

Successes and Failures in writing the History of Children and Childhood

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The history of youth has been a contested subdiscipline dictated by equally notable successes and failures. This letter-to-the-editor outlines how historians have attempted to write children into the past and argues that two things need to be done in order for this category of historical analysis to develop: to recognise material differences between children's lives and eliminate the false dualism of children and childhood.

Keywords: children, childhood, class, methodology

It is only recently that children and their childhoods have become a staple part of academic history. Prior to the 1970s, they were rarely discussed and researchers in the 1990s were still calling for a greater consideration of young people in history (Hendrick, 1992). For the majority of the twentieth century, the dominant societal ideology surrounding children in the West was that they were to be 'seen but not heard' (Nasaw, 1985, 7). This is not to say the entire century was conservative, as movements, within education in particular, incorporated children's play, choice, and voice. Nevertheless, the prime virtue expected of children has been obedience and their own experiences and opinions were not as important as those of adults. The prevalence of corporal punishment, which still occurs in domestic settings even though its use in institutions is no longer sanctioned, demonstrates this. Such societal ideals about the young must have influenced the way they were researched – given their lack of importance compared to adults it is not surprising that they were rarely considered. The fact that young people are now much more regularly considered in historiography reflects changing attitudes.

Children are unique amongst groups previously marginalised in history in that they cannot directly contribute to addressing the historiographical imbalance. Adults, however, have approached the history of youth in two ways: children's history and the history of childhood. Whilst the former privileges the experiences of children, the latter focuses on the societal constructs of youth (Gleason, 2016, 477). It is essentially the history of what adults said and thought about children. This is not a problem in itself; understanding the place of the young and the cultural expectations of them is important. However, it has been argued that the history of childhood is the dominant approach researchers take and that this is problematic (Stearns, 2008). It means that historical children are being

seen but not heard. We know what adults thought about them, but we do not know what it was like to grow up at a given time or what children themselves thought. Thus, our historical understanding of children's history is incomplete. Children's history has been written in smaller quantities because of a 'source problem'. To write about children, a researcher must have access to their voices and experiences via historical records. Children create fewer written sources than adults and the biases of record-keepers in the past mean that they have not been prioritised for preservation (Maynes, 2008). Joseph Hawes and Ray Hiner humorously compared finding such sources to finding the illusive character Waldo in the series of puzzle books (Jaybour, 2005, 78).

Children are not totally invisible, however. Hawes and Hiner (2008) describe them as 'hidden in plain view,' suggesting that it is historians' failure to adapt methods that is partially to blame. They give the example of photographic sources, saying that instead of asking what is being done to the child it will be beneficial to ask: what is the child doing? The linguistic change is subtle, but this represents a significant change in approach. The child is being given preference as opposed to the surrounding adults. Other less traditional historical sources should be considered to understand children's experiences. Consideration of drawings may allow illiterate children to be included whilst the games children played could tell us more about their lives. For example, children in the Depression-era United States were known to play 'the eviction game' which involved moving objects quickly from one side of a room to another (Freedman, 2010, p.34) This demonstrates how eviction had become a normalised part of their lives to the extent it was incorporated into play. The absence of child-authored sources in archives is real and has been compounded by a failure to ask different research questions and search beyond traditional evidence. The research of children's history has been restricted by debates surrounding children's agency. Children's history is based on the idea that children are historical actors capable of influencing change and their own lives, so this discussion has represented a serious obstacle.

It has been argued that children are unruly and unpredictable (Grant, 2005, 471) and their agency is questioned as they are not in control of their own lives and surroundings, and have lesser capabilities of rational choice or understanding of how the world works (James, 2007, 253). Children's history does challenge notions of agency, but this should be seen as a good thing (Mintz, 2012). The parallels between the way that children's agency is questioned, and the arguments previously used to marginalise women and ethnic minorities in Western society is striking. There is a troubling tone of dehumanisation to these arguments. Rather than deal with children's historical experiences, the response of the profession has been to delegitimise them. Children's history highlights that current understandings of historical agency are based on unrealistic ideals. Can every adult be said to be in full control of their own life, make only rational choices, and fully understand how the world works? Age can be viewed a system of power relations and cultural expectations which sees children occupy a position of relative powerlessness, in part due to measures designed to protect them (Paris, 2008). This does not mean that they cannot experience, attach meaning independently to,

and exert influence on (albeit limited by circumstances beyond their control) their social, cultural, and political surroundings.

Children's agency has often been identified by looking for moments of rebellion or protest. An extreme example is the discourse that surrounds children's suicides as a fatal expression of control over their own destiny (Jones, 2015). Focusing on moments of protest risks the ignorance of the vast majority of children's existence when they were not engaged in direct conflict with adults. Assent should not be equated with submission to adult power but viewed as a choice representing an expression of agency. Alexis de la Ferrier (2014) argued that whilst adults used children who testified after the Algerian war of Independence (1954-1962) as political instruments, the young participants in this propaganda displayed their own political intent and motive in agreeing to do so. To summarise, historians would do well to remember that the possession of an ulterior motive is not the sole reserve of adults. This recognition of children's agency beyond protesting or acting like adults is a significant success in the history of youth.

There are now more researchers willing to stand up against the rejection of children's historical experiences, often via dehumanising efforts to question their agency, though the development of children's history is not guaranteed. The historiographical imbalance between children's history and studies of childhood needs to be tackled. The development of an adversarial relationship between advocates of both approaches has hindered cooperation – instead of writing of children and childhood academics write of 'children versus childhood' (Grant, 2005). This, as is argued by Karen Eppler Sanchez (2008), is a 'false dualism.' It is impossible to disconnect children from childhood. Even in the mind of a child, childhood can still be an imagined ideal, which is most obvious in cases of children assuming responsibilities at early ages. For example, a social worker visiting a Californian transient camp found a ten-year-old girl making home and looking after younger siblings. The child still spoke of playing but it was clear her childhood experience was not the ideal of growing up she believed in (Lewis, 1936, p.158). Due to family circumstances, children worldwide assume 'adult' responsibilities, such as being young carers, so this should not be viewed as purely historical, though it can be said that in general, historical children assumed adult roles at younger ages.

A combined methodological approach incorporating children and childhood may prove highly beneficial and it is a significant failure that this has not been adopted on a notable scale. The significance of children's actions and experiences may be revealed when contextualised against the societal background in which they occurred. Similarly, one way the significance of adult actions and policies can be seen is the impact they had on young people. Investigations of children and childhood can be mutually beneficial and should be done in conjunction more often.

One of the most significant current issues facing youth history is the dominance of a cultural approach. The field has been a victim of this approach's success as it has revealed details more quantitative analysis would have missed, and revealed a great deal about culture within age groups.

However, it is argued by Peter Stearns (2008) that this has led to an ignorance of the variation in children's material experiences of childhood. Childhood is many experiences, not just a single cultural one, and individuals' experiences are heavily influenced by their socioeconomic and geographic circumstances. For example, a child growing up in Tanzania would experience a different childhood to one growing up in Wales. But also, two children in London, one affluent and one impoverished, would also experience contrasting childhoods. Class should not be ignored in search of culture. Furthermore, searching for a wider youth culture could mean smaller details, such as changes within family or peer groups, are overlooked. The cultural history of childhood is important, but this should not overshadow the influence of class, or ignore variety in experience to favour generalisations. The history of children should be a history from below that considers the power dynamics of age and includes the experiences of working-class children. After all, the material differences in experiences of childhood between the most affluent and the most impoverished have never been greater than the start of the twenty-first century (Kuznesof, 2005).

In conclusion, there have been great successes resulting in children being written into the past, such as considering moments of assent as well as dissent, and the challenging of traditional notions of historical agency. However, despite a concerted effort to write young people into the historical narrative, there are still notable failures that restrict children's history. A historiographical imbalance has been solved by a greater consideration of youth, but this has been done predominantly from the perspective of childhood, not children. It should no longer be acceptable to have children seen but not heard in this way. This may be achieved by moving away from the 'false dualism' of 'children versus childhood' in favour of methodological synergy to allow the consideration of both aspects of youth in society and for each approach to benefit the other. Finally, there must be greater acknowledgement of the influence both geographic and socioeconomic circumstances can have on children's material experiences of childhood. The cultures of childhood are important, but we must not only write of it as a single cultural experience.

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