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Sarane Spence Boocock, **Kimberly Ann Scott**. *Kids in Context: The Sociological Study of Children and Childhoods.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. xiii + 317 pp. $87.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2024-0; $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2025-7.

Reviewed by Rhonda S. Ovist (Department of Sociology, Rollins College)

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Children and Childhoods: More than Worthy of Study in their Own Right

Let me begin by saying that I liked this book. *Kids in Context* is exactly what the sociology of children and childhood in the United States needs: a well-organized, readable, relatively comprehensive introduction to the literature that is accessible to researchers, students and non-academics alike. Sarane Boocock and Kimberly Scott have written a text that is a pleasure to read, engaging the reader with well chosen and nicely contrasted studies. Through their insightful presentation of the material, Boocock and Scott create a convincing argument that "the sociology of children and childhoods is a field in its own right because 1) it examines a wider range of children's experiences than other fields of sociology and 2) it challenges the conventional role of children in society and in social science research" (p. 6).

Of course, like all texts, *Kids in Context* is not without limitations: the under-utilization of author reflexivity, an occasional slant towards universalism and Western bias, and an inconsistent implementation of the social context model of childhood lead to underlying tensions in the presentation of material. Nonetheless, I highly recommend *Kids in Context* for those who want, or need, a good overview of the contemporary sociology of children and childhood.

Boocock and Scott's book reflects what Alan Prout and Allison James coined as the "emergent paradigm," an approach to the study of children and childhood that gained currency first in Europe and is increasingly shaping the work of American researchers.[1] *Kids in Context* nicely illustrates and lends support to the central tenets of the emergent paradigm, including the notions that childhood is a social construction; children are active participants in the construction of their lives and the social world around them; and, children's lives are "worthy of social study in their own right."[2] Through their review and analysis of the literature, the authors provide compelling support for Johnson's position that "children are theoretically central to understanding how social life is reproduced and how it changes over time."[3]

Boocock and Scott successfully brings together studies from a variety of disciplines and methodological approaches, expertly and respectably weaving them together in what is, at its core, a sociological framework. Readers will be made acquainted with research from numerous disciplines including history, anthropology, psychology and biology as well as a range of multi-disciplinary fields. In addition, working from the premises that "there is seldom a 'best' method of study" (p. 47) and there are many advantages to using multiple methodologies, the authors draw on research that uses quantitative data, ethnographic research, traditional methods and new methodologies that integrate the views of kids themselves into the research. Although the emergent paradigm includes the assumption that qualitative research best gives "children a more direct voice and participation" in data production[4], Boocock and Scott effectively include qualitative and quantitative data when possible, increasing the readers' confidence in their conclusions and the possibility for generalizing their findings. In fact, Boocock and Scott should be congratulated for their insistence that "children and their ideas be taken seriously" (p. 41), and their efforts to include research that treats "kids as the best sources for understanding children and childhood" (p. 47), despite its relative scarcity (in part due to ongoing resistance to accepting children as valid research partners and informants).

At times, the authors use research that articulates the views of children to confirm or elaborate on more adult-centered data. Kid focused research is most interesting, though, when it presents an altogether different view of the social world than research based on adult perspectives. For instance, while adults tend to think of themselves as rearing children, children see themselves actually taking care of their parents a great deal of the time (p. 84). Or, whereas adults are focused on kids' achievement and discipline in schools, kids talk about how to keep school from getting "too stressy" and neutralizing some of the adult control over their lives (p. 128).

Boocock and Scott, like all good sociologists, are interested in identifying social patterns. Thus, they focus on the three variables that they see as "distinctive to the sociological approach" (p. 7): context, comparisons and change. Throughout the text, the authors attempt to examine the societal contexts of children's lives, make comparisons between various childhoods, and address the changes that occur for children and in childhoods "through the life course and through historical time" (p. 10). They introduce "the social context of childhood" model (p. 8), based on Urie Bonfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of human development, as the primary organizing and analytic scheme (which is reflected in the organization and titles of sections). The social context of childhood, which is diagrammed and introduced in chapter 1, focuses on the multiple environments that contextualize kids' lives. The core, where the child is centered, includes what are considered the three most immediate and overlapping environments affecting children: family, peer groups and school. These environments are "nested" immediately within "local community or neighborhood," which, in turn, is nested within "region/state or province/city or district, which is subsumed by 'nation' and all of which exist within the overall environment of "global society" (pp. 8-9). The social context of childhood model epitomizes the emergent paradigm by its recognition that children and childhoods affect, and are affected by, these interlocking contexts, even when the kids and their immediate surrounding environments are not directly involved in the more distant spheres. Overall, the social context model is an intuitively appealing organizing structure for the book, which is broken up into sections focused on, in the order listed here: families; social worlds outside the family; variations of childhood due to the variables of race, class, ethnicity and gender; and global issues of childhood. Just the same, I believe that the social context model is applied inconsistently at times, a critique that I will take up in further detail below.

Boocock and Scott utilize a number of other organizing strategies in presenting their review of the research on children and childhoods in the individual chapters. Most often, they organize their discussion around the main themes that emerge from the research. Usually, the themes within each chapter knit together neatly, and the authors do an admirable job of bringing together such a huge range of issues into a single coherent text. There does not seem to be a single organizing template for the chapters, which may, in fact, help diminish any appearance of monotony or a textbook like recitation of the data. In some chapters, the authors compare and contrast different theoretical (chapter 2) or political approaches (chapter 12). In a number of chapters, they highlight research addressing debates that have dominated public discourse, including the pros and cons of daycare (chapter 6), video games (chapter 11), and divorce (chapter 4). The latter approach, which may ultimately date the book without revisions, adds to its current timeliness and appearance of relevancy (a real selling point when choosing texts for undergraduate students).

The discussion in *Kids in Context* builds cumulatively through the chapters, and the reader is carefully guided through the inevitable overlapping of relevant research between chapters. For instance, in their discussion of peer abuse, the authors inform the reader that research shows that peer cultures participate in the teaching of racism, then direct the reader to the following chapter (race, ethnicity and social status) for a more thorough discussion of the topic. As a consequence, the authors are able to create a coherent framing for their book, while implicitly demonstrating the impossibility of compartmentalizing issues of children and childhood into simple, single context categories.

Kids in Context does exactly what the authors promise: it provides a "coherent synthesis" of the current research on children and childhood, presenting it in a very accessible and readable fashion (p. xiii). Just the same, it is useful to consider some of the things that this text does not do, or does not do as well. The following critique in not meant to negate the strengths of *Kids in Context*, but rather to give potential readers a better sense of how this text might best suit their needs and interests, and to suggest where some of its limitations might lie.

Readers should not look to *Kids in Context* as a source for "new" theory concerning children and childhood. While Boocock and Scott engage in some analysis of the literature, it is generally limited to making connections between the cited research, examining the strengths and

weaknesses of alternative theories, and building an argument for the legitimacy and validity of a sociology of childhood. Consequently, this book provides a great introduction to the sociological perspective of children and childhood, but, as a college teacher, I would not use it as a stand-alone text; it is best read with additional texts and articles that can give more substantive, theoretically developed analyses.

I would like to have seen Boocock and Scott continue the level of reflexivity present in the preface throughout the text. Instead, I am left with a sense that the authors are not being fully honest with the reader about how their theoretical assumptions have shaped their presentation of the material. Boocock and Scott's central argument is that the study of children and childhood is a field of study in its own right and should not be left to the parenthetic attention of other fields. Their book is also guided by the less explicitly stated, yet just as central, claim that the new sociological perspective of children and childhood (known by some as the "emergent paradigm") is the best approach to define this field. Otherwise, I get the impression that the authors want to give the impression that they are just giving the readers the facts, without judgment or prejudice, an impression that I would argue is false. For instance, in their early chapter on various theoretical perspectives they "take the position of British sociologists Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout [*Theorizing Childhood*] (1998) that different ways of thinking about children and childhood may be complementary rather than competing, and we will not attempt to identify a 'best' perspective" (p. 15). Yet, this claim seems disingenuous; Boocock and Scott's discussion of theoretical perspectives are selective, using those elements that "fit" with their position and ignoring or critiquing those elements that do not. This is also seen, albeit more explicitly, in their discussion of Jean Harris's book *The Nurture Assumption* (1998). Boocock and Scott rightfully refer to some of Harris's findings that complement sociological research on the importance of peer relationships. But they choose not to discuss in detail Harris's focus on genetic determinism, an aspect of her research that many sociologists found problematic. My complaint is not that this selective use of theories or research is bad, or wrong. As Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout also state, many scholars may "routinely combine elements [of different theories] across the boundaries in their work," recognizing that some elements of different theories may be complimentary while others are incompatible.[5] My complaint is that the authors are not up front about what they are doing. I would argue that consistent reflexivity on the part of the author does not diminish the validity of the written work; rather it increases it, giving the reader a more honest and complete context from which to evaluate the text.

One of the most important tenants of the "emergent paradigm," and one that Boocock and Scott state numerous times in their book, is that there is no single childhood. On the contrary, there are "various forms that childhood has taken in various times and places" (p. 7). Unfortunately, given the wide range of experiences and constructions of childhood throughout the world at any given time, it is impossible to truly represent the varieties of childhoods and children's experiences in a single text. The authors are left with the difficult task of negotiating a fine line between producing an introductory text accessible to the average reader without falling into a more conventional, universalistic treatment of the subject matter. Boocock and Scott manage to keep their balance a great deal of the time, but I will suggest there are some points along the way where they seem to tilt in the direction of universalism.

Whereas the authors express the importance of recognizing the variations in children's lives and childhood, these variations are at times put aside in order to present a coherent image of societal conditions. Two examples of this can be seen in Boocock and Scott's discussion of family life (chapter 4). In their brief historical account of changes in childcare responsibilities, the authors provide a singular trajectory of reduced "parental availability and a growing demand for alternative forms of child care" (p. 55). While this describes a general process, it ignores variations of class and race, variables the authors themselves describe as significant, not the least because when they are included we see that there is no single childhood. For instance, throughout history in Western societies, privileged families have substituted slaves and, later, servants for mothers' labor. It is also the case that among some Native American societies, the practice of grandparents taking a dominant role in childrearing goes back centuries. Boocock and Scott also make contextual generalizations concerning the nature and structure of the family itself. While many would agree with the authors' statement that "in all societies, the primary social institution responsible for the care and upbringing of children is the family" (p. 51), there is the risk here of ignoring the actual variations across time and societies in kin relations and children's place in them. Consider the argument of J. Collier, M. Rosaldo and S. Yanagisako concerning scholars' tendency to apply the term "family" across societies: "While outsiders may be able to 'delimit boundaries' that

resemble what they understand to be family, they do not acknowledge that natives may not be interested in making such distinctions."[6] Just as there are various childhoods, there are various kin relations (which may or may not be conceptualized as "family" as it is defined in Western society). If we are to truly compare and contextualize childhoods, then we need to at least acknowledge that family itself (and all other institutions for that matter) are also social constructs that do not exist in some universal form.

I believe that these problems are a symptom of a much larger omission on the part of the authors: for the most part, *Kids in Context* is about Western children and childhoods, not all children and childhoods. With the exception of chapters 10 and 11, discussion of non-Western children and childhoods is limited to occasional comparisons with the bulk of the material that is focused on North American or Western European conditions. My concern, though, is not with Boocock and Scott's focus itself, but rather that they do not explicitly state that they are doing so. Readers may consequently be given the mis-impression that research drawn from Western societies can be extrapolated to all other societies, or worse, be taken as the "norm," which is clearly not the intent of the authors.

The lack of clarity in which children and childhoods are being examined also leads, ultimately, to an inconsistent implementation of the social context model. As Boocock and Scott argue, there are multiple childhoods, and thus, there must be multiple applications of the social context of childhood model which can then be compared and contrasted. In other words, this model can only be applied to one childhood at a time. The specific nature of each contextual level, and the ways in which each context interacts within the immediate environments of children, depends on which children are at the core. In chapters 3 through 9, the social context of childhood model is centered primarily on children in North America and Western Europe. It is only in chapters 10 and 11, where the topic is the global context, that the lives of children in the southern hemisphere are given comparable attention. This suggests that the authors have shifted in their utilization of the social context model in chapters 10 and 11, no longer focusing only on Western children but rather shifting back and forth between Western and non-Western children. The good news is that these latter chapters provide the best understanding of childhood as a global issue found in the book. The bad news is that this shift creates a disjuncture in the text and ultimately disrupts the coherence and explanatory power of the context of childhood model.

Boocock and Scott's lack of attention to the questions of "which kids are we looking at" and why it matters leads to unexamined tensions in their book. Given the relative shortage of data on non-Western kids, the authors would do well to acknowledge the implicit Western bias in the available research. They could then guide the reader to relevant questions such as: what types of data would we have if non-Western children were placed in the core of the model? What difference might it make if their experiences with family, peers, school and social stratification were examined? Why do Western researchers know so little about non-Western children's families, social relations and encounters with social hierarchies? How can we avoid representing non-Western children as the global other or the disadvantaged other? Should these children be defined by how they suffer from the powerful, often Western-controlled institutions that impose economic policy, exploit workers?

Despite what I feel are limitations of this text, I stand by my judgment that *Kids in Context* is a very good book, and makes an important and much needed contribution to the emerging field of children and childhoods. This would be a great text for undergraduate courses that address family, children/childhood, or education. I will be recommending *Kids in Context* to people both within academia as well as professionals who work with children in the community.

Notes

[1]. Alan Prout and Allison James, "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems," in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, ed. Allison James and Alan Prout (London: Falmer Press, 1997).

[2]. Ibid., p. 8.

[3]. H.B. Johnson, "From the Chicago School to the New Sociology of Children: The sociology of children and childhood in the United States, 1900-1999," in *Children at the Millennium: Where Have We Come From, Where Are We Going?* , ed. S. L. Hofferth and T. J. Owens (Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science, 2001): 53-93. As quoted in Boocock and Scott (2005), p. 15.

[4]. Prout and James, "A New Paradigm," p. 8.

[5]. Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 26.

[6]. J. Collier, M. Rosaldo and S. Yanagisako, "Is There

a family? New Anthropological Views," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1992), p. 34.

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