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Reconstructing developmental psychology - some first steps

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Abstract

My starting point is the claim that developmental psychology has traditionally projected a standardised image of childhood, especially through the emphasis on describing universal stages of psychological growth within what are assumed to be normal childhood environments. These reifications of universality and normality have in turn regulated social action at individual, family and school level.   Increasingly, these same images are being idealised and treated as a standard for judging the quality of childhood in contexts far removed from their Euro-American origins.   I explore the historical roots of universalistic thinking about children's nature, their needs and what constitutes healthy development and consider the opportunities for a new psychology of childhood to be reconstructed in ways that pay more attention to the cultural dimensions of the subject. I illustrate the growing interest amongst psychologists in studying children's development as a socio-cultural process, as well as the lessons of social constructionist critiques of the developmental paradigm itself. I conclude by reflecting on some the challenges facing psychological studies of childhood issues that are more reflexive, inclusive and cultural.

Stories of standardisation

During the closing years of the nineteenth century US psychologist G. Stanley Hall began to advocate what at the time must have seemed a relatively novel approach to the treatment of children. He argued that scientific methods should be used to study children's natural development systematically, and that this knowledge should be used as a basis for improving child rearing and teaching methods. In Britain James Sully similarly urged 'a scientific study of individual children by psychological, sociological and anthropometric methods'...including 'the normal as well as the abnormal, paying special attention to the commoner causes of minor deviations among normal children , and to the diagnosis of the rarer abnormal or pathological types' (cited by Rose 1985, p115). These pioneers of the 'child study movement' were part of an increasing trend towards treating children's growth, development and learning as a specialised area for scientific study. Child Development became a topic for psychological research in its own right, with its own agenda of questions, methodologies and theories. Now, at the close of the twentieth century, it seems fitting to ask to what extent the study of child development has served to enlighten understanding about the features of healthy growth, the prerequisites for emotional security, the most effective systems of care and education etc.

In this article I tackle one aspect of this question only. It concerns the current status of knowledge about child development in informing policy and practice in a world-wide context. At root the issue is about the role of beliefs and knowledge about child development in standard setting - identifying the goals of development, the characteristics of competence and adaptive social behaviour at each stage of life; prescribing what counts for quality child-rearing in family and day care; judging what kinds of teaching enhance children's learning; and determining which kinds of experience are harmful and which kinds are beneficial to social adjustment, self-esteem etc. The messages of a century of psychological research are many and varied (Fuller et al 1997). While developmental research has undoubtedly served in some respects to inform and enlighten work with children (Schaffer 1980). my contention is that in other respects it has projected a standardised story about the years of childhood, which insufficiently represents the experience of children in families, schools and other settings, and insufficiently encompasses the possibilities for childhood past, present and future.

The most compelling example of standardisation is psychometrics. The apparent technical precision of mental measurement, supported by statistical norm-setting has offered scientific legitimacy to educational practices in which children throughout the twentieth have been scaled, sorted and selected in terms of standardised expectations of childhood. The influence of Galton, Cattell, Binet, Burt and others is well known. They left an inheritance of psychometric

technologies that continues to regulate children's progress through school. The concept of 'ability' as a tangible, measurable human characteristic has also been routinely exported, along with the rest of the paraphernalia for educational assessment, prediction and selection. Over the years it has also contributed to divisive debates about the existence and origins of class and ethnic differences, and been linked to concepts of 'cultural deprivation', the labelling and segregation of 'subnormal' children, and so on (Richardson 1991).

Measuring deviations from the norm is the distinctive feature of psychometrics, but most developmental psychology has a different goal - to discover more about the norm itself - to identify general laws of human growth shared in common by all. Developmental research seeks to explain how and why most children think, feel and behave in particular ways at different ages and stages as well as evaluate both positive and negative environmental influences; all of which can be used to guide decision-making about children's health, education and welfare.   One well known example is Bowlby's controversial theory about the growth of early emotional attachments, the importance of maternal sensitivity and the impact of maternal deprivation. This theory had a profound influence on attitudes and practices in child care, and beliefs about essential features of good mothering (Tizard 1991). Another example is Piaget's comprehensive account of the universal stages in individual development - from sensori-motor action to autonomous logical thinking - which was highly influential in shaping beliefs about primary education practice during the 1960s and 1970s (Walkerdine 1984).   While both these theories have been heavily disputed, their power has been in offering an authoritative account of what it means to be a child and what is appropriate in terms quality child care and education. While they may have been offered as scientific theories, the function they have served is as pedagogies of child care and education (Singer 1998).

Intelligence testing, maternal deprivation, and cognitive development are but three of many topics in which developmental psychology has shaped beliefs and practices throughout Europe and North America. But the spread of psychology's influence doesn't stop there. Increasingly developmental concepts are shaping beliefs and practices throughout the world. As the ecology of childhood is being radically transformed by global change and innovations, so too are conceptions of growth and learning, of the needs and rights of children for a healthy environment, of expectations for good standards of care and education. Schooling is one of the most direct and potentially most powerful globalising influences. The 1990 World Summit for Children set the year 2000 as a target for extending basic education to all children throughout the world. Sitting in classrooms and being taught basic literacy and numeracy promises to become a standardized feature of universal modern childhoods. Underpinning these and many other areas of international action on behalf of children is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (Verhellen 1997) . There is no

question about the potential positive role to be played by systematic well-researched knowledge about these themes. The specific issue for this article is about the adequacy of the developmental paradigm to inform this process of global standardisation. Concerns have already been expressed by some commentators about the narrow conceptualisation of childhood and child development implicit in the UN Convention (Boyden 1997; Burman 1996; Woodhead 1998b). The issue was vividly illustrated in the eye-catching title of a book about implementing the UN Convention - 'Stolen Childhood'. The implication is that a universal standard can be set about the goals, processes and expectation of child development from which by definition millions of unschooled street children, child workers etc are excluded (Vittachi 1989). As one commentator put it:

" The dominant perception, which is increasingly becoming a standard notion of childhood throughout the world, is an extension of a romanticized Western view which regards children as essentially isolated from the rest of society" (Knuttson, 1997, p3)

The challenge, in brief is to reconstruct a model of 'developing children' that can more adequately encompass diverse childhoods, while at the same time promoting children's fundamental needs and rights, including their right to participate in the process of defining the directions and process of their development (Woodhead 1998c). The challenge is similar to that confronting research based on the concept of 'developing countries' (Nelson and Wright 1995).

In the rest of this article, I illustrate some of the limitations of contemporary child development knowledge to embrace global childhoods, and suggest some reasons why psychology has traditionally given such a weak account of childhood diversity. I then consider trends within the study of child development that hold promise of leading to a more adequate paradigm, concentrating on two (on the face of it) quite different areas of theoretical debate. The first trend comes from within the field of child development research. It distinctive in the emphasis placed on human psychological growth as a cultural process, and is known variously as 'social constructivism', 'socio-cultural psychology' or 'cultural psychology'. The second trend arises through critiques of the status of research and theory as the product of cultural activity and is often referred to (in some ways confusingly) as social constructionsim. This second trend is closely allied to post-modernist or post-structuralist approaches to social theory. The following brief overview inevitably touches on major social scientific and epistemological themes, full treatment of which is far beyond the scope of this article. My aim is to draw attention to some features of these debates as they might suggest some positive directions for psychological studies of childhood, recognising that issues as intractable as these cannot be resolved in

the space of a single article.

Textbook images of childhood

In the search for guidance on how to protect and promote children's development throughout the world, textbooks on Child Development have a great deal to offer, but there is a cultural price to pay. Most major textbooks offer a Euro-American perspective, in terms of the cultural experiences shared between their authors, the researchers whose studies they report, and the children whose development they seek to describe and explain. While these are not homogeneous groups, they share similar reference points within the range of 'normal' expectations of childhood amongst Western societies. The essential cultural dimension is all too often neglected in terms of the way research questions that are framed, samples selected and conclusions drawn. As a result, normative theories are too easily converted into prescriptions about children's 'needs', about the 'developmental appropriateness' of learning experiences or the 'effectiveness' of parenting techniques and evaluations of specific childhood interventions are generalised beyond their context (Woodhead 1985; 1988; 1996; 1997). Culture-specific descriptions are all too easily translated into universal prescriptions, not necessarily by the textbook author, but by those who read, use and apply psychological ideas about children. To put it bluntly, for much of this century, developmental psychologists have carried out their research much like the metaphorical goldfish swims around the goldfish bowl, oblivious to the water that sustains both themselves and their subjects. Individual psychological functioning has been studied independently of context, but the conclusions have been generalised to all.

An extreme example of developmental ideas being used to promote specific images of childhood comes from a Thai handbook on child-rearing. Writing about the way traditional beliefs prevent parents making use of scientific knowledge in child-rearing, a complex of cultural assumptions were projected through a psychological concept of children's needs:

"Giving the child more of the independence the child needs and making less use of power and authority...will shake the very roots of those Asian families where authoritarian attitudes and practice are emphasised" (Suvannathat et al 1985)

This is but one example of the lively trade of western concepts and research methods to childhoods in very different contexts. This isn't just a question of imperialist psychologists "thinking locally, acting globally" as Gulerce put it (Gergen et al 1996). Scientific psychology has been eagerly seized upon, for example in India, as Misra observed:

'For a long period, psychology taught in the Indian Universities was pure Western psychology, and attempts were made to safeguard it from the contaminating effect of Indian culture and thought. Its teaching maintained a strong universalistic stance. The research focussed mainly on testing the adequacy of Western theories and concepts, wherein participants provided objective behavioural data. In this scheme of scientific activity, culture was an irrelevant and extraneous intrusion' (in Gergen et al 1996 p497)

These issues crystallized for me through an international project concerned with the quality of child development experiences in early childhood programmes in Kenya, India, France and Venezuela. For example, on visiting a village nursery school in Machakos district, Kenya, I was formally greeted by 60 children sitting passively on rows of benches, mostly four and five year olds but with some as young as two. There were no toys, nor even any books that I could readily see. All sixty children were in the care of one teacher who led them firmly but expertly through a repertoire of group songs and alphabet chanting. I was immediately reminded of Katherine Bathurst's vivid description of a turn-of-the-century English infant class (Bathurst 1905). Would it be appropriate to draw the parrallel and reach the same conclusion as Bathurst about the harm being done to these children's development? I thought back to the textbooks on my shelves - the emphasis on children as active learners, the significance of play with a wide range of materials, the value of close, responsive dialogue between adults and children, the assertiveness of the pre-school child, negotiating their growing sense of personal identity and individual autonomy with peers and adults. Following the lessons of my textbooks would it be right to condemn these early education experiences, and many more provided throughout the Majority World as 'developmentally inappropriate'. Numerous issues were at stake her, about the link between conventional childhoods and modern school systems, and about the sustainability of a nursery school model in a low resource context. But there were also issues about the cultural expectations for children's play and learning, their role in family and society and their relationship to adult authority. I also found myself reflecting about the contexts, (or developmental niches) within which my own beliefs about early childhood had been nurtured, and about the historical epoch that had fostered developmentalism. Conventional accounts of early childhood could at best only offer one perspective on these young children's childhoods (Woodhead 1996; Woodhead 1998d).

The inappropriateness of applying textbook Child Development to Majority World children's lives became even more apparent when I began a project on child workers in Bangladesh, Central America, Ethiopia and The Philippines, (Woodhead 1998a;1998c; 1999). Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was the starting-point for this project, which affirms the 'right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be

harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development". What do textbooks have to say about the place of work in child development? The short answer is - very little. For the most part, textbook childhoods are constructed as a time for nurturance and care, play and learning in the family and at school. Summarising indexes for eight child development textbooks published between 1987-95 revealed 157 entries for 'family', 126 for 'play' and 108 for 'school'. Just 1 entry appeared for 'work' (Woodhead 1998a). This academic myopia about the significance of work in children's development is puzzling even within the context of Europe and North America, given the evidence on the extent of children's work within the family, (eg Morrow 1994) and in casual employment (McKechnie et al 1996). Within a global framework it draws attention to the narrow frameworks of thinking about childhood that shape the vast majority of studies of child development.

The universalist legacy

Faced by these gaps in developmental psychology's account of it's subject, the question arises: what are the historical reasons for conventional accounts of child development lacking a strong account of diversity, either within or between cultures. According to Jahoda (1992) the study of child development is built on a fundamental belief in 'psychic unity'. This can be traced back to the Enlightenment, and especially the writings of John Locke. It found strongest expression in nineteenth century attempts to discredit racialist (called polygenist) theories that linked physical differences to presumed differences in mental capacity. Modern child development thus inherited a universalist legacy, that all 'humans are part of nature and as such are subject to general laws' and can be encompassed within positivistic scientific principles' (Jahoda 1992, p115).

Recognising these universalist aspirations is important, because it explains why cultural studies of child development for many years appeared marginal to the core goals of the discipline. Starting from western concepts and experimental paradigms, researchers who did carry out cross-cultural studies were largely content to test for evidence of universality in perception, memory, problem-solving, cognitive style, personality and motivation, to mention but a few of the topics studied over the years (reviewed by Segall et al 1990). For example, generations of students have replicated Piaget's three mountains experiment to demonstrate young children's failures in perspective taking. They have poured water into different shaped glasses to demonstrate their inability to understand about the invariance of quantity under transformation, and so on. These and other experimental cognitive tasks have been transported across the globe in classic cross-cultural comparisons, such as amongst the Wolof of Senegal (Bruner et al 1966), amongst the Kpelle of Liberia (Cole et al 1971) and amongst Australian Aboriginal (Dasen 1974). From such studies it became possible for

Dasen (1977) to produce a graph comparing 26 communities, in terms of the percentage of subjects at each age who had attained the stage Piaget called concrete operational reasoning. Predictably, the evidence favoured European populations and those who had experienced European type schooling as showing higher levels of competence.

Because much cross-cultural psychology was carried out within the confines of a universalist paradigm, it made limited impact in relativizing conceptions of child development. To pursue the goldfish metaphor, it is as if cross-culturally minded goldfish were able to jump between adjacent bowls in order to observe the extent of commonality in swimming behaviour amongst neighbouring fish. But for the most part they still assumed that both concepts and methodologies constructed in Western labs could be applied anywhere, and that the impact of culture and context would be revealed by the extent of differences. Equally, areas of commonality in children's psychological functioning were assumed to point to shared psychic make-up and shared maturational processes. The possibility that points of similarity might be also be accounted for by cultural processes (**shared** cultural processes) appeared to elude them (Cole 1992). In other words, culture was seen as 'the icing on the cake', or 'variations on a musical theme'. The idea, that 'the cake' itself, like 'the theme' is itself shaped by cultural forces has only recently begun to gain ground.

To continue the Piagetian example, one of the most influential challenges came from a group of researchers led by Donaldson (1978) who demonstrated that a subtle change in the task so it made 'human sense' could transform children's performance. Their work opened the door to a whole line of studies demonstrating the power of context in children's thinking (Light et 1991). This new line of work is often labelled 'social constructivism', an extension and reappraisal of Piaget's 'constructivist' account. More recent work in psychology is now drawing attention to many other social and culture dimensions of child development.

The potential of cultural psychology.

One of the main sources of inspiration for cultural psychologists has been Vygotsky, a contemporary of Piaget working in Soviet Russia:

'The fundamental aspiration of the whole of modern child psychology ..(is) the wish to reveal the eternal child. The task of psychology, however, is not the discovery of the eternal child. The task of psychology is the discovery of the historical child... The stone that the builders disdained must become the foundation stone'
(Vygotsky, cited by Rogoff, 1990,p 110)

A cultural approach has the advantage that features of childhood (including modern Western childhoods that are so often taken as a standard for all) are understood as a product of specific economic, social and cultural processes. This is not to deny the significance of universal maturational processes, nor the way children's development is shaped by their environment. What a cultural approach emphasizes is the respects in which the environment for child development is shaped by human action, profoundly social in character and at all times mediated by cultural processes. There is nothing fundamentally natural about environments for child care, either at home or with in a pre-school setting. All environments are culturally constructed, shaped by generations of human activity and creativity, mediated by complex belief systems, including about the 'proper' way for children to develop. The most significant feature of any child's environment are the humans with whom they establish close relationships. The most important powerful routes to learning are through cognitive tools that are themselves products of human civilization - forms of discourse, literacy, numeracy, and more recently information technology .   Moreover, Cole argues that cultural context should not be seen as something outside the process of development, "as that which surrounds" but as an intrinsic part of the developmental process "as that which weaves together" (Cole 1996, p 132-135). From this point of view, patterns of nurturance, communication and teaching are not something that merely influences children's development. They are an intrinsic part of the developmental process, in so far as the child's engages with and participates in these processes from the very start. Trevarthen (1998) argues that 'intersubjectivity' or 'participatory consciousness' is the foundation for children's ability to communicate with others and engage in cultural life.

From a different perspective Shweder (1990) has argued that Cultural Psychology is a challenge to the Platonic quest of general psychologists, rejecting the search for a complete account of the central mental processor that governs our inner life, and displacing positivistic, behavioural explanatory models with an emphasis on intentionality ...'that the life of the psyche is the life of intentional persons, responding to and directing their action at, their own mental objects or representations, and undergoing transformation through participation in an evolving intentional world... (p22)

Growing numbers of developmental psychologists are now embracing the challenge of a more cultural approach, for example Greenfield and Cocking (1994), Goodnow (1990) Goodnow and Collins (1990), Rogoff (1990), Kagitcibasi (1996), Super and Harkness (1982), Harkness and Super (1995; 1996), and Jahoda (1992). I will restrict myself to just two examples of what a cultural approach might entail. The first concerns the significance of schooling as a cultural institution and follows on from the cross-cultural Piagetian paradigm referred to above. Whether children have access to Western style schooling appeared to be one of the most significant variables affecting their performance in Piagetian

experiments. One interpretation was that the environment and teaching offered by schools extends not only to the teaching of essential skills for the modern world (i.e. literacy and numeracy), but also promotes general cognitive abilities; that the impact of school in a culture was to 'push cognitive development faster and further' than in cultures without schooling (Greenfield and Bruner 1966, cited by Cole 1990). But more recent work has questioned this conclusion, not least because the measures taken to represent cognitive advancement are isomorphic with modes of communication and thinking taught through school.

'verbal logical problems map neatly onto the discourse of school with its motivated exclusion of everyday experience and its formal mode' (Cole 1990, p105).

It is hardly surprising that indicators of cognitive development that originate from research in a society dominated by schooling, reveal other societies, without schooling as apparently 'deficient'. Cultural psychologists would argue that what children learn at school does not liberate their minds for a universally relevant abstract thinking, so much as provide training in particular forms of schooled-cognition. (eg Butterworth and Light 1992; Rogoff and Chavajay 1995). The features of school learning, the emphasis on language as a medium of instruction, the emphasis on de-contextualised learning, the emphasis on literacy and symbolic numeracy, need to be understood as a modern adaptation to a particular set of socio-economic and cultural priorities. The implication is that statements about the beneficial or detrimental effect on 'development' of particular experiences such as work or school are seen as culturally and historically relative. 'Development' is about the acquisition of particular cultural skills and tools that are adaptive to a particular socio-economic context and historical epoch, not about a once-for-all universal process. Becoming literate and numerate through schooling may become universal, they may be presumed to be 'natural', but that doesn't mean that these features of childhood cease to be cultural.

The acquisition of a sense of 'self' provides a second example of the potential of Cultural Psychology. The development of an autonomous sense of self has always been assumed to be a core feature of mental life, a universal of child development. One leading anthropologist was well aware that this was a dangerous assumption to make:

"The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cogntive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures" (Geertz 1975)

Twenty years after Geertz's warning, psychologists are beginning to embrace the possibility that the liberal individualistic Western models of child development, (including Piagetian cognitive development, as well as theories specifically about personal and social development) might be founded on a culture-specific and epoch-specific image of human boundedness (see Sampson 1989; Kitayama and Markus 1995).

 Kagitcibasi (1990; 1996) has addressed these issues in the context of social change affecting children in Turkey. She argues that modern views of child development are steeped in individualism, with its emphasis on the psychological value of the child to parents, socialisation goals associated with separation and independence, and a style of rearing encouraging autonomy and a strong emphasis on personal, cognitive and social development. This contrasts sharply with the interdependent outlook in traditional agrarian societies where obedience training is emphasised and there is little place for encouraging play, for choice or for the exploration of ideas and beliefs.   As part of the process of 'modernisation', it could be argued the sooner the Western model of child development is adopted the better. Kagitcibasi proposes that this may not be the inevitable nor necessarily the most appropriate model to follow. She offers a third view, better characterising the experience of many societies, in which the child's development has acquired psychological value, but in the context of family patterns still emphasising interdependence and respect for parental authority.

There is much work to be done in rendering abstract conceptions of the self as 'independent' versus 'interdependent' meaningful in terms of social research. To mention just one area that requires close scrutiny. Our knowledge about how children acquire a sense of self and other, how they learn about the social rules that regulate family life and about their capacities for social perspective-taking have been greatly advanced in recent years, especially through the work of Dunn and colleagues (Dunn 1988, 1996). She has drawn attention to the developmental significance of the confrontations between toddlers and their caregivers, the teasing and fighting that goes on amongst siblings, as well as the evidence of capacities for empathy and co-operation. Her account is already part of textbook psychology. Yet there is a worry about whether social cognitive processes interpreted from studies in the UK and USA can be generalized more widely. Edwards (1995) urges caution:

"...the classic account of the toddler's drive for autonomy and separateness...appears incorrect as a thematic description of toddler development in many non-Western cultural communities...For example, in Zinacantan, Mexico....the transition from infancy to early childhood is not typified by resistant toddlers demanding and asserting control over toileting and other self-

help skills (the familiar "no, I can do it") but instead by watchful, imitative children who acquire toilet training and other elements of self-care with a minimum of fuss" (Edwards 1995, p 47)

To psychologists who start form the assumption that they are revealing universal psychic processes, a cultural approach comes as something of a revelation. Culture as about difference is important, but even more important is a recognition of culture as our common inheritance.   Are there any topics in child development not embraced by cultural psychology? Suddenly the goldfish finds they are outside the bowl looking in. We are forced to recognise that the way children are cared for, the way they think, memorise, use language and acquire a sense of self, may or may not be universal, but that doesn't make them any less cultural (or potentially variable within a more inclusive definition of child development). Even universal processes are in important ways human creations, based on human capacities for communication, thinking, language, tool using and social organisation, which may have co-evolved as features of the species. Instead of the benchmarks for development being intrinsic to the child, they have to be seen in important respects as embedded in the child's relationship to cultural context. Rogoff makes the point clearly in respect of children's intellectual development:

'The developmental endpoint that has traditionally anchored cognitive developmental theories - skill in academic activities such as formal operational reasoning and scientific, mathematical , and literate practices - is one valuable goal of development, but one that is tied to its contexts and culture, as is any other goal or endpoint of development valued by a community... Each community's valued skills constitute the local goals of development. ..... In the final analysis, it is not possible to determine whether the practices of one society are more adaptive than those of another, as judgements of adaptation cannot be separated from values' (Rogoff, 1990, p12)

Consequently it just isn't good enough to take western (or any other cultural) expectations about children's emotional security, social relations, play, learning and teaching development as a inviolable standard against which to judge other childhoods. The social scientific lens needs to become more reflective, in order to problematise familiar child-rearing values and practices, ways of learning, thinking and conceptualizing the self that are presumed to be normal or even natural.

Relativizing 'social science'

I turn now from the lessons of cultural psychology (or social constructivism) to a more profound, more epistemological challenge that child development is

culturally-constructed. The most influential early challenges to the image of the child constructed by mainstream developmental psychology included Kessen's essay on the 'American Child and Other Cultural Inventions', (Kessen 1979) and Ingleby's account of 'The Psychology of Child Psychology' (Ingleby 1974).

"...most expert students of children continue to assert the truth of the positivistic dream - that we have not yet found the underlying structural simplicities that will reveal the child entire, that we have not yet cut nature at the joints - but it may be wise for us developmental psychologists to peer into the abyss of the positivistic nightmare - that the child is essentially and eternally a cultural invention and that the variety of the child's definition is not the removable error of an incomplete science".
(Kessen 1979)

The 1980s and 1990s has seen much greater acknowledgement by psychologists: that they are part of, not detached from the social and cultural world within which child development questions are identified; that they are subject to the same psychological processes they seek to describe; that there may be a connection between the 'inner' child of their own autobiography and the 'outer' child they seek to describe; that they are (literally) creating their subject, in so far as child development theories and research shape the environments in which children develop; and that their scientific claims to objectivity rest on assumptions that their own theories of human cognition cannot sustain (see for example Gergen, 1982; 1985, Gergen et al 1996, Bradley, 1989, Burman, 1994; 1997, Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers, 1992, and Morss, 1996).

Whereas cultural psychologists had drawn attention to the limitations of a science that took inadequate account of culture, these commentators also focussed attention on the cultural assumptions of the scientists themselves! The distinction is a subtle but important one. Cultural psychologists would not, I think, see their emphasis on historical and cultural relativity as having any implications for the status of their research-based knowledge, whereas a social constructionist analysis is much more concerned with the status of scientific knowledge. If there is a conceptual crossover point between cultural psychology and the epistemological relativity implied by social constructionists it is in the deconstruction of the concept of autonomous, rational selves capable of making impartial inferences from observations, on which our image of science is built, (Gergen 1982).

In short, cultural psychology argues that children's development is culturally constructed, whereas social constructionism argues that the theories and methods of 'Child Development' are also culturally constructed. Social constructionism goes furthest in pulling away the foundation stones beneath the universalist developmental edifice on which modern standardized conceptions

of childhood are built. The problem with social constructionism is to know whether there are any foundation stones left on which to rebuild a more modest culturally located structure. At this point, it is common to invoke the claim that social constructionists' challenge to scientific objectivity is logically self-defeating. For example:

'One basic claim of social constructionism...is that thought, including that of social scientists, mirrors the historical and cultural orientation. This means that the evaluations and explanations of social construction theorists themselves are subject to historical and cultural forces....and there is no basis for determining their validity or comparative adequacy. Social construction is a social construction' (Turiel 1989, p. 93).

In the face of this conundrum, many would accept that all theories are representations expressed in the shared language of the research community. But they would argue that some accounts of childhood are more adequate than others, more comprehensive, making better sense of a wide range of observations and capable of being put to more effective use, within an explicit framework of goals and values, both about childhood and about what counts for knowledge. I look beyond the impasse in two respects. The first is to acknowledge multiple stakeholders in child development, multiple perspectives, of which scientific perspectives are but one (Woodhead 1996).   Greenfield argues:

'Multiple perspectives do not signal the end of science, a popular view of the cultural criticism school ... They simply signal the beginning of a new scientific paradigm in which the perspectives of researchers and subjects are specified and studied, not assumed' (Greenfield 1994, p 25).

The second follows from the first. Social constructionism demands that the cultural location of developmental knowledge be specified to incorporate the researcher as well as their subject; and that particular attention is paid to the values and power relations implicit in the concepts, design, methods and language of research. While 'reflexivity' has been widely assimilated within many social science methodologies (eg Ball 1993), it remains an alien principle within much mainstream developmental psychology, which continues to insist that understanding children's development is more a journey of scientific discovery than it is a process of cultural construction. In this respect, mainstream developmental psychology appears largely insulated from the critique of social scientific studies of childhood, notably 'developmentalism' offered by those working within the new social studies of childhood (James and Prout 1997, James et al 1998).

Standardizing relativity

In this article I have traced some of the challenges faced by conventional universalistic, scientific developmental psychology to accommodate satisfactorily the cultural dimensions of the subject. I have indicated two distinct aspects of the debate. In the first place, children's development is fundamentally cultural. These cultural dimensions apply both to universal and to variable features of children's experience of growth and learning. In the second place **the study** of Child Development is a fundamentally cultural activity in so far as developmental psychologists are cultural members. Applying these principles to the study of child development in both cultural and (moderate) epistemological senses offers a more positive, inclusive and reflexive basis for examining child development issues in diverse contexts. But there are formidable challenges, especially where cultural and epistemological relativity becomes entangled with issues of moral relativity. These challenges are summed up by the comment heard at a conference that "Children have no time for relativists". The implication is that deconstructing developmental knowledge risks undermining the scientific basis for standard setting about what is harmful and beneficial for children's healthy development. At the same time, emphasising the cultural integrity of child development practices can unwittingly endorse social or ethnic discrimination and legitimize official complacency about inequalities. It can appear to condescend to the poor and to undermine the struggle for social justice. It can seem like a form of inverted imperialism, which romanticises 'traditional' cultural practices and justifies the denial of access to 'modern' health care, educational, cultural and economic opportunities. In the face of these concerns, can a cultural perspective be sustained?

Firstly, an **ac**ultural, universalistic emphasis on the natural course of children's development is misleading in failing to acknowledge the contextual and ecological legitimacy of alternative conceptualisations of what is 'natural'. The concept of 'developmentally appropriate practice' well illustrates this theme. Developmental appropriateness is a widely used indicator of quality in care arrangements for young children, drawing attention to the ways their play and learning is promoted, and the approach to teaching adopted by caregivers. It has been especially clearly elaborated by the US. National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in part as a response to pressure within the US public elementary school system for downward extension of school achievement expectations into the early years (Bredekamp 1987). Within that context, the NAEYC document served a powerful function, offering a 'scientific' defence of informal play-based programmes for young children, based on the best available psychological knowledge about child development. Presuming universal applicability is highly problematic. Even within the USA, Developmentally Appropriate Practice has been challenged on the grounds that it is insensitive to the cultural diversity in children's family experiences and parenting practices, and it risks resurrecting discredited judgements about deprived environments and the need for compensation (Mallory and New 1994).

Secondly, universalistic thinking, (by definition) does not leave much room for negotiation. Yet in practice there is nothing more contentious than how the years of childhood should be spent, with debates within families, between generations, never mind amongst nations and cultures. For example, Venezuelan investigators asked both mothers and day care workers the question "Which is most important for children's development - play or discipline?". Only 8% of mothers replied 'play', 52% replied 'discipline' and 25% thought they were equally important. The pattern for day care workers was similar, although they gave a little more emphasis to play (24%) and a little less to discipline (44%). The emphasis of both mothers and careworkers on discipline is surprising to the minds of those who have been educated to a belief in the pre-eminence of children's play. The low emphasis on play is reinforced by answers to a question about how to promote children's learning. Play was only mentioned by 9% of mothers and 13% of day care workers. Much greater emphasis was placed on the adult's role as a teacher, (Teran de Ruesta et al 1995, cited by Woodhead 1996). In short, each of these stakeholder groups has a clear, and not always complementary view about the care, discipline and teaching of young children, which reflects their beliefs and priorities for childhood. In so far as there are multiple perspectives on what counts as quality child development, it can be argued that standards of quality in early childhood programmes are neither uniform nor fixed in time, but should be subject to informed negotiation amongst stakeholders (Moss and Pence, 1994; Woodhead 1996). From a very different disciplinary starting-point, 'Participatory Rural Appraisal' starts from how local communities, including children, define their own priorities for development (Chambers 1995, Johnson et al 1995). The status of children as stakeholders in the process of development is too often neglected within developmental theories constructed by adults to help other adults regulate children's lives (Woodhead 1998b).

What about the challenge that cultural relativism undermines social action on behalf of children? It is essential to bridge the gap between universalist abstractions about child development and the reality of diverse, day-to-day childhood experiences. Contextualizing does not mean diluting the power of general principles. General principles have no power unless they can be rendered meaningful to particular situations. For example, Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) asserts that it is part of children's rights to be prevented from doing work that is exploitative or harmful, while Article 28 states with equal conviction that it is part of children's rights to be educated and that primary schools should be made compulsory for this purpose. In other words the place of work in children's development is implicitly denigrated while the potential of schooling is idealised. In passing we may note that working children do not see their choices in these terms. They refer to good and bad things about both work and school. At work they may be exploited. At

school they may be beaten. Asking which is best - to go to school or work - is for many a meaningless question (Woodhead 1998c) . They have to work in order to support their family, and in many cases in order to pay for school. Preventing these children from working does not improve their chances of going to school - on the contrary, it may drive them to more exploitative or dishonest activities, as field experience has shown (White 1996).

All the examples so far have referred to relativity across and within contexts and cultures. I have said nothing about the sense in which childhood is historically constructed. Setting modern conceptions of childhood within a long term framework is a healthy antidote to universalist thinking. Since it was established as a separate discipline a century ago, Child Development has only studied a limited number of childhood generations, mainly in a very restricted set of socio-cultural environments. It seems implausible to imagine that the contemporary textbook child will have relevance in perpetuity. One of the challenges for the subject is to make sense of social change, whether it be in family arrangements for child care (Singer 1998); the impact of information technology on children's thinking and social relationships, (Gill 1996); or the transition from work-based to school-based childhoods (Oloko 1994; see also Segall et al 1990, Part IV).

Fifthly, the challenge to cultural relativism cannot be answered unless the relationship is articulated between theoretical ideas about the status of child development beliefs and practices on the one hand and moral and political imperatives to intervene on behalf of children on the other. The street boy in Addis Ababa heard begging by calling out **"stomach zero"** to passing drivers is issuing just such a challenge. A point must be established where diversity becomes deprivation, where variation becomes violation, plurality becomes pathology, by any standards. In this respect Gergen argues that cultural constructionism is better matched to the task than a scientific empiricism that claims to be value-free. If we accept that scientific research and knowledge is governed by normative rules, then there is every reason for the community of psychologists (along with biologists, anthropologists and other social scientists) to make explicit the assumptions about childhood that inform their work and the range of contexts to which their conclusions apply. Part of the task is to identify core features of human growth and maturation shared by all children, as well as fundamental physical, emotional and psychological needs that must be met.   But the expression of these needs and the way they are met is always embedded in particular economic, social, political and cultural contexts. Perhaps it is a greater openness to cultural possibilities that should become a more standardized feature of a reconstructed developmental paradigm. At the very least it would set a positive agenda for constructing future childhoods, with as well as for children.

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