Part I

In Search of Child Perspectives and Children’s Perspectives in Childhood Sociology and Developmental Psychology

Introduction

In the late 1980s, a Norwegian book with the thought-provoking title På jakt etter barneperspektivet (In search of the child perspective) was published (Åm, 1989). Åm claimed to have found a child perspective in selected theories interpreting the meaning of children’s social play – i.e. general approaches to the functions of play constructed by adults on behalf of children. The precise content of the child perspective in general and children’s perspectives in particular remained vague, however. We will not search for a child perspective within the relatively narrow realm of play theories, however. Instead, the ambition of Part I is to scrutinize a child perspective and children’s perspectives within selected and potential promising parts of the so-called new child perspective of both childhood sociology and recent contextual-relational developmental psychology.

The primary intention is to explore whether recent childhood sociology and contextual-relational developmental psychology may improve our essential understanding of children’s perspectives on their own live-worlds. This may not be an easy task, because theories that were originally developed to address completely different and adult relevant topics have been used as if they represent a genuine child perspective. For Example, Alanen (1988) and Alanen and Mayall (2001) apply feminist theory as a perspective on children, with the rationale that children are suppressed in society, as well as women. Another Example is James, Jenks, and Prout’s (1998) use of a general Foucaulian analysis of power, time-regulation, and school discipline, in order to study “real children” and even the “experience of being a child”. Such types of theory, however, are “imported”, i.e. the approaches are not originally constructed with the main purpose of developing a unique child perspective theory.

This search may prove to be in vain, but the process may uncover interesting views and conceptual understandings inherent in very influential contemporary theories on children and childhood.¹ Childhood sociology and contextual-relational

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¹ It should be noted that one of the “searchers” is not a sociologist but a developmental psychologist. This may make childhood sociologists cringe because childhood sociology was launched as the very critical counterpoint to the classical “grand theories” of developmental psychology.
developmental psychology are very broad in scope, however, encompassing more than just one approach, and space constraints prohibit a comprehensive presentation. For the purpose of this book, the search for various child perspectives and children’s perspectives, those positions are selected, which are most likely to enhance our knowledge.

But why look within childhood sociology and contemporary developmental psychology for child perspectives and children’s perspectives? First of all, over the past decades, the childhood sociology has established an important platform for itself within the social sciences. In a brief amount of time, the sociology of childhood has gone from marginalized rebel to a mainstream source of knowledge about children and childhood (Kampmann, 2003). Particularly during the 1990s, this branch of sociology articulated new socially and reality embedded constructions of children and childhood. These theories not only renewed sociology; childhood sociology is now in widespread use within ethnography, educational studies, and cultural studies (e.g. Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; France, Bendlow, & Williams, 2000; Kampmann, J. 2000; Tufte, Kampmann, & Juncker, 2001; Carlsson, 2003; Halldén, 2003; Warming, 2007). However, childhood sociology has had relatively little influence on social and developmental psychology. Hence, we should also look within the so-called contextualist relational developmental psychology for a possible child perspective in order to revitalize developmental psychology, not least since childhood sociologists seem to agree to use classical grand developmental psychology as their “scapegoat” in legitimizing their theories.

Secondly, the same period has witnessed a remarkable, parallel unfolding of the child perspective in society. Childhood sociology as well as recent developmental psychology and various humanistic approaches claiming a child perspective reject the classic dogma about children as passive recipients. But whether child perspective and childhood sociology in fact reflect one another is far from certain, although many researchers and professionals seem to take this relationship for granted. Thus, the paradigm of childhood sociology has been applied as “the new view/perspective of children” in various contexts as synonymous with a child perspective (e.g. Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Ottesen, 2002; Eide & Winge, 2003; Halldén, 2003). Also architects of childhood sociology have specifically used the concepts child perspective and children’s perspectives and related them to their work: The Norwegian Centre for Child Research arranged in 2003 the seminar Children’s Perspectives in Childhood Research – Prospects and Challenges. Here Jens Qvortrup delivered a lecture titled “A Child Perspective and Childhood in the Welfare State” and William Corsaro contributed with “Gaining Children’s Perspectives and Using Them to Interpret Children’s Agency in Their Peer Cultures”.

But current developmental psychology is not synonymous with the grand developmental theory paradigm, so the assessments and considerations put forth in this book will not be based on such an approach.

Readers wishing a more comprehensive insight into these theories may consult the reference list.

Although childhood sociology has carved a niche for itself in sociology, it has had little influence on sociology in general.
It remains an open question, however, whether there is any real basis for this. Is it possible to deduce, directly or indirectly, essential understandings that are relevant for a child perspective? As will be demonstrated later specific statements from childhood sociologists clearly point in that direction.

The same can be said about recent contextual-relational developmental psychology. But whether these qualify as actual child perspectives requires further examination. It is, however, important to note the following: Contextual-relational developmental psychologists do not necessarily claim to offer specific child perspectives. For example, one does not find any chapter or substantial section describing how recent developmental psychology defines and does research within a “child perspective” or “children’s perspectives”. These terms are not to be found in the detailed key word indexes of standard updated works that represent the state of the art (e.g. Berk, 2006a). But obviously, this does not mean that one cannot search for a child perspective; it may be present, implicitly or explicitly. Therefore, it is of important academic interest to make such an inquiry. As mentioned, researchers and professionals have used theories on childhood alike as though they represent a child perspective – probably because these theories articulate important statements that suggest a possible child perspective, as we shall demonstrate later.

The search for a child perspective and children’s perspectives will be guided by the following key questions:

- **Is a child perspective apparent in selected aspects of childhood sociology?**
  If yes, in what ways are children conceptualized that enhance adults’ recognition and awareness of children’s perceptions and experiences of their worlds?

- **Is a child perspective apparent in selected aspects of contextual-relational developmental psychology?**
  If yes, in what ways are children conceptualized that enhance adults’ recognition and awareness of children’s perceptions of experiences of their worlds?

- **Do children’s own perspectives have a central position within these bodies of theories?**
  If yes, in what ways do the respective disciplines show and present children’s own perceptions and experiences of their worlds?

- **What common conceptual platforms and potential for future integration can be identified?**
  What concepts appear to be particularly important for an interdisciplinary integration of concepts from childhood sociology and contextual-relational developmental psychology?\(^4\)

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\(^4\) It is our impression that there is a growing opportunity for an interdisciplinary integration. New openings have been possible, because some fundamental views of children have interacted with each other in sociology and psychology.