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The social study of childhood

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The Social Study of Childhood

SALLY MCNAMEE, 2016

London, New York: Palgrave

224pp., hardback £65/ paperback £26.99

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The book is addressed to 'undergraduates who are beginning to engage with the social study of childhood' and aims to help students see childhood in a new way (1). Meeting its aim successfully, this book clearly and accurately explores a variety of dominant discourses, tensions and debates about the social, historical and at times political study of childhood. The author has meticulously chosen the current issues surrounding childhood study by providing eleven well-written, engaging and thought-provoking chapters. The reader can explore childhood through the lenses a variety of disciplines such as childhood studies, history, sociology, social work, education and children's geographies. It is the educational style of this book that constitutes its major strength that is to provide an insightful and stimulating learning experience, while offering a critical view of the main literature of childhood studies and experiences of children's life worlds.

The book offers a comprehensive account of the key concepts and theories about childhood by methodically bringing together the work of distinguished scholars, such as P. Alderson, P. Christensen, A. James, A. Prout, J. Qvortrup and many others (see for example, James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Prout 2005; Qvortrup 1994). The first two chapters are concerned with theories behind the different ways to understand children and their experiences of childhood. Chapter 1 explores discourses of childhood as they change over time and sets a firm basis in understanding how these 'operate in constructing particular experiences of childhood' (24). Focusing on the two dominant theories of childhood, chapter 2, critically discusses traditional theories of developmental psychology and sociology and the 'new' social study of childhood. This way the reader can gain a broad idea of the different ways childhood has been studied and terms such as agents and children as 'beings' rather than 'becoming' are introduced. Then, moving forward the notion of the 'new' study of childhood, it is acknowledged that the term

is not 'so new' and it has undergone multiple changes, as new disciplines such as children's geographies and educations have joined the study of childhood (Tisdall and Punch 2012).

Considering different approaches of studying childhood, chapter 3 looks at 'issues in researching childhood'. Central to this chapter is the idea of researching 'with' or 'by' children versus 'on' children. The author highlights the significance of using participatory and visual methods emphasising the importance of child-friendly methodology. It furthermore explores issues when researching with children such as participants' access, role of researcher, power and other ethical considerations. Next, chapter 4 explores children's rights and citizenship. It examines the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in conjunction with the African Charter on the rights and Welfare of the Child, while exploring dominant debates between rights and protection. It further illustrates how 'traditional notions of citizenship position children as citizens in the making rather than citizens in the presence' (59). Chapter 5 looks at the relationship of the State and childhood and positions its focus on legal and policy issues surrounding childhood, drawing on examples such as child poverty, divorce and care.

The following chapters (6-10) continue with examining childhood within a variety of contexts and themes. Chapter 6 examines the diversity of children experiences within families. After discussions of relationships, power and control and resistance, the chapter concludes with the author arguing for further research that prioritises the child in the family. Chapter 7 explores children's experiences at school in both Global North and South considering the challenge a universal education might oppose to developing countries, as well as issues such as control, power, agency, competency and bullying.

Drawing on the idea that child work equals a lost childhood, chapter 8 reviews child labour globally and looks at domestic and agriculture labour while considering current legislation, Rights of the Child and up-to-day scholarship. Chapter 9 changes the topic slightly and looks at children's leisure by investigating play, media use, internet and technology and investigates

how this 'children's time' can be majorly organised under adult control. Children's health is the next topic examined by looking at children's agency and competence of health and illness. Finally, chapter 11 offers an overview of the universality of childhood and investigates current debates on globalization while looking at topics such as diverse ways to experience childhood and child soldiers.

On the whole, this book provides an excellent tool for those who come across the social study of childhood for the first time as well as established scholars. Very importantly though, it enables the reader to challenge 'traditional' and rigid ideas of childhood and explains exhaustively why children's voices should be heard and taken into account. It offers ideas on emerging issues and discourses and constantly encourages the reader to develop ideas for further research. Its introductory nature is both the book's strength and weakness. It covers a vast range of theories and literature using evidence critically and referencing promoting learning. Nevertheless, as it covers such a variety of literature, it fails to elaborate in-depth on specific topics and thus does not exhaust entirely any of the topics discussed. For example, chapter 9 discusses children's experience of electronic media as a form of leisure. However, considering the existing level of children's involvement with technology, internet and media, I would argue that a separate theme chapter looking at children and technology would benefit further this book (see for example Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 2001).

Taking into account this is a book addressed to students, it effectively meets its purpose and promotes critical thinking through a number of exercises and reflection points at the end of each chapter, as well as examples and case studies collocated within the sections to further explain the literature. In addition, even though it mainly focuses on the 'west', the book reveals a global character as it looks at examples of children's everyday lives in places all over the world, such as Canada, UK, Denmark, France, Sub-Saharan Africa, New Zealand, China, Mexico, Peru, South Korea and US. Overall, I believe that this book contributes prominently to the interdisciplinary nature of the disciplines of Childhood Studies and Children's Geographies as enthusiastically and inspiringly examines childhood and promotes children's voices and agency within geographically diverse everyday lives.

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