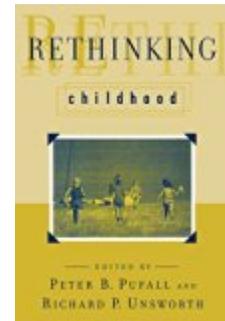


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter B. Pufall, Richard P. Unsworth, eds. *Rethinking Childhood*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. xiii + 292 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-3365-0.

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Children's Voices: Who's Listening?

Rethinking Childhood is the result of a long interdisciplinary collaboration and several sets of exchanges between scholars in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand from eleven different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities as well as several professional fields. The fruit of a process that included conversations among chapter authors is a volume that is not only thematically cohesive, but one in which connections between essays are made explicit. Such is a cherished rarity in edited volumes.

Editors Peter B. Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth suggest that we need to reconceptualize childhood in a way that focuses less on what adults assume about children and more on the actual experiences of children, described in their own words, in diverse settings. In the United States today, approximately 20 percent of children live in poverty and struggle with social and educational systems that fail them. Today's children are besieged by the mass media and advertising aimed at children and the market shares they represent. In a post September 11 world, children's sense of safety and security in the world has been transformed by levels of hatred and violence that are truly incomprehensible—not only to children but to adults as well. "Children are the canaries within the mineshaft of modern society" and it is time to listen to their songs (p. 65).

The editors' introduction poses questions about these issues and the qualitative methods required to deal with them, and sets the thematic tone for the essays that follow. Western societies, suggest Pufall and Unsworth,

have been confined to thinking about children as either embodiments of a romantic Rousseauistic ideal of innocence or in the Aristotelian view as not-yet-fully human beings noteworthy for their potential to become fully human. To see children as fully human demands that we listen to their voices and respect their agency in constructing their lives. "Voice" is defined as "that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own" (p. 8). Agency refers to "the fact that children are much more self-determining actors than we generally think. They measure issues against their own interests and values, they make up their own minds, they take action as a function of their wills ... if adults allow them to do so" (p. 9). For over a century, developmental psychologists have been listening to children and their conceptions of the physical, emotional, moral, political, and educational worlds. What is different in this volume is the explicit tensions brought out in numerous areas between what ordinary adults in power assume children think about their everyday experiences and the way children actually think and behave in those power-ridden relationships.

Rethinking Childhood is organized into five parts and fourteen chapters. Part 1, "Children's Voice and Agency," consists of four chapters that delve more deeply into the meaning of voice and agency. Allison James's essay extends the editors' introduction by describing the history of interdisciplinary studies in childhood and the movement away from thinking of children as passive subjects of traditionally conceived forces of socialization towards a view that acknowledges children in the active construc-

tion of their lives. In the next two chapters, "Children as Philosophers" and "Children as Theologians," Gareth B. Matthews and Eileen W. Lindner provide compelling evidence that children are quite capable of thinking like philosophers or theologians when asked philosophical or theological questions. Matthews rejects the Aristotelian conception of children and insists that the essence of childhood is not given by simply asserting what children will normally become. He writes "by ignoring the possibilities of philosophical reflection and dialogue with children, adults impoverish their relationship to those children, underestimate the cognitive capacities of children, and make their days in childcare and teaching much more dreary and boring than they need be" (p. 41). In chapter 4, Jack Meachan emphasizes that we cannot understand development without including the child as an actor as a "third force" alongside the traditionally considered influences of nature, nurture, and their interaction. We need to better understand how children participate in their own development. To some extent, developmental psychologists have attempted to capture children's agency with concepts such as "niche picking" and "niche construction" to designate children's participation in choosing and constructing environments that best match their individual abilities and interests.

Part 2, "Voice and Agency in Education," includes three chapters focused on children's experiences in different educational contexts. Susan Etheredge's chapter "Do You Know You Have Worms on Your Pearls?" profiles a gifted second grade teacher and portrays a classroom learning community where children's voices and agency are honored. In their chapter, A. Wade Boykin and Brenda A. Allen focus on African-American children from low-income families and discuss how schools can better serve these children so that diversity becomes an asset rather than a liability or "risk" factor. For example, Boykin and Allen suggest that African-American children tend to view learning as a communal process and not as a competitive task, as is so often the case. The authors reflect what developmental psychologists call a "strengths based approach" to teaching that focuses attention on the knowledge, skills, values, and experiences that children bring with them to school in order to best cultivate each child's potential. Justine Cassell describes the ways in which children participated in an international online forum—a "Junior Summit" program. Cassell describes how children from 139 different countries cooperated and communicated with one another through the Internet. Summit participants insisted that their political voices be heard—sometimes to the consternation of

the adult organizers. The chapter is especially provocative in demonstrating the potential of the Internet to empower children.

The three chapters in part 3 all explore children's voice and agency within families. In her chapter on advertising and marketing to children, Enola G. Aird argues that aggressive marketing and advertising practices aimed at children compromises children's ability to "help shape their world and to articulate their hopes, wishes, and fulfillments" (p. 142); she recommends that parents and other adults seek to protect children from the "ever-encroaching messages of marketing" (p. 151). Implicit in her chapter is the notion that advertisers borrow from developmental psychology and use our understanding of children's interests in an obviously exploitative manner. In her chapter "Children's Lives In and Out of Poverty," Karen Gray argues that we need research that goes beyond the conventional quantitative literature linking poverty to negative child outcomes to examine the meaning and experience of poverty to the child. After listening to stories of resilience and vulnerability, she recommends policies that might enhance resilience and reduce the children's perceptions of deficits. In "Children's Lives in and Out of Poverty," Karen A. Gray briefly reviews traditional research on the negative affects of poverty on children's development. But she goes far beyond traditional studies by looking more closely at what poverty means for individual children. She argues that policy-makers should include children's voices and experiences in poverty in constructing legislative measures to reduce poverty. In their chapter, "Children and Divorce," Jan Pryor and Robert E. Emery noted that children are not always consulted on matters involving significant family changes. The authors listened to children whose parents were divorced—again going beyond traditional outcome studies. They solicited children's views of what constitutes a family and their views of family change; collected retrospective reports from the children ten years after the divorce; and painted a complex picture of children's recollections of changing feelings. Acknowledging children's voices in such matters does not "amount to conferring decision-making powers and responsibilities on them" (p. 171), but does diminish children's vulnerability and enhances their resilience in such situations.

In part 4, chapters move beyond the family and school into neighborhoods and sports for children. James C. Spilsbury and Jill E. Korbin describe their research on the responses of children and adults to a help-offering/help-seeking situation. Their responses suggest that both adults and children are ambivalent about giving and

seeking help. Rhonda Singer's (more recently Rhonda S. Ovist) chapter "Are We Having Fun Yet" sharply illuminates how children's reasons for participating in organized sports do not correspond to the socialization goals that adults project onto such activities. Children play to have fun, while adults hope that sports teach self-discipline, the value of hard work, teamwork, and competition (p. 223). Singer suggests that closing the gap between adults and kids' conception of fun will keep children involved in sports.

The final chapters in part 5, "Voice and Agency as Legal Rights," include two essays that examine how legal systems influence children's rights and identity. Barbara Bennett Woodhouse argues that traditional concepts of rights have not served children well and must be reshaped. She proposes two categories of rights: "needs-based" rights that include those related to survival such as nurture, education, food, medical care, and shelter; and "dignity-based rights" that acknowledge children as individuals with the same claims to dignity that adults enjoy, including equality, individualism, empowerment, protection, and privacy (p. 235). Woodhouse bases her analysis of children's rights on the principles embodied in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that, like the Convention on the Rights of Women, has been ratified by all nations except the United States and Somalia. Alice Hearst looks closely at article 8 of the UNCRC claiming that every child has the right to preserve his or her identity. Her essay explores multiple layers of identity—familial, cultural, biological, and political. Proper acknowledgement of such identity rights for children could change the way the law configures childhood by acknowledging that children participate in the shaping of their own lives (p. 247). A final section by Raymond A. Ducharme provides readers with a well-organized and thoughtful guide to Internet resources for those seeking further information and resources related to children's issues. It is a fitting and timely end for the volume.

The authors of this highly intelligent and accessible book rallied across disciplinary boundaries to listen and understand the ways children shape their own experience. American children, contend the editors, are scarcely understood in this rapidly changing world be-

cause we have not listened to children's voices and respected the ways in which children actively shape their own experience, their destinies, and their capacities to make sensible decisions. A former editor of *Daedalus* suggested to the authors that the book should contribute to a re-thinking of childhood, "to listen to children, to hear them, to see them as having agency, and to understand the restraints under which they live their lives" (p. x). The "new" paradigm presented in this volume includes both "recycled" methods (interviews, ethnographic methods) as well as potentially radically new methods. The more radical methods include interdisciplinary discussion and the use of "interpenetrating" language stripped of discipline-based jargon and communicable to a wide audience. In a world of over-specialized academics such transparent language is a pleasure to read and helps to make the book accessible to both undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of disciplines.

John Dewey once said that it was unethical to treat human beings as objects or as a means to an end. Dewey proposed that the social sciences treat humans as subjects and ends unto themselves. Dewey further writes that the thinking of children is not fundamentally different from that of adults—a very radical statement and one that has not been heard by traditional stage models of development.[1] Many of our institutions (such as schools, health institutions, the media and churches) do treat children as if they were objects rather than subjects, as does much of the work of the child sciences. In the child sciences, the emphasis on aggregate data and statistical analysis attempts to portray the "child in general" child. But there is no general or typical child; there are only individual children. Valuable as those canonical studies are for identifying meaningful patterns of development across wide ranges of children, they must be supplemented by studies that capture the richness of individual experience. *Re-thinking Childhood* goes a long way towards establishing, re-establishing, and legitimizing the qualitative methods that privileges lived experience before large sample sizes. Dewey would be proud of this volume.

Note

[1]. Emily D. Cahan, "John Dewey and Human Development," *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 2 (1992): pp. 205-214.

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