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## Researching 'the Child' in Developmental Psychology

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The study of 'the child' has been, for more than a century, the territory of developmental psychology. In recent decades, the hegemony of developmental theory and methods has been challenged by critics within the now well-established field of the sociology of childhood that has emerged primarily in Europe in the course of the last two decades (see for example, Corsaro, 1997; James & Prout, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Qvortrop, 1987). Within developmental psychology, some critical voices also emerged (for example, Alldred and Burman, Chapters 10 of this volume; Burman, 1994; Bradley, 1989; Morss, 1996) but these have been few, and the mainstream of research in developmental psychology has taken little note of the criticisms posed from either outside or inside the discipline. Some of these criticisms centre around the perception that developmental psychology has failed to adequately describe and understand children's ordinary lives and their active participation in their social worlds, or in other words, to research their subjective experience. As I have argued elsewhere (Hogan, 1998; Hogan, Etz, & Tudge, 1999), most research with children conducted over the last century of developmental psychology has not sought to understand children's subjective experience.

In the present chapter I aim to shed some light on developmental psychology's apparent lack of interest in learning about the content and personal meaning of children's everyday lives. The chapter reflects on the models of children and child research that dominate the field, and explores how assumptions about children manifest themselves in specific research practices. The chapter also describes some of the challenges that the field faces, especially in Europe, as new assumptions about children and research, and a growing value for understanding children's worlds from their perspectives, takes hold in related fields of child study and in the policy domain. It explores opportunities for pursuing dual goals of researching both children's development and their personal experience of events, relationships and culture, independent of adult perspectives. The chapter begins with an overview of the criticisms that developmental psychology has received for its approach to the study of children, both from within and outside the field.

## Critiques from Outside and Inside the Field

More than ten years ago, psychologist John Flavell (1992), in a review of advances in cognitive developmental psychology, conceded that the field of developmental psychology had learned little about children's subjective experience although it had made impressive advances in the empirical study of children's cognitive growth. He concluded that learning about children within the discipline had been limited to age-linked competencies and knowledge acquisition, and the effects of these cognitive accomplishments on some aspects of social and nonsocial behavior:

we have seldom tried to infer what it is like to be them and what the world seems like to them, given what they have and have not achieved cognitively. When knowledge and abilities are subtracted from the totality of what could legitimately be called 'cognitive', an important remainder is surely the person's subjective experience: how self and world seem and feel to that person, given that knowledge and those abilities. (Flavell, 1992: 1003)

Flavell's comments are important because they resonate so well with the views of critical developmental psychologists, and with the principal critics of the field within the sociology of childhood, yet appear to have gained little purchase within developmental psychology itself.

Christenson and Prout (Chapters 3 of this volume) describe the approach to the study of children and childhood emerging under the banner of the sociology of childhood, or the 'new social studies of childhood', but it is useful here to briefly outline the perspective on developmental psychology that has emerged from that quarter. Sociologists of childhood criticize psychology for its focus on documenting age-related competencies at the expense of investigating what it means to be a child. They argue that the developmental approach leads to a detached and impoverished understanding of children's needs. Indeed, the sociology of childhood has, at least in part, defined itself in reaction to the approach to the study of children in developmental psychology; it is concerned with presenting an alternative view of children and childhood to that which it perceives developmental psychology as representing and promoting. The ontological and epistemological basis for this approach lies mainly in constructivist and critical theory paradigms. The methodologies are primarily case studies with children conceptualized as active participants of the research endeavour, and the favoured methods of data collection are interviews and participant observation. There is a strong emphasis on reflexivity, and on interpretative approaches to analysis.

Much of sociology's dissatisfaction with psychology centres around a few core issues: the perception that a focus on development has led to the neglect of the quality and meaning of children's present lives, the search for 'universal' laws of child development, the assumption that child development is 'natural' (biologically based), a view of children as passive, and a focus on age-related competency/deficits rather than on subjective experience. Some of the

arguments that have emerged from the sociology of childhood are also to be found in the writings of developmental psychologists who have adopted a critical perspective on their discipline (Bradley, 1989; Burman, 1994; Greene, 1999, 2003; Hogan, 1998; Hogan et al., 1999; Morss, 1996; Westcott & Littleton, Chapter 8 of this volume; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2001).

Kuzcynski and his colleagues (Kuzcynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999), believe that most developmental psychologists are somewhat concerned about the emergence of the sociology of childhood and, by implication, by its critical position on theory and methods. Evidence to support this claim is not readily evident; rather, it appears that developmental psychology, especially in North America, where the majority of research and publishing in the field takes place, is largely unaware of these challenges either to territory or to its vision of children. It may indeed be the case, as Damon (1998) attests in a preface to the most recent *Handbook of Child Psychology*, that the field has undergone a period of self-reflection in recent years; that it has debated the notion of development and has grappled with the possibility of reconciling itself with ideological principles of diversity and equality. Notwithstanding these developments, the field has not engaged in reflection and self-appraisal at other levels. Indeed, Valsiner (1998: 189) also writing in the *Handbook*, has characterized the field as being immersed in 'hyperactive data collection' to the neglect of reflection and development at the meta-theoretical level. Bennett (1999: 11) has observed that developmental psychology, unlike some other areas of psychology, has not engaged in 'a period of self-scrutiny prompted by post-modern critiques' where the fundamental goals and methods of the field have been debated. Critical developmental psychology exists only on a small scale, and mainly outside North America. As a result, many of the field's guiding assumptions remain unchallenged and research agendas remain unchanged. The search for a greater understanding of how children experience their lives in particular, a question that has captured the attention of policy makers and social research funders in the UK and Ireland, remains a minor research issue for the field.

### **'The Child' as Research Object in Developmental Psychology**

If there is a core mission in the field of developmental psychology, it is to understand the processes of change, with age, in the psychological functioning of individuals. Most of the field's efforts to understand these processes have targeted the childhood years and a large proportion of the research on children involves documenting children's age-related competencies, with a view to discovering the factors most likely to predict a passage to competency and positive functioning in adulthood. The epistemological basis for the majority of this work is in positivist and post-positivist paradigms. The

**Table 2.1 'Mainstream' model of research with children in developmental psychology**

<b>Ontology</b> <i>Assumptions about children</i>	<b>Epistemology</b> <i>Assumptions about research with children</i>	<b>Methodology</b> <i>Applications in research with children</i>
Context-free <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal</li> <li>• Timeless</li> <li>• Isolable</li> </ul>	Leads to information about 'the child'	Efforts to 'control' or to neutralize effects of context; reliance on standardized tests
Predictable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard development</li> <li>• Progressive development</li> </ul>	Leads to universal laws of child development	Exclusion of atypical children, variation beyond norms interpreted as deviance
Irrelevant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unformed</li> <li>• Passive-dependent</li> <li>• Unreliable</li> </ul>	Adult reports receive higher value than children's, emphasis on 'objective' measurement	Adult reports more widely used, treated as benchmark

principal methodologies are experimental, survey and objective testing and although the methods are varied, they largely favour collection of quantifiable data. The use of qualitative methods is rare, and self-report is less trusted than observation.

Critics have argued that 'the child' of research in developmental psychology, as the common use of the definite article suggests, is an object rather than subject of scientific research, in that researchers expect to come to know its essential qualities through rigorous examination of its properties, under controlled circumstances. There is some merit to this argument, in that this approach to children is evident at multiple levels within the overall research endeavor in developmental psychology; in its research agenda, dominant meta-theory, theories and methodologies (Greene, 1999; 2003; Hogan, 1998, Hogan et al., 1999; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). It must also be acknowledged, however, that developmental psychology is a large and variable field, within which several paradigms of development co-exist. Yet it can certainly be argued that there is a mainstream model that wields a powerful influence over research practice and publishing on children's issues.

As new conceptualizations of children and their role in research attract increasing attention in other disciplines, and also from policy makers and research funders, it is important for the field to reflect on what could be called the 'mainstream model' and its influence over research activity. Here I will first briefly describe the approach to developmental psychology that is reflected in much of the criticism that has been targeted at the field in respect of claims that children have been treated as 'objects' of research, to the neglect of their subjective experiences, before considering the merits of such

a characterization of research within the field. These criticisms suggest that there is a mainstream ontology of childhood (assumptions or premises about the nature of children and childhood), and an associated epistemology (attendant beliefs about the kind of knowledge it is possible to gain about children, about the role of researchers, and about the role of children in research) that have given rise to a accepted methodologies with prescribed design and sampling options, and to a set of methods used to conduct research.

### ***The context-free child***

The first broad criticism of the field is that children are conceptualized, and therefore researched, as though they have an existence that can be divorced from the context in which they live. Universal laws governing development continue to be sought and the findings of research are explicitly or implicitly held to be globally applicable across both place and historical time. Furthermore, the context-free child is assumed to function at a mainly individual level, with abilities and behaviors that are *isolable*, to use Kessen's (1979) term, from the social world in which he or she lives. These ontological assumptions, critics argue, are reflected in certain epistemological positions and methodological approaches. One fundamental epistemological premise is that context, be it culture, community, research setting, time in history, or relationships, can be 'controlled' and that the 'true' child will emerge. Those who adopt this standpoint, it is argued, do not consider it to be important to find out what is going on between children and the world in which they live. It follows that their psychological characteristics can be recorded and understood by the detached and neutral observer. Most important for the issues under consideration in the present volume, children's personal responses to the research process and the implications these might have for data gathering and data interpretation are rarely considered.

### ***The predictable child***

A second area of criticism is that developmental psychology is based on a view of childhood as a phenomenon already known to adults. This can be broken down into two strands: first, the view of child development as regulated or *standard*, with children behaving and developing within predictable age parameters; and second, the view of child development as *progressing* naturally in a linear fashion. The field is considered to be uncomfortable with an image of childhood as fragmented, multi-directional, and idiosyncratic. Instead, there is a search for universal age parameters and strivings to establish normative models of child development. Walkerdine (1984), for example, argues that developmental psychology has produced a vision of childhood, one that is reflected in pedagogic practice, which insists that there is 'an actual sequence of development' (p. 163).

### ***The irrelevant child***

Another strand of criticism directed at developmental psychology is that it has viewed children as having less to offer to research, even about children themselves, than adults. This view encompasses three arguments. The first is that children are viewed as *unformed persons* within the field. This perception of children as adults-in-the-making, not so much as persons in their own right in whom researchers should be interested, is reflected in the way in which tenses are used, according to Morss (1996). He argues that adults are commonly represented as existing in the present and children in the future. By positioning children as 'becomings' rather than as 'beings,' Morss maintains, adulthood defines itself in a territorial way – 'it commands the present, and hence legitimizes the denial of rights to non-adults' (Morss, 1996: 158). It is for this reason, he argues, that so much emphasis is placed on the long-term effects of early experiences, perhaps to the detriment of adequate attention to immediate effects and needs.

The second argument concerning irrelevance is that children are represented within developmental psychology as being *passive and dependent* and therefore that agency is viewed as being located not internally but externally. Thus, while children are viewed as distinct from adults, there is also an expectation that their views will be interchangeable with those of adults if their reports are to be deemed valid and reliable, since parent reports are typically used as the 'gold-standard' to judge the accuracy and value of the child report (Hodges, 1993).

The third argument in this set is that children are viewed within developmental psychology as being *unreliable informants*; that it is assumed that they cannot credibly and consistently provide information about events or experiences for research purposes. The knowledge that they can provide is viewed with skepticism, particularly when there is evidence of inconsistency, and especially when it is presented by very young children. Children are viewed as living in an ephemeral fantasy world, as being highly suggestible, prone to making up stories, and as having limited age-dependent competencies. Taking these three premises together, an image emerges of children as unequipped for the task of describing themselves, at least until they are approaching adulthood, when they can offer an adult-like perspective in adult language.

In summary, the various strands of argument about the shortcomings of the field presented above together suggest that developmental psychology has produced a mainstream model of research with children that reflects a vision of childhood as important and distinct, but also universal and essentially known or predictable. That image has material consequences for research methodology used with children. An important element of that research model is that it supports the exclusion of children from assuming the role of expert and validates adults instead as expert informants on children. If childhood is a highly regulated and universal experience, unrelated to historical time and to social context, then adults, with their superior capacity for objectivity and more sophisticated understanding, who themselves have

been children, can claim to possess expertise on the experience of any given child. Children's personal experience of events, relationships and everyday life receive little attention, with the result that knowledge about what it is to be a child can scarcely be described within the literature. How valid is this characterization of developmental psychology's approach to research with children, and especially to research on children's experience?

It can be argued that all of the criticisms laid out above have some merit and can be easily substantiated. Assumptions of universality are reflected in the use of standardized tests and measures across time and place, often normed on the dominant cultural group in a given society, such as white middle-class Americans, and in the testing of children in 'strange situations' such as university laboratories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 19). Such assumptions are also reflected in expectations of some psychologists that research will yield the 'true score' of each child. This image of 'the child' reflects a core assumption of the positivist paradigm – the assumption of a real, rather than a socially constructed, world.

Assumptions about predictability also have some merit; in support of this criticism it can be argued that individual differences in behaviours, thought, and emotion that transgress established norms are often viewed as deviance, while the methods most commonly used in research with children involve standardized testing (where children's performance is compared to a standard or norm). Meanwhile, little effort has been expended in the development of research tools to examine such issues as young children's perspectives on their relationships (Sturges, Dunn, & Davies, 2001). Above all, however, criticisms regarding assumptions of the irrelevance of children in research are warranted (Hogan et al., 1999). While claims that children are portrayed as passive by the mainstream of developmental psychologists are open to question, and especially if the increasingly influential models proposed by theorists such as Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987) are taken into account, the tendency of the field to disregard children's perspectives on the nature and meaning of their lives is easily evidenced. There is clearly a scarcity of research asking children, especially young children, to describe their own feelings and behaviours or to evaluate the services and care provided to them. As Langsted has asked with respect to the paucity of research on children's perspectives on early childhood services: 'Is anyone interested in the kind of daily life the *children* want? Does anyone regard children as experts when it comes to their own lives?' (Langsted, 1994: 29).

While the criticisms outlined above do have merit, however, the characterization of developmental theory and research that is typically presented in critiques of the field by sociologists of childhood has often been unduly simplistic, overlooking the complexity of ideas about children and their development within the field both historically and currently, and especially theories and research in which children have been represented as agentic and development as culturally and historically located. It is fair to say that such ideas have not, historically, dominated the field (Tudge, Gray & Hogan, 1996),

but their influence on contemporary research and theorizing is considerable and is increasing (Lerner, 1998). In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine the ideas and events that have shaped developmental psychology's approach to research with children, and especially its neglect of subjective experience. I will also outline both historical and emerging ideas that can contribute to creating an impetus within the field for developing models of research with children that are compatible with gaining knowledge about both children's development and their lived experience.

## Constructing 'the Child' of Developmental Psychology

It has often been argued that perceptions of the nature of childhood are socially constructed. Such arguments have occasionally been made by psychologists such as Kessen (1979), who famously argued that the child of developmental psychology was a 'cultural invention.' So too are our approaches to research with children. The research studies we conduct reflect choices; we select issues to research, questions to ask and participants deemed worthy as informants. We then select which aspects of our findings to believe and which to doubt, and we chose which findings to reiterate and reinforce in our discourse about research, so that a certain finding becomes 'well-established' or 'widely accepted'. Through this ongoing process, sets of assumptions about the nature of children are constructed, as are assumptions about their role, their capacities, and their needs. These in turn create the basis for research methodologies. The extent to which those assumptions and methodologies are accepted, implicitly or explicitly, by the community of researchers in the field, determines which research approaches become dominant and which remain marginal. To understand the present state of research with children, it is helpful to examine the historical origins of research in child development, as well as the events that have recently contributed to interest in children's experience of their lives and indeed of participation in research.

### ***Early philosophies of childhood***

There is a danger in this type of brief historical analysis of bringing twentieth-century western values to bear on evaluations of the treatment of children in another historical period, as is evidenced in the work of some historians of childhood (Aries, 1962; DeMause, 1974) and to conclude that societal treatment of children has improved in a unilinear fashion across time. The history of childhood does, however, provide compelling evidence that there were *different* orientations to childhood in other centuries than exist today.

Modern histories of childhood suggest that the concept of childhood as distinctive may not have emerged until the eighteenth century and that the

seventeenth-century ideas of philosopher John Locke contributed significantly to this new thinking. In his popular book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), which offered advice on the physical and psychological development of children, Locke presented a vision of childhood as a phase of life worthy of attention in its own right, a formative period of heightened vulnerability. He is generally credited as being among the earliest to perceive children as individuals in their own right, with particular abilities, with impulses that were governed by reason and restraint, and with their own point of view. His ideas of childhood have become assimilated into mainstream thinking about the nature of childhood (Borstelmann, 1983). In many respects these ideas had positive consequences for the understanding and treatment of children in society but may also be seen as shaping an image of children as unformed persons who are passive and dependent.

Rousseau's image of childhood in the eighteenth century, portrayed in works such as *Emile*, also cast childhood in terms of distinctiveness and value (Borstelmann, 1983). Yet his belief that children did not reach what he termed 'the age of reason' (implying adult reason) until age 12 contributed to the common image of children as incapable of making meaningful judgments, and perhaps contributed to the idea of children as 'becomings' rather than 'beings,' as described by Morss (1996).

What can be seen as romantic views of childhood innocence and purity, which were strong at the turn of this century, can be traced back to these ideas, and forward to contributing to the creation of a moral imperative to improve the lives of children and to vindicate their rights (Kessen, 1979). They may also, paradoxically, have laid the foundation for a view of children as passive, inexpert, and lacking valuable knowledge, while at the same time placing agency and knowledge in the realm of adults. Hendrick (1990) argues that the historical positioning of children as helpless was part of an attempt at social control and accompanied by efforts to control young people's activities, particularly in the wake of the industrial revolution which brought parents' work out of the home, and separated children from parents. Moves to establish a system of public education were backed with arguments that children, especially those from the working classes, were ignorant and in need of education and socialization. The denial of the street knowledge of working-class children, in Hendrick's view, arose out of the fear of children as a potentially powerful group in society.

By the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, children and their education and development had gained the interest of both academic researchers and governments, evidenced by the establishment of institutes for the study of children (Burman, 1994) and in the intervention by state, private, and religious agencies into family life to protect children (Hart, 1991). By the 1890s a journal of human development had been established in the USA and the questionnaire method had been used with children in Germany to 'investigate the contents of children's minds', providing the precursor to aptitude tests (Cairns, 1983).

### ***The institutionalization of child study***

Early institutes for the study of the child in the USA and in Europe continued to pursue methods to objectively study children; so too did the first academic departments conducting research on children, principally developmental psychology, education and home economics. Interest in research on children grew at a time of widespread enthusiasm for science and scientific progress and in these early research activities the roots of ideas about 'the child' as context-free and predictable can be seen.

One of the founders of child study in the USA, G. Stanley Hall, was committed to Darwinian ideas of evolution and by extension to the notion that childhood follows a natural, regulated pathway (Cairns, 1983). Such biological progressivist ideas were widely accepted in these new institutes where a primary goal was to discover the origins and processes of the adult mind (Burman, 1994) as they were in the new discipline of developmental psychology. They continued to be articulated in the theories of Baldwin in the USA, and of Freud and Piaget in Europe (Greene, 1999). These ideas were well received by western society and universities as they were entirely compatible with the philosophy of science to which the social sciences and especially psychology were turning.

### ***The hegemony of positivism in social science***

Positivism originated in the natural sciences, its defining assumptions being that there is an objective reality that researchers can accurately measure. Ironically, this paradigm was embraced by social scientists at a time when the natural sciences were calling into question its usefulness as a single investigative framework (Suppe, 1977). As child study became established, the child of research became increasingly objectified throughout the 1940s and 1950s. A certain level of variation was considered normal, but beyond this, individual differences were interpreted as deviance or alternatively as 'outliers' in data sets and were duly ignored. The basis for this was a desire to produce data that were scientifically rigorous, which in the positivist paradigm is equated with objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the context of a western culture enamored by science, folk knowledge about children was denigrated as 'old wives tales' and children were brought into laboratories to be weighed, measured, tested, and contrasted to norms. In institutes of child study, women's reports of child behaviour were discouraged, since mothers were viewed as incapable of providing impartial, objective information on children (Burman, 1994). Early adherence to the positivist paradigm strengthened with successive generations of researchers in the twentieth century, supported, at least in part, by emergent theories of child development and models of human functioning. Among these were the 'grand theories' of child development in psychology, a small number of which have guided research on children throughout the century, directly or indirectly.

### ***Theories of child development***

The scientific model provided a basis for the emergence of individualistic stage theories of child development. The 'grand' theories, those that offered the most comprehensive explanations of human functioning and that gained the most attention, contributed to the creation and maintenance of a number of assumptions about children and their place in research. Freudian theory, for example, promoted the idea of predictable stages, and the notion of a regulated child. Freud's work was aimed primarily at understanding the adult mind by tracing the experiences of children and can be seen as contributing to the notion of the unformed child. Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which has been so influential in education systems and other domains, also assumed a natural basis for development. It set parameters around the age at which certain tasks could be accomplished and the stages through which children were thought to move progressively. Piagetian revisionists over the last two decades have shown that under different research conditions from those used by Piaget, children can display competencies at substantially earlier ages than he had believed (Donaldson, 1978; McGarrigle & Donaldson, 1974). Bradley (1989) argues that they retain, however, the notion of quite specific age parameters around certain competencies, and by implication, the notion of a universal or standard child. Interpretations of Piaget's work as a model of biologically-based and predictable developmental patterns permeate societal structures such as the education system, the juvenile justice system, organized religions, welfare provision, and, of course, research across all of these domains. Piaget's work, however, is often incorrectly interpreted as placing children in isolation from the social world (Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993) and therefore as supporting the image of the context-free or isolable child, a criticism that has continued to be aimed at many successive cognitive theorists. Although Piaget was a constructivist, believing that children's cognitive development was shaped both by biological influences and social experiences, his ideas have come to represent, for sociologists of childhood, much of what is unacceptable about developmental psychology's approach to the study of children (cf. James et al., 1998). There is some irony in this: Piaget's principal method of inquiry, the clinical interview (Piaget, 1928; 1932), and his close observations of the minutiae of everyday lives of his own children, have much in common with the methodologies espoused by the new social studies of childhood, and indeed with an ethos of respect for children's perspectives (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). Furthermore, Piaget emphasized children's agency in constructing their understanding of their worlds. Thus the typical representation of Piaget's work by some critics provides a good example of over-simplification of concepts of child development, and constitutes another example of what Woodhead and Faulkner refer to as 'throwing the baby out with the developmental bathwater' (2000: 31). Unfortunately, this tendency to concentrate on relatively narrow aspects of theories of child development, both by psychologists and non-psychologists, serves to

unduly dichotomize theoretical positions within developmental psychology itself and between developmental psychology and other fields of child study.

### **Challenges to Mainstream Models of Research in Developmental Psychology**

The principal contemporary challenge to the theories and methods of developmental psychology originate outside the discipline, in the sociology of childhood, as described above. Perhaps the most important developments within the field itself, those most likely to precipitate the adoption of alternative models of children and research, are those that challenge specific theoretical and methodological assumptions. These include, on the one hand, the growth in social-contextual models of child development, and, on the other, new research findings that bring into question notions of limitations in children's ability to contribute meaningfully, through their own accounts of events, to scientific knowledge.

#### ***Old and new ideas about meaning in research***

Investigating children's contextually situated development is not a new or even recent activity. For at least a century there has been dissatisfaction with an approach to studying children that separates them from context and tries to reduce their experiences to a numerical code (Tudge et al., 1996). Sociologist James Mark Baldwin (1895), psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1987), and educator John Dewey (1896, 1902), advocated investigating the everyday meaning of children's lives. They were among a number of researchers and theorists across several disciplines and fields who, at the outset of the century, rejected the notion that children are isolated and timeless. Mid-twentieth century, the gestalt movement added to the call for research to have greater relevance to the real world of individuals. Roger Barker and Herbert Wright (1951), were among the first to document all of the activities, of which there were thousands, in which one boy was engaged in the course of single day.

Yet research activity and theorizing of this kind was at the fringes of mainstream research in the field for most of this century. It gained acceptance by a critical mass of researchers in the late 1980s with an enthusiastic welcome for the re-discovered work of Lev Vygotsky and for the ideas of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) marking an awareness of the importance of context for child development itself (Greene, 1994) and for the practice of research. Both Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner argued that children grow up in a social world in which both social and temporal context plays a critical role but that they are active agents in shaping their own lives. They also insisted that research in laboratories cannot alone represent the real worlds and everyday experiences of children. Vygotsky (1978, 1987) brought attention to the value

of observing children's routine activities in the social world as a source of knowledge about their social and intellectual development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued convincingly that research must be '*ecologically valid*', that is, it must take place in real life settings and aim to capture the experiences of children that have relevance to their lives. There is increasing evidence of research that takes such an approach (see Tudge & Hogan, Chapter 6 of this volume).

Interest in contextual/ecological ideas has grown, and theoretical models have advanced (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner, 1998), contributing to a shift away from the model of 'the child' as research object, in theory, if not fully in practice. It has been bolstered by, and in turn contributed to, the emergence of social-constructionism and a turn to qualitative methods across the social sciences. In response, in part to criticism that research on children's social and cognitive competencies bore little relevance to their experiences in the real world, researchers have increasingly taken into account the context in which research takes place and the different meanings children might assign to research questions, depending on how, and by whom, they are posed.

### ***New research findings***

Recent findings about children's abilities challenge the premise that children cannot contribute meaningfully to research. They help to shed light on some of the developmental limitations on children that are imposed by age and the implications for researchers of doing research with children that facilitates their providing meaningful accounts of their subjective experiences. It should be noted that there is also a substantial history of criticism of the assumption that young children are not sufficiently competent to report on their own experiences. Margaret Donaldson (1978), for example, argued that we often confuse children's language ability with their general intellectual ability, and that when we attempt to make ourselves understood to children we find them to be more competent than we expected. Recent research supports this view.

It is typically assumed, for example, that the younger the children, the less they are to be believed. Furthermore, when young children make errors in remembering an event, we are inclined to allow that to reinforce our prejudices about their (lack of) credibility more than we do when older children make errors (Lieppe, Mannion, & Romancyck, 1991). However, researchers are now finding that young children can give accurate accounts of personally experienced events (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Steward & Steward, 1996). Younger children remember less than adults and they are more susceptible to external cues from the interview process itself, such as the suggestibility of questions (Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1998). They are also influenced by question format. Waterman, Blades, and Spencer (2002) found that the use of ambiguous closed questions may lead to the researcher misunderstanding what the child means to communicate in his or her response to a question. But children can remember accurately, especially when they are freely

allowed to recall the details of events they have personally experienced (Baker-Ward, Gordon, Ornstein, Larus, & Clubb, 1993; Peterson & Bell, 1996). Preschoolers have been found to be the most suggestible age group (Bruck et al., 1998). School-aged children are better able to recall, although they are still very sensitive to contextual suggestion and particularly to their interpretation of the investigator's expectations (Garbarino & Stott, 1992). Children *are* capable of providing reliable responses, but the researcher must be aware of the most appropriate ways to phrase questions (Waterman et al., 2002). The research setting is also important, in that real-life settings lead to greater validity than research conducted in artificial research contexts, such as university laboratories (Ceci & Bronfenbrenner, 1991)

### ***Challenges from the Practice and Policy Domains***

In the practice domain, the issue of child abuse has gained growing attention and has contributed to interest in appropriate methods for interviewing children. Indeed it has contributed to the upsurge in research on children's memory for personally experienced events, or autobiographical memory. Williamson and Butler (1995) connect an increased commitment by professionals to hearing what children themselves have to say about their treatment to a rise in social work activity in the area of child protection and welfare domain as it relates to child sex abuse. They attribute this shift in perceptions of appropriate professional practice in part to a greater public scrutiny of services arising from a number of high-profile child abuse cases involving care staff in residential child care settings. In several cases, claims were made that children had complained about abusive treatment but had not been attended to – they had either been ignored or not believed.

The perception that children's subjective experiences should be better valued and understood is reflected in recent international policy changes and particularly in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. There is considerable consensus that the convention, adopted in 1989, reflects an unprecedented value for the subjective worlds of children and for their right to be consulted and taken seriously (Cohen & Naimark, 1991; Davie, 1996, Hart, 1991; Melton, 1991). Children's right to hold and express personal beliefs is contained in Articles 12, 13, and 14. For research purposes, however, Article 12 bears the greatest relevance since it reflects the principle that the child's own views should be respected and should in the first case be listened to:

State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child be given due weight, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

It is open to individual states to decide the appropriate age at which to consult children, and there has been variation in the breadth with which this principle

has been applied. Some states consider it relevant only to issues such as custody, rather than an approach that is inclusive of a broad range of children's experiences, such as school, family, or research (Franklin, 1995). Legislative and policy changes have occurred at the national level in both the Irish and UK contexts, and are reflected in recent initiatives. In Ireland, for example, an expressed goal in government policy, captured in *the national children's strategy: Our children, their lives* (Ireland, 2000), is to afford children more and better opportunities to 'have their voices heard' in matters that affect them, and to 'understand their lives.' The material consequence of this initiative has been the channeling of resources, in the form of research funding, into studies that will meet this goal. Thus there is now a financial as well as a moral imperative to orient research towards child-centered questions and methods.

### **Reconciling Competing Approaches to Research with Children**

It is tempting to portray developmental psychologists and sociologists of childhood as occupying separate universes, with one group focusing on 'the child' as the object of study and the other group interested exclusively in sociostructural factors in society. Such dichotomies are, however, overly simplistic. Sociologists have long been interested in the ways in which broad social forces exert their impact on large groups, but there is also a long tradition in psychology, stretching back over a century, of more 'ecological' approaches in which individual and broader sociocultural factors are viewed as being mutually constitutive (Tudge et al., 1996).

I have argued in this chapter that developmental psychology has come under increasing criticism from other fields of child research about the marginal position afforded to children in research. I have also argued that such criticism, while having some merit, is too often based on a simplistic analysis of a complex field of inquiry. This type of analysis creates the foundation for the polarization of ideas, and supports unnecessary divisions between disciplines of child study. At the same time, the growth of interest in contextual models of child development within developmental psychology holds promise of the emergence of alternative research models grounded in constructivist paradigms. These moves increase the likelihood that developmental psychologists will pay more attention to the ways in which children experience their lives.

To date, however, developmental psychology has not been particularly successful in matching conceptual advances with methodological progress, and much research carried out using contextual theories continues to be based within positivist and post-positivist paradigms, emphasizing objective knowledge of 'the child'. The fault may lie, at least in part, with the culture of publishing within developmental psychology, which values such models and shows considerably less interest in alternative models of research on or with children. The upshot of this perspective on what constitutes worthwhile

research is that those researchers who are interested both in children's development *and* their experiences find themselves in a difficult position. There are few avenues available for publishing qualitative research that adopts interpretative approaches to data analysis in the leading developmental journals, although it is worth noting that highly ranked journals such as *Child Development* have lately attempted to include more studies that reflect diversity in samples and recognize the importance of context for development.

What then is the role for developmental psychology in the study of children's subjective experience, and can the goals of developmental research agendas and the underlying meta-theories be reconciled with those of sociologists and other researchers of children and childhood? In my view, the study of children's experiences of their worlds, focusing on their perspectives, and the study of their development, need not be mutually exclusive. To adopt a developmental approach is to ask in what ways, and through what processes, individuals change with age. The approach to developmental psychology found objectionable by sociologists of childhood and critical developmental psychologists is not the whole story of developmental psychology, as I have argued above. There is ample scope for research with children about their lives within developmental frameworks, and for collaboration across relevant disciplines for the following reasons:

1. A developmental perspective can be retained while some traditional assumptions and research practices are forfeited. For example, assumptions about biological determinism and of universally invariant stages of change (insofar as these actually drive research agendas) can be exchanged with a view of child development as a series of transactive processes, involving child and environment, moving through time, assumptions contained in the work of theorists such as Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), Lerner (1998), Sameroff (1975; 1983), Valsiner (1997a, 1997b, 2000) and Vygotsky (1978, 1987).
2. Developmental psychology need not ignore the present lives of children and disregard ignore the material, relational and temporal contexts in which they are located – and indeed there are many examples of research that does not ignore these phenomena (see for example, Dunn (Chapter 5), Tudge & Hogan (Chapter 6), and Westcott & Littleton (Chapter 8, this volume)
3. Developmental psychology need not focus on measurement of competencies at the expense of exploring the nature and meaning of the activities, events, and relationships that make up life experiences.
4. The goal of understanding processes of change in individual functioning is not intrinsically incompatible with a perspective on children as active agents in their own worlds. Accepting a role for chronological age as one of many factors potentially shaping human experience does not necessarily pose a threat to a valid exploration of children's experiences. Neither is it necessary to entirely ignore or discount biological forces in order to learn about children's experiences.

Rather than dismissing developmental approaches, then, as being antithetical to the study of children's lived experiences, it is important to consider what might be lost if we attempt to understand children's experience without reference to their development. Greene (2003) argues that a developmental perspective crucially anchors individual experience in time, both individual and historical:

The outright rejection of a developmental perspective can lead to an approach to psychology that fails utterly to take on board the significance of our dynamic existence in time, of our specific location in the life course, and of the crucial influence of our personal interpretation of time and age. (Greene, 2003: 143)

To conclude, there is much of interest to developmental psychologists that need not be forfeited in the interest of studying children's experiences. A developmental perspective on children's experience within psychology is both possible and valuable. The tasks ahead are to garner the interest of developmental psychologists to ask questions about children's experience, and to develop the methodological tools that will allow such questions to be answered. Greater reflexivity about research models would help to advance the field and to facilitate inter-disciplinary research.

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