Understanding Childhood: A literature Review

Çocukluğu Anlamak: Bir Literatür Taraması

Kelechi Victoria Udeh[1] , Ntite Orji Kalu[2]

1. University of Derby, Faculty of Education, MA Education MX3AU, Derby, United Kingdom.
E-mail: Kelechiemeribe2@gmail.com
2. Masaryk University, Faculty of Education, School Education, Brno, Czech Republic. E-mail: 454586@mail.muni.cz

Abstract

A child's identity can be explained by certain characteristics such as age, size, and physical developments and so on. Children are critical for the continuance of the human society. The journey through childhood determines individual personalities and the ability to handle the demands and responsibilities of adulthood. Every society is and should be interested in the well-being of the child. The concept of childhood consists of all the experiences happening within this period of life. The vulnerability of the child has not only prompted interest in the person of the child, but also makes it necessary to legalize laws and rights, enforce rules to protect and ensure its well-being by governing bodies, parents, cultural practices and so on. Different approaches and schools of thoughts have debated the main determinants and components of childhood, and the resulting behaviors in later life. This paper is based on the need to understand the background of human behavior which is ultimately traced to childhood components and experiences. This paper is theoretical in nature and has reviewed scholarly articles on the genetics, cultural, and anthropological components of childhood, carefully selected from credible and accredited databases. This paper also discusses, objectively, the criticisms facing these approaches to childhood, such as the child's personality trait, people's perception of who a child is, and the use of media to facilitate those perceptions. Lastly, the paper establishes the individualism of a child regardless of external factors, as a main contributor to the personality and behavior of the child, and later as an adult member of the society, making a huge impact on the success of that society.

Keywords: Childhood, Behavior, Personality, Development, Environment.

Öz

Bir çocuğun kim olduğu yaşı, fiziksel gelişimi gibi unsurların temelinde açıklanabilir. Çocuklar insanlığın devamı için kritik öneme sahiptir. Çocukluk yolculuğu, bireysel kişilikleri ve yetişkinliğin talep ve sorumluluklarıyla başa çıkma becerisini belirler. Her toplum çocuğun refahı ile ilgilenir ve ilgilenmelidir. Çocukluk kavramı, yaşamın bu döneminde gerçekleşen tüm deneyimlerden oluşur. Çocuğun savunmasızlığı, sadece çocuğun kişiliğine ilgi duyulmasına neden olmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda yasaların ve hakların yasallaştırılmasını, yönetim organları, ebeveynler, kültürel uygulamalar vb. tarafından çocuğun refahını korumak ve sağlamak için kuralların uygulanmasını gerekli kılmıştır. Farklı yaklaşımlar ve düşünce ekolleri, çocukluğun temel belirleyicileri ve bileşenleri ile sonraki yaşamda ortaya çıkan davranışları tartışmıştır. Bu çalışma, insan davranışının arka planını anlama ihtiyacına dayanmaktadır ve bu da nihayetinde çocukluk bileşenleri ve deneyimlerine dayanmaktadır. Bu çalışma teorik bir nitelik taşımaktadır ve çocukluğun genetik, kültürel ve antropolojik bileşenleri üzerine güvenilir ve akredite veri tabanlarından özenle seçilmiş bilimsel makaleleri gözden geçirmiştir. Bu makale aynı zamanda, çocuğun kişilik özelliği, insanların çocuğun kim olduğuna dair algısı ve bu algıları kolaylaştırmak için medyanın kullanımı gibi çocukluğa dair bu yaklaşımlara yöneltilen eleştirileri de objektif bir şekilde tartışmaktadır. Son olarak, makale, çocuğun kişiliğine ve davranışlarına temel katkıda bulunan ve daha sonra toplumun yetişkin bir üyesi olarak o toplumun başarısı üzerinde büyük bir etki yaratan dış faktörlerden bağımsız olarak bir çocuğun bireyselliğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çocukluk, Davranış, Kişilik, Gelişim, Çevre.

Introduction

The early years of life are critical, as they set the tone for future life endeavors. Life skills acquired and developed within this period, such as cognitive and social-emotional skills have long-lasting impressions on the later outcomes of life. Understanding childhood is essential for the well-being of the child as research have shown that children who grow up in loving and understanding environments are better adjusted in life and happier, fostering their well-being, according to an OECD report in 2020.

The nature of children or childhood has been a contested concept in the domain of child development research, given that the people's understanding of childhood changes alongside the development and changes of society and the social paradigm. While some scholars maintained that children are the product of the genetic variation of parents, others believed that social interaction and experience constitute the nature of childhood. Some other researchers have also argued that children's behaviour is innate and is driven by developmental demands that are natural and not dependent on DNA, social interaction, environmental influences, or experience. For instance, it has been reported that children inherit behaviours, physical characteristics, political attributes, religious inclinations, personality traits, vocational affiliations, and detestation from genes (Bouchard, 2004; Nelkin & Lindee, 1995). Those who uphold genetic explanations for childhood adopt the concept of genetic essentialism, thus attributing children's behaviour to natural factors. Theorists like Erik Erikson, John B. Watson, and B.F. Skinner believed that childhood is a function of environmental influence and social interaction (Cherry, 2020). Those with this view tend to support the idea that children are products of the environment and upbringing (McCormack, 2019). Similarly, Sigmund Freud proposed that childhood personality development is innate and not influenced by the environment or social interaction and these inherent traits occur during five psychosexual stages (Cherry, 2022). This implies that there is a quest to understand childhood and children's behaviour which has generated multidimensional thinking among scholars.

Apart from this genetic-environment-social interaction contention of children's dynamism, the nature of childhood has also been argued from the context of what constitutes childhood. From an anthropological perspective, childhood is the creation of culture as children are influenced by parents, adults, specific education, and cultural practices of where they grow. In this case, children are seen as young adults molded by the cultural setting of their locale (Montgomery, 2008; Stevenson & Worthman, 2014). Similarly, the sociological perspective of childhood sees childhood as a social construction (Norozi & Moen, 2016) which upholds the idea that childhood is not part of natural human development but is influenced by the structural elements of society a child lives in and the background of the child. This perspective is based on the notion that childhood is not universal as children come from different geographical locations in the world and may have different experiences, thus, childhood is socially constructed. Also, childhood is viewed from the historical perspective (e.g. Aries, 1962) as an evolutional trend of meaning attached to children as the world evolved. Thus, Aries believes that a proper understanding of childhood involves referring to history in society. The nature of childhood is also seen from a cultural perspective (Schaffer, 2004). In this context, the nature of childhood varies from culture to culture, implying that childhood in the United States is different from childhood in African settings.

Similarly, there is a general argument on the nature of childhood based on responsibility for children's upbringing. From the functionalist dimension, it has been argued that children's upbringing is the primary role of a nuclear family which was the responsibility of socializing the children and preparing them for life in the wider society. (Murdock, 1949; Parsons, 1954). Marxists argued with functionalists and maintained the nuclear family's ideological function in preparing children for society as it pushes those values that are needed to reproduce a capitalist society (Charney, et al., 1976; Lee, 2015). It is obvious that there is no agreement on the nature of childhood or what may be a universal standard for explaining childhood. In the recent development in childhood research, much emphasis seems to be placed on the sociological perspective of understanding childhood as a social construct. The thrust of this essay is to contest the sociological perspective of childhood as social construction for a better understanding of childhood to promote the well-being of children within said social construct.

Method

The methodology adopted for this review is the descriptive review method, which, according to Paré et al. (2015) is used when trying to determine the extent to which gathered information reveals interpretable pattern or trend with respect to pre-existing propositions, theories, methodologies, or findings. A descriptive review in this study was hence used to explain the trends in the perception of childhood. Verified and credible sources were used to gather the literature reviewed in this paper.

Definition

Different explanations have been given by various scholars and groups on who a child is. From the genetic criterion, a child has been viewed differently. For instance, a child is seen from physical size and development (Rogers, 2003). In general terms, childhood means the early stages of human life irrespective of the culture and society. A child is perceived as a body and mind that is unable to do or achieve anything (James & James, 2008). This means that childhood is when people are completely dependent on other people for everything including decision-making. Under the genetic criterion also, a child is defined as the "next generation" (Alanen, 2001). What a child is, can be explained using the adulthood criterion viewing childhood as a journey to adulthood. For example, Qvortrup (2002) maintained that in any developed society, a child belongs to a group with a position in society that is anchored on an organized plan of care and education. It is in line with the definition that James, Jenks,& Prout (1998) stated that the nature of a child is understood to be a phase of imperfection, where adulthood is seen as the endpoint as the child grows and is no longer dependent but becomes independent and from imperfection turns to perfection. It means that a child is to be guided to the point of perfection which is adulthood. In the opinion of Rogers, 2003 (cited in Woodhead & Montgomery, 2013), a child is a person who is perpetually lacking and needs to be cared for, implying that a child has nothing valuable for independence unless given by another person. Generally, in the adulthood criterion, a child is a helpless imperfect person that requires guidance to adulthood which is believed to be the point of perfection and freedom from childhood.

Also, the legal criterion is used to define what a child is by law. The global definition of what is termed as a child was given by The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which defined a child as any individual who is below eighteen years of age (UNICEF; OHCHR). This suggests a globally agreed definition of a child (Norozi & Moen, 2016). Furthermore, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) defined a child as a person between the age ranges of 0-18 years(UNICEF; OHCHR). The age criterion presents a child as infants, toddlers, youth, adolescents, tweenagers, minors, and teenagers. This follows the age criterion which is used to identify a child given certain age limits. By age standards, a person is regarded as a child from birth to puberty. The age and legal standards of a child are being used internationally to determine other dimensions of childhood such as the right to education and child labour. In summary, from all criteria, a child is a person who must depend on others and be guided by adults until they get to adulthood at 18 years.

The United Nations in conjunction with all the countries who promised to protect children's rights, during the convention of 1989, agreed on several rights that will ensure their well-being and dignity within the society, without any prejudice.These rights range from rights to life, thoughts, association and expression, to the participation of parents and states taking all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of abuse, violence, negligence, maltreatment and exploitation. An OECD report of 2021 supports that the well-being of children is strongly connected to their environment. A comprehensive understanding into the nature and peculiarities of the child, including the changing nature of what is required to ensure their well-being is most important.

Approach to Childhood : Social Construction

A brief history into childhood suggests that the word was invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to explain a certain stage of life that required love and protection from moral and physical

hazards, that were not considered necessary before this time (Bellingham, 1988). The previous century was known as the "child-saving" era, as it was the period when the childhood stage gained some recognition (Kerr, 2022). According to Kerr (2022), from the eighteenth century, children were seen as active agents in their own development, and the role of adults to respond to the child's individual needs at every stage of development. This era also ushered in laws that were to protect the child from the common issues of that era, such as child labour, and promote a healthy and more nuturing relationship between children and their parents. After this period, the state also become involved in the well-being of children, to protect them when the family has failed in its responsibilities. By the 20th century, the child was considered to be good, born with potentials that can be nutured. Childhood became a stage of life that was protected by laws and rights, with consequences to defaulters. The well-being and happiness of the child

A remarkable transition has occurred in the perception of childhood over time, giving rise to different schools of thought on the development and stages of childhood and how best to nurture the child. Different scholars have expressed and philosophized different approaches deemed fit to understand childhood. To understand childhood, scholars have approached it from various stand points; from the view of biology, sociology, history, anthropology, geography, and so on. The sociological theorists of childhood have evolved from perceiving the child as a mere receipient of social processes to postulating child-centered theories that pay attention to the child's perspective and needs (Holland, 2008).

One of the key sociological perspectives or approaches to childhood is social construction. With consideration to geographical location, the sociological approach to childhood believes that the social and cultural contexts in which the child is located determine the social world of the child (Holland, 2008). James & James (2008) stated that social construction refers to the theoretical sociological stance that assesses how real-life experiences turn out in everyday life through people's collaborations and discussions. These scholars further explained that social construction explores understanding the cultural context of what happens in society and, knowledge is constructed based on those perceptions of the societal culture. In this sense, childhood is the byproduct of the interaction between culture, social interaction, and knowledge generated from interaction with the environment. Modern social constructivists argue that children are innocent and fragile and can be easily destroyed, thus they need special attention, nurture, and protection (Pollock, 2017). This implies that childhood is a world created for children by adults in society. In this direction, Postman (1985) argued that children imitate the behaviour of adults because they are exposed to adults' world of television and that, lack of adult supervision exposes children to learning that is inappropriate for their age. Palmer (2015; 2018), in his concept of "toxic childhood" contended that the modern world is damaging children by exposing them to all kinds of media that help poison their minds.

Nicholson (2012) contended that schools were meant to physically shape the children through play and schooling, but schools have cut back on playtime with the impression that supervised outside play is inimical to children, therefore, parents keep their kids in bedrooms equipped with all the devices needed to live in a virtual world thereby exposing them to learning beyond their level. Pugh (2002) argued that rich parents who do not have5 time to guide their children provide consumption as compensation. This can take the form of trips to sporting events, designer clothing, Halloween costumes, and even a weekly allowance, to buy toys and other things, all in a bid to navigate their pathways of life. Murray (2005) in his concept of the commodification of childhood, explained how children are linked with all kinds of markets and according to him, the markets invade childhood and are oppressed hence parents are forced to purchase certain kinds of toys which are believed to help build the character of their children. These scholars are of the opinion that childhood is highly influenced by media. Johansson (1987) reported the view of Philippe Ariès who argued that childhood is highly influenced by media as children will always conceive what they want to be based on their exposure. Researchers have argued that princess culture has taken hold of girls, which has presented an opportunity for marketers to sell them various products

to portray being feminine (Miskec, 2014; Orenstein, 2006).

It has also been reported that childhood is seriously influenced by consumerism (Ghosh & Gaur, 2020). Hill (2011) noted that young people are the targets of markets today as they are presented with advertisement messages encouraging consumer behaviour in the urge to satisfy their self-image. This highlights the concept of consumerism where industries are targeting children to sell all kinds of media artifacts that is believed to shape the way children behave and what they want in their daily lives. Generally, it has been established in different childhood studies that the structure of childhood is gradually fading because of consumerism which has led to children suffering from severe psychological and physical deficits (Eckersley, 2011; Hill, 2011; Schor, 2004). Consumerism or materialism is considered social evil as children pay more attention to conspicuous consumption or beliefs to imply too much consumption of material goods makes them happy (Eckersley (2006). The evil of consumerism is associated with the evil of media as children spend more on the internet in search of materials to buy. Hill (2011) contended that these children are becoming victims of consumerism and getting lost in search of happiness and end up accumulating stress and dissatisfaction for themselves which affect their thinking and behaviour.

However, the modern view of childhood tends to portray that childhood is in crisis. The crisis in childhood is attributed to contemporary parenting practices (Kehily, 2010). The author noted that the recent meanings of childhood are shaped by the connections between the present and past concepts of childhood. Pollock (2017) argued that there used to be universal features of childhood: infants were depending on others for their physical care, children needed emotional attachment to survive, children played, children around the ages of six to eight years were treated differently from younger ones, and infants were treated indulgently, and puberty changes were noticed. This author also argued that before now, there was a universal concern in society to teach children moral, ethical, cultural, and social practices that would help them adjust perfectly to adulthood. Social constructivists are of the view that there are certain factors that have a bearing on the experience of childhood and how people think about children's needs such as representations by media, children's status in the home, provision of education, and healthcare education. Similarly, following the stance of social construction, the crisis in childhood can also be associated with cultural diversity and the dynamics of social grouping. Children are exposed to different cultural settings and practices in different parts of the world. For instance, African children who migrate to the United States appears to face childhood crisis due to cultural differences and group dynamics of their new settlement. Research has shown that differences in educational opportunities, health conditions, cultural practices, social interactions, and social grouping account for a crisis in childhood (Leseman, 2002; Morrow, 1999).

However, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau in their study concerning modern social contract theory argued that the nature of humans is solitary, it is healthy, happy, innocent, and pure, and emerging societies are formed as soon as they begin to live together as families and neighbours. Jean Jacques Rousseau also believed that rise to negative emotions and disastrous passions such as pride, envy, and jealousy which in turn breed inequity and human vice results from emerging societies (Gianoutsos, 2006; Vernes, 2006). John Lock believed that children are born with minds as blank slates, however, they have natural preferences which include personalities, likes, and dislikes, and educating the children means molding their minds and natural readiness. It means that children have innate personalities that must be developed by society. From John Locke's perspective, parents have the duty to observe their children, and to understand their likes and dislikes. It means that instead of detecting what children should do or the way they should behave, parents or guardians must help the children develop their innate personality characteristics. Against the social construction notion that children are innocent and fragile and can be easily destroyed, thus they need special attention, nurture, and protection (Pollock, 2017). John Locke argued that as parents treat their children as intelligent and appreciate their inherent dispositions to emerge in this direction, they are better prepared to guide their children towards rational reasoning which will help them take rational decisions in their later lives.

Contrary to Locke's view of parenting as basic ingredient of childhood, Rousseau argued that children do

not need any other guide but their own intellect by the time they have received education. Jean Jacques Rousseau contended that children could attain freedom and independent mind through learning from nature. The theorist argued that education from nature is not dependent on man's actions, rather a man's education depends only to a limited extent on things, and what is within his control. Rousseau argued that nature, which human beings have no control over, must determine the course of the upbringing of children (Gianoutsos, 2006). These two social contract theorists uphold the doctrine of the innate personality of children but differ in who is responsible for helping them to maximize their innate characteristics. While Locke subscribed to parental observation and guidance, Rousseau believed in nature guidance. However, they agreed that children's inclinations and dispositions should be allowed to guide their interests and actions.

Criticisms

Aruguably, since the well-being of the child is of uttermost importance, certain criticisms have insued against the theory of social construction by different scholars. Firstly, the social construction theory holds that children are the product created by society and they are what society says they are. This position has been contested by John Locke, Jean Jacques and Rousseau in their study on social contract theory. They argued that even though children are born as blank slates, they have inherent personalities. This implies that the behaviours of children are not entirely a function of their interactions with people, cultural practices, or social media. This argument seems to be true. For instance, when children select the kind of food they eat at birth, the question arises, is this because of interaction with others, or the trait is innate in them? The argument here is that if all that children do are determined by society, how come children sometimes have a different preference for something when they have interacted with people? This implies that childhood can be influenced by both innate personalities as well as societal influence. Social construction also holds that children are innocent and fragile and can be easily destroyed, thus they need special attention, nurture, and protection (Pollock, 2017). The view of Rousseau and Lock contested this notion and maintained that children are rational animals and should be treated as such for their hidden potential to be unveiled. As against the social constructionist who believe that children are fragile and thus cannot take think and take actions on their own, Rousseau and Locke maintained that children could think if they are guided to think and act.

The argument against social construction hinges on the proposition that only society determines childhood and that children are what adults want them to be. However, the contention of Rousseau and Lock is that even though children are influenced by their environmental factors such as parents and educators, they have natural inclinations and yearnings that are natural and given by nature. The argument also pointed out that society cannot predict all that children can do at a particular time because children have their own natural interests hidden inside them that can only manifest when the environment is conducive. The position of Rousseau and Lock agrees with Gianoutsos (2006) who noted that because children have a natural love for freedom, a desire to be treated rationally, and are curious about the adult world, it is not farfetched that they are aware of reward and praise. This implies that instead of trying to modify and reshape childhood, society should maintain conditions that would help children to maximize their personalities positively. It means that instead of trying to restructure children's behaviour using media, they can be closely monitored to understand their interests and use such knowledge to expose them to media presentations that will help them build their personality profile on their own while being guided by adults.

The social construction of childhood has been critiqued by Ba' (2021) who argued that this new approach of childhood presents children as simply the passive receivers of socialization. According to these critics, the main problem lies in simultaneously requiring, strong subjectivities on the part of children on one hand, and the compelling role of social structures to explain the lack of freedom that has to be maintained for childhood's possible liberation. They argued that the proposition that childhood is utterly dependent on society and culture erodes children's freedom and renders them passive in the

process of their development. Thus, they contended that social construction is established on neo-liberal views which are absorbed from specific social associations. They argued that children are passive, they can think, reason, and apply their knowledge in situations to take decisions. This tends to affirm the argument of Rousseau and Lock who believed that children have innate personalities and just need a proper environment to maximize their hidden potential.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Childhood is critical to the success of every society, hence the inquiry and study towards understanding the principles that promote their well-being. This is because when children are properly brought up in society, social problems associated with youths' restiveness are minimized and social progress is maximized. Many theoretical perspectives of childhood such as anthropological, historical, cultural, and sociological, have been theorized to explain the nature of childhood. All these perspectives present childhood as a period when children need help and guidance from adults to develop into perfect adulthood. The social construction of childhood is a new approach in the sociology of child development or understanding of childhood. Though this paradigm shift in childhood theorizing tends to be widely accepted, it has been criticized for its weakness in the areas of assuming that children are passive individuals who cannot think and take actions without interacting with people and culture, and the assumption that children do not have innate personalities.

Understanding childhood follows and explain how people's perception of the child has changed over time, given that our societies keep evolving. Learning about childhood therefore is essential to help parents and educationists understand the trends in childhood, to provide the relevant materials that support the development of the child, catering to their well-being, to meet the dynamic nature and demand of the society. Understanding childhood ensures that the child's well-being is considered, thereby enabling them to grow and flourish in a safe, secure, healthy and nurturing environment, that meets their developmental needs.

In conclusion, there is no universally accepted approach to childhood, however major deductions from these arguments are that: children have innate personalities hidden in them, and can only be developed when the appropriate environment is created for them; society parents, and other adults should always allow children to manifest their interest for proper guidance and not try to coerce them to exhibit a specific culture of society through media representation; the notion that children are rational animals and need freedom should be upheld by society as this could promote the structuring of the social environment in such a way that children can freely apply their rationality in decision-making concerning their needs; and finally, the new social construction of childhood could be modified to accommodate the notion that children, in addition to social interaction and societal culture, have hidden personalities to also influence their childhood in society.

Declarations

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