1. The revolutionary nature of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the origins of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary approach of children and childhood

Children’s rights have received a higher profile by means of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989, was a long time in the making. It therefore has a long history, not only politically, but also from a theoretical-paradigmatic standpoint. With regard to the latter, we could say that the CRC ascribes to a (pedagogical) tradition in which Rousseau and Montaigne, for example, played a key role. But the role of a figure such as Janusz Korczak who, in the 1920s, drafted a ‘Charter for the protection of children’ was also crucial. This Charter exerted an important influence on the development of the various international children’s rights instruments as we know them today, and of which the 1989 CRC can be considered the apotheosis. At that time, the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child became a convention. Henceforth, the demand for attention to the rights of children no longer rested on a mere statement of intention (a declaration), but on a text that must be seen as a framework of reference for all legislation in those countries that have ratified the Convention.

It is important to keep in mind that the CRC is first of all a text that arises from indignation concerning an existing state of affairs and that very explicitly strives to change this situation (Meirieu, 2002). Children were invisible for a long time, and where they were visible, there was very often little importance given to what children experienced and what they had to say. An illustration of this is the recent investigation by the Samson Committee in the Netherlands into the prevention of sexual abuse in institutions. The investigation demonstrates very clearly, for instance, how children who were the victim of sexual abuse prior to 1980 were absolutely not taken seriously when they told others about the sexual abuse. ‘They were mocked, ridiculed, not believed, and in many instances were even punished for their supposed lies, “filthy talk” and improper thoughts’ (Samson Committee Report, 2012, p. 69). Attention
to the rights of children appeared in this light as a protest against the continual failure to appreciate children.

This protest served as the impetus for the long struggle for the recognition of the ‘here and now’ of children. Childhood is indeed much more than mere preparation for adult life. As Korczak (2007, 171) very clearly formulates it:

Children are future adults – so they say. They are only in the process of becoming, they actually do not yet entirely exist, they do not yet belong. … What does this mean? We children: are we not yet alive, do we not feel, do we not suffer – just like adults? And childhood: is it not a part of real life – of everyone? Why do they wish to make us wait – and for what?

Accepting that there is also a ‘here and now’ for children means that we, as adults, pay attention to the meanings that children and youth attach to what is happening in their present lives. ‘Children are the future’, as is often said. But the present is just as important as this future perspective. It therefore means that what children perceive as important plays a role in the decisions that we take in and about the lives of these children and youth.

In addition to the attention to the ‘here and now’, the CRC also very clearly offers opportunities to revisit the traditional model of the adult–child relationship. Traditionally, the adult appears as the finished, the complete, while the child appears as ‘the not-yet’. The child is developing; the adult is developed. This has important consequences for the manner in which we view children. Let us take the example of the long-term sick child. When children are sick for a long time, one of the elements that initially surprises adults is the resilience that children and youth possess. The image of the strong, sick child contradicts the way that we currently think about granting the right to decide to children concerning their own treatment. In practice, we often notice that this right is linked to a number of conditions (Hemrica, 2004). The most notable of which is the question whether children indeed have sufficient skills to think with us about their illness and its treatment – a question which is not, or only exceptionally, asked of adults. The applicable rule for children is that they must prove that they meet a certain norm. For adults, on the contrary, it is assumed to be self-evident that they meet this norm. Furthermore, this norm is very cognitively coloured. It then has to do with, for instance, the understanding of the nature and seriousness of the illness, or the understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of various possibilities of treatment. The significance of social and emotional skills seems hardly relevant. This seems to suggest that taking the ‘right’ decision is not only rational, but apparently is also taken alone and independent of others. Just like adults, the child is determined by his feelings and intelligence. The child is a serious being and therefore always deserves to be taken seriously. It is not about ascribing to children the same interests and values as adults (Mortier, 2002). It rather concerns ascribing equal value to divergent interests and values.

Attention to children’s here and now, recognizing children in their specificity, having an eye for children and childhood as a separate social group, the development of a new child policy (and in connection with this, an alternative image of the adult)… these are all themes that have played a role in childhood studies in the last few decades. Today, childhood studies can be defined as the study of childhood from an interdisciplinary perspective. Several disciplines such as geography, ethics, history, consumer studies, and sociology for example have played a central role in establishing this interdisciplinary approach of childhood. In this, childhood studies are different from the sociology of childhood as the latter need to be seen as the study of childhood from the discipline of sociology. However, the sociology of childhood has been very
important in elaborating an alternative paradigm on childhood, a paradigm that has been influential for the other disciplines within the childhood studies.

The start of this alternative thinking on childhood can be situated in the work of Gertrud Lenzer, Professor of Sociology at Brooklyn College (Lenzer, 1991; see also Lenzer, Chapter 16 in this Handbook). Lenzer criticized the lack of attention on children within the social sciences. She thought it strange, for instance, that children received a great deal of attention from the advertising industry, but did not constitute a systematic subject of scientific research as an important group in society. Lenzer’s thoughts were heard, as the American Sociological Association (ASA) decided in 1992 to create a new division, the Sociology of Children. The ASA initiative soon inspired other associations. For instance, the Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS) created a Working Group, ‘Soziologie der Kindheit’ (Sociology of Childhood) (Honig, Leu and Nissen, 1996). And in the same period, we witnessed the generation of interest in a ‘Sociologie de l’enfance’ in France (Sirota, 1998, 12). It would signify the start of a new discipline, which we today summarize under the broad term ‘childhood studies’, but which previously and currently is equally called child studies or children’s studies. A number of issues were notable from the beginning. For instance, the pioneers heavily emphasized the importance of an interdisciplinary approach. This includes, for example, attention on the history of beliefs about childhood, for the growth of scientific approaches to studying children, for the significance of gender, and for debates around children’s rights. Unilateral perspectives on children and childhood sell children short. A holistic approach to children and childhood is important. At the same time, it is notable how the emphasis on diversity among children receives greater attention. From the very start, it turned the childhood studies story into a place where highly divergent forms of childhood are addressed (Nieuwenhuys, 2010).

In this contribution, we want to take a closer look at the relationship between, on the one hand, the paradigm shift that childhood studies as a discipline represents, and on the other hand, children’s rights as a concept by which to fully comprehend the social and pedagogical position of children. In accordance with the intent of this Handbook, to this end we will rely heavily on what is considered as the basic literature within childhood studies. The investigation of the interrelation between children’s rights and childhood studies is not evident. Already in 1998, Freeman (1998) wrote how remarkable it was that two disciplines, which have so much in common, have so little dialogue with one another. One really can say that both disciplines were living apart together. Since then, the theme of children’s rights has received greater attention within childhood studies (e.g. Mayall, 2000; Kaufman and Rizzini, 2009; Alanen, 2010). The current status of childhood studies furthermore increases the difficulty of the exercise. Childhood studies are a field of study that may indeed have a common denominator, but with many different faces. James (2010) therefore uses the interesting metaphor of ‘the fabric of childhood studies’. ‘We can focus on the entire piece of cloth and recognize from its shape and dimensions the separateness of children from adults, as well as admiring the complexity of the patterns that are created by the weaving together of the different elements of the warp and weft’ (James, 2010, 496).

In what follows we take three steps. With the first step we examine the breakthrough of the new paradigm of childhood. We briefly outline the context in which the new paradigm has developed and, to this end, we also focus on, among others, the criticisms formulated about the concept of development in relation to children and childhood. With the second step, the main themes of the paradigm of the childhood studies take centre stage: (1) childhood as a structural form and (2) children’s agency. Both ideas are made explicit and illustrated with regard to the work of the most important authors within the field of childhood studies, with a specific focus on those representing the sociology of childhood. Finally, with the last step we formulate a few
ambitions with regard to the continued translation and deepening of children’s rights as a concept. The starting point in this regard is that to this day, children’s rights are still considered too much from an adult perspective.

2. Searching for an alternative to the unilateral developmental-psychological perspective on children

2.1. Development and socialization as the leading concepts for thinking about children

And still we want it to move quickly. And this is why we lift the little plant up with our impatient fingers, though in so doing we pull out the thin root fibres, and the little plant shrinks. Or we place it in a hothouse, and it quickly grows big, yet is unsuitable for the cold soil. Growing occurs slowly. And whoever does not believe that should just go look at a plant for a few hours. Then he will see that he sees nothing. And yet the plant has grown in those few hours.

Thus writes Jan Ligthart in his ‘Verzamelde Opstellen’ (Collected Articles) from 1917. Ligthart was one of the educators who considered the development of children as a growing process that follows a natural course. Views about the child and her development were repeatedly borrowed from the way that people deal with nature. Children themselves determined the pace of their development to a significant extent; the most important task of the educator was simply to follow. In the literature providing pedagogical advice, we also see comparisons between children and the laws of nature appearing until the late sixties.

In the meantime, a new science of the child emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. References to natural processes made way for experimental research into developmental phenomena. The new approach began to make waves under a variety of names such as developmental psychology, child psychiatry, child studies and pedagogical pathology (Depaepe, 1993). From this point on, knowledge about the child was scientific knowledge – so concluded the enthusiastic followers of the new science. The desire for education, the need of the educator to intervene in the environment of the child in this way received a scientific foundation (Dekker, 2010). The new science of the child went hand-in-hand with medical science in its pursuit of mapping out child defects in order to in this way promote the image of the normal child. The enthusiastic belief in the new science led to the need for greater monitoring of the child and education, which was justified by referring to the interest of the child. Max Weber used the term *Entzauberung der Welt/Disenchantment of the World* to describe this process (Dassen, 1999). Whereas romantics took the disenchantment of the world as an indication of the world becoming increasingly less attractive, with Weber it appeared as a challenge that people should dare to face head on. Applied to children, youth and their education, this implied that at the start of the twentieth century, there was a conviction that at some point it would be possible to fully know and fathom the child in her totality (Tumel, 2008). It was therefore no more than a matter of time until all the secrets of children and childhood would be thoroughly and clearly mapped out.

‘Development’, an essentially temporal notion, is the primary metaphor through which childhood is made intelligible, both in the everyday world and also within the specialist vocabularies of the sciences and agencies which lay claim to an understanding and servicing of that state of being.

(Jenks, 2005, 36)
In this way Jenks refers to the crucial role that Piaget played in the realization of this notion of development, and at the same time shows how Piaget’s psychological theory and Parsons’s sociological theory opposed one another in a symbiotic relationship. For Parsons, the child symbolized the other, and consequently it constitutes a threat to order in the social world. The social activities of the child therefore must be situated entirely within the discourse of socialization. Or as Corsaro (1997, 9–10) states it:

In Parsons’ view the child is a threat to society; he must be appropriated and shaped to fit in. Parsons envisioned a society as an intricate network of interdependent and interpenetrating roles and consensual values. The entry of the child into this system is problematic because although she has the potential to be useful to the continued functioning of the system, she is also a threat until she is socialized.

Mayall (2002, 23) describes Parsons and Piaget as ‘the twin towers of sociology and psychology who provide the interlocked and complementary framework for commonplace notions of childhood’.

More or less the same idea of the child lies at the basis of the developmental psychology of Piaget, as well as the functionalist socialization model of Parsons. The child appears here as a not yet being that willingly passes through the stages of its development or easily adapts to the existing social systems. Childhood or the stage of being a child is not considered valuable as such, but is always seen from the perspective of adulthood. In this sense, the child stage is nothing more than a transitional phase. It is interesting how Jenks (2005) nevertheless links two different images of normal childhood to one another. First of all there is the Dionysian image of the child. The child, burdened from birth by original sin, appears here as a small demon that must be cast into the proper form with all means available. The child is wild and primitive, a Pippi Longstocking avant la lettre. The task of education consists of taming the wild child and civilizing her. The Apollonian child, on the contrary, is presented as intrinsically good. The child displays the characteristics of a noble savage or a naive genius who, with his poetic worldview, is very close to the divine origin of things. Both of these images of the child result in education as social control, even if this education assumes a different form in each situation. The model of education in line with the Dionysian image of the child is characterized by strong control and an explicit use of power. The Apollonian image of the child rather results in controlling children by means of ‘child-centred approaches’ (Jenks, 2005, 66). Smith (2011) claims that Jenks’s distinction between the two images of the child is not so much about the difference between innocence and evil but rather about the distinction between innate innocence and acquired innocence. And thus we find ourselves back with Piaget and Parsons.

The Dionysian notion of acquired innocence resonates with modes of socialization in which virtuous habits must be inculcated through external discipline. The innate innocence symbolized by the Apollonian child indicates an alternative form of socialization, grounded in subtler modes of manipulation, by which children are allowed to develop ‘naturally’.

(Smith, 2011, 27)

2.2. Breakthrough of an alternative paradigm

‘What Foucault’s work allows us to understand is that the truths of Piaget’s and other claims about development are not timeless and universal scientific verities but are produced at a specific historical moment as an effect of power’ (Walkerdine, 2009, 116). Walkerdine indicates
that, within a developmental-psychological perspective, children’s thought is considered as a way of thinking that gradually moves in the direction of mature thought. Children’s thought is therefore described as fundamentally different from that of adults. And the difference described appears in terms of a lack or shortcoming of the child. This natural lack disappears as children grow up. Within this perspective, children are ‘human becomings’ rather than ‘human beings’, according to Walkerdine (2009, 117).

‘Development’ as the leading concept from which to think about children and childhood – certainly in the early stages of childhood studies – is an object of severe criticism. It would be too static, by which is meant that children’s own contribution and activity is thoroughly neglected. Furthermore, it would borrow too much from statistics. With this, people take issue with the notion that for a long time, developmental psychology was primarily the study of similarities, the common, the averages and the norms, and much less the study of variation and diversity. It is simply assumed that all people grow and develop according to a previously established plan, which entails that someone who diverges from this plan is very quickly perceived as ‘different’ and is thus considered to be a problem. In connection with this, Popkewitz (1999) points out the danger of the dominance of the concept of time over, for instance, the spatial concept, which plays into the hand of thinking in universal terms. ‘From the use of Piaget’s conception of “stages” to Vygotsky’s “zones of proximal development”, research emphasized time dimensions that “tell” the researcher whether some intervention is significant or not’ (Popkewitz, 1999, 23). The dominance of the concept of time goes together with a firm belief in the continual progress of humanity, the belief that not only groups of people, but also individuals continually develop toward a higher condition. Development is placed on the same line as ideas such as growth and progress, which contributes to the establishment of a competitive ethics in which mental and manual skills are subjected to a hierarchical evaluation (i.e. ‘When did your child start walking?’ ‘My child was speaking by the time he was 13 months old’).

Children’s behaviour is not only normalized, but also decontextualized. People prefer to view individual children or mother–child dyads without taking into consideration their social and economic or cultural context. By focusing on the individual child as a social unit, differences in gender, social class and cultural knowledge are hardly taken into account. As a result, people do not demonstrate the least diffidence when formulating universal claims concerning the development of children. ‘These sciences have produced a mass of literature using “children” from the western world that have psychologized and biologized younger human beings, creating the universal condition of childhood’ (Cannella, 1999, 37). By presenting children and childhood in this way, an image of the child is formed which is fundamentally different from that of the adult.

They are the ultimate ‘Other’ than the adult – those who must have their decisions made for them because they are not yet mature – those who must gain knowledge that has been legitimized by those who are older and wiser – those whose ways of being in the world can be uncovered through the experimental and observational methods of science – those who can be labelled as gifted, slow, intelligent, or special.

(Cannella, 1999, 36)

It is clear that, certainly in the 1990s, the wide interest in the development of children – opponents summarize this under the denominator of ‘developmentalism’ – came heavily under attack. These criticisms lessened at the start of the twenty-first century (Woodhead, 2009). The battle with the most rigid versions of developmental psychology appears to have been waged. Authors do emphasize though that a number of concepts and tools that attempt to grasp the
dependence and vulnerability of children cannot be avoided. For instance, Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development is referred to, among others. Woodhead (2009, 57) summarizes this shift eloquently: ‘In short, a strong research agenda on change and transitions in children’s growth, learning and well-being is essential for Childhood Studies, even if we choose no longer to describe this agenda as about “child development”’.

Meanwhile, resistance and criticism had already led to the creation of a new paradigm. The fundamental principles of this new paradigm are thereby formulated in stark contrast to the notions of development and socialization. According to Jenks (2005) and James and Prout (1997), the fundamental assumptions of the new paradigm are as follows: (1) Childhood is understood as a social construction and thus provides a framework for the interpretation of the first years of life, (2) childhood cannot possibly be considered as a natural or universal characteristic among a group of people, but rather appears as a specific structural and cultural component within diverse societies, (3) children’s social relations and cultures are worth studying in themselves, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults, and (4) children are active in determining their social life, the life of those they live together with and the society in which they reside, and are consequently not the passive subjects of social structures and processes.

In 2009, with the publication of the Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies, the following five characteristics of the new childhood paradigm were advanced (Qvortrup et al., 2009): (1) the focus on the ‘normal’ child instead of the child who deviates from the norm, (2) the emphasis on the ‘here and now’ of children instead of on their coming adulthood, (3) the appreciation of children’s agency and participation instead of only viewing them in terms of receivers of knowledge, (4) the analysis of the structural conditions under which childhood takes shape within a specific society, and (5) the scientific study of children and childhood is conducted in the same way as other groups in society are studied. From the initial chapters of the 2009 handbook, it also seems that childhood studies are in fact based upon two main perspectives (Wintersberger, 2012). There is the perspective introduced by Jens Qvortrup in which childhood is considered as a structural category or as a permanent segment of every society. The emphasis is thus on childhood as a generational unity, comparable with unities such as adulthood or seniors. Additionally there is Allison James’s perspective. Here the focus is on children as actors. Children are efficacious actors in creating their lives, the lives of those close to them and the society in which they live. We will examine this in greater depth in the following section.

3. The sociology of childhood: Child of many fathers and mothers

The role of the sociology of childhood has been essential in the growth of childhood studies into a fully-fledged academic discipline. While we could say that in the early 1990s the two largely coincided, the sociology of childhood today forms part of a broader field in which, for instance, the history of childhood and an ethics of childhood have claimed a place (Kehily, 2009; Wall, 2010). Given the importance of the sociology of childhood, in what follows we take a more extensive look at the various elements it contains.

While the various researchers within the Sociology of Childhood present themselves as forming part of one single paradigm, notable differences can in fact be identified in the way in which the attempt is made to map out an alternative to the functionalist socialization model of Parsons. In the paragraphs that follow, we attempt to clarify these (subtle) differences by referring to the research of a few leading (and widely cited) researchers within the Sociology of Childhood paradigm.
3.1. Corsaro’s ‘interpretive reproduction’

Corsaro (1997), as opposed to most proponents of the Sociology of Childhood paradigm, situates the origin of his alternative model with Piaget, and more specifically with his constructivist approach to child development. Second, Corsaro also considers Vygotsky’s theory about the zone of proximal development as a key element in the development of his constructivist-inspired model of socialization. From a social perspective, in the zone of proximal development, children can indeed participate in social activities in which they otherwise could never participate in on their own. While he is not blind to the shortcomings in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky – for instance, he adheres to the criticism of the exaggerated focus on the individual development of children – Corsaro strongly believes in linking constructivist ideas to a form of socialization that places the collective and the social at the heart of children’s activities.

At the very least, Corsaro’s position with regard to socialization can be called ambiguous. On the one hand, he wants to continue to hold onto this concept in his thinking about the relationship between the child and society, but on the other hand, he also realizes its problematic character. ‘It has an individualistic and forward-looking connotation that is inescapable. One hears the term and the idea of training and preparing the individual child for the future keeps coming right back to mind’ (Corsaro, 1997, 18). Corsaro attempts to resolve this ambiguity by introducing the notion of ‘interpretive reproduction’. The ‘interpretive’ component refers to the innovative and creative aspects in the social participation of children. The ‘reproduction’ component includes the idea that children do not simply internalize social and cultural norms, but actively contribute to cultural production and social change. The term simultaneously means that children, in their social participation, experience the limitations that coincide with the existing social structures. Children do not escape the influence of the society and culture of which they are a part. At the same time children do not simply imitate the world around them. ‘They strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and to participate in it. In attempting to make sense of the adult world, children come to collectively produce their own peer worlds and cultures’ (Corsaro, 1997, 24). Children are introduced into the culture by their family from the time they are born, after which they rather quickly explore other cultural contexts with other children and adults. According to Corsaro, childhood is thus a period in the course of an individual’s life in which that individual enters a certain culture (with its subcultures) and then participates in it, and in this way helps (re)produce her proximal future.

To this point, Corsaro’s Sociology of Childhood is thus situated only at the micro level: the social world is produced and reproduced by inter-human interaction (Alanen, 2000). However, Corsaro introduces a second element in his conceptualization – this time at the macro level – which confirms that through ‘interpretive reproduction’, children not only contribute to their proximal culture, but also to the cultural reproduction and change of the society in which they live. To this end, his theory requires a conceptual link between the level at which the cultural activities of children take place and the level of the social structures in which social reproduction and change can occur. Corsaro finds this link in the structural perspective that was mainly developed by Qvortrup (Qvortrup, 1990). The notion of childhood as a period within the lifetime of an individual is coupled to a second notion of childhood as being a permanent structural category in society (and in this way is comparable with concepts such as social class). In summary, ‘interpretive reproduction’ covers three types of common activities: (1) the creativity with which children assimilate information and knowledge from the adult world, (2) the participation of children in a series of peer cultures and (3) children’s contribution to the reproduction and expansion of adult culture.
Despite his attention to the structural perspective, it is clear that Corsaro bases and sees the foundation of his *Sociology of Childhood* in ethnographic research of and with children. The *peer cultures* collectively produced by children form the starting point of his alternative to a unilateral, development-oriented approach, and it is from this that he attempts to further conceptualize his sociological theory. A *Sociology of Childhood* as presented here is characterized by a strong orientation to the subject and environment. Honig *et al.* (1996, 21) in this context talk about ‘akteursbezogene Kinderforschung’ (actor-related child research), in which the greatest attention is paid to the experiences of children in their daily life. The counterpart to the ‘akteursbezogene Kinderforschung’ is the ‘strukturbezogene Kindheitsforschung’ (structure-related child research), in which the work of James, Jenks and Prout can be considered as groundbreaking.

### 3.2. Breakthrough of ‘the sociological child’

Die Kindheitsforschung faßt ‘Kind’ als ein Konstrukt auf, das sozial und kulturell variabel ist. ‘Kindheit’ ist insofern nicht nur die Bezeichnung für eine Lebensphase individueller Sozialisationsprozesse, sie geht diesen Prozessen als ein historisch-spezifisches soziokulturelles Muster auch immer schon voraus.

In other words, childhood appears here as a discursive (culturally constructed) phenomenon and therefore always depends on the context. In their book, *Theorizing Childhood* (1998), James, Jenks and Prout formulate the ambition of mapping out the various (pre)sociological models of childhood and weighing them against one another. To this end they work chronologically and within this chronology identify a clear transition to thinking about children in terms of agency. Their most important distinction in this is the one between the traditional image of the socially developing child – James, Jenks and Prout (1998, 23) talk in this regard about a ‘transitional theorizing about the child’ in which the central concept is the socialization process – and a fourfold classification of new approaches to childhood in which *being* rather than *becoming* is the leitmotif. The child is thereby conceived as a person, as a status, as a set of needs, rights and differences.

A first image of the child within the new childhood studies is the ‘social structural child’. Children constitute a structural category; they form part of social life and consequently must be understood as forming part of any social system. In this approach, the child is summarized as an analysis-unit *sui generis* that is comparable with any other analysis-unit in society. ‘Discourses centred around the social structural child claim childhood as a generalizable category, an enduring (though changing) feature of the social structure of any society and one which is universal, global and in possession of a recognizable identity’ (James *et al*., 1998, 210).

The second image of the child is the ‘minority group child’, described as the political version of the ‘social structural child’. This approach emphasizes the fact that children in society are often discriminated against structurally by all sorts of institutionalized forms of power. Just as with the first image of the child, this form of childhood is perceived as a universal experience. All children, albeit to different degrees, are short-changed regarding their human rights. This approach often establishes the link with the women’s movement, the difference being that it is no longer *gender* but *age* that forms the object of the struggle.
The discourse on childhood of the third approach describes the child as the ‘socially constructed child’. With this, a radically relativist position is assumed by not accepting the existence of the child in itself, but by always seeing it as the result of constitutive practices. ‘Childhood is always structured, in either a strong or weak fashion but it is none the less temporal and susceptible to change’ (James et al., 1998, 214). The ‘socially constructed child’ is rather a place than a global phenomenon, and we hereby obtain a very particular conceptualization of childhood.

The final discourse about childhood – heavily inspired by anthropology – ultimately refers to the child as a ‘tribal child’, in its turn, the political version of the ‘socially constructed child’. Here childhood is mainly defined in terms of being separate from other cultures within a society. This separation is not the result of a natural process, but should be seen as the result of the autonomy of children, which points to a clear victory of agency over structure. ‘Tribal children’s culture is to be regarded as the self-maintaining system of signs, symbols and rituals that prescribes the whole way of life of children within a particular socio-historical setting’ (James et al., 1998, 215). Such a conceptualization of childhood includes a great deal of critical potential. It indeed offers numerous possibilities for resistance against, for example, the normalizing effects of age hierarchies, socialization theories and education practices.

According to James et al. (1998), these four sociological images of the child should be situated within a framework of a series of conceptual dualisms, of which the agency–structure dichotomy is the most prominent and determinative. A second important dualism is formed by a more particular versus a more universalistic interpretation of childhood. The result of this is that the ‘socially constructed child’ belongs in the ‘structure/particularism’ cell, the ‘minority group child’ in the agency/universalism cell, the ‘tribal child’ in the agency/particularism cell and the ‘social structural child’ in the structure/universalism cell.

The great merit of the approach of James et al. (1998) is clearly ordering the various new sociological discourses about childhood, and presenting them in such a way that the differences in nuance between these discourses are brought more sharply into focus. At the same time, however, there is something problematic about this endeavour. For instance, it is unclear why the political version of a certain image of the child immediately belongs in a different cell. James et al. (1998, 207) indeed acknowledge the problematic character of their classification when they claim, ‘we shall emphasize the overlaps and areas of agreement between the four discourses rather than attempt to demarcate their differences and begin an arid process of rigid and permanent separation’.

The most significant criticism of the models distinguished by James et al. (1998), however, is found in the assumption that the unit most referred to in the sociological study of childhood should be children either as individuals in all their particularity – such as, for instance, the ‘socially constructed child’ – or as a group or cohorts – such as, for instance, the ‘minority group child’ (Alanen, 2000). Opposed to this thinking in terms of categorizing children, various authors take a relational approach to childhood. In this relational approach to sociological forms, relationships between people rather than people as individuals are the unit of analysis. ‘Relational thinking is both structural and processual, and agential without confining agency exclusively to the level of individual actors’ (Alanen, 2000, 500). In this way a different interpretation of agency appears as the central concept within the theory of the Sociology of Childhood. We currently rediscover this interpretation with representatives of the German as well as the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the Sociology of Childhood. We will elaborate this in the next paragraph.
3.3. On ‘generationing processes’ and ‘generationelle Ordnung’ (generational order)

By ‘generationing’, Mayall (2002, 27) means, ‘the relational processes whereby people come to be known as children, and whereby children and childhood acquire certain characteristics, linked to local contexts, and changing as the factors brought to bear change’. In their relationship with adults, children are confronted with knowledge and experiences that have their origin in an earlier time. Adults, in turn, perceive that children understand the social world in a different way than themselves because the learning of these children is bound to their membership in a different generation. Alanen (2000, 14) formulates it as follows: ‘“generationing” refers to processes through which some individuals become (“are constructed as”) “children” while others become (“are constructed as”) “adults”, having consequences for the activities and identities of inhabitants of each category as well as for their interrelationships’. In this way, generation becomes a key concept for the study of childhood. Mayall and Alanen are in this regard heavily inspired by the generation concept as developed by Mannheim (Mayall, 2002; Alanen, 2009). According to Mannheim, people can undergo the same socio-historical processes at the same place and time, but differ significantly in their capabilities and limitations in dealing with these processes. Whereas Mannheim mainly applies this idea to various social classes in a society, Mayall sees possibilities for applying this to children. ‘If we accept that children are a distinct social group exploited by adults at school, then it is a short step to thinking of children as being specifically located, and having specific experiences of social developments’ (Mayall, 2002, 160–161).

According to Mayall, this conceptualization of ‘generationing’ displays significant parallels with ‘gendering’ as the process by which being a woman is defined from not being a man.

Alanen (2000) couples to this attention to ‘generationing processes’ an appeal for a strongly imposed constructionist research methodology. According to her, most Childhood Studies – despite their assumption that childhood is a social and historical construction – demonstrate an unacceptable constructionist deficit by the fact that ‘the condition of being a child is simply assumed as a starting point without giving attention to the complexity of material, social and discursive processes and their interplay through which childhood is daily reproduced as a specifically generational condition’ (Alanen, 1999, 14). In this perspective, agency cannot remain limited to constructionism at a micro level that only emphasizes the child as a social actor. It rather refers to the power and capabilities of those who are placed in a position of a child in order to help influence, control and organize the activities that take place in their everyday lives. To this end, agency should be directly studied in relation to the generational structures in which children move, ‘the source of their agency as “children” is to be found in the social organization of generational relations’ (Alanen, 2000, 15).

The author who to this point has succeeded in demonstrating the greatest ability for synthesis within the shaping of agency is undoubtedly Michael-Sebastian Honig. Honig (1999) demonstrates that there is indeed room for developmental thinking within the conceptual framework of the Sociology of Childhood. This developmental thinking cannot just be oriented toward an image of the future, and as a result cannot only refer to developmental and socialization processes. ‘Entwicklung ist definitiv kein teleologisches Konzept mehr. Dem Individuum kommt als ‘Konstrukteur’ seiner Biographie eine zentrale Stellung zu’ [Development can no longer be seen as a teleological concept as the individual appears as the one who constructs his own biography] (Honig, 1999, 73). As opposed to growth and development, the course of life comes to be a key concept, such that childhood can be considered as one stage in the life of humankind, a stage that can only be seen in relationship to other stages of life.
Childhood as a relational construct is also partly interpreted from the perspective of development and partly from a generational perspective. From a developmental perspective, it refers to the difference between child and adult and their mutual relationship within a historical-biographical context. From a generational perspective it refers to family links within a broader social context. Within the context of late modernity, childhood is characterized by an interrelation of both aspects. In this way, childhood is not an arbitrary discursive product, but refers to a discursive practice or a set of practices. Analysis of these generational practices should make it possible to obtain a view of what childhood means today. The study of childhood thus demands multiple perspectives, whereby the objective of childhood research is situated in the mapping out of the cultural grammar that structures the relationships between children and adults in a society.

4. The ambitions of an approach to children’s rights from a perspective of childhood studies

There is clearly a strong bond between children’s rights as a concept and the most important themes in childhood studies. When we follow Wintersberger (2012) in his suggestion that in fact two perspectives play a role in childhood studies, then we see how both perspectives – childhood as a social category and the child as actor – have clearly played a role in the last decade concerning the further translation and implementation of the CRC.

Childhood as a separate structural segment in our society has become readily apparent. For instance, we note that more and more research takes the child as the unit of analysis instead of the family. The result is that the impact on and the perspective of the children involved in discussions concerning housing, poverty or divorce can be delineated much more clearly. In many European countries e.g. there is an increasing attention on child poverty, defined as a violation of children’s rights. Additionally, we also see it in the increasing application of the label ‘child-friendly’. Cultural centres, hospitals, legal institutions… attempt to organize themselves in such a way that they can realize greater openness and accessibility with regard to children. In this, the provision rights of children are given form from a children’s perspective. Also inside the Council of Europe, people have picked up the thread by, among other things, formulating new guidelines for more child-friendly health care and more child-friendly justice (see also Liefaard, Chapter 14 in this Handbook). Finally, the attention on children as a social group also has a retroactive nature. Thus, we are currently seeing within the history of childhood a great deal of research into the position and the experience of children within the various types of institutions that have been established specifically for them since the middle of the nineteenth century (see e.g. Bakker, 2007; Prochner et al., 2009; Frijhoff, 2012). Frijhoff (2012, 16–17) refers in this respect to an interesting field of tension:

In the eyes of a historian of childhood, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted on 20 November 1989 by the United Nations, is, therefore, fraught with some ambiguity. Recognising the full rights of childhood, it also keeps children confined into their childhood and the interpretation given to this stage of life in the different parts of the world, streamlining their personality ever more into a standard child, distrustful with regard to autonomous growth, and rejecting the right to adventure. Scholars may freely experience a Eureka feeling, but children must fight harder and more often for their own right to discovery.
We also rediscover the field of tension described by Frijhoff in the whole discussion about children as social actors. Being described by international treaties and standards as a ‘subject with rights’ does not mean that people are also immediately recognized as such. Furthermore, participating in society entails much more than simply possessing rights of participation. It is impossible to explain the different positions with regard to children as social actors in the scope of this contribution. Hanson (2012) presents an up-to-date and interesting overview. In so doing he distinguishes four different currents. The first current is characterized by the traditional view of children: they are ‘becomings’, not ‘beings’. The second approach, ‘the welfare approach’, allows the balance to shift more in the direction of the right to protection rather than the right to participation (Hanson, 2012, 76). Within the third, more emancipatory approach, children are considered competent as long as the contrary is not demonstrated. And in the libertarian current, people ultimately talk about children as independent citizens who can make autonomous decisions. The problem with all these approaches is that they remain caught up in the question of what the child is rather than asking the question about the potential of the child of the child (Honig, 2009). In other words, it truly seems that, in our search for the meaning of children’s rights, we remain bound by our view on children as non-adults. In their analysis of the scientific literature about children’s rights, Reynaert et al. (2009) demonstrate that three themes have dominated since the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child. First of all, there is attention to autonomy and participation rights as the new norm in practice and policy. Second, research also deals with the field of tension between children’s rights and the rights of parents. And finally there is the rise of the ‘global children’s rights industry’. The first two themes are very clearly related. The stress on participation and autonomy too often gets bogged down in a discussion in which children and adults come to be diametrically opposed to one another. The cause of this is found in the concept of agency itself, which has very clear roots in a conceptual framework in which the image of the autonomously thinking adult takes centre stage. The dominant thinking of agency and participation thus actually tries to fit children within an adult model rather than questioning the model itself (Wall, 2012).

It is important to notice that in the debate on the rights of the child up until now the emphasis is on the rights that children have. Masschelein and Quaghebeur (2005), for example, show in their analysis of the discourse on the right of the child to participate, how the child will be more and more defined as a participatory subject. The child has been described in terms of ‘being able to express herself’, as ‘making active choices’, as ‘self-responsible’ or as ‘negotiating meanings’. Defining the child in terms of a participatory subject constitutes an individualizing principle, challenging the child to transform herself into a certain kind of individual with her own self-determined identity. Several authors point out risks of a rights tradition emphasizing individuality and autonomy. Such and Walker (2005) show how the responsibility for realizing rights from the state to the individual may result in a policy by which children can enjoy their rights as long as they behave as responsible citizens. According to Mortier (2002), the emphasis on people as autonomous individuals ignores the fact that they often do not act autonomously. Roose and De Bie (2007) illustrate how the concept of the autonomous individual sharpens the contrast between the ‘citizen’ and the ‘non-citizen’. The standard of the autonomous individual creates a structural residue of ‘not yet’ citizens (children, for example), ‘no longer’ citizens (elderly people, for example) or ‘not entirely’ citizens (such as people with a disability). This group of people who cannot sufficiently participate is growing all the time, as society is becoming more and more complex and the calls for participation are becoming ever stronger. As a result, the problem of children at risk increased both qualitatively, with new child risks and new parental risks, and quantitatively, with even more parts.
of the population at risk. Jeroen Dekker (2009) concludes that, paradoxically, the CRC can be considered as an important multiplier of the phenomenon of the child at risk. According to Dekker (2009), the Century of the Child turned into the Century of the Child at Risk.

This conclusion requires us to move beyond modernity’s morally autonomous individual. As long as rights are grounded in free, equal, or autonomous individuality, children will be pushed to the outer edges of the social circle. As John Wall (2010) indicates, human rights need to be imagined as more than mere expressions of individual liberties or entitlements. Human rights ultimately derive their meaning and purpose from their capacity to expand the diversity and inclusiveness of human relations. A good example of this can be found in the discussion about giving the right to vote to children and young people. Recently some countries such as Brazil and Nicaragua decided to give minors from sixteen years old the right to vote (see also Mitchell, Chapter 10 in this Handbook). This decision connects with a broader social movement to look at children and youngsters as active citizens. Children do not become citizens; they are citizens from the early beginning. In its turn this connects with the attention on the participation rights as one of the central pillars of the CRC, although the right to vote is not mentioned within the CRC. Discussing the lowering of the age to vote is interesting, but up until now this discussion gets stuck in a rather conservative thinking on democracy. We are giving the right to vote to those about whom we are convinced they can act and think as we adults do. Thus, what we are doing is trying to fit children in an adult-based political construction. Minors get the right to vote once the difference with adults is reduced to a minimum. However, what we need today is a kind of democracy in which the difference between children and adults is fully awarded. In this democracy one could think e.g. about giving the right to vote to all children and young people.

In this interpretation, children’s rights and human rights are rights that are to be shaped in a participative way, a process during which parents and children themselves participate in the definition and the content of these rights (Roose and De Bie, 2007). Rights then function as a starting point for dialogue. Children must be accepted as co-actors in dialogue about their best interests. This implies that in every context, children and educators, such as parents, must look at how children’s rights are given full play. The rights of children must be placed in their broader social context. It is not so much that people are or are not citizens, but rather that citizenship is actualized in diverse activities and relationships.

Children are thus not expected to become citizens by seeking to attain a given norm, supported by the rights they can rely on, but to achieve citizenship through their various relationships and actions, a citizenship that can assume different shapes. This orientation also influences the position of the pedagogue, who is not expected to guide the child towards fully-fledged citizenship, but to act rather as an adult who enters into a dialogue with the child.

(Roose and De Bie, 2007, 439)

The ultimate aim of every educational intervention then lies in the accomplishment of and the support for opportunities for responsible action. In this approach, responsibility relies on the awareness that one has to learn to deal with situations in society where choices have to be made and where those choices raise the issue of how individual and social responsibility relate to each other. The opposite of the image of democracy as a project to be realized is the image of democracy as a fact. It concerns a type of coexistence where all citizens have the opportunity to develop an opinion and where there is no decisive criterion regarding political issues. In such a case, democracy and citizenship, just like community building, are a consequence of the
experience people gain. Then, upbringing and education should not be regarded as a reconstructing activity, but rather as a constructing and creative activity.

5. Conclusion

At the heart of childhood studies research today is the question: ‘What allows us to be able to talk about children and childhood?’ The traditional answer to this question is that children are people in the process of becoming and in so doing make the transition from ‘nature’ to ‘reason’. Childhood considered from this perspective still retains the promise of a better future. It is clear that the circumstances in which the various forms of childhood currently take shape have changed. When we only describe childhood in terms of learning and development, we sell the child short. Today, a sort of a-pedagogical approach to the organization between generations is taking place, which reduces the value of the traditional adult–child relations.

Anyone who considers children’s rights to be important is hereby faced with a huge challenge. The fact that the promise inherent to children’s rights must still largely be realized has much to do with the mainly adult interpretation of children’s rights. Children form a third of the world population, but to this point we have not succeeded in including their perspectives and experiences in our thinking about human rights. Consequently, what we need is a transition from a view of children as those who have the same rights as adults, to a view of children that contributes to shaping our understanding of human rights. Societies indeed do not only take shape based upon concepts such as equality, freedom and rationality; today they are perhaps much more influenced by the notions of diversity and difference. Only when we can consider and give specific form to children’s rights in this way will children obtain a fully-fledged place as a social citizen in our societies.

This happy marriage between childhood studies and children’s rights can result in a stronger understanding of the richness of children’s rights. In this, especially the history of childhood probably plays a crucial role. We may not forget that children’s rights already was a central idea within social anarchist theories of the mid-nineteenth century. These theories were far more radical than e.g. recent pupil voice work as it visualizes an education without schools as most people would recognize it. It would be interesting e.g. to contrast the CRC with some of the anarchists view of young people having a voice which is not dependent on adult consultation. What will appear is young people’s capacity to critique, re-imagine and reconstruct the communities they belong to. However, contemporary neo-liberalism seems to have marginalized alternative traditions of thought and action. The marriage between childhood studies and children’s rights therefore also offers us the privilege of an alternative. It is an alternative we would do well to value and emulate wherever and whenever we can. The age demands it.

Questions for debate and discussion

- How can we construct and understand a history of children’s rights that is much more than only a series of activities and ideas that ended up with the CRC?
- How can we rethink and reconstruct children’s rights within today’s neo-liberal discourse (in which citizens more and more are considered as clients and in which rights often appear as something you consume)?
- How do we map the dynamic interplay between children, parents and the state from a ‘rights as responsibilities’ approach?
- What active roles can children play in shaping our (re)thinking about human rights?
References


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