Sheila Greene and
Elizabeth Nixon

Children as Agents in
Their Worlds

A Psychological–Relational Perspective

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Are children the passive recipients of influence from their parents and from society? Is their development determined by their genes and their neurons, or do they have the capacity to think about and influence their own lives and the world around them? How does their interaction with their social and material worlds support or hinder agency? Are children agents, and what do we mean by agency? *Children as Agents in Their Worlds* aims to answer these questions through a critical psychological and relational approach, while referencing and critiquing a wide range of perspectives from other disciplines including sociology, anthropology and education.

Greene and Nixon review the pioneering work of scholars of childhood studies and current post-human theories of agency and offer a developmental perspective on the emergence of the sense of agency and the exercise of agency in children. They discuss key themes including agency in families, agency within the school context and with peers, and children as agents in the wider public sphere. They explore agency and diversity, examining sex, age, genetic inheritance and contextual sources of difference, such as social class and geographical location.

Offering a stronger theoretical base for research and policy, through a synthesis of both psychological and relational theories, *Children as Agents in Their Worlds* will be essential reading for students and professionals in developmental psychology, sociology and anthropology, as well as education, childhood studies, children's rights and related fields.

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Children as Agents in Their Worlds

A Psychological–Relational Perspective

SHEILA GREENE AND ELIZABETH NIXON

For

Arthur and Theodore

&

Isabelle and Emily

Contents

Introduction

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The aim of this book is to offer a more satisfactory analysis of the meaning of children's agency than those that exist in the current literature. Unlike existing books and journal articles, this book will take a critical psychological approach, while referencing and critiquing a wide range of other disciplinary sources. The psychological approach we adopt is strongly influenced by modern developmental theory and is thus relational and systemic. In this way, we will argue, it is highly compatible with, although different from, the recent relational turn evident in childhood studies and other branches of the social sciences.

The definition of agency

It might be useful at this point to note the dictionary definition of agency. According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, agency is: 'The faculty of an agent or of acting'. Other meanings given refer to someone or something given the power to act, e.g. an estate agent or a travel agency. Agent comes from the Latin *agere*, to act or to do. However, when agency is used to refer to a mode of human activity, the word typically means more than simply 'acting' or 'doing'. It often implies activity that is intentional or under the control of the doer. Thus Raeff defines agency as 'aspects of action that a person controls or regulates him/her self' (2017, p. 477) and Sokol and colleagues describe agency as 'a person's autonomous control over his or her actions' (2015, p. 284). But, as we will see, the definition of (human) agency is contested and the concept or construct is used very differently by different writers and within different disciplines.

A new interest in agency

From an academic perspective agency is a topic of discussion in many disciplines including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, neuroscience, psychology and developmental science. Agency has been comparatively neglected by psychologists for reasons we will expand on later. Suffice it to say that most psychologists subscribe to a positivist worldview and avoid ascribing human actions and behaviours to causes that cannot be observed or measured, particularly non-material causes such as agency. There are exceptions to this general statement and we will discuss them in Chapter 3. Writing in 2011, Chirkov claimed that 'in recent years modern psychology has been experiencing an increase in interest in the topics of human autonomy, self-determination, free-will and agency' (2011, p. 609), and, as psychologists, we happily belong to this movement.

Agency and the linked concept of free will have always been issues for debate in philosophy and this continues to be the case. In recent years philosophical debates have often been influenced by findings from biological and human sciences, such as the new research into evolution and genetics (e.g. Dennett, 2003). Since the 1980s the discoveries emerging from neuroscience have prompted discussions within the sciences and in philosophy about the extent to which free will (and agency) is or is not an illusion (Crick, 1994; Wegner, 2002; Tallis, 2016).

Children's agency

In the past, studies of agency rarely mentioned children. Children were often seen as incomplete adults and thus incomplete agents, since common connotations of agency were the capacity to reason and form one's own judgements and the ability to act with autonomy. On the grounds of their assumed limited capacity to reason or to act autonomously, children were not seen as a relevant focus for discussions around agency. However, in the 1990s with the advent of the new sociology of childhood and, separately, with a shift in theoretical emphasis in developmental psychology, children's agency has become a topic of interest in academia. Children's agency is a now central topic in theories focused on children and childhood and is also a key concept in current research, policy and professional engagement with children. In this book we will use the term 'children' to encompass the years 0–18, as employed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), while recognising that there are important distinctions to be made within this wide sweep of ages, such as 'babies', 'infants', 'preschoolers'. When it comes to older children, terms like 'adolescents',

'teenagers', 'young people' or 'youth' are often used. We note that the categories 'child' and 'youth' overlap as far as the UN is concerned, with 'youth' covering the years 14–24.

It is an explicit tenet of the 'new' sociology of childhood that children should be positioned as agents and social actors rather than as the passive recipients of 'socialisation' to be shaped and moulded by others (James and Prout, 1990, 1997). Agency is also a central concept for the field of child rights studies (Quennerstedt, 2013) and is frequently employed and deployed by advocates for children's rights and children's participation (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie & Vandevelde, 2009; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

The disciplinary area that started as 'the new sociology of childhood' and expanded into childhood studies can be credited with putting the topic of child agency onto the academic map. In establishing the case for a new paradigm for understanding children and childhood, scholars like James and Prout (1990) and Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta and Wintersberger (1994) contrasted their approach with that of traditional sociology and psychology, both of which positioned children as passive vessels, waiting to be shaped into adequate members of society. While both disciplines were criticised for their lack of interest in children in their own right, developmental psychology came in for particular attack, mainly because it was more influential and had infiltrated important areas of practice such as education, child welfare and parenting. In relation to child agency specifically, psychologists had little to say for most of the last century, for reasons we shall elaborate later. They did utilise cognate concepts, such as mastery and self-regulation, that are relevant to a full understanding of agency but the idea of children as agents was antithetical to the ontological view of 'the child' at that time (Hogan, 2005). But this has changed in recent years, as developmental psychology itself has changed. Agency is now a respectable topic for child psychology and developmental science (Kuczynski, 2003; Overton, 2015; Sokol, Hammond, Kuebli & Sweetman, 2015).

Problematising child agency

Mason and Bessell (2017) are among those who are enthusiastic about the achievements of the scholarship on agency to date, stating:

> The contribution of research on agency and participation cannot be overestimated and has begun to reshape the ways in which childhood is understood and to challenge the ways in which children are positioned within social hierarchies.
>
> (p. 257)

However, in recent years scholars have been expressing disquiet with the state of the field of childhood studies and its failure to properly interrogate key terms, such as agency. For example, Mizen and Ofusu-Kusi (2013) see children's agency as 'a much used but largely unexamined concept' (p. 363). Alanen (2018) exemplifies this perspective in the following statement:

> There are however also signs of growing internal criticism that point at possible deeper trouble in the field, manifest in some persistent conceptual difficulties. Such difficulties originate for instance in the endemic use of notions such as 'agency' (or also 'voice') in childhood research, as 'agency' in fact stands for widely different things across the range of existing approaches to the social world; also its meta-theoretical (philosophical) foundations vary.
>
> (p. 2)

In 2019 she went further and commented that when adherents of childhood studies express concern about the field being stuck, 'the most emphatically announced problem case seen to impede the overcoming of this "stuckness" is the notion of (children's) "agency"'' (p. 136).

Unresolved issues

As we have noted, what the word agency means remains a matter of debate. But when the concept was first employed by childhood researchers in the 1990s, this lack of clarity was rarely mentioned. Researchers, armed with the revolutionary idea that children are agents, simply searched for examples of children being active social actors or 'agents'. Since the early 1990s many articles have been published that report empirical work aiming to give examples of child agency. Much of this work suffers from a failure to address the meanings of agency or from a simplistic notion of agency as a property of the child which needs only to be encouraged or revealed. These studies often demonstrate conceptual muddiness and a resulting confusion in how the term agency is used.

Thus, for a significant number of scholars, agency has become a contested and problematic term in child research (e.g. Esser, Baader, Betz & Hungerland, 2016; Spyrou, 2018). It should be noted that this concern about the meaning of agency and its use is not universal. A chapter on agency in the influential *Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* published in 2009 does not present agency as a problematic term (James, 2009) and many journal articles and books have been published since that date that do not question

the use of the concept. It has been argued by those calling for a review of the concept that when the idea of child agency was first introduced, it was presented in a way that was out of step with the contemporary post-modern theoretical context. Lee (2001), Prout (2005) and Oswell (2013) argue that, despite the popularity of post-modern and post-structuralist theories in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the kind of agency promoted in the early years of childhood studies belonged to a 'modern' epistemology. Spyrou agrees that the early conceptualisation of agency was already dated in the 1990s and argues for a 'post-human' reframing of agency (2018). He identifies a 'humanist' flavour to the childhood studies approach to agency. Spyrou, Rosen and Cook (2019) see the current conceptualisation of the child as agent as 'standing in the way of reaching for alternative ways of knowing' (p. 4) They say that childhood scholarship has been 'complicit in valorising children's agency to the point of a fetish' (p. 3) and that the ontological view of the child that results is one that is theoretically misconceived. We agree with their view that the concept of agency needs a theoretical overhaul but come to some different conclusions about how this should be done, as we will elucidate later. The 1990s formulation of child agency could also be classed as 'romantic' in its valorisation of the individual voice, the autonomous self and the idea of agency as intrinsic to each person. These are also issues to which we will return in later chapters.

In response to this situation, in recent years a number of childhood studies and sociology scholars have offered a critical analysis of the concept of agency as seen in childhood studies (Tisdall & Punch, 2012) and several have offered a new theoretical framework, focused in the main on relationality, which we will discuss in more depth later (Oswell, 2013; Esser et al., 2016; Alanen, 2018; Spyrou, 2018).

Why this book? Confronting unproductive tensions between disciplines

Despite the existence of justified and cogent critiques of the 'new paradigm's' approach to agency, many of which we would endorse, the reality is that most of these critiques and reformulations have come from a strongly sociological perspective. The authors of this book are both developmental psychologists, albeit with a strong social bent and a critical orientation towards much of traditional mainstream developmental psychology. Our position is that psychology has much to offer our understanding of child agency and we consider that we can set out a convincing case to back up that position. In doing so we lean on and refer to the work of our colleagues

from childhood studies and sociology, who may or may not agree with what we have to say. We refer also to the recent upsurge in interest in agency on the part of developmental scholars and the empirical and theoretical work in psychology, not always referring to child agency as such, that can be brought to bear on a new approach to thinking about agency and children.

We regret that there seems to be a continuing lack of awareness among child psychologists and developmental scientists of the work of scholars from the sociology of childhood and childhood studies. Childhood studies has brought the concept of agency to the forefront of its theorising as well as its empirical research. The discipline has engaged actively with ontological questions about the attributes of the child and how children are positioned as members of the category childhood. Childhood studies scholars have explored how children's positioning in society alters their experience, their power and their rights. Such topics are largely absent from psychology and developmental science. Children's contexts are considered by most developmental psychologists, especially those with a socio-cultural orientation such as Rogoff (2003) and Valsiner (2000), although it is not that long since they were not (see, for example, Kessen's classic critique of child psychology from 1979 arguing that the American child should be seen as a cultural invention).

Our goal is to provide a stronger theoretical base for research and policy in relation to childhood agency. We consider that this cannot be done unless the psychological perspective is brought into conversation with current work in the social sciences. There have been signs of a level of rapprochement between childhood studies and developmental psychology. Statements supporting engagement with psychology in general and developmental psychology in particular can be found in the childhood studies literature (e.g. Prout, 2005). But such statements exist alongside an unfortunate continuing demonising of developmental psychology. For example, a 2018 book edited by O'Dell, Brownlow and Bertilsdottir-Rosqvist entitled *Different Childhoods* has as its central focus a critique of the discipline of developmental psychology, which they see as a normalising enterprise that actively excludes and stigmatises the children who deviate from its rigid norms. They say: 'Invoking "natural" or biological explanations of development serves to construct "appropriate" and "inappropriate" developmental activities and, hence, normative and transgressive developments' (p. 3). On the other hand, it has to be said that, for the most part, developmental psychologists neglect the social sciences and what they can contribute to the understanding of children. Although the comparatively new field of developmental science is 'deeply and broadly multi-disciplinary' (Lerner, 2006, p. 4), in reality the skew in developmental science is towards the biological

sciences not the social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, human geography and childhood studies.

In this book we will present our argument for including psychological and developmental perspectives in any attempts to offer an adequate theory of child agency. We will argue that including a psychological perspective enriches our understanding of agency since agency is not a purely social or relational phenomenon. From a psychological perspective a dynamic-relational theory can still and must still find room for the individual and the functioning of the self. Also we argue that agency develops over time from birth into a not very clear point some time in childhood. When looking at child agency specifically, it is not good enough to lump all children (ages 0–18 years) into the same conceptual category. Examining agency developmentally also helps us to understand what agency is and how it is constituted.

We will also examine some of the practical implications of different theories of and different definitions of agency. How one thinks about agency is central to any ontological vision of the child or children and being clear about the ontological view of the child that one holds is not just an academic issue; it has very practical consequences for how children are positioned and treated in society. Seeing children as agents versus seeing children as not-agents, however we theorise these matters, has implications for how we (adults) act towards children, in the home, on the streets and in the realm of politics.

The structure of this book

In Chapter 2 of this book we will review the pioneering work conducted by scholars under the banner of childhood studies. We will examine the emergence of 'the new paradigm' in the 1980s and 1990s and the place of agency in the sociology of childhood and childhood studies. We will track the research conducted on children as social actors and agents and discuss the distinction that emerged between social action and agency. We will proceed to outline how the construct of agency has evolved within childhood studies from agency asserted and exemplified to agency as an individual characteristic, to agency as socially enabled or constrained, and finally to agency as fluid and distributed. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how the term agency is used in childhood studies – firstly as a counterpoint to the passive child and secondly as a platform for advocating for children's rights. We will argue that the politics behind the idea of the agentic child need to be further interrogated.

In Chapter 3 of the book we will turn our attention to the insights on agency that have been offered by philosophers and theoreticians within psychology, neuroscience and the social sciences. Although these perspectives may not pertain to children's agency specifically, we will argue that our understanding of children's agency can be advanced by engaging with material beyond childhood studies and child-related areas of psychology. We will discuss the concepts of free will and determinism, the enduring agency–structure debate within sociology, and cognate concepts within psychology, such as self-efficacy, self-determination and personhood.

In Chapter 4 we will adopt a developmental perspective to trace the emergence of the constituents and roots which enable the sense and exercise of agency to occur. We will review research which illustrates the development of intentional action at around 8 or 9 months, and the development in the second year of life of the understanding that others have intentions, which may be different from one's own. From there, we discuss the emergence of language abilities, and how these abilities facilitate reflection upon one's mental states and efficacy as an agent, as well as an ability to regulate one's actions (a process often termed self-regulation). The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how the development of identity and a sense of morality are intricately tied to one's experiences as an agent in the world.

The following three chapters consider children as agents within family, school and the broader public sphere. In Chapter 5 we will discuss children's agency with their families. We will track the research on parent–child relationships and will argue that, despite children being represented as sources of effect within their families, this is not always the same as conceptualising them as agents. Drawing on a framework proposed by Leon Kuczynski, which explicitly acknowledges the agency of children in their relationships with their families, we will review research which explores the motivational, cognitive and behavioural aspects of agency in families. Despite theoretical developments, and a literature replete with examples of children's agency in the family context, we will suggest that there is still some way to go before children's agency in their families is properly understood.

In Chapter 6 we will discuss children's agency within the school context and with peers. We argue that in minority world and in many majority world countries children are often segregated from the adult world and embedded within an education system where they lack power and their agency is not enabled. We will discuss how discourses pertaining to 'active learning' and 'child-centred pedagogies' and an emphasis on 'education for citizenship' fail to be realised in the life of the child at school. We will conclude the chapter with an overview of research on children's peer cultures and will

discuss how the processes involved in establishing and maintaining these cultures are highly pertinent to the child's sense of and exercise of agency.

In Chapter 7 attention will turn to the position of children in the wider public sphere. We will discuss the global, societal and academic discourses and practices that are relevant to the construct of children's agency and consider how these discourses affect how children are seen and positioned as agents (or not) in their worlds. Chief among these discourses is children's rights discourse, primarily propagated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UN, 1989). Discourses associated with children's participation and 'voice', and children as citizens, as carers and as consumers, will also be discussed. We will discuss challenges inherent within these discourses and what they mean for children's agency. We will argue that these discourses often compete with each other and that there are major problems with both theory and practice in relation to children's participation and voice.

In Chapter 8 we will explore agency and diversity. A dominant theme throughout the book – that agency means different things across different disciplines and to different researchers – will be examined in this chapter. We will consider variations in how agency is expressed and exercised and will examine some of the origins of these variations, ranging from characteristics of the child, including their sex, age and genetic inheritance, to contextual sources of difference, such as social class and geographical location. Having illustrated how different children in different contexts express agency in different ways, we will ask what this means for defining and theorising agency. In considering the many definitions, typologies and dimensions of agency presented in the literature, we will discuss the merits and difficulties associated with them.

In the final chapter we will bring together our thinking on how various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives on agency can be synthesised. We will argue for a relational perspective on agency but warn against an extreme relational position, whereby children are de-centred and the existence of their inner worlds is denied. Despite its conceptual thorniness and susceptibility to misuse, we will argue that there is much value in holding onto the concept of (children's) agency, in a re-appraised formulation of the kind we offer in this book. We reject the view of the child as autonomous, rational and essentially competent and creative for a vision of the child as a person with agentic capacity, over time and at times capable of forming and asserting their choices and their opinions but not always heard and not always effective and not always acting for good or productive ends. We add power relations as an explanatory factor in how agency is expressed or not. We will argue that a psychological and developmental perspective has

much to bring to this theoretical synthesis and that to understand agency we need a psychological perspective that is capable of theorising the person in relational and processual terms. We close by specifying the features of our approach to children's agency as *agency in connection*, in the hope that it will open the understanding of children's agency to an appreciation of its complexity and the need to see it in both psychological and social terms.

The concept of agency in childhood studies

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The editors of the *Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, which was published in 2009, note that sociology and anthropology are 'the two most obvious forerunners in the now interdisciplinary social studies of childhood' (Qvortrup, Corsaro & Honig, 2009, p. 3). Sociology and anthropology, not psychology, have been most associated with focusing scholarly attention on 'children's agency'. Positioning children as social actors, not as passive recipients of moulding by their environments, most particularly the actions of their parents, was a key tenet of 'the new paradigm of childhood' that emerged in the late 1980s, and this tenet has been one of the most influential foundation stones of contemporary scholarship in childhood studies. In their book *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood*, published in 2016, the editors, Esser, Baader, Betz and Hungerland, start their introductory chapter by saying: 'Agency is without question one of the key concepts, possibly *the* key concept of Childhood Studies' (p. 1). In any treatment of children's agency sociological and anthropological perspectives must be seen as important, both historically and currently. It is of course the case that there are multiple perspectives within these disciplines and those sociological and anthropological theories about children's agency that are associated with the field of childhood studies have changed and developed over the past four decades.

Disagreement with the perceived principles and methods of child and developmental psychology was one of the main motivations for the emergence of the new paradigm for the study of childhood, now labelled childhood studies. There is no doubt that psychology dominated the academic conceptualisation of children throughout the twentieth century. This dominance was reinforced by its utility in shaping and informing the

practice of applied psychologists and other practitioners working with children in areas such as education, mental and public health. Sociology and anthropology appeared to have little to contribute to child management. Also, until the 1980s, the study of children and childhood was neither common nor valued within these disciplines. For example, in 1990 James and Prout noted that it is certainly true that sociologists have devoted little attention to childhood as a topic of interest in itself.

In the years when the new paradigm of childhood was coming into being, its novel perspectives were highlighted by pitching them against the perceived prescriptions of child psychology and child development. For most of the twentieth century psychology, with few exceptions, promoted a view of the child as the passive recipient of forces from within or without that shaped his or her behaviour or destiny. Because of this stance and because of psychology's commitment to '"rationality", "naturalness" and "universality"' (James and Prout, 1990, p. 10), child psychology was seen to stand for all that was toxic to children both theoretically and in the many forms of practice that leant on psychological theories.

Sociology and agency: the tension between structure and agency

To understand the sociological meaning of agency it is necessary to understand the long-standing tension in sociological theory between theories that emphasise 'agency' and those that emphasise 'structure' as explanatory concepts in shaping social processes. As Jensen states, 'the relationship between structure and agency is at the core of sociological controversies' (2009, p. 152). Emile Durkheim is often seen as the founding father of sociology and as an influential proponent of the view that societal structures dictate and shape individual behaviour. His theory is labelled structural functionalism and is often contrasted with the symbolic interactionism associated with the work of George Herbert Mead and others. As Giddens states, 'symbolic interactionism stresses the active, creative components of human behaviour', whereas the other main theoretical approaches in sociology (functionalism, structuralism and Marxism) 'emphasize the constraining nature of social influences on our actions' (1997, p. 567). Theorists have typically tended towards one side or the other in the structure vs agency debate. Giddens (1979) has attempted to resolve the opposition between the opposing sides, sometimes labelled structuralists and individualists. He does so in his theory of structuration, which asserts that dualist thinking is unhelpful and that structure and agency are interdependent (Giddens,

1984). Although few contemporary sociologists would deny that individuals have some degree of agency, the strong emphasis on the causal role of structures can be seen in some of the influential theorists who write about children, such as Qvortrup (1987) and Alanen (2009). Both see childhood and adulthood as structural terms and emphasise the importance of the social structure, 'generation', in consigning children to a lesser and de-valued role.

As discussed later, many childhood studies scholars theorise childhood and children by means of theories that centre on structure versus agency or structure and agency. For example, Jensen (2009) links structure and agency by pointing out that in the Western pluralisation of family forms – exemplifying new social structures – children have very little agency, since adults make the decisions around marriage, co-habitation, divorce, re-marriage etc. Children's agency is exercised at the micro level of adjustment to whatever family form their parents have chosen or ended up in. 'Children have some agency but this is kept in a rather limited space, and a major space of this agency is traced in their capacity to adjust' (2009, p. 153).

Socialisation theories

Socialisation has been a key concept in the academic study of children since the early years of the last century. It has been central to the theorisation of children's place in society on the part of both sociologists and anthropologists, but was also important in psychology. The term was used with a broad scope initially, encompassing the shaping of social institutions as well as individuals, but gradually became concentrated on the formation of the individual. In a history of the use of the term, largely referencing the USA, St Martin (2007) claims that before the First World War the goal of socialisation was the inculcating of obedience and conformity to society's norms, whereas by the 1960s and 1970s the goal of socialisation was typically seen as the nurture of autonomy and individuality in the child. However, the active role of the children in co-creating this process was not part of the discussion until the late twentieth century. Undoubtedly socialisation, as a concept, was influenced by the Durkheim view of society that emphasised the primary role of structure – in this case social norms and the role of parents and other adults in perpetuating them – over the role of children and any individual agency they might be seen to possess.

Giddens defines socialisation as 'the process whereby the helpless infant becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable person skilled in the ways of the culture in which she or he is born' (1997, p. 25). He does go on to say that the child does not absorb influences passively but 'is from the

beginning an active being' (p. 25). In the latter assertion Giddens departs from many of his predecessors and peers who would see competence, autonomy and, ultimately, agency as achieved in maturity, after the internalisation of society's values and associated behaviours. Psychologists use a similar definition of socialisation, e.g. 'the process by which individuals are socially guided to become competent members of their society and culture' (Kuczynski and De Mol, 2015, p. 323). For most of the twentieth century, whenever children were the focus of attention in sociology and anthropology, the theoretical approach adopted was centred on the concept of socialisation and for most of this time the agency of children was not emphasised.

Arguably socialisation is not so much about children as about how children are shaped to become adults and successful members of their community. Brayfield conducted a content analysis of key words in the prestigious academic journal *Journal of Marriage and the Family* in the years 1939–1997 and found almost no mention of children except as the focus of socialisation (Brayfield, 1998, cited in Mayall, 2013). One of the most influential anthropological books about Ireland, *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland*, which was published in 1973, has the word *children* in the index followed by *see family life; father; marriage; mother* (Brody, 1973). Tellingly, children themselves do not warrant discussion.

Although often positioned as theoretical and methodological rivals, psychology, sociology and anthropology were aligned for most of the twentieth century in their lack of interest in children's actual lives and experiences and in their emphasis on children's passivity and the need for them to be shaped into acceptable human personhood by parents and other environmental/societal forces (Greene, 2006). All three disciplines made frequent use of the concept of socialisation. Psychology also hosted another strand of thinking, less palatable to sociologists and anthropologists, which saw child development as the outcome of the unfolding of universal, biologically driven processes.

A degree of rapprochement between child psychology and anthropology can be seen in the work of Beatrice and John Whiting, anthropologists who initiated the Six Cultures Study of Socialisation in the 1960s (Whiting and Whiting, 1963). In this and other studies the Whitings worked with psychologists and indeed researchers from other disciplines to advance the understanding of the role of culture in human development. Their work was very influential in some areas of child development, drawing the attention of psychologists to the importance of the Cultural Learning Environment (CLE) and paving the way for the work of culturally oriented child psychologists such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Valsiner (2000).

In sociology and anthropology, aside from a restricted theoretical repertoire, a further barrier to progress was the low regard in which attention to children was held. By the 1980s a growing dissatisfaction on the part of some sociologists with their discipline's treatment of children and childhood was discernible. Ambert's 1986 paper 'Sociology of sociology: The place of children in North American sociology', published in the first volume of the short-lived journal *Sociological Studies of Child Development*, is often seen as an early harbinger of the 'new sociology of childhood'. Ambert, who commented on the dominance of socialisation theories and on the low status of the sociology of childhood/children, said: 'One does not become a household name in sociology by studying children' (1986, p. 24). As recently as 2014 Thorne commented that in sociology the study of children is 'certainly marginal' (p. 221). In anthropology the situation is much the same. As James notes, 'they studied children in order to get to know more about processes of cultural reproduction rather than to understand their present lives' (2009, p. 36). In a paper published in 2008 entitled 'Why don't anthropologists like children?' Hirschfeld states that despite a scattering of important works over the decades 'this work has not coalesced into a sustained tradition of child-focused research. Nor…has it succeeded in bringing children in from the margins of anthropology' (2008, p. 611). His view is disputed by Lancy, who describes the considerable body of anthropological work on children (2012). Mayall, a sociologist, sees signs of increased acceptance and valuing of the sociology of childhood within mainstream sociology (2013, p 37).

Despite some dissenting voices there is a widespread view that in the mainstream of both sociology and anthropology child-focused study was, and maybe still is, neither core nor valued. An inference to be drawn from this observation is that children were not visible to academic sociologists and anthropologists as social actors and agents with an important position and role in society. The new paradigm of childhood emerged in part to rectify this neglect.

Children as social actors

In an historical review of the sociology of childhood Mayall states that the shift from seeing children as the target of socialisation to seeing them as active agents took the form of giving 'due recognition to children as important members of society, not as pre-social objects of socialization but as contributing agents to the welfare of society' (2013, p. 2). The roots of this awakening to the need to value, study and invest in childhood can be

seen to date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, declared by the Swedish social reformer Ellen Key as 'the century of the child'. She enjoined her readers to respect children:

> Our age cries out for personality, but it will ask in vain until we let our children live and learn as personalities, until we allow them to have their own will, think their own thoughts, work out their own knowledge, form their own judgements.
>
> (1909/1900, p. 232)

Certainly it was around this time that rich countries stated to turn their attention in a very systematic way to the welfare of children, conceptualised as the future citizens of the state.

The anthropologist Hardman stated in 1973 that children should be a focus of study 'in their own right and not just [seen] as receptacles of adult teaching' (2001/1973, p. 87). Hardman was clearly picking up on the reliance within anthropology on a unidirectional view of socialisation and the interest in children solely as adults-in-the-making. In the 1980s, working in the USA, Corsaro also emphasised the agency of children, not so much as contributors to the welfare of society but as contributors to the dynamics of everyday life. His book *Friendship and Peer Culture in the Early Years* was published in 1985 and was based on observational studies of children's peer culture. It contains some of the key ideas that were to become part of the new paradigm as announced by James and Prout in 1990, as well as providing an early exemplar of ethnographic work with children.

Mayall notes that, in the 1980s, alongside the new perspective on children came a new perspective on childhood: 'Most important is to recognize childhood as a permanent constitutive section of society and to consider intergenerational processes between childhood and adulthood' (2013, p. 2). This move to considering childhood from a relational and generational perspective originated in Germany and in the Nordic countries but was quickly taken up in the UK. In Europe, scholars like Alanen (2009) and Qvortrup (1987) have continued to argue for the importance of generation as a key concept in understanding childhood, and both were contributors to the 'Childhood as social phenomenon' research programme and the influential text *Childhood Matters* (1994). Positioning childhood as an important element in the social structure of all human societies and pointing to its diversity in form and function were important steps forward in the sociology of childhood and children. This research also provided one of the key foundation stones for 'the new paradigm of childhood'.