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The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies

Childism

Childism is sometimes defined as viewing the social from the perspective of childhood. This includes taking children's experiences and perspectives seriously, but it also goes beyond. In this context, viewing implies conducting objective analyses of children's positions in society and in social theory with a view to carrying out theoretical reconstruction relating to criticism of, and claims about, social justice and recognition for children. While childism includes both a political and a scientific dimension that are interrelated but not identical. This entry offers a definition of childism, exploring its central claims and its limitations.

Childism Defined

Politically, childism puts forward the radical notion that despite differences in age, body size, brain development, experience, and power, children and adults are inherently of equal worth, and children's perspectives and experiences should thus be considered on the same footing as those of adults. Thus, the political dimension of childism may also be defined in terms of advocacy for the recognition of children and their rights. However, the concept has also been used in the opposite sense, for instance in the work of the American psychotherapist, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, to address discrimination against children, a position that is usually defined as adultism.

Full recognition of children's democratic rights involves a range of ethical and methodological challenges. John Wall has argued that the main aim is to ensure that children's experiences and interests make a difference to how power is exercised. Only then is democracy truly representative, seen from a childist perspective. One tool that could promote that agenda would be to give everybody, regardless of age, the right to a vote, as politicians are typically more attentive and loyal to the interest of citizens with voting power. Children's right to vote could take the form of the right to choose either to vote oneself or to let another person vote on one's behalf. Of course, a baby cannot make such a choice, but this could be solved by giving the baby's guardian (typical a parent) the right to vote on his/her behalf, albeit with the restriction that the moment the child wishes to vote or hand over his/her vote to another person, s/he has the right to do so. As Wall points out, this solution is not without risks and pitfalls; nevertheless, a reform of the democratic system that is informed by childism and which also addresses the related methodological and ethical challenges and pitfalls would not only enhance children's democratic rights but would also ensure a more radical and inclusive democracy for others who, for one reason or another, are excluded from voting.

Childism's Central Claims

Scientifically, childism's central claim is that to understand childhood properly is to understand society differently, and therefore that insights gleaned from childhood research not only generate knowledge about children's lives and perspectives but can potentially also shed light on human life, society and social changes more broadly, thereby also helping to revise existing theories and ensure more accurate analyses of the social, including social change. Childism challenges fundamental epistemological and ontological assumptions in the humanities and social sciences, creating a basis for rethinking social theories and gaining new or deeper insights into decisive issues in contemporary society, including identifying and opposing child-discriminatory mechanisms in relation to democracy.

From a social science perspective, a major goal of childism is to acknowledge childhood as a social phenomenon and to integrate critiques, generated by the new social studies of childhood (also known as the second wave of childhood studies), that target existing research and policies. These critiques regard the children–adults distinction as a false and dualistic construction; they also interrogate the practice of adultism, that is, the habit of taking the adult as the norm in all situations, and as a result, addressing children as the other, taking their position in the social order as natural and legitimating discrimination.

Childism may, thus, be regarded as analogous to feminism, which has challenged the dualistic construction of women and men, thereby generating insights into discriminatory mechanisms and contributing to theoretical reconstruction and development. Thus, childism makes a common case with feminism, as well as anti-ethnocentrism, anti-sexism, and the like, in its critique that mainstream research and policy are based on White, heterosexual, adult middle-class male norms. It follows from this that calls for inclusion, social justice,

and recognition must reject mainstream approaches and any notion of equality based on these norms, and instead embrace a difference-centered approach that seeks to restructure basic social norms as well as ontological and epistemological assumptions in everyday institutions, politics, and research. Following this line of thinking, childhood researchers have de- and reconstructed traditional models of citizenship with a view to designing more inclusive and difference-centered models.

Childism's Background and Limitations

Childism is inspired by, and owes a considerable debt to, feminist and anti-racist approaches; however, childism also adds to and reformulates these approaches as—just like mainstream approaches—they often naturalize the othering of children, for instance, in the case of the social construction of children as care receivers and adults as caregivers. Thus, the feminist ethic of care has been reconstructed from a childist perspective that deconstructs the dualistic construction of caregivers and care receivers and replaces the related dependence–independence dualism with the notion of interdependency. Likewise, other theories including Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, Niklas Luhmann's concept of trust, and child development models in psychology, have been reconstructed based on insights from childism.

Although childism has deconstructed dualistic models of children, the approach nonetheless conceptualizes children as simultaneously "the same but different" compared to adults. This idea acknowledges children's difference, compared to adults, in terms of body size, brain development (including the absence, in healthy children, of brain degeneration), years of life experience, position in the social order, and generationally-based experiences and competencies; while simultaneously recognizing that differences between children—due to contextual differences, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, and so on may be equally—or even more—significant. Nevertheless, children's differences compared to adults pose (and expose) certain methodological and ethical as well as theoretical and societal issues, suggesting that research from a childist perspective can offer unique insights. One example is that researching power relations (e.g., in participatory research practices or in society) from a childist perspective exposes the matter of age, enabling new theoretical concepts to flourish, such as the generational order, generational ordering, and generagency. Another example is that childhood exposes new dynamics and inequality fault lines, as well as hopes and fears related to social changes triggered by the global economy, environment, and new technologies. Thanks to its focus on children's experiences and agency, childism offers us a kind of sociological microscope through which to scrutinize such changes.

See also Adultism; Child-Centered/Child-Led Research; Childhood Studies; Children's Rights; Citizenship; Generationing

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