrants (another strand of diversity among children that requires a closer look). We know that the Civil War transformed the lives of most American families, white and black (although we still know remarkably little about the daily lives of children during and after the war). The United States developed, and *developed* is the word of choice, from an isolated agricultural dependency to an aggressive and powerful state. Technology and science joined the industrial entrepreneurs to persuade the new Americans, from abroad and from the farm, that poverty was an escapable condition if one worked hard enough and was aggressively independent. But there were other changes that bore more immediately on the lives of American children; let me, as an example of cultural influences on children and child psychology rather than

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<sup>1</sup> It has become a cliché to speak of psychoanalysis as an outgrowth of Jewish intellectual culture in turn-of-the-century Vienna (a shallow summary at best), but no corresponding common saying exists for, say, Watson's growing up in postwar Carolina, or Hall's curious combination of *odium sexicum* and *odium theologicum* in Victorian times, or Binet's history as an apostate continental associationist.

as a worked-through demonstration of my thesis, extract three interwoven strands of the changes that touched children.

The first, and the earliest, was the evolving separation of the domain of work from the domain of home. When women left or were excluded from the industrial work force in the 1830s and 1840s, the boundary marked by the walls of home became less and less penetrable. First for the white, the urban, the middle-class, the northeastern American, but enlisting other parts of the community as time went on, work (or *real work* as contrasted with *homework*, the activity of women and schoolchildren) was carried on in specialized spaces by specialized people, and home became the place where one (i.e., men) did not work (Cott, 1977; Lasch, 1977).

The second and entailed change was the radical separation of what a man was from what a woman was. Colonial and early Federal society, like all other cultures, had stable and divergent visions of the proper sphere of male and female. But in the half century under our present consideration, something of a moral metamorphosis occurred in the United States (and in large measure, in England, too) and one of modern history's most eccentric arrangements of human beings was put in place. The public world of men was seen as ugly, aggressive, corrupting, chaotic, sinful (not an altogether regretted characteristic), and irreligious. The increasingly private world of women was, in inevitable antithesis, sweet, chaste, calm, cultured, loving, protective, and godly. The muscular Christianity of the Mathers and Edwardses became the feminized Christianity of matrons and pastors; the caretaking of culture became the task of women's groups (Douglas, 1978). So dramatic a statement of the contrast is hardly an exaggeration of the facts. And the full story remains to be told; historians of medical practice, for example, are just beginning to reveal the systematic attempt to desex American and British women in the 19th century with methods that ranged from sermons to surgery (Barker-Benfield, 1977).

The third change in American life that set the cultural context for child psychology followed on the first two. Children continued to be cared for by women at home, and in consequence, they took on the coloration of mother, hearth, and heaven. The early American child, who was told, "consider that you may perish as young as you are; there are small Chips as well as great Logs, in the

Fire of Hell" (18th-century primer, quoted by Johnson, 1904), became Little Eva, Huckleberry Finn, and eventually Peter Pan. The sentimentalization of children—caught for tombstones and psychology books best by Wordsworth's "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!"—had implications for family structure, education, and the definition of the child in expert writings that we have not yet, nearing the end of the 20th century, fully understood or confronted.

Thus it was that American child psychology began not only under the conflicting attention of Locke, Rousseau, James, and Darwin, but with the progressivist, sexist, and sentimental expectation of the larger culture standing by.

### *The Common Themes of American Child Psychology*

Are we now free of our origins? It would be both unhistorical and undevelopmental to believe so, in spite of all we have learned about research and about children over the last 100 years. The positivist promise of pure objectivity and eternal science has been withdrawn. Therefore, it may be methodologically therapeutic to glance, however briefly, at several common themes of our field that seem dependent, in the usually complicated way of human history, on the story I have sketched thus far. All of the themes may be ready for a thoughtful new evaluation.

#### THE COMMITMENT TO SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The notable success of the physical sciences in the 19th century, the elation that followed on the Darwinian revolution, and the culture's high hopes for a technological utopia joined at the end of the 19th century to define child psychology as scientific and rational. The vagaries of casual stories about children, the eccentricities of folk knowledge, and the superstitions of grandmothers were all to be cleansed by the mighty brush of scientific method (Jacoby, 1914; Watson, 1928). The conviction that we are scientists remains one of the heart beliefs of child psychology, and in its humane and sensible forms, the commitment to a systematic analytic examination of the lives of children and their worlds is still the unique and continuing contribution of child psychology to American culture.

But some less obvious and perhaps less defensible consequences of the rational scientific

commitment were pulled along into child psychology by the high hopes of its founders. Perhaps the one that we have had the most difficulty in handling as a profession is the implication *in all theories of the child* that lay folk, particularly parents, are in need of expert guidance. Critical examination and study of parental practices and child behavior almost inevitably slipped subtly over to advice about parental practices and child behavior. The scientific statement became an ethical imperative, the descriptive account became normative. And along the way, there have been unsettling occasions in which scraps of knowledge, gathered by whatever procedures were held to be proper science at the time, were given inordinate weight against poor old defenseless folk knowledge. Rigorously scheduled feedings of infants, separation of new mothers from their babies, and Mrs. West's injunction against playing with children can stand as examples of scientism that are far enough away not to embarrass us enlightened moderns.

More, I risk the guess that the sentimental view of the child that prevailed at the beginnings of child psychology—a vision which, let it be said, made possible humane and appropriate reforms in the treatment of children—was strongly influential in what can only be called a salvationist view of children. Child psychologists, again whatever their theoretical stripe, have taken the Romantic notion of childish innocence and openness a long way toward the several forms of “If only we could make matters right with the child, the world would be a better place.” The child became the carrier of political progressivism and the optimism of reformers. From agitation for child labor reform in the 1890s to Head Start, American children have been saviors of the nation. The romantic inheritance of purity and perfectibility may, in fact, have misled us about the proper unit of developmental study and about the major forces influencing human growth and change. I will return to the consideration of our unit of study shortly.

There has often also been a socially hierarchical message in our scientific–normative interactions with the larger culture. Tolstoy said that there is no proletarian literature; there has been no proletarian child psychology either, and the ethically imperative forms of child psychology, our messages to practice, have ranged from pleas for equitable treatment of all children to recipes for forced assimilation to the expected forms of child behavior. Once a descriptive norm has been es-

tablished, it is an antique cultural principle to urge adherence to it.

Finally, for some eras of child study, there has been an enthusiastic anticipation that all problems are reducible by the science of the moment; intellectual technology can succeed (and imitate) the 19th century's commercial and industrial technology in the progressive and ultimate betterment of humankind. The optimism of the founders of child study and their immediate successors is dimmer today—“The sky's the limit” may be replaced by “You win a few, you lose a few”—and serious questions have been posed even for the basic assumptions underlying the scientific analysis of human behavior (Barrett, 1978). Child psychology may soon have to face anew the question of whether or not a scientific account of human development can be given without bringing in its wake the false claims of scientism and the arrogance of an ethic based on current findings.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTHERS, EARLY EXPERIENCE, AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Strangely at odds with the theme of rational scientific inquiry has been the persistence of the commitment to home and mother in otherwise varying portraits of the child. Some child psychologists have been less than laudatory about the effectiveness of particular mothering procedures (Watson dedicated his directive book on child rearing to the first mother who raises a child successfully), but critics and praisers alike have rarely doubted the basic principle that children need home and mother to grow as they should grow (again, the normative injunction enters). I do not mean to dispute the assumption here; I want only to suggest its connection with the mid-19th-century ideology that long preceded systematic child psychology and to point out several riders on the assumption that have, in the past, been less vividly visible.

Two riders on the home-and-mother position are under active debate and study nowadays—the irrelevance of fathers and the critical role of early experience. The cases represent with the starkness of a line drawing the influence of contemporaneous cultural forces on the definition of psychology's child. It would be difficult to defend the proposition that the recent interest in the place of fathers or the possibilities of out-of-home child rearing grew either from a new theory of development or from striking new empirical discoveries.

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Rather, for reasons too elaborate to explore here, fewer and fewer American women have been willing or able to devote all of their work time to the rearing of children. It will be instructive to see how much the tasks assigned fathers and day-care centers reflect the old ascriptions to essential maternity. Psychology follows culture, but often at a discreet distance.

The blending of new social requirements into old ideology is precisely demonstrated by the incorporation of fathers and day-care workers into the premise that what happens to the child in the first hours, weeks, months of life holds an especially determining position in human development. Proclaimed on epistemological grounds by Locke, gathered into the American ethos in part because it so well fit the perfectionist argument, elevated to scientific status by evolutionary theory, the doctrine of the primacy of early experience has been an uncontested part of American culture and American child psychology throughout the history of both. Only in the last several years has the premise been called seriously into question (Kagan, Kearsley, & Zelazo, 1978) and, even then, at a time when ever more extravagant claims are being made about the practical necessity of safeguarding the child's first hours (Klaus & Kennell, 1976).

The assumption of essential maternity and the assumption of the determining role of early experience join to support yet another underdebated postulate of child psychology. If something goes wrong in the course of a child's development, it is the primary responsibility of the mother (or whoever behaves as mother), and once more in echo of the salvationist view, if a social problem is not repaired by modification of the child's first years, the problem is beyond repair. The working of the postulate has produced ways of blaming mothers that appear in all theoretical shapes and, more generally, ways of blaming other victims of social injustice because they are not readily transformed by the ministrations of the professionals (Ryan, 1971).

The tendency to assign personal responsibility for the successes and failures of development is an amalgam of the positivistic search for causes, of the older Western tradition of personal moral responsibility, and of the conviction that personal mastery and consequent personal responsibility are first among the goals of child rearing. It is difficult to imagine an American child psychology without a core commitment to the proposition that

*someone* is responsible for what happens in the course of development.

#### THE BELIEF IN THE INDIVIDUAL AND SELF-CONTAINED CHILD

Hovering over each of the traditional beliefs mentioned thus far is the most general and, in my view, the most fundamental entanglement of technical child psychology with the implicit commitments of American culture. The child—like the Pilgrim, the cowboy, and the detective on television—is invariably seen as a free-standing isolable being who moves through development as a self-contained and complete individual. Other similarly self-contained people—parents and teachers—may influence the development of children, to be sure, but the proper unit of cultural analysis and the proper unit of developmental study is the child alone. The ubiquity of such radical individualism in our lives makes the consideration of alternative images of childhood extraordinarily difficult. We have never taken fully seriously the notion that development is, in large measure, a social construction, the child a modulated and modulating component in a shifting network of influences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The seminal thinkers about children over the past century have, in fact, been almost undeviating in their postulation of the child as container of self and of psychology. Impulses are in the child; traits are in the child; thoughts are in the child; attachments are in the child. In short, almost every major theory of development accepts the premises of individualism and takes the child as the basic unit of study, with all consequences the choice has for decisions that range from selecting a method of research to selecting a therapeutic maneuver.

Uniform agreement on the isolable child as the proper measure of development led to the research paradigms that have dominated child psychology during most of its history; basically, we have observed those parts of development that the child could readily transport to our laboratories or to our testing sites. The use of isolated preparations for the study of development has, happily, been productive of remarkable advances in our knowledge of children, but with the usual cost of uniform dogma, the commitment to the isolable child has occasionally led child psychology into exaggerations and significant omissions.

There are signals now aloft that the dogma of individualism, both in its claim of lifelong stability



of personality and in its claim that human action can be understood without consideration of context or history, is under severe stress. The story that Vygotsky (1978) told 50 years ago, the story of the embeddedness of the developing mind in society, has finally been heard. The image of the child as an epigenetic and continuous creation of social and biological contexts is far more ambiguous and more difficult to paint than the relative simplicities of the traditional and culturally justified self-contained child; it may also illuminate our understanding of children and of our science.

### *The Present Moment*

The cultural epigenesis that created the American child of the late 20th century continues, and so does the epigenesis that created child psychology. Necessarily, there is no end of the road, no equilibrium. Rather, the transformations of the past 100 years in both children and child psychology are a startling reminder of the eternal call on us to be scrupulous observers and imaginative researchers; they may also serve to force our self-critical recognition that we are both creators and performers in the cultural invention of the child.

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