

Paper presented at
WELLCI Network Workshop 1: New perspectives on childhood
The Centre for Research on Family, Kinship & Childhood
University of Leeds (UK), 12-13 November, 2004

Leena Alanen

Department of Early Childhood Education
University of Jyväskylä (Finland)
lalanen@edu.jyu.fi

Theorizing children's welfare

1 Introduction

The main intention in my talk is to traverse the rather confusing field of different notions of welfare and some of the research approaches applied and developing in the field, in order to clear some ground for developing a theoretically informed sociological approach for the study of children's welfare. So the questions I am asking are:

- what we are talking about when we are talking children's welfare, that is: how do we conceptualize children's welfare?
- what alternative notions, frameworks and theories does the social scientific literature on welfare and welfare policy provide us which could be applicable in studying children's welfare?
- what routes of development may lie ahead when we want to go on to develop a sociology of children's welfare?

My interest in these questions derives both from earlier work and from my present involvement in two research projects:

- The international COST Action 19: 'Children's welfare' (2001-2005)
- 'Regimes of childhood and children's welfare' (2004-2007; funded by the Finnish Research Council)

The objectives of the *COST project* include the following:

- to improve the understanding of children's welfare under the impact of globalisation, internationalisation, and the market, as growing factors in children's lives;
- to improve understandings of differences in welfare, space and time use between children and between generational groupings (e.g. children vs. adults);

- to improve the understanding of children's provision from public (state) budgets;
- to make children's welfare transparent as far as the intergenerational distribution of resources and children's use of space and time are concerned.

The *Regimes of childhood and children's welfare* project is closely affiliated with the international COST project. The focus is now on children's welfare in one national case - Finland: We aim to penetrate more deeply into some of the central issues targeted in the international project. There are three subprojects:

- Children's share of economic resources
- Children's space regimes and childhood as a symbolic place,
- Welfare regimes and discourses of child welfare.

The frameworks for both of these projects derive from the development and results of the field of **Childhood Studies**, and particularly from the development in the **sociology of childhood**.

A brief introduction to what Childhood Studies and the sociology of childhood are may be helpful for some of the participants of this workshop. I will then take a look at the welfare research literature, and ask: where are children and childhood in these studies. And finally I will suggest some ways that sociologists might find useful in developing a theoretically informed sociology of children's welfare.

2 Childhood Studies: a brief introduction

The project of producing sociological knowledge on children and childhood began some twenty years ago by a critique of conventional sociological knowledge, criticized for being negligent, even discriminating and repressive towards children. Typically, it was argued, children were excluded from being regarded as legitimate empirical objects of sociological study even when the research issue was on one or another aspect of their lives. Also children were typically treated as 'dependent variables' of various categories of adults, professions and institutions who 'have' children, take care of them, work on them, are responsible for organizing their living conditions, or in any other way relate to them. Consequently children were looked upon from the viewpoints of adults, professions, agencies and institutions. Such research practices unavoidably produced knowledge that was massively adult-centred, paternalistic and "adult chauvinist": they presented an *ideological* viewpoint on children and

childhood (Joffe 1973, Speier 1976), that is - at best - a both partial and biased viewpoint (Goode 1986; Waksler 1986).

The social scientific notion that this critique held most responsible for keeping the sociological knowledge of children and childhood both partial and biased is 'socialization'. Beginning from the classical texts of the discipline and extending to the latest textbooks, this concept has been foundational for any sociological discussions on children and childhood. Irrespective of the fact that there now exist a number of different understandings of 'socialization', they all converge on this: children are *non-social, not-yet-social, in the process of becoming social*, and therefore in need of being *made social*. And because of their not-yet-social nature, children have remained marginal to the proper concerns of sociology, which is the (already) social (Ambert 1986).

The perspective to children provided by 'socialization' is, moreover, also inherently *adultist*, as it brings children into view from the singular viewpoint of adults and adult society.

And thirdly, it is also a limited perspective in that it is '*forward-looking*', or anticipatory; the interest is in what children are going to be, and not in what they presently are, or do, how they feel about the world around them, what their experiences are, and so on: they are effectively 'social becomings', not social beings, and also therefore children fell to the margins of the discipline.¹

To correct such faults, a redirection of sociological work began. This time children needed to be placed in the centre of sociological attention and studied 'in their own right', and not as appendices to the (adult) social world. And to end the sociological discrimination of children required also that researchers include in their research material the views, experiences, activities, relationships and knowledges of children, directly and first-hand. Where adults had

¹ See e.g. Speier (1976), Thorne (1987), Qvortrup (1990) and Waksler (1991) for discussions of this critique, and Alanen (1988: 56-63; 1992: 11-20, 80-90) for an analysis of the socialization discourse. Different sociological traditions and schools of thinking have their own refined notions of 'socialization'; it is not a homogeneous construct and, therefore, such critique may not apply in each case. Also 'socialization' can have its uses, as when one's concern is with what adults do when their goal is to prepare children for life in the social worlds of which adults are a part. What the socialization critique claims that it is a limiting notion if the aim is to illuminate what children themselves do while being socialized (which has an impact on the products of socialization), and it completely ignores the other processes and activities in which children are also engaged while being socialized. Texts on children's socialization should therefore read as 'portrayals of adult perspectives while recognizing that other perspectives are possible' (Waksler 1991).

been routinely the target population of social scientific study, now also children will need to qualify as relevant units of research. They will, moreover, be seen as the (methodological) equals of other members of society: as social actors (agents) and as participants in the everyday social world, contributing to its events and thereby also to its reproduction and its transformation.

Looking today at the short history of the sociology of childhood, it is understandable that most of the new and corrective research on childhood that we may now read, actually has focused directly on 'real' children, their activities and experiences, understandings, knowledges and meanings. As children too act in the social world and participate in the social life around them, and are involved in the construction of events in their daily lives, their relationships and 'negotiations' with the adult world and among themselves are have been brought into the centre of attention.

1. A *sociology of children* has grown out of this early critique and subsequent correction of existing research paradigms. It strongly emphasises the study of children's everyday lives, experiences and knowledges. In the important first codification of the new childhood sociology field (James & Prout 1990), the authors suggested (in 1990) that a new paradigm for the study of childhood was emerging. The central tenets that they then listed for the paradigm describe the kind of sociological work on childhood that is here called the sociology of children. Quantitatively this is today still the dominant approach that researchers in the field take. It is a particularly dominant approach in British childhood studies - a feature for which it would be interesting to hear explanations!

2. A second, *deconstructive sociology of children and childhoods* emerged from discussions in social sciences around post-positivist ("socio-constructionist") methodologies and their implications for how the social world should be understood and researched. Here the notions of 'the child', 'children' and 'childhood' are all viewed as semiotic, discursive formations that convey ideas and images through which children and childhood are, and have been, 'known' and communicated as the "truths" of their time. The sociologist now looks at 'the child' and 'childhood' (and related notions) and sees them as social and cultural constructions (cf. Jenks 1996).

The practical significance of the existence of such constructions is that we find them incorporated in the broader social models of action and cultural practices that provide cultural scripts and rationales for people to act in relation to, and on, children and childhood. The task of the sociologist is now to 'deconstruct' ("unpack") such constructions - the cultural ideas, images and models of children and childhood – by exposing the actors, the interests and the circumstances and processes of their production, interpretation, communication and practical implementation. As this specific route to investigate childhood relies on discursive, semiotic methods, it can also be called the *discursive sociology of children and childhood*.

3. A third, *structural sociology of childhood* has also been developing in which childhood is taken as a (relatively) permanent element in (modern) social life whereas for individual children it of course marks only a transient period of life. In this view, 'childhood' itself is a structural - both structured and structuring - phenomenon (see e.g. Qvortrup 1994). To see childhood in this way, it is instructive to think of it as being comparable and parallel to the proto-sociological 'class', as well as the more recent feminist invention of 'gender' - and the list could be extended to include 'race'/ethnicity and disability which also have been treated by sociologists as structural phenomena. Such a parallelization also serves the idea that the particular structural form that childhood takes in a particular country, culture or some more limited location, is the result of the continuous interplay between childhood and these other structures.

The structural approach to childhood implies for research macro-analysis (e.g. Qvortrup 2000). The actual living children, each with their different and individually experienced childhoods, are left outside the immediate focus; they are of course there, but assembled under the socially formed category of childhood. The central task of the structurally operating sociologist is to link empirical manifestations that are observed at the level of children's lived everyday lives with their macro-level contexts. This is accomplished by identifying the specific social structures and large-scale processes which (in interplay with other structures and linked processes) impact children's daily lives and living conditions, and produce common, unifying features in children's conditions. Children thereby make a materially, socially and culturally constructed generational group.

These three strands of sociological approaches to children and childhood should not be seen as alternatives and even less as rivals. At present they also should not be understood as fully

developed theoretical and methodological 'paradigms'. However, what they can do is to provide different, complementing lenses to use in researching children and their social conditions. I personally find the distinction between them helpful also when reading the welfare research literature. I will now move to that area, but before doing so, a methodological note:

In the two children's welfare projects (the COST Action 19 and the adjacent Finnish project), material, social and cultural resources such as income, space and time as well as discourses and rights are viewed as constraints, opportunities and limitations for children to practice their agency. The both objective and subjective experience by children, of such constraints, opportunities and limitations as well as their use (or non-use) can be taken to constitute the lived and experienced childhoods, thereby also indicating the state of children's welfare/well-being. Generally, the methodology of the international project assumes that children in all European countries form an institutionally and culturally established category of persons, and starting from this assumption, children's access to and use of a number of valued and welfare-relevant resources is described, analyzed and compared cross-nationally. Thus, the methodology defines a *structural-categorical* approach to in researching children and their welfare.

This, however, is not the only possible methodological approach in the study of childhood. The Finnish subproject aims, among other things, at a deeper analysis of how welfare is 'produced' for (and also by) children, by way of applying a *structural-relational* approach (more on this approach: Alanen 2001a, 2001b). In this case childhood is conceptualized as a socially generated (social) *position* within a (number of) generational structure(s). Childhood - and there can be a plurality of them in any (sub-)society - now refers to the figurations of specifically *generational* relations with which children, on a daily basis, engage themselves and through participation in relations co-produce themselves as 'children', i.e. as occupiers of particular generational positions, in relation to a number of other (e.g. adult) positions. The analytical focus therefore is on exploring (1) those structures that can be identified as specifically generational, and not class, or gender structures (within which children certainly also live), as well as on (2) the positions and the practices of positioning that generate, maintain and (occasionally) transform the generational structures. As in this approach the primary unit of research is 'relations', and not individual children or an aggregate of children living in and through those relations, this (methodological as well as theoretical) approach is

discernable from other structural perspectives to childhood as a (structural-)relational approach.² My contention is that in studying children's welfare the relational approach is more helpful in producing a *dynamic* analysis on how children's welfare is produced than e.g. the structural-categorical approach.³

3 Welfare research: where are the children?

When looking through the already massive research literature on welfare and well-being, in the aim to find theoretical resources for developing a sociological view on children's welfare, two challenges emerge from the reading::

- 1) one of missing knowledge on children's welfare - the empirical challenge - and
- 2) one of undeveloped theorization of children's welfare - the conceptual challenge.

The challenge of missing knowledge

Two empirical observations: *First*, the quality of childhood and state of children's well-being are a permanent concern in public discourse and political debates in many Western countries. Furthermore, the living conditions and social circumstances of children today are widely believed to result in problems for individual children in their interaction with their significant others and the social world in general. This would imply that in countries in which governments are committed to promoting welfare for their citizens, that there is a strong need, in both public discourse and welfare policy-making, for scientific evidence knowledge concerning children's welfare and well-being.

However - and this is the *second*, contrasting observation - the existing scientific knowledge about the social processes, or 'mechanisms', through which children's welfare (or "illfare") at any point of time and in any place is generated, recognized and responded to by the wider

² On categorical and relational methodologies, see e.g. Connell 1987, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992. Pierre Bourdieu argues strongly for a relationalist methodology and contrasts it with a mode of thought that he (following Cassirer) calls 'substantialism' which "leads people to recognize no realities except those that are available to direct intuition in ordinary experience, individuals and groups". Relationalism (or relationism; Scott 1998), identifies the real not with substances but with relations, and sociology, according to this view, is the analysis of these relations, that is: "relative positions and relations between positions" (Bourdieu 1990, 126; 1998, 3). "The real is relational" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 232).

³ 'Structure' in itself is a social scientific concept with many meanings (see e.g. Porpora 1998). The two structural approaches to the study of childhood briefly described above also can be seen to apply two different notions of structure.

society, remains amazingly scanty, and when existing, narrow in approach. That is: children and childhood have largely been overseen both in academic research on welfare and in the welfare policy domain.

The theoretical challenge

In the welfare research field, children have not yet been anywhere high on the agenda.⁴ Attention to this omission, and even outright neglect of children and childhood in welfare (and welfare state) research, is a fairly recent one, and again, one may ask why this is so.

This is a strong claim, and may need some qualification. Well yes, some attention has, certainly, been focused on children also within welfare research and the welfare policy domain, but *this has tended to be on a single issue*, such as *poverty, child labour*, or comparisons of a single *child welfare system*, such as child benefits or day care arrangements.

Alternatively children have been used in research and policy debates in a purely *instrumental* fashion. In such cases they have been added to the story of welfare development through the assumption that being a child basically means to be on a preparatory stage for adulthood and citizenship - the socialization paradigm at work, repeating the view that children are merely 'becomings', and not 'beings', even less full citizens.

Based on such an understanding of children it can be argued that children are a reasonable object of economic, social or cultural *investments* (such as poverty alleviation, provision of family benefits, or day-care services), the expectation being that societal gains will be reaped from these investments some time in the future. This is the well-known argument of Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2002) for "a child-centred social investment strategy".

Welfare: Concepts and approaches

The idea and the concept of welfare is far older than welfare research as a domain of scientific work, or social policy as a domain of social praxis (Barry 1999). Since the origin of welfare

⁴ Historians of welfare (e.g. Hendrick 2003), however, have shown greater sensitivity to the issue, bringing the phenomenon up to modern times and debates.

as a philosophical, and also as a moral and political term, diverse old and new meanings have been added to and removed from it, leading to the present situation in which the term is

- ambiguous,
- used in many senses and
- may even convey quite opposite senses.

Scanning through the now vast welfare research literature, one may find that the term is made to refer,

- to the health, happiness, and fortunes of a person or a group (or an animal),
- to statutory procedures or social efforts designed to promote the basic physical and material well-being of people (or animals),
- to systems of service provision whose ostensible aim is to promote social well-being and alleviate social distress,
- to forms of assistance that have the child's best interests at heart,
- to organized provision of educational, cultural, medical, and financial assistance to the needy,
- to the financial assistance to poor people, and
- (in welfare economics), simply to a utility.

The complexities in the meaning of the concept of welfare are further compounded by the fact that

“in the last thirty years, the concept has been inextricably bound up with the philosophy of the welfare state... This underestimates the importance of non-state institutions for dealing with the dominant welfare problem, the relief of deprivation, and for the supply of typical welfare goods, such as education, health and pensions.” (Barry 1999.)

So there is a broad *diversity* in the use of the term and the meaning of the concept. There exist furthermore *a broad range of research traditions and methodological approaches* under the umbrella term of 'welfare research'.

This makes the field conceptually confusing, and it seems therefore that to progress in the conceptualization of children's welfare we

- take a critical look at - or 'deconstruct' - the concepts used and the research approaches currently applied in the field, and
- ask to which extent, and on what assumptions, are they able to incorporate children within their conceptual construction.

Among the best-known in the literature on welfare, and most frequently applied *approaches* there are the following:

- 1) the 'standard of living', or 'quality of life approach (Ripley 2003);

- 2) the 'social indicators' approach (Micklewright & Stewart 2000; Ben-Arieh & Wintersberger 1997; Joos 2001),
- 3) the 'needs' approach (Doyal & Gough 1991); and
- 4) the 'capabilities' approach (Nussbaum 1990; Sen 1992).

Finally, the now voluminous study of the welfare state has produced

- 5) the 'welfare state regimes' approach (originally Esping-Andersen 1990; critically, among many others: Sainsbury 1994, 1999).

In addition to a critical deconstruction of such research paradigms, a useful distinction is provided by Martin O'Brien and Sue Penna (1998) for the attempt to incorporate also children into welfare theorizing,. In their book (titled 'Theorising welfare') they distinguish between two interconnected components of welfare theory which they name

- (1) a theory of *social welfare*, and
- (2) a *social theory* of welfare.

In the first form of theorizing - which will produce *theories of social welfare* - the focus is on "how distributions of resources and opportunities and social patterns of access, participation, inclusion and exclusion support, or contribute to or undermine individual and collective welfare. In short it is a *theory of the organization of social relations* and of the *impacts of this organization on individual and collective well-being*" (O'Brien & Penna 1998, 4).

This form of theorizing is essentially a *theory for welfare policy*: it aims to (theoretically) open up the particular views of social and political life that are implicit in the policy and welfare frameworks that are intended to generate more 'effective', more 'rational', more 'just', more 'humanitarian' or otherwise more 'appropriate' policy operation and outcome.

The premises and basic assumptions of such frameworks are typically about people's behaviour, learning or interacting, the formation and change of attitudes, or how people generate resources and share them. They are the premises of welfare frameworks in that they guide the making of social policies and welfare programmes as well as their implementation; and they will tell us how welfare will be provided and life will be experienced when the policy or programme is implemented (idem, 4-5).

O'Brien and Penna point out that this sort of theorizing is essentially *normative*: it tells us how people *should* act and what beliefs they *should* have, how political or economic

institutions *should* operate and how organizations *should* relate to the populations they serve *if* we are to make our policies and programmes work "better" (that is: to produce the wanted efficiency or outcomes).

It is useful to note that one in no way need to take a theory with such a normative logic in a negative sense, as if it would necessarily refer to manipulation and direction of people's beliefs and behaviours. In fact many historical as well as more recent strands of critical social and political theorizing - such as liberal, Marxist or ecological theories - show great concern for changing people's behaviours or social institutions in order to create more just, more egalitarian, or more democratic structures and relations, and thereby, welfare - in whatever way it is defined in each case.

Normative thinking frequently underpins policies and programmes that are publicly proposed and promoted in the claimed aim of advancing of the well-being of children. Therefore, we should come to the conclusion that *to theorize children's welfare implies the task of uncovering and making transparent the cognitive (discursive) structures within such policies and programmes, and the standpoints, interests and values embedded within them.*

Such a task is in line with the general agenda of Childhood Studies in as far as it is committed to consciously producing social scientific knowledge from a children's standpoint. Also: here we are invited to apply the deconstructive mode of childhood sociology.

A second route towards theorizing children's welfare is also available, and this is by way of focusing - as O'Brien and Penna write - on

“how existing social policies and welfare programmes emerged in the first place and how they came to take the form they do, and what the relationships are between the policies and programmes and the societies in which they are situated.” (O'Brien and Penna 1998, 6)

The basic premise in this sort of *social theory of welfare* is the idea that welfare policies, programmes and institutions do simply provide, or produce, welfare for people in fact they powerfully organize social relations between people: their inclusions and exclusions, centralisations and marginalisations, liberations and oppressions.

Therefore, to theorize welfare in this second mode refers to the effort of analyzing and describing

- how these social relations (organized by welfare policies, programmes and institutions) are patterned,
and
- what are (and have been) the social forces and the struggles that underpin the observable distributions, inclusions and exclusions.

This is a particularly useful ('structural-relational', see above) approach for rethinking children's welfare, particularly in the context of the hard social fact of a 'generational order', or generational divisions, within which children (as well as adults) live; that is: there exist *generational* (material, social and cultural) positions that powerfully order the social relations of children's daily lives, and produce the social divisions within which they live - as 'children'.

To conclude: To advance in the theorizing of children's welfare I propose that we begin to integrate welfare research and the sociological study of childhood, and in doing so we look critically at and from both directions:

- by beginning from the study of welfare as a social (relational) process, we embed its insights within the sociological study of generational divisions, and
- by working in the reverse direction: by using the analytical tools, suggested by a structurally informed perspective on generational relations, - a generational order - we rethink and reorient the conceptual resources provided by welfare research towards incorporating children and childhood in the theorizing.

Discourse matters in child welfare

One of the points I personally would like to make in promoting this kind of project is to emphasize that *discourse matters in child welfare*. Also, in my own present research I hold to the structural-relational view that it is useful to think of children's welfare as a multilevel process while at any point of time and at any place it is also the 'product' of this process – of the interplay of a multitude of material, social, economical, political, and cultural actors and agents, acting on and across interpersonal, institutional, national and global 'levels'.

This process-oriented approach implies that research attention is focused on the interactions between key agents of welfare production, and the contexts and processes within which these interactions take place. To theorize 'children's welfare' we therefore need to describe analytically *both* the qualitative state (condition) of children, and childhood *and* to the

complex process in which this qualitative state of children/childhood is produced, day-by-day and moment-by-moment, children themselves being among the co-producers.

To get a grip on the (always provisional) outcome of the on-going process on welfare production at any moment we will need any structural-categorical methodology, but to catch the dynamics of the process, a process-sensitive - structural-relational - methodology will be needed. And as it is necessary (in any individual study) to limit one's attention to some aspects of the complex welfare-producing process, attention needs to be focused also on the cultural underpinnings of welfare politics.⁵ Discursive and cultural (deconstructive) analyses of the many factors and forces influencing children's lives have been a significant part of the Childhood Studies from its very beginning. The cultural/discursive turn in the social sciences can, and should also be utilized also to the benefit of analyses and theorization of children's welfare production. In this case it means to focus the study on the discursive communities and agents that are active in the process of children's welfare production, on their messages, interactions and communication, and their impact on the process and outcomes of the process.

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⁵ An inspiring example of cultural studies on social policy is the study by Chamberlayne et als (1999).

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