The sociology of childhood and children’s rights

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1. Introduction

In 1967 secondary school students (aged 11 to 18) in England were asked (via an invitation set out in a national newspaper) what kind of school they would like. The resulting book (Blishen 1969), is studded with students’ contributions, and records an indictment of school as they experienced it. Students argued that school entailed being treated as passive recipients by teachers who assumed they knew best and also imposed pointless, trivial rules; but school should offer opportunities for children to take part in decisions about what to learn, to discover, to delight in, in the context of more democratic relations with teachers. Blishen comments that the children felt imprisoned; for adults imprisoned children’s courage and curiosity. In 2001 a similar project was carried out, this time including school-age children aged from 5 to 18 (Burke and Grosvenor 2003). Children were invited, as individuals or as groups, to present their ideas in any form (written, pictorial, via videos) and thousands responded, from across the country and from a variety of schools. It is worth quoting a summary of the main findings from the 2001 project, which echoes Blishen’s findings.

‘Respect’ was the word that occurred most; it was what the children wanted, but felt they didn’t get. They were forced to do work they weren’t interested in, in buildings that were falling down around their ears. They were expected to fit into a structure and a curriculum that seemed to have been created without the first reference to what they might enjoy or respond to. Most of all, they were sick of not being listened to. Sick of being treated like kids.

(Burke and Grosvenor, 2003, Foreword, pp. ix–x)

This summary leads towards a number of considerations and questions. First, we may ask why it is that English children’s experiential knowledge teaches them that at school they are not treated as human beings, as people, in accordance with their human rights. For indeed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has to be understood as a human rights convention, with specific points, which were hammered out through negotiation, in relation to children’s structural positioning in a range of societies. We may also note on this,
that though the UK ratified the CRC in 1991, these two studies indicate that ten years later the government had not altered the education system, in accordance with its provisions. Why is that? Second, therefore, we may wish to consider the argument that long-established traditions, policies and practices, operate not only at macro-level, but also as factors affecting the day-to-day negotiations that children engage in at school. On the essential matter of respect for their membership of human society, it would seem that the English children at school in the 2000s were having much the same experiences as those in school thirty or more years earlier.

This chapter aims to draw attention to the usefulness of keeping our attention focused on the large-scale and its intersections with the small-scale, on the inter-relations of the macro with the micro, on inter-relations between structure and agency. In respect of children and their experiences, it insists on the importance of what the sociologists’ sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1967) pointed to – the critical and central importance of seeing connections between private troubles and public issues. Thus it is useful to consider children’s experiences and activities in the light of large-scale social structures. Sociology comprises a key assemblage of concepts, valuable in understanding why, for instance, English children at school are not respected, not accorded dignity as human beings. Furthermore, I argue that sociology is useful (and even essential?) for understanding why we need a separate rights convention for children; and further, why it is so difficult for adults to operationalise the articles of the Convention and for children to challenge their ascribed subordinate status. Or to put it another way, sociology points the finger at the problem social group – adults – and shows why many of them are reluctant to respect the Convention.

In making the above assertions, I am aligning myself with those who adopt a critical approach to sociological work (see e.g. Layder 1994). That is, the sociological aim is to provide – or in the case of this chapter to draw on – analyses of how a social organisation or a society is organised and to make suggestions arising about the implications of the character of that organisation for the experience of individuals or social groups. This is the approach made by, for instance, Margaret Stacey (1988) in her feminist study of the health care system; she documents how traditional ‘malestream’ studies focused on the paid health care workers (doctors and nurses) and neglected the unpaid, the people who look after their own health and the women who care for men and children, at home. By including women’s unpaid health work, she not only widens the territory for investigation but she shows how women’s work has been devalued. Similarly, Bourdieu, having carried out a detailed study of the French education system, saw it as appropriate to offer a critique of the class-based character of the system and suggestions for improvement (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1986).

In order to explore the above points, this chapter starts by outlining some key ideas that have been developed in the last thirty or more years, in what has been called the ‘sociology of childhood’. Then I go on to consider the relevance of these ideas for understanding why we need the CRC. I then discuss some studies carried out in a range of countries, which help us to understand the Convention as an aspirational rather than prescriptive document; and which point to how established traditions and understandings underpin and shape local interpretations of children’s rights.

2. Sociological approaches to childhood

2.1. Structural approaches

As the example given at the outset suggests, children’s experiences and their acquired experiential knowledge are fundamentally influenced by large-scale policies, by long-established
traditions sedimented into practice, by assumptions driving policy, which are based on sometimes outdated understandings. English children today experience childhoods under the weight of ideas about children and childhood, dating back at least one hundred years.

Though the history of the study of childhood is outside the scope of this paper, some initial points have to be made, as introduction (these draw on my history of the sociology of childhood [Mayall, 2013]). And in this section, I am giving further discussion of points made about definitions of childhood in the Introduction to this Handbook. Thus, it is fair to say that since the mid-to-late nineteenth century, theoretical approaches to childhood in minority world countries have been dominated by developmental psychology (for a brief history and balanced view, see Woodhead 2009). It can be said that it is the idea of development towards adulthood, rather than the detail of varying theories, that has permeated the consciousness of people in minority world societies. Probably most people there take a commonsense view that what children mainly do during childhood is develop towards adulthood. Furthermore, the basic idea of developmentalism permeates policy-making and practice. Thus when children become the objects of attention by the law, the police, the education system, it is to experts in the shape of psychologists that these professions turn. At home, parents are offered advice grounded in developmentalism on how to ‘rear’ or ‘socialise’ their children. Perhaps one of the most influential ideas stemming from developmental psychology is that children are above all to be protected and provided for in order that they may develop well, in a conceptual space regarded as a-political. Childhood should take place in a private arena, in a garden, until children are ready to enter the public domain and engage with adult life. Ideas associated with children’s unreadiness are inadequacies such as incompetence, instability, credulity, unreliability; and these lend credibility to adults’ understanding that children are not (yet) fully human.

However, the last thirty or so years have seen challenges to the attractive vision of the garden of childhood. It is not by accident that the work towards the CRC took place in the same years that ideas and assumptions about children and childhood were being challenged. Sociological and psychological studies about how childhoods differed across time and place provided one strand in this thinking (Kessen 1965, 1975; Bronfenbrenner 1971; Bettelheim 1971); another strand was theories that noted how people’s experiences and their self-image could be powerfully affected by the identifications imposed on them, for instance in schools, asylums and prisons (Goffman, e.g. 1961) and by the diffusion of power through the policies and practices of institutions (e.g. Foucault 1977). As regards children in particular, Holt (e.g. 1975), among others, argued that the character of schooling and of societal norms more generally oppressed children.

It has been said that a basic sociological step forward is to move children and childhood out of ‘a conceptual space that has been declared a-political’ (Elshtain 1981: Chapter 6; see also Elshtain 1996). This entails recognising that political decisions (on, for instance, health, welfare and education) do indeed affect children’s experiences; that is, that these experiences are structured by large-scale policies and by social traditions and assumptions. It also entails recognising that children are members of society, are active agents in society and, importantly, that they contribute to it, although children’s agency is itself socially structured (James 2009). This is where the important, central arguments of Jens Qvortrup and his colleagues come in. Qvortrup argues that children should be conceptualised as a social group, in the sense that they share commonalities, especially in relation to the economic system; these can be identified at local, inter-personal levels and in the specific ways in which macro-structures, policies and practices influence their lives (e.g. Qvortrup et al., 1994, 2009). For detailed examination of these influences, see Wintersberger (1994) and Sgritta (1994), who investigate the division of national resources as between various groups in society; and argue that children are
discriminated against economically by national policies and practices. These points about children as a social group are also discussed by Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie and Vandeveldt (2012) in section 4 of their paper, where they argue that children’s rights have been largely interpreted as individual rights, whereas it may also be useful to think about them as ‘collective rights’, and thus to take account of power relations that children experience and work with, and to analyse these power relations in order to work towards more respectful relations between adults and children.

Qvortrup argued in his first paper on childhood as a structural form (1985) that historical analysis showed the direct economic contributions children made – to their households and to the societal economy – during most of recorded history. Nowadays, he argues, children’s contributions in minority world societies are through the work children do in school, acquiring the knowledge and skills appropriate for that society. To put it more grandly, his analysis identifies children’s contributions to the division of labour. This contribution to thinking about children as workers in minority world countries has been taken up in later studies, where the idea that minority world children have stopped directly contributing to economic welfare has been challenged; for studies have documented children’s paid work and their unpaid work for households, including caring for family members (e.g. Morrow 1994; Mizen et al., 2001; Zelizer 2002, 2005). It is interesting that when English children themselves are asked whether what they do in school constitutes work, they give mixed responses; compared to what adults do, they say no; but as preparation for adulthood, some say yes (Mayall 2002: Chapter 5). It seems that some present-day children have absorbed the argument that they are not economic contributors to society.

Some of the arguments about children as contributors to the division of labour derive from feminist analyses. Male sociologists had conceptualised society into public and private domains, into the economic and the cultural. Women identified the need to tackle male assumptions that what they did at home was a natural part of emotional relationships; that men out there in the public sphere worked and that women at home in the private sphere did not. Instead, from the early 1970s onwards, women in the United States of America and across Europe argued that what they did at home should be conceptualised as work: washing, cleaning, cooking, caring for and caring about family members; indeed producing and caring for the next generation can be thought of as work without which society could not continue (e.g. Mitchell 1971; Oakley 1972). Similarly it can be argued – and has been documented – that children too carry out household tasks and that they too engage in caring work, forming and maintaining relations within the family (e.g. Alanen 1992; Mayall 2002: Chapter 5). These arguments about children’s contributions to the division of labour have, of course, particular resonance once we look at the wider world beyond minority world societies; and as will be discussed later on, the division of children’s labour between immediately productive work and school work, and local understandings of this division, perhaps have important lessons for minority world societies.

Consideration of children as members of society, contributing to its welfare, yet also having claims to be protected and provided for by adults, raises questions about children as a social group. Thus it has been argued that childhood is necessarily subordinated to adulthood and children to adults just because young children have to rely on adults to keep them alive, and to provide them with the means to grow healthily (Shamgar-Handelman 1994). Thence follow the cultural traditions whereby children must obey adults and be socialised by adults; and in particular the traditions of patriarchal power and rights (Therborn 1993; see also Hood-Williams 1990; Bardy 1994). Thence often also follows the argument that children are best off living with parents, since they should be regarded as responsible for their children and are best
placed to protect and to provide. However, the CRC contributes an important point here, by arguing (Article 5) for the responsibilities, rights and duties not only of parents, but of ‘the members of the extended family or community, as provided for by local custom’. It can be argued that, to the extent that societies neglect the rights of the social group children to a fair allocation of national resources, and to the extent that children are discriminated against, by those in power and by the power structures in a society, children can be understood as a minority social group (e.g. Sgritta 1994).

Göran Therborn’s (1993) argument is relevant here. He argues that the extent to which children’s rights are respected can be linked to or interpreted through consideration of large-scale influences in any given society, notably religion and law. Thus, through study of (mainly) European societies, he argues that some countries, including some southern societies, have strong Catholic traditions whereas others, including many northern societies, have Protestant traditions; and he argues that Catholicism has a stronger hold over citizens’ beliefs and practices than Protestantism, and relatively more fixed, long-established ideologies. Further, he argues, some societies, including many southern European societies have ‘civil law’ traditions, often based on Roman law, which include both ‘positive laws’ to suit men’s needs and ‘natural laws’, that is ideal laws; these laws may be further solidified by being coded, as in the Napoleonic Code. Other societies, including many northern societies, rely on legal systems (including common law), which are developed over time, through consideration of judicial precedents and through changing legislation. Again, he argues, civil law is more prescriptive and fixed than these developing systems. In both cases, religion and the law, the more prescriptive version relies heavily on and endorses patriarchy. Therborn concludes that the likelihood of a society respecting children’s rights will vary according to how fixed and unresponsive its religion and legal system are. And he argues that Nordic countries have gone further in respecting children’s rights than southern European ones. This argument provides an important instance of how sociological analysis can help us understand the circumstances in which children’s rights are or are not respected, and of how those rights are likely to be interpreted in accordance with the religious and legal traditions of the society. However, more work needs to be done on the extent to which children’s rights are indeed respected, both in law and in practice, in countries across Europe – and beyond.

At this point, it may be useful to take account of the analysis by Galant and Parlevliet (2005) of ways of understanding rights. Their four-part presentation provides a way into understanding sociological approaches to rights. Thus the authors argue that there are four dimensions to rights: rights as rules, rights as structures, rights as relationships and rights as processes. In brief, rights as rules refers to agreements, including legislation, and including also what is agreed in a society through custom or norms. Second, rights can also be understood as implemented through the structures of a society, through its institutions (such as education, welfare and health services) and policies designed to advance certain behaviours. Third, human rights fundamentally involve relations at all levels, between the individual and the state, between social groups, and between people in their everyday lives. And finally, the implementation of rights requires processes, through which participation in negotiations, in compromises, allows people to reach agreement. The authors note that there must be coherence between all four of these rights, so that people can rely on the clarity and integrity proposed by the four-part framework. The sociological approach to children’s rights (outlined in this chapter) can be understood as resting on this framework, with its emphasis on maintaining dialogue between the small-scale and the large-scale; and on relational processes through which change, including improvement, can be made. These points lead us on to the second section of this exploration of sociological ideas.
2.2. Studying relational processes

Here, we are concerned with how childhood and adulthood relate, at both macro and micro levels, and how each level of these relational processes affects the other. Indeed at this point we have to consider the argument that generation is a fundamental concept structuring how we are to think about childhood (Qvortrup 2009; Alanen 2009). For it can be said that essentially childhood and adulthood are not age-related; instead they are characterised in opposition to each other, that is, relationally. The status of child is arrived at by considering what it is not, that is the status of adulthood. For the status of adulthood includes the idea that the people inhabiting it do valuable things; and as briefly set out above, women have had to fight to get acceptance that what they do too is socially valuable. Indeed it has been proposed that one key reason why minority world children have been denied valuable status is that they have not been understood as doing socially valuable things (La Fontaine 1998). This point is recognised in the habit indulged in by colonial masters, of calling their servants ‘boys’; and, we may add, in the practice of some men in referring to women as ‘girls’, thus in both cases denying them the status of adult, that is of a valuable person. These points provide a commentary on the age-related definitions of the CRC (see for discussion, Chapter 1 in this Handbook, page 2).

It is also clear (and the above examples point to this) that in many societies, including minority world societies, the status ‘child’ is assigned to those who occupy positions of dependency vis-à-vis adults. As Judith Ennew (1994) explains, ‘… modern childhood constructs children out of society, mutes their voices, denies their personhood, limits their potential.’ The young people of minority world societies experience restrictions, conventions, assumptions, which emphasise what they must do and must not do, as well as what they cannot do. We have to recognise that social structures surrounding children generally emphasise chronological age as a marker of childhood, and indeed the CRC itself suggests under-18s are generally included in childhood, while recognising that societies may mark transition to adulthood at other ages or on the basis of concepts such as maturity or puberty. But alongside this common assumption that chronological age defines the limits of childhood, it is relevant to focus on this social ordering of childhood, this assignment to children of particular social locations and institutions, from which positions they participate in social life, and in particular participate in relations with those inhabiting the other major social location, adulthood (Alanen 2009). Alanen argues that just as gender has been a useful concept for deconstructing relations between the sexes, so when we are thinking about the childhood social group and the adult social group, we are concerned with relations between the generations.

One way of considering generational relations is to build on the work of Mannheim (1952/1928). He proposed that people born at a particular time are influenced by the traditions, policies, practices that are current at the time. Mannheim argued that some groups of people actively constitute themselves as a generational group, working together to construct new ideas that modify or challenge existing ideas. The French impressionists provide an example – a small group of young men (and a few women), who lived in Paris from the 1860s, met, talked, collaborated, exchanged notes, and through their paintings challenged contemporary ‘academic’ painting traditions and changed the character of pictorial art in France. Another example, making a slightly different point, is provided by ‘the 1968 generation’. In the 1960s, in revolt against post-war attempts to re-impose patriarchal and other traditional practices, people began to challenge these attempts and to propose more democratically organised societies. In that case, it can be suggested, it is not so much when these people were born, as the extent to which they identified with the new ideas. So the 1960s generation could be mixed in age-composition. This idea about generation was, perhaps for the first time, taken up in...
Germany by sociologists interested in childhood; they compared their own childhoods at around the time of the Second World War, with 1960s and 1970s childhoods, and related the on-the-ground character of these two sorts of childhoods to the large-scale changes and events taking place (see Zeiher, 2003, for a description of the study).

When we are thinking about relations between those assigned to childhood and those assigned to adulthood, we can go beyond chronological age as marker of these two groups, and instead think about the social structures, norms and practices that influence how people called children or adults are expected to live their lives. Then we can better understand what factors help to structure the relational processes that children and adults engage in. Currently in England, for example, government policies are requiring people up to the age of 18 to remain in education or training (including apprenticeships); in a sense, this means politicians are raising the age of entering adulthood from 16 (the former school-leaving age) to 18. The negotiations some of these young people are now having with teachers and parents are likely to reflect young people’s challenge to this enforced prolonging of the dependencies of childhood, for they might prefer to participate more directly in the social and economic activities of society – to be out at work, taking on some financial independence and contributing to the economic welfare of their household and of the society more generally. Indeed they may wish to participate more effectively in decision-making about how they spend their time, in accordance with Article 12 of the CRC.

At a macro level, we can study how local traditions, established policies and institutional norms provide bases for structuring services such as education, health and welfare. We can then consider how people, on the ground, respond to the character of these services: by acceptance, challenge or revolt. We can also consider the inter-personal relations of (as above) children and teachers, or parents and health professionals, in the light of the macro-structures organising their relations. An interesting take on these negotiations is provided by Bourdieu. He proposes that at inter-personal levels, a person negotiates his or her status vis-à-vis that of another person, by bringing to bear their ‘habitus’, that is, their assumptions, acquired knowledge, understanding of their place in the social system (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 94–130). Though he does not deal directly with childhood (but see Bourdieu 1995), an example could be the negotiations children have with their parents, for instance about what clothes they could or should wear, how much attention they should give or wish to give to school work, what importance they may and should give to friendships; for again, children’s participation rights are at issue here. The two generations bring differing knowledge and assumptions (habitus), as well as varying amounts and varying types of economic, social and cultural capital, to bear to these negotiations, based on their differing experience deriving from the traditions, customs, policies and practices of social worlds thirty or forty years apart.

Relational sociology offers a conceptual space for consideration of children’s own experiential knowledge and in recent years there has been a huge number of empirical studies that have explored that knowledge, by enlisting children to talk about their experiences (for discussion see James 2009). For one way of linking the small-scale with the large-scale is by situating children’s own accounts of their childhoods within the context of larger-scale factors that affect those childhoods (Alanen 2001); children’s agency can then be located within consideration of social structures. Feminism again offers a way into making sense of what children say and in doing so provides a fuller account of what their knowledge means and implies. Thus it has been argued that listening to women’s accounts means taking seriously the voices of those who are outsiders to the male-dominated social order; and through listening and analysing we move towards standpoint: gaining a fuller understanding of how the social order is experienced by an important social group (Smith 1988). The same point can be made about children: as a
minority social group they have important points to make about their experiences of childhood within the context of child–adult relations, and about how far they perceive that their rights are respected (Waksler 1996; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998; Mayall 2002: Chapter 9). Of course it can be argued that for women to listen to women and then to analyse and discuss the wider social order in relation to women's accounts, is different, perhaps more likely to be successful, than for adults to engage with children's experiences. On the other hand, we adults have all been children and perhaps retain some empathy with their social status. Perhaps as time goes on more space (and funds) will be granted to children to carry out their own research, and to reflect on what they find. We should note too that the explosion of empirical studies with and for children has led on to work both on methods of working with children to elicit their perspectives (e.g. Greene and Hogan 2005; Christensen and James 2008) and on the ethics of research with children (e.g. Alderson and Morrow 2011).

3. The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights

The above brief account of some major features of the sociology of childhood allows us to consider why we need a separate convention for children and for childhood; and also why it is so hard for its articles to be cemented into the laws and practices of societies. If we think of children's rights as human rights, then sociology allows us to compare the character of childhoods with the character of adulthoods, and to consider differences and how these point to the need for a convention specifically aimed at improving childhoods. We may take three kinds of difference to make the point.

First, child–adult relations are characterised through adult understandings at a specific time in a specific society of what childhood consists of. When children are thought of as incomplete, as lacking the crucial abilities adults associate with themselves, with children regarded as embarked on a socialisation journey towards the gold standard of adulthood, it is an easy response for adults to relate to children through authoritarian behaviour, through oppression, through the imposition of norms for childhood that may be experienced by children themselves as inappropriate. Alongside such behaviours, adults may focus on protecting and providing for children, not only when children are young and lacking the physical competence to provide for themselves, but when children manifestly can do so. As Gerison Lansdown (1994) argued, adults tend to confuse biological vulnerabilities with social constructed ones. Adult assumptions and behaviours can then be found incorporated into customs, religions, norms and practices, governing what children may and may not do. However, it is an important feature of the CRC (though itself devised by adults) that it helps to alter the balance of power by focusing on the concept of participation rights whereby children may work towards changing adult–child relations.

Second, of particular concern for those who have listened to children talking about how adults behave to them is the point outlined at the start of this chapter: that children experience adult unwillingness to believe that they are morally competent. Evidence from minority world children indicates that they find they are routinely not believed, and not thought capable of judging rationally; they talk of being falsely blamed. At root is their experience that they are not taken seriously as members of the human species (Waksler 1996; Mayall 2002: Chapter 5). I do not know how far this experience is common across societies and the topic would merit investigation.

Third, in minority world societies, children are not regarded as contributing to the division of labour. Instead, childhood is conceptualised as preparation, outside the political sphere. Contributions to the division of labour are restricted to adults. At its most problematic, this
perceived absence means that children and their activities are not valued; their value is seen as entirely in the future, as economic contributors in adulthood. It is one of the merits of the globalisation of childhood research that it is forcing minority world people to take account in their thinking of the economic contributions to household and national economies made by children across the majority world; and to reconsider the division of children’s time and effort between schooling and more direct economic contributions across both majority and minority world societies.

All in all, study of childhood in relation to adulthood clearly points to the need for a convention that takes account of the specific differences between childhood and adulthood, which may differ across societies, but which will be found in any society. That is, that children, especially in early childhood, are weaker and less experienced than adults. In this context, it is clear that a convention is required in order to encourage adults to respect children as human. The CRC has fulfilled this need, in the sense that it recognises that in all societies young children do require adults to protect them and provide for them, alongside the recognition that children must be enabled to take part in decision-making in matters that affect them. This entails adult respect for children as moral agents, and recognition of and respect for children’s developing physical capacities, which will enable them to take part in productive activities.

However, sociological investigation also clearly points to the power of established beliefs, customs, norms and practices in shaping how people live their lives. It is the power of these beliefs, customs, norms and practices as operationalised by adults that inhibit adults from implementing children’s rights. And sociology points to how these beliefs and so on become formalised into institutions and laws, so that people live out their lives on the basis of unconsidered assumptions. In commentaries on the drafting processes towards the CRC, it has been noted how international negotiations had to be carefully undertaken and compromises made in order that countries would be willing to sign up to the Convention (e.g. Johnson 1992; Freeman 2000; Cantwell 2011). In the next section of this chapter, I consider some reports on recent research studies, relating to children’s rights, in order to examine in more detail how the macro and micro have been found to inter-relate and what the consequent character of childhood turns out to be. I try to show how study of relational processes across the generations contribute to understanding, and to changes in the status and character of childhood – and of adulthood. And in addition the aim is to explore how local beliefs and practices shape understandings of children’s rights.

4. Lessons from research studies

Here, I consider some recent research studies in order to provide a critical look at the assumptions, norms and values that shape practices based on the idea that children have rights. For, the simple appeal to articles of the Convention as a basis for practice is not adequate in the task of uncovering understandings that lie deep and may be unquestioned. All the studies chosen here relate local practice and experience to large-scale features of the society, and thus can be understood as broadly sociological in approach. Consideration of these studies provides a commentary on the points made in the Introduction to the Handbook about the importance of approaching children’s rights through a critical perspective, taking account of local circumstances and of interactive processes between stakeholders. Quennerstedt (2013) gives further discussion of these points.

A paper by Lucia Rabello de Castro (2012) describes a study of how students (aged 12 to 21) at private and municipal schools in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, defined participation in the school setting. She conducted open-ended interviews with students and with school staff in
order to investigate this topic. She found that both students and staff, in the main, worked according to a ‘conservative’ understanding of participation; that is, students said that participation comprised conformity to school norms: ‘an individual endeavour to act out the students’ role adequately, that is to attend classes, to be attentive during classes, to study and do the homework’. This vision was endorsed by the staff, who explained that the students were immature and needed guidance, for otherwise they would act unwisely; furthermore, students, and especially those elected to stand on school councils, should also help the staff with the smooth running of the school. A minority of students argued in favour of some form of individual or collective resistance to the norms of the school. Rabello de Castro, discussing the findings, notes that staff feared losing control over students’ behaviour, and she emphasises how the prevailing norms of student behaviour reflected developmental assumptions about children’s incompetence and immaturity. She argues, in conclusion, that it will be necessary for the education system in Brazil to take what she defines as political steps, towards democratising the schools. This conclusion points to the intersection of the articles in the CRC; in order to work within its spirit, it is not enough to conform to just one or a selection of articles (in this case the right to schooling); the character of schooling has to be thought of in relation not only to the articles referring to participation but to the spirit that underpins the CRC as a whole. Again, I refer to the initial example in this chapter, where it appears that providing a free comprehensive and compulsory school system in England has not altered the assumptions of policy-makers and teachers about the proper relations of adults to children. As Rabello de Castro concludes, what is required is a politicising of child–adult relations. For a further interesting discussion of the politics of respecting children’s rights, see also Helle Rydstrøm’s (2006) paper on problematic inter-relations between deep-seated ideas about rearing boys in rural Vietnam and respect for children’s rights.

Just how complex a matter it is to respect children’s rights adequately is demonstrated in a paper exploring how far children are consulted when they are within the asylum-seeking system in Norway (Lidén and Rusten 2007). Norway is one the few countries that has deliberately incorporated the CRC into its domestic law (in 2003) and it is therefore an interesting country to consider in respect of implementation. When asylum-seeking children and parents arrive in Norway it is customary for officials to interview both adults and children, in order to establish their stories and their reasons for seeking asylum. Various issues arise. It will be important that the adults who do the interviews know how best to talk with children. And though, according to the Norwegian regulations, children must be accompanied to the interview by a parent, the presence of this parent may be inhibiting to the child and may influence what he or she says. And then there is the question of what weight is to be given to the respective views and reported experiences of the adults and of the children who are seeking asylum.

This paper points up the complexities that have to be faced in a thorough-going approach to implementation of the CRC. It appears that aiming for good practice, in accordance with children’s rights has presented Norway with as yet unsolved problems. The researchers argue that there is a need in the asylum system for better understanding about child-specific forms of persecution and suffering, as well as a more systematic approach to the use of human rights standards in the analysis of claims, including cross-referencing of CRC articles. Here they note in particular the intersecting relevance of Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12. They also argue for better training for case-workers who interview children and parents so that they may elicit more appropriate data. And they argue that lawyers should be given a mandate to include children in the family’s asylum proceedings, so that children’s participation rights and their best interests come together.
A number of studies have highlighted the importance of sociological understanding of norms and values in any society where people, either its citizens or others visiting the society with the aim of helping, are concerned with implementing the CRC. For instance, a paper by Henderson (2006) focuses on the importance of analysing a specific topic in relation to local understandings of family and community. She carried out a detailed study over three years focusing on children in South Africa whose parents had died of AIDS. She found that a minority world assumption that these children should be defined as ‘vulnerable victims’ and as ‘orphans’ did not fit with how the children and local adults responded after these parental deaths. For, commonly, the children had wider kin connections and came to live with relatives in the extended family, whose members regarded themselves as responsible for the children, or they were taken into the households of other members of the local community. And though the children themselves had suffered and still suffered from their bereavement, they were active in reconfiguring a sense of place for themselves, drawing on networks of kin and local opportunities for agency. In so doing they were taking part in the economic and cultural activities of the community. So this study raised questions about what kind of help incomers to the society can most usefully give; if any.

Another example of how those seeking to promote children’s rights must take account of cultural beliefs and practices and how these intersect with structural factors, if they are to make any headway, is provided in a study of a small community in northern Tanzania. Marida Hollos (2002) examined adult ideas about childhood, and about inter-relations between adults and children. She found that large-scale economic factors had brought about local change in these ideas. Traditionally, adults had made their living through agriculture (in an area of poor fertility), within a patrilineal system of responsibility and dependency. In these ‘lineage societies’, children were understood and valued as responsible participants in the work of their family and were cared for in the family on the basis that they took part in economic activity (see also Punch 2001). But over several generations, the custom of parcelling out the very limited arable land available to sons (usually at marriage) and the consequent inability of people to make a living from the unfertile and overworked land area, has forced young men to find other work, in some cases far from home. Young men may establish a wife and children in their home area, and visit when they can. Following these changes, there has then been a move among some people in the area to focus their resources more on the nuclear family; and arising out of this change, has come a change in adult valuations of children; children are described as having emotional value, bringing joy to their parents. Hollos gives a summary of how these changes work out: in lineage families children ‘work a lot, play little, and rest and study even less’; in nuclear families, children ‘work little, play a lot, rest quite a bit, and study’. Hollos’ study demonstrates in detail how changing economic conditions feed into changes in how children are valued: what children and childhood are for. Anyone wishing to promote children’s rights would have to work with these varying and changing valuations of childhood.

A final example of how a sociological approach is key to understanding human rights at local level is provided by Virginia Morrow and Kirrily Pells (2012). For this paper, they draw on the Young Lives programme of longitudinal research into the lives of young people growing up in poverty in Andra Pradesh (India) and Ethiopia. They note that debates and programmes concerned with poverty in the twenty-first century have seldom connected up with discussions and actions relating to children’s rights; and they argue by contrast that it is essential to consider how economic deprivation affects children directly, and to focus on the political and economic processes, and the structures that create, or fail to reduce, poverty. Poverty structures local understandings of rights and responsibilities. For this paper they draw mainly on interviews and discussions with young people. Young people (aged 15 to 16) in
Andra Pradesh found that work was hard, and it was difficult to combine work with school, but it was essential for them to contribute to the family’s economic survival. Further, as in other studies, they said that work teaches you valuable skills and it is fundamental to relations with others in the community. Another sub-study, in Ethiopia, focused on orphans (defined by intervening agencies as orphans and vulnerable children) and again, through interviews with children aged 9 to 16, the researchers found that poverty underlay many of the children’s concerns; it was necessary to work in order to help the household they lived in. Morrow and Pells argue that the common minority world assumption that these children are above all ‘vulnerable’ (as also documented by Henderson 2006) does not reflect the children’s own perspectives and experiences, which are locked into their relations with those they live with, and have to be understood through engagement with the structures and processes of poverty within which these children exercise agency and live out their childhoods.

5. Further comments

The points made earlier about how sociology can help us understand the social positioning of children and the relational processes that they engage in, have been explored in relation to some examples. The research studies emerging from the minority and majority worlds are pointing to the key importance of studying how children relate to the economic and political contexts they live in; and how adult ideas about childhood locally and internationally shape those childhoods, but are challenged by children themselves. The study of children’s rights, if and how they are respected, shows it is necessary to think about local understandings of what childhood is, and how childhood relates to adulthood, within socio-economic and political contexts.

Thus, for instance, let us consider ideas about children’s relations with family. Studies, such as those for the Young Lives programme, show that children’s engagement with family may comprise the responsibility of all members to contribute to the economic, as well as social, welfare of the family, as soon as they are physically able. But other studies show another set of ideas, which we may regard as complementary rather than competing. An example of how family and dependency may be differently envisaged comes from a study in Bangladesh, where women and children are regarded as dependents, and a crucial social system involves guardianship, whereby a male, usually but not always related, is responsible for the behaviour and development of women and children (White 2007). This does not mean that women and children are not economically active, but it does mean that their agency is under the control of the guardian. This example resonates with commonly held views in the UK, where children are commonly regarded as dependents (and traditionally as under patriarchal power); and parents are held responsible for their children’s behaviour (see Therborn 1996). White argues that an adequate approach to children’s rights is to regard them as human rights but to think about them in a given society in relation to the customs, history and norms of that society. Through this analysis one would aim to find the conceptual spaces that may allow for progress to be made on children’s rights. However, here it will be crucial for local people, rather than incomers, to take the lead in considering avenues of change. In the UK, for example, as in many minority world societies, responsibility for initiating and implementing change will depend on what division of responsibility for children is in force, as between parents and the state; for in the UK we may argue that responsibility for children’s provision and protection rights rests ultimately with government and can thus be best pursued through political processes; whereas when it comes to participation, some researchers aim to demonstrate children’s competence, through study of their agency and active engagement with social problems (e.g. Percy-Smith and Thomas 2009). However, it is crucial, if progress is to be made, that adults who work with
and for children at all levels of society (parents, paid workers in the law, education and social work, civil servants, politicians) be educated about children’s rights.

The globalising world brings with it both disadvantages and advantages (as the Introduction points out). Thus Morrow and Pells (2012) argue that globalisation, organised or influenced by international agencies, brings with it undue emphasis on ‘modernisation’, and on ‘outcomes’, conceived of in mainly economic terms. As regards children, these goals carry dangers, since the aim may be to change childhoods in line with minority world childhoods, without due attention to local understandings and conditions. Alongside that problem, is the perennial challenge: how to tackle the task of improving childhoods, given local socio-economic conditions (Rizzini and Bush 2002). A case in point is schooling. In order that children may ‘compete’ in the globalised world, it may be proposed that childhood everywhere should be fully scholarised, and that children’s productive work be abolished. This would require a re-ordering of state and family responsibility for children, in the direction of the provision of free schooling. Yet globalisation has upsides; it improves our understanding. Thus we learn from children who do paid work – in both the minority and majority worlds – that apart from its directly economic benefits, work confers dignity, self-worth, connection to the local community, as well as useful skills (Mizen et al., 2001; see also Hanson, Volonakis and Al-Rozzi, Chapter 18 in this Handbook); and we also learn from our scholarised children that they do not feel valued, as moral agents or as contributors to the local or more general good. Globalisation is also allowing for a range of sometimes competing ideas about childhood to circulate, to be debated and to be considered in local and international contexts. Olga Nieuwenhuys (2005) has provided a useful discussion of the ILO’s and World Bank’s endorsement of children’s rights to a protected scholarised childhood, and she offers a more nuanced view of the intergenerational reciprocities and responsibilities observable in majority – but also in minority – world societies. Empirical research studies in both majority and minority world societies are forcing us in the minority world to rethink childhood, especially as regards children as economic contributors; and more generally to reconsider the status of childhood in our societies. For instance a series of seminars brought together researchers from a range of societies to discuss their projects and their ideas about childhood, across societies (Tisdall and Punch 2012).

This chapter has woven together a macro approach to childhood with an emphasis on relationality. It has shown how attention to the large-scale is essential to understanding childhoods and to understanding whether and how children’s rights are respected. An important theme in these considerations is the inter-relations between responsibility, family and community. Freeman (2009) noted that during the negotiations towards the CRC, the notion of intergenerational responsibility in families was debated and it was concluded that children’s responsibilities towards older generations in their family could not be included in the CRC, since they could not be enforced and/or might lead to children becoming economic slaves of their parents. However, several African countries did argue for the inclusion of inter-generational responsibilities, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) included Article 31 stressing these. And a theme running through many of the empirical studies with children (in many societies) is their understanding that they do have responsibilities up the generations, notably to help maintain the economic welfare of the family. It has been an important aim of research with children to explore these understandings in majority world societies (e.g. Liebel 2012) and also in minority world societies (e.g. Mizen et al., 2001). Further, the notion that as people we are interdependent members of communities (however defined, and with whatever scope and range), as discussed, for instance by John O’Neill (1994), is an important consideration that seems to hover at the edges of debates about rights, and about responsibilities. Young people themselves tend to discuss their increasing independence in the
context of their continuing interdependence within their families and peer relations (Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland 2001; for more general discussion, see also Morrow 2003). Furthermore, in the examples discussed above, respect for rights seems to be linked into high evaluation of inter-dependent family relations across the generations and of the idea of community. Thus the Brazilian students and staff looked for a well-functioning school community (Rabello de Castro 2012), the Norwegians were working towards including asylum-seekers into their community (Lidén and Rusten 2007), the ‘AIDS orphans’ in South Africa were welcomed into the homes of community members (Henderson 2006); the Andra Pradesh young people valued their work in part because it gave them a stake in their community (Morrow and Pells 2012); and the life or death of a Tanzanian community was interlinked with how children’s responsibilities to family were conceptualised (Hollos 2002). It would seem therefore that there is room for in-depth studies of how children’s rights in a given society link in with understandings of both responsibilities and community.

Questions for debate and discussion

• What are the limits of children’s agency?
• What contributions do children make to the division of labour, in varying societies?
• How useful is it to think of childhood as social status (rather than as defined by age)?
• How can children and adults collaborate towards greater respect for children’s rights?
• In what respects is it useful to think in terms of children’s collective rights (rather than, or as well as, their individual rights)?
• What is the importance of concepts of community and inter-generational responsibilities for understandings of children’s contributions to societal well-being?

References


