and social policies; by dominant ideologies which are inherently conservative in orientation, as well as being sexist, racist, heterosexist and ageist.

- There has been an increasing unwillingness, particularly on the part of women, to accept the negative consequences of nuclear family life. New family arrangements (greater numbers of lone parents and more re-formed families) are the direct consequence of this. Gay men and lesbian women have also chosen to have children and to apply to adopt and foster children, thus challenging the boundary of what constitutes a family.[12]

Conclusion

Cannan (1992: 123) contends that it is not changing family structures which cause social problems, but the relationship between the family and the state, and policies and practices which the state implements to support or undermine certain family forms. This is a very important message to end with. We need to critically examine social work policies and interventions to consider where and when 'traditional' nuclear family arrangements are indeed being privileged over other family forms. We must be prepared to value other family patterns, and work with service-users to support them. Finally, we must hold to the fore the reality that there is no singular 'family perspective' or 'family needs'. On the contrary, members of a family are likely to have very different positions and perspectives, structured as they are by wider forces of oppression including gender, age, 'race', sexuality and disability.

Recommended reading

- Bernardes, J. (1997) *Family Studies: An Introduction*, London: Routledge (a readable book with strong opinions on the nuclear family).
- Elliot, F.R. (1996) *Gender, Family and Society*, Basingstoke: Macmillan (provides good theoretical material and an analysis of statistical data).
- Muncie, J., Wetherell, M., Dallos, R. and Cochrane, A. (1995) *Understanding the Family*, London: Sage (an edited collection with many interesting and highly relevant chapters).

3 Childhood

Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that until the mid 1980s, there was surprisingly little sociological interest in childhood, either by classical sociologists or by North American sociologists (Qvortrup 1995). Where children appear in the main body of sociological writing, this is largely in the context of a wider investigation of something else, most frequently the family, the community or the educational system. Children emerge in the literature as adjuncts of their parents, their carers or their teachers, with little recognition that they might have a place of their own in sociological knowledge and enquiry. Sociological surveys and official statistics frequently did not consider even the presence of children in their data collection and analysis, further increasing their invisibility in sociological discourse (Qvortrup 1994).[1] The absence of an analysis of childhood in sociological writing is not only a historical phenomenon. Two recently published textbooks on sociology make no mention of childhood: children are again sidelined in discussions of education, childcare and changing family patterns (Bilton *et al.* 1996, Marsh *et al.* 1996).

The 'adultism' (Alanen 1994) in sociology has important consequences for sociology and for social work. Most importantly, the absence of children in sociological discourse presents a significant gap in knowledge and understanding of society. This can be likened to the historical position of women within sociology. Feminist sociologists have argued that traditional sociology is not simply sexist, it is flawed sociology; its knowledge base and its research practices lack validity because they have ignored or sidelined the experiences of women (Harding 1991, Stanley 1990). Feminist sociologists have struggled over the last twenty years to put women and women's experiences onto the sociological map: to challenge conventional 'malestream' sociology

and to build a new sociological theory and practice which has as its core the experiences and 'standpoints' of women. Sociologists interested in children and childhood are similarly working today to make sociology reflect the experiences and perspectives of children and young people.

The lack of a sociological analysis of childhood means that academic and childcare discourse around childhood and children has been created on the basis of ideas and models which are largely psychological in derivation. Much of what we understand about childhood is rooted in psychological ideas about child development, adolescence and socialisation, often described in functionalist, positivist language. The individualising approach in psychology makes it difficult to see that issues and difficulties faced by children and young people may be structural in origin, located in the structural position of children as a subordinated, marginalised group, rather than in individual personality or developmental stage (Saporiti 1994). More than this, Mayall (1994) argues that psychological discourses which aim to classify, divide up and control children may oppress children in practice.

The implications for social work are self-evident. Most of what social work knows about childhood is informed by psychology: ask any social work student what they can tell you about children and young people and they will probably come up with notions about 'ages and stages' or 'needs of children', demonstrating little awareness of the partial and normalising nature of the frameworks they are using. Similarly, dominant theoretical perspectives in social work with children tend to be individualistic in nature, seeking causes and explanations in individual personality or family pathology rather than in structural issues such as class, poverty or inequality.[2]

This chapter will examine two phases of sociological enquiry into childhood: first, sociology's early (and continuing) interest in socialisation; and second, sociology's more recent concern with the institutionalisation of childhood. Before going on consider sociological approaches to childhood, it is necessary to set the parameters of the discussion: to ask, what is childhood?

Definitions of childhood

The starting-point must be an attempt to define childhood – here our difficulties begin. We can be fairly certain that childhood begins at birth, or perhaps even at the end of infancy. But when does childhood end and adulthood commence? By looking at this more closely, we find that definitions and expectations of age groups are not fixed: they

change over time and among cultures, especially between rich and poor societies. Hence what we expect of children living in the streets of Brazil or India may be very different from our expectations of children in middle-class families living in suburban villas in the United Kingdom or France or the United States.

Legislation exemplifies this lack of clarity about childhood by failing to delineate the childhood/adulthood boundary in any precise way. This means that in the UK, there are different ages for marriage, for voting in elections, for having sexual intercourse (heterosexual and homosexual), for driving a car, for buying cigarettes or alcohol, and for claiming social security benefits. Pilcher (1995) sets out the official ages of adulthood in modern Britain, as shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Official ages of adulthood in modern Britain

Age	*Context*
8	Age of criminal responsibility (Scotland)
10	Age of criminal responsibility (England and Wales)
13	Minimum age for employment
14	Own an air rifle
	Pay adult fare on public transport
16	Leave school
	Heterosexual age of sexual consent
	Buy cigarettes
	Marry (Scotland)
	Marry with parental consent (England and Wales)
	Hold a licence to drive a moped
	Eligible for full employment
17	Hold a licence to drive a car
18	Vote in elections
	Buy alcohol
	Watch films and videos classified as '18'
	Homosexual age of sexual consent
	Marry without parental consent (England and Wales)
25	Adult levels of Income Support
26	Adult in Housing Benefit rules

Source: Pilcher 1995: 62, Table 4.1.

The high degree of variability demonstrated in Table 3.1 suggests that there is no agreed point in a child's life when childhood ends and adulthood begins. This is not a politically neutral state of affairs. On the contrary, there has been (and will undoubtedly continue to be) contestation over particular areas within this. Two recent examples of this include the campaign waged throughout 1998 to try to persuade the UK Parliament to standardise the age of sexual consent to sixteen years for both homosexual and heterosexual sexual intercourse; and the dispute over the age of criminal responsibility which re-emerged with the conviction of two ten-year-old boys for the murder of two-year-old James Bulger in 1993. (I will discuss this more fully later in the chapter.)

Regulations concerning the minimum school leaving age and entitlement to welfare benefits serve as indicators about current societal expectations of the boundary between childhood and adulthood. Nevertheless, there are discernible differences even here. The childhood of a middle-class child is expected typically to continue at least to university and often beyond, evidenced by the reduction in grants for students in higher education (Roberts and Sachdev 1996). Similarly, the removal of entitlement to social security benefits for sixteen- to eighteen-year olds has increased the dependency of all children on parents and reduced their scope for self-sufficiency. In contrast, the childhood of a child who has experienced family breakdown and has been 'looked after' by the local authority ends at eighteen years of age in Scotland (twenty-one in England and Wales) when the young person is expected to be old enough to look after her or himself. (See Children (Scotland) Act 1995, Children Act 1989.)

A consideration of official reaction to children involved in prostitution demonstrates society's uncertainty over the boundary between childhood and adulthood, and a major degree of ambivalence towards children and childhood. Children as young as ten years of age have been cautioned for soliciting for the purposes of prostitution, and many more aged fourteen and over have been convicted of similar offences (Home Office figures, England and Wales, quoted in Lee and O'Brien 1995). Yet the behaviour of these children, if witnessed in the context of the family rather than the street, would be liable to be viewed as indicative of sexual abuse rather than prostitution. Childcare agencies have been campaigning to encourage the police to see these children as victims of crime rather than criminals (*Community Care*, 19–25 November 1998: 9).

Kelly *et al*. (1995) point out that there is no consensus on an international level about a definition of childhood. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has developed a set of recommendations in response to the sexual exploitation of children, which its signatories are obligated to fulfil. These recommendations are framed under the assumption that childhood is defined as up to eighteen years of age and young people as eighteen to twenty-one years. Yet Kelly *et al*. point out that few countries use these definitions, and as a result it is unlikely that information is kept locally or nationally using these classifications.

Historical accounts of childhood

Historical analyses of childhood (offered by both historians and sociologists) are useful for our consideration for three main reasons. First, they provide further evidence with which to challenge the idea that there is a distinct chronological time which we can point to and call 'childhood'. Second, they make it clear that contemporary ideas of childhood as a time of separateness and difference from adult activities and preoccupations cannot be taken for granted. Third, the disputes that occur between those interested in historical perspectives demonstrate that the study of childhood is, in Frost and Stein's language, an 'ideological battleground'; studies of childhood, like studies of the family, thus reflect a political agenda (1989: 16).

It was the French historian Philippe Aries (1962), who first drew attention to the idea that childhood, rather than being 'natural' or innate, was socially constructed, and that attitudes to childhood changed over time (Gittins 1998: 26). Aries contrasts what he sees as indifference to children (or 'ignorance of childhood') in the tenth century with the 'obsession' with childhood in modern societies. He writes:

> In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes it from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother ... he belonged to adult society.
>
> (1962: 125)

Aries based his ideas on the portrayal of children in medieval paintings and poetry. Here children from about five years of age could be found

wearing adult clothes and taking part in the full range of adult activities. They were, Aries contends, to all intents and purposes small adults, and, given high rates of child mortality, parents had no special emotional attachment to their children. Aries identifies a shift from the end of the thirteenth century, as children became increasingly differentiated from adults, with their own clothing, literature and activities. The advent of formal education outside the home in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries then consolidated the concept of childhood as a distinct phenomenon. Aries identifies two distinct dimensions to the new consciousness about childhood: first, he describes a new awareness of, and enjoyment in children by adults; and second, he outlines a new conceptualisation of childhood as a time for physical, intellectual and social development.

Aries is clear that the new understandings about childhood did not impact on all children at the same time. On the contrary, he perceives marked class and gender differences in the experiences of children. It was the new middle classes, he maintains, who were in the forefront of the drive to introduce education for boys. Upper-class boys in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries received little formal schooling and could be army officers by the age of fourteen and even as young as eleven years on occasions. Aries reports that girls from all classes had no formal schooling and many were married and running households by fourteen years of age. By the eighteenth century, most aristocratic children (both boys and girls) received some schooling, though girls' education finished earlier than boys. Working-class children continued to work to supplement family incomes late into the nineteenth century, and to have life experiences which were very similar to those of their parents. What this suggests is that the construction of childhood as a special category was targeted first and foremost at middle-class boys; subsequently, other children have been accommodated into this characterisation at different times and to different degrees.

Aries locates the lengthening of childhood in changes in ideological beliefs. The Reformation had brought with it ideas about a disciplined life, while Calvinism had stressed the notion of original sin: children were doomed to depravity unless controlled and trained by parents and schools. Then in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideas placed on members of society the responsibility that they should seek to contribute to the good of society through attaining rationality: education was to play a major part in this.

Frost and Stein state that Aries' work has been 'central in helping us to build a conception of the historical variability of Western childhood' (1989: 12). There are, however, a number criticisms of Aries'

work, criticisms which suggest that he may have been mistaken in his ideas that children joined adult society at the age of five years, or that parents were less attached emotionally to their children in the past (Pollock 1987). Sociologists such as Thane (1981) argue that Aries underplayed both the importance of the Renaissance and its new ideas of individualism, and the significance of economic change and more specifically, the rise of capitalism. Thane links the emergence of modern age groups firmly to the birth and development of European capitalism. She argues that the new middle classes were striving to maximise their control over their wealth and property; adult life too was becoming more demanding, so that more skill was required for those directly involved in commerce or in professional occupations such as the law. The consequence of these two motivating factors was the emergence of schooling and the lengthening of childhood. These pressures were, according to Thane, felt less acutely by both landowners and by the landless labouring poor. Thane suggests that it was only when landowners felt the pressure of competition for power and wealth from the rising middle classes, and later still, when changes in economic and work practices led to the need for a different kind of worker, both literate and numerate, that education became more widely available. By the end of the nineteenth century, the new fear of the 'dangerous classes' led to the introduction of both factory and education legislation aimed at taking working-class children out of the adult world of work and into the children's world of school. Thane concludes that there was a clear correspondence between the birth of capitalism, modern classes and modern age groups (1981: 11).

This account confirms that childhood is not only historically variable, but also varies across gender and class groupings. Jamieson and Toynbee's (1992) sociological investigation of children growing up in rural communities in Scotland between 1900 and 1930 sheds further light on the real-life complexities which are concealed by the catch-all concept 'childhood'. Jamieson and Toynbee contend that a major feature in the lives of children of crofters and farm servants in the early years of the twentieth century was not separateness from adults as we might have anticipated. Instead, children's lives were characterised by continuities between themselves and adults: they rose at the same time, worked together, and went to bed at the same time. Children had few toys and were expected to perform a variety of tasks for their parents, both inside and outside the house. Income earned by children was not for their personal consumption: it was a contribution to the family economy. Household membership carried with it 'expectations of contributing one's labour, in the same way that membership of the

community created ties of economic and social reciprocity' (1992: 31). Explaining the implications of this more fully, Jamieson and Toynbee write:

> these children had no childhood in the sense we understand the word today – as a particular special time free from the responsibilities of adulthood, deserving tolerance and indulgence from adults, and allowing time to develop one's potential as an individual. Parents had limited freedom to choose how their children should be brought up; the economic circumstances of some parents demanded that they use what resources they had to survive, in particular the services of their children in the household and whatever else they could be usefully sent to earn. Few parents could afford to give their children treats in the form of pocket money, toys or excursions, even if they wanted to. And very few parents would have been comfortable with the laxity of allowing their children to behave as they wished, not least because this would fly in the face of convention.
>
> (1992: 166)

Although there may have been similarities between the lives of children and adults, however, they were not the same. On closer inspection, it is evident that there was a clear demarcation between what were regarded as 'children's' and 'adults' ' tasks; and within this, differences too between the jobs of boys and girls, reflecting the division of labour between adult men and women. Boys did not drive cattle, look after cows or fetch water, but were expected to tether rogue sheep; girls never did this. Fishing was an exclusively male activity, and it was rare for men or boys to do housework. Jamieson and Toynbee (1992) outline the pattern of work connected with the collection of peat as an example of the age and gender divisions. It was men's job to mark and cut the peat; women's to carry it home; and children's to stack it.

We can now argue that childhood is historically variable, it differs across class and gender, and that there are important continuities in experience between adults and children across generations. In an earlier publication, Jamieson and Toynbee (1990) pinpoint the post-Second World War period as a key moment in the creation of a new idea of childhood and a new relationship between parents and children. Changes in the nature and distribution of goods for consumption in the period after the end of the Second World War meant that working-class 'children's jobs' (daily shopping, collecting fuel, cleaning cutlery,

polishing brasses) largely disappeared. At the same time, many more women were working, so that work around the home became a 'main leisure time activity for a significant minority of men and women' (1990: 95). New ideas also emerged in the relationship between adults and children, with parents seeking a more democratic relationship with their children, in contrast to the more authoritarian attitudes of the past. Jamieson and Toynbee locate these changes in increased affluence, the cult of leisure and the development of mass consumption, mass media and mass culture: the shift to the 'affluent consumer society' was associated 'not only with the multiplication of goods provided for children by parents, but also a reduction in the contributions made by children and young people to their family household' (1990: 102).

These historical accounts demonstrate that any idea of childhood as a fixed, chronological period with a universal, agreed conceptualisation is untenable. In practice, childhood as it is currently envisaged in Western society may be a comparatively recent phenomenon, created by shifts in the socio-economic and political world, as well as by psychological ideas about the 'needs' of children as distinct from adults. A historical analysis, however, also demonstrates significant points of connection and overlap between the experiences of adults and children. This leads Frost and Stein (1989) to assert that there is no such thing as a single history of childhood. Instead, there have always been diverse experiences of childhood across class, culture and geography and diverse accounts of family life, illustrating the capacity for both affection and cruelty across generations (1989: 18). Cross-cultural studies extend the discussion further.

Cross-cultural differences in childhood

I have already stated that poverty and wealth have a major impact on children's experiences of childhood throughout the world. In addition, cross-cultural studies suggest that there are widespread differences in child-rearing and in the social organisation of childhood in different cultural and ethnic settings. Some of the key differences are reported by Hill and Tisdall (1997) in their review of anthropological studies. Hill and Tisdall identify that, while in some cultures children spend considerable amounts of time apart from adults, in others children are involved from an early age in work-related activities alongside adults. (This confirms our earlier observations about children in rural Scotland in the early years of the twentieth century.) Research also highlights communities across the world in which the care of young children,

rather than being restricted to a nuclear family model, is shared among a wide set of people, often female kinfolk. Hill and Tisdall suggest that ideas of family identity in these settings may be more important than those of individual personality (1997: 16). Hill and Tisdall also point to societies in West Africa where it is common practice to foster children from five years onwards with relatives. This is not perceived to be an act of rejection on behalf of parents (as a white European perspective might assume), but is instead valued as a positive service to the children, who are able to gain wider social links as well as specific skills.

Rogers (1989) considers the varied experiences of children growing up in minority ethnic families in the United Kingdom, and finds that their expectations and norms about what childhood is may at times be very different to the traditional white, Eurocentric model. Although it is important that we should not fall into the trap of stereotyping black families, it is nevertheless also important to draw attention to the continuing reality that there are different ways of thinking about children and childhood. Rogers suggests that traditional families whose origins are in South Asia have ideas about independence and dependence which are deeply at variance with white norms, so that group loyalty and interdependence are valued far more highly than independence and individual freedom (conventionally seen as attributes of being 'grown up'). Children may be expected to contribute in some way towards the management of the household and even the family business at an early age. There may be significant differences in terms of expectations of girls and boys, with girls and boys spending increasingly segregated time as they grow up, girls with their adult female relatives and boys with their adult male relatives. Again this is at odds with expectations about age-specific activities in a conventional white childhood.

Hill and Tisdall (1997) stress the impact of growing up in a racist society on black and minority ethnic children in the UK. They may grow up legally, and in some respects culturally, British but have their own distinctive religious and cultural influences – influences which are routinely marginalised, discounted and discriminated against (1997: 17). This means that for them, oppression and discrimination may be a large part of their experience of childhood. Meera Syal (1996), in a deeply evocative novel, tells the story of a black girl from a Punjabi family growing up in a white mining community in the English Midlands in the 1960s. The girl at the centre of the story moves in and out of different social and cultural groups at home, at school and in the neighbourhood, as she successfully negotiates her passage from childhood into adulthood.

Summary

I have argued that the idea of childhood as a specific age grouping is not sustainable. An investigation of differences between children socially, culturally and historically reveals that childhood is a socially and historically specific construction; definitions vary between classes, ethnic groupings and genders as well as across time. James and Prout (1990) put this succinctly:

> Childhood is understood as a social construction ... Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies. Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender or ethnicity. Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.
>
> (1990: 8)

Implications for practice

The summary suggests that, as social workers, we should examine where *our* ideas about childhood are coming from, so that we can give proper attention to the differing childhoods of the children with whom we are working. This is not to recommend a cultural relativism which seeks to play down potentially damaging or abusive experiences. Rather it is about an acknowledgement that the happy, free, play-focused childhood of television advertisements is a particular kind of myth: it is a story that we tell ourselves which has little basis in the reality of children's lives. As social workers, we are expected to make assessments and recommendations on behalf of children. We must do so from an understanding of both the diversity of children's experiences and the ways in which children's lives are structured by age, gender, class and ethnicity.

But there is another, sobering point to be made here; one which suggests that we should consider childhood in a more global sense. Harris (1989) reminds us that much of the comfort

and material wealth of the developed world is based on the reality of child labour and poverty wages in developing countries. Harris writes:

> if child protection were indeed based on considerations other than law and policy – on a hierarchy of need or suffering, for example – it is inconceivable that we should be so exercised by the murder of a single Maria Colwell or Jasmine Beckford yet be so acquiescent in the systematic destruction of young lives in more distant parts of the globe.
> (1989 : 29)

Sociology and childhood: traditional perspectives

Hockey and James (1993) point out that when we think about childhood, we tend to see it not as a entity in its own right, but instead as a preparation for adulthood, that is, for what is regarded as *the* central stage of the life course. Socialisation into adulthood therefore becomes a key sociological concern. Socialisation is commonly presented as 'the process whereby individuals in a society absorb the values, standards and beliefs current in that society' (Coleman 1992: 13). Two major perspectives have dominated socialisation theory: the normative perspective, which locates power within societal structures, and the interpretive paradigm, which locates power within the individual. Grbich (1990) identifies a third position developing, one which comprises various conceptualisations of the two, viewing both individual and society as potentially powerful (1990: 517).

The normative perspective

For those working from a normative paradigm, socialisation is viewed as a passive process over which we have little or no control. For functionalists such as Durkheim and Parsons, it is seen to be achieved by the internalisation of commonly-held, societal values and norms through the agency of the family, school, community, workplace, etc. A Marxist or radical feminist viewpoint assumes that it is enforced on individuals by the regulatory mechanisms of society, such as the courts,

police, education system, etc., which reward certain behaviours and punish others or through the workings of patriarchy and the sexual division of labour. Socialisation is thus envisaged as a mechanism either for transmitting the social consensus or for enforcing social conformity. It is concerned with the social and cultural forces which impinge on us from birth, beginning with 'primary socialisation' in the family (as the child learns how to behave through the intimate relationships of the family) and progressing to 'secondary socialisation' which occurs in the school, peer group and wider community, as the child (and later adult) learns to deal with and become a member of the outside world.

This conceptualisation of the socialisation process has been criticised for being determinist and absolutist in emphasis. For example, in an influential essay, Wrong (1961) describes this as an 'over-socialized conception of man'. Critics have pointed out that socialisation is never a one-way street; there are always counter-cultures at odds with the 'dominant' view. Willis' celebrated study of working-class boys (1977) takes issue with those who see school as an inculcator of middle-class values that are supposedly absorbed unconsciously by working-class children. He points instead to the vast numbers of kids who do not conform, and who actively resist attempts to incorporate them into a dominant middle-class culture. He argues that for many children, their counter-culture is what matters most, and that this is a working-class culture with profound similarities to shop-floor culture. This is not a defeated culture, but one which has rules and skills all of its own.

The interpretive perspective

The normative perspective, I have suggested, minimises individual 'agency' and the capacity of the individual to interact with and influence his or her social environment. Interpretive sociologists, in contrast, present socialisation as an interactive process. It is still accepted that we enter a pre-given social world, but individuals are no longer seen as wholly constrained by societal structures. Instead, it is pointed out that individuals (children and adults) try out new behaviour and build on previous experiences of given situations, bringing meaning and purpose to their actions.

American social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934) has had a major influence on thinking about the interactive nature of the socialisation process. He argues that there is no 'self' or personality that exists at birth. Instead, the self is constituted throughout life,

confirmed and transformed by a sequence of negotiations with others who are themselves on life's journey. The 'self' has two components: first, the self is subject ('I') as we initiate social reaction; and second, the self is object ('me'), because in taking the role of another, we form impressions of ourselves. Social experience is thus the interplay of the 'I' and the 'me: our actions are spontaneous yet guided by how others respond to us (Macionis and Plummer 1997: 138). Socialisation is understood as the process of learning to take the role of the other; Mead suggests that this process continues throughout life, as changing social circumstances reshape who we are.

Symbolic interactionists leading on from Mead stress the importance of the 'roles' which we play: the primary task for a child in order to make sense of, and influence, the world is to learn to take the role of the 'other' (for example, mother, father, sibling). By adapting and submitting to the demands of the social world, the child learns to become a role player in different settings at different times. It is argued that each of us learns a slightly different combination of roles that will always be defined in slightly different ways (see Berger and Luckmann 1967).

Some sociologists, however, have criticised what is seen as over-determinism in the presentation of roles and how they work. Connell (1983), for example, argues that, because we all hold countless roles, all of which have different expectations of them, no generalisations can be made here. He also disputes the claim that role (and the idea of internalisation of role prescriptions) can explain social learning and personality formation. He writes that role cannot explain 'the opposition with which social pressure is met – the girls who become tomboys, the women who become lesbians, the shoppers who become shoplifters, the citizens who become revolutionaries' (1983: 202). In other words, role cannot explain resistance. Goffman is also interested in the ways that people actively resist, refuse or manipulate their given roles. In his (1968) study of asylums he argues that even in institutions with the most rigid rules, there is still a process of negotiation: a twisting of the rules, an unwritten contract between warder and patient.

Socialisation as a map

This leads us to Grbich's third conceptualisation of socialisation: that it is a map, not a blueprint; it can never be a single, total process, and expectations others have of us will always be conflicting, loose and obscure, differing from situation to situation. There are also many

areas of life where there are no established rules and expectations, where we have to make independent assessments. In the 'postmodern' world, socialisation can never be a complete, all-encompassing process. Bauman (1990) writes:

> Being free and unfree at the same time is perhaps the most common of our experiences. It is also, arguably, the most confusing ... much in the history of sociology may be explained as an on-going effort to solve this puzzle.
>
> (1990: 20)

Bauman goes on to explore more fully the idea of freedom and independence. We are free to make choices and decisions, but the choices and decisions which we can make are constrained in various ways: by those who set the rules about the choices we can make; by qualifications and personal resources, financial and otherwise; by class, gender, ethnicity. The groups of which we are members enable us to be free and at the same time constrain us by drawing borders on that freedom. It is therefore important to ask whose interests are being met in the sustaining of particular class, gender and racial inequalities. There needs to be an adequate analysis of how power works in society; of how the status quo is maintained and why.

The fundamental question for sociologists now changes. Instead of asking 'how does society socialise individuals?' it is necessary to ask 'who socialises society?' This raises much larger questions about the ways in which society works: about whose interests are met in the status quo, with all its particular class, gender and racial inequalities. Writing about gender socialisation, Mackie (1987) argues that gender, age, and sexuality are all social constructs that are built upon relatively minor biological and psychological differences between the sexes. The main purpose of gender socialisation, in her view, is to perpetuate the inequality between women and men. A host of agencies are involved in this process: the mass media, films, newspapers, employers, governments, the law, the education system, the police, social workers. (See also Sharpe 1976 and Lees 1986 on the ways that girls learn to be women.)

While I wholly accept that gender inequalities are structured into society, I find this approach too pessimistic, ignoring as it does the potential for contradictory discourse and the importance of resistance. Historical studies of socialisation and the creation of gender identity demonstrate that what is considered permissible behaviour for women and men has changed considerably in the last fifty years or so (Moore

1993). It has changed too at particular moments because of political exigencies such as the Second World War, where women found themselves in many positions in society formerly occupied only by men. Women today receive very mixed messages about their rightful situation. They are encouraged onto the labour market to carry out what are often low-paid, part-time insecure jobs. At the same time, government cutbacks have led to a reduction in nursery places, and community care planning has been built on an assumption that women will continue to be primary carers (Finch 1984). (This issue is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.)

A parallel point can be made about cultural specificity in relation to gender socialisation. Different cultures have assumed different role models for women and men. Men have not always been hunters and gatherers, just as women have not always been principally involved in childcare. There has been extensive anthropological research in this area (e.g. Oakley 1972). Studies of masculinity have similarly indicated that there are many different ways of behaving 'like a man' across cultures. Tolson (1977) demonstrates that definitions of 'masculine' conduct vary between cultures and societies, hence Italian men are allowed (and encouraged) to be emotional and passionate while English men are expected to be inexpressive and cold.

Brittan and Maynard (1984) are also interested in the origins of socialisation, in this case, the ways in which children acquire racist and sexist beliefs and attitudes. Brittan and Maynard argue that racism and sexism exist not because of socialisation; on the contrary, 'socialisation reproduces what is already there' (1984: 111). This does not lead them, however, to be despairing about change. Instead, they point to the capacity of Black Power and Black Consciousness movements in the United States and South Africa to reclaim negative images of what it is to be black in a racist society and recreate them in a powerful and positive way.

Summary

I have argued that there are pitfalls in a sociological perspective which is only interested in children as 'becoming adults'. This approach may undermine the importance of conceptualising childhood as a social category, and may lead us to undervalue children as social actors in their own right. In addition, normative sociological theories of socialisation are inherently conservative: as Mayall states, they assume that society is a 'given', and that children are 'to be taught how to fit in' (1996: 54). I have stressed that socialisation is better understood as a two-way process: we (as children and as adults) interact with the world as it does with us. Socialisation should not be seen as a stereotyping, for we are all different, and bring to every situation our unique age, gender, ethnic, cultural, class, familial and historical position. This means that we should not make assumptions based on our own experiences of socialisation. Instead, we should be open to the possibilities which individual history and agency, structural position and cultural differences bring. Moreover, an analysis of power is essential in understanding the paradox of freedom and dependence.

Implications for practice

As agencies of socialisation, social work and probation organisations should be clear about the potential they have for either perpetuating inequalities or encouraging new attitudes and behaviours. We know from studies of decision-making in social work that there are widespread differences in the assessment of, and interventions with, girls and boys (Campbell 1981, Hudson 1988), just as black children's experiences of the childcare system have been very different to those of white children (Ahmed 1989, Barn 1993). It is our responsibility to do something about this.

Denzin (1987) describes the contemporary postmodern child as 'a media child': 'he or she is cared for by the television set, in conjunction with the day-care center. Cultural myths are learned from television, including how to be violent and how to be a man in violent society' (1987: 33). Social workers – themselves part of society – have an important job to do in trying to support what they perceive to be more positive images and identities for children and young people.

Sociology and childhood: more recent perspectives

Since the mid 1980s, there has been an explosion of interest in the sociology of childhood as sociologists have sought to redefine children as the subjects of research and at the same time understand the ways in which childhood is socially constructed by adult society. There is still much work to be done here: Chisholm suggests that the sociology of childhood is still very much 'in its own infancy' (Chisholm *et al.* 1990: 5). Nevertheless, a number of key debates of relevance to social work

and childcare emerge in the new sociological interest in childhood and children. These include:

- The regulation of childhood.
- Childhood – lengthening or disappearing?
- Children – individual consumers or members of an oppressed class?
- Children – angels or demons?

The regulation of childhood

Ennew (1986) argues that the most important feature of childhood today is the idea of 'separateness'. She sees this in two parts: first, the idea that children should be 'quarantined' away from various 'nasty infections' of adulthood, such as sex, violence and commerce; and second, the notion that childhood should be a happy, innocent, free stage of life – a time of play and socialisation, rather than work and economic responsibility (1986: 33).

The notion of childhood as something separate from adulthood is, as we have already considered, a relatively new phenomenon. Children in the UK in the middle of the nineteenth century lived lives that were much closer to those of their parents, working, eating and sleeping together, with little scope for play or age-segregated recreation. With industrialisation and urbanisation came the creation of a new wage-earning class, and with this, a concern about the behaviour and habits of what became known as the 'dangerous' classes (Pearson 1983). Children, themselves a constituent part of the new working class, were central to this concern. Factory legislation to limit the working hours of children and women was accompanied by legislation to introduce full-time education for all children. Children were literally swept off the streets and into new controlled settings: schools, reformatories, children's homes and youth organisations. The impulse to prevent the contamination of urban poverty and delinquency was so strong that thousands of city children were 'rescued' from their old worlds and either 'boarded out' with families in remote crofts and farms (see Abrams 1998) or transported to the 'new' worlds of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.[3]

Pearson (1983) argues that it is not simply the behaviour of children that changes over time, but public reaction to that behaviour. In his vivid account of the nineteenth-century moral panics about working-class children, he demonstrates that what had previously been regarded as 'normal' childhood activity became criminalised. For example, it had in the past been considered acceptable, 'normal' behaviour for children to sell goods in the street. But during the nineteenth century, this behaviour became relabelled as delinquent and punishable.[4] From this he infers that an examination of 'bad' children tells us more about current perceptions of safety, 'dangerousness' and law and order than it does about children and young people themselves.

Although Foucault was not primarily interested in a study of childhood as such, his analysis of what he sees as a shift in disciplinary mechanisms in society (1977) provides further information about the development of childhood as a distinct, regulated phase. Foucault identifies a shift in techniques of punishment from the surveillance of bodies to the surveillance of minds; from the control of the problem to the control of the problem-doer (the individual or the family); from a traditional form of law based on juridical rights to a colonisation by the 'psy' complex (psychological and psychiatric ideas and practices) and the criteria of 'normalisation'. The 'psy' discourse, according to Foucault, created the categories which it then used to classify and divide up individuals, and regulate and control behaviour.

Donzelot (1980), working from Foucault's ideas, examines the development in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of a sector which he defines as 'the social'; neither public nor private, independent from and connected with other sectors (juridical, educational, economic and political). A new series of professions assembled under the common banner of 'social work' and took over the mission of 'civilising the social body' (1980: 96). As a consequence, children and the family are 'policed' today to a degree that would have been unimaginable one hundred years ago. Teachers, health visitors, social workers, youth leaders, counsellors, psychiatrists, ministers of religion, childcare 'experts' all have a say in regulating childhood and in maintaining children as innocent, asexual, dependent and in need of protection, as do education and welfare systems. Theories of child development and socialisation thus constitute the childhood which we take for granted at the same time as they set the parameters for 'normal' and 'abnormal' children's behaviour: in Foucault's conceptualisation, they create childhood.

It is not only ideas about childcare that have set the boundaries of childhood. Parton (1985) argues that child abuse tragedies have played a major part in educating society about what childhood is and should be. Over the last twenty-five years since the public enquiry in 1973 into the death of Maria Colwell, there have been almost forty public enquiries in the UK into child abuse. These enquiries have presented good parenting and the love of children as the norm; any deviations

from this have been presented as individual aberrations which should be treated as such. The focus for social workers working with families and children has therefore been to identify the small numbers of children who are seen as 'at risk' in families, and allocate resources accordingly (see also Rodger 1996).

Reviewing this period, Parton *et al.* (1997) suggest that a shift has taken place from child abuse being constituted as an essentially medico-social reality with the expertise of doctors as central, to a new position where it is now seen as a socio-legal problem, with legal expertise as pre-eminent (1997: 19). At the same time, there has been a move away from a discourse centred on child *abuse* to one which is built around the much broader idea of child *protection*: not only the protection of the child, but also 'the protection of parents and family privacy from unwarranted state interventions' (1997: 41).

This can be understood as the latest compromise position in a battle which has been fought over the last hundred and fifty years or so between those who have wished to promote greater state involvement in the lives of families and children and those who have believed that regulation was a matter for the individual, not the state (Cree 1995).[5]

Childhood – lengthening or disappearing?

While childhood has been constituted as a separate phase, so children's dependent state has been stretched far longer than in the past: although children may reach puberty at ten or eleven years, they may not be seen to enter adulthood until finishing full-time education aged twenty-one and upwards. Sociological studies in recent years have sought to explore this so-called lengthening of childhood: to examine children's activities in school, employment and leisure, their relationships with older generations, their dependency and independence, their legal status, and the impact of gender, 'race' and class (see Chisholm *et al.* 1990, Coleman 1992, Mayall 1994, Qvortrup *et al.* 1994). This research demonstrates that children's lives have become increasingly age-segregated and partitioned off from those of adults, thus increasing both their isolation and their dependency. Moreover, children are spending more and more time in institutional and organised settings, from pre-school to school and after-school care. As a consequence, they can be understood as inhabiting a separate and exclusive sphere in which they are protected from, and at the same time controlled by, the adult world.

Ennew (1994) sees connections between the 'curricularization' of children's lives and the compartmentalised lives inhabited by adults.

Just as adults move from different spheres of home, work, shopping and leisure, so the school timetable has been extended outside the walls of the classroom and into the whole of children's existence. Ennew identifies this as a feature of modern lives: 'Leisure and play, far from being separate and different from work, are now timetabled according to the same criteria and the same units of time' (1994:132). The curricularising of children's lives increases both the protection of children and their dependence on adults, as adults ferry children to and from the various cultural and sporting activities which fill their out-of-school hours. Within their tight schedules, Ennew argues, children make superficial and fragmented social relationships with other children and adults, and the idea of 'free time' disappears as children are confronted with the imperative to organise and structure their time 'constructively'. Qvortrup (1995) suggests that, from this perspective, childhood is becoming a shorter and shorter phase of a person's life (1995: 195).

Ennew's account has clear resonance for the lives of many middle-class children living in western Europe or the United States. How transferable the scenario is to working-class children and parents in the same countries is less certain. Families on low incomes and without transport will be much less able to make use of the many and varied social and cultural activities which are routinely available to more mobile, middle-class families with much greater disposable income. Because of this, working-class children are much more likely to continue to take part in unsupervised play around their streets and neighbourhoods. In addition, there is some research evidence that it is middle-class families who make most use of external childcare resources such as nurseries and paid child-minders. Working-class families still rely more heavily for childcare on the extended family network, including parents, siblings and close neighbours, suggesting that the influence of family members (rather than paid adult carers) may continue to be prominent in their lives (Hill 1987).

Studies of children's unsupervised play activities demonstrate the continuing vibrancy of the parts of children's lives that have not yet been colonised by adults. Opie's research (1993) into children at play suggests that games, rhymes, jokes and songs in streets and playgrounds are still an important part of childhood. In addition, Ennew (1994) identifies a small number of studies which suggest that children will resist and take charge of their own time, in whatever ways they can. The main force of their resistance, she argues, is to hide from adults what they do in their own time: that is, what children do when they tell us they are doing 'nothing'.

Children involved in unstructured play continue, however, to be seen as a threat to others and to themselves. The curfew on children under ten years of age playing outside after 9 p.m. first introduced in 1997 to three council housing estates in the town of Hamilton, in Scotland, and extended in 1998 to other cities in the UK bears witness both to a continuing street life for working-class children, as well as to public anxiety about the potential 'dangerousness' for children of unrestricted time, particularly unscheduled time in the evenings (*Community Care*, 5–11 November 1998). [6]

Boyden (1990) is highly critical of the ways in which the 'official' Western view of childhood is being disseminated internationally to countries and cultures which may traditionally have very different ideas about the capabilities and competencies of children. Children on the streets, out of school and away from home are being targeted for intervention by welfare and aid agencies. Yet the activities of these children may be understood as mechanisms of survival, performing the important function of preparing them for adult life.

Postman (1983) has very different ideas about childhood in modern industrial societies. Far from lengthening, he argues, childhood is in fact disappearing, because the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is being rapidly eroded. Postman sees this as a wholly disagreeable state of affairs. He illustrates his argument by pointing to the children who commit 'adult' crimes and the increasing similarities between the worlds of children and adults: schools are becoming indistinguishable from places of work, and adults and children now share the same consumer culture. Postman blames the media, and in particular television, for this state of affairs, because television has removed the 'mysteries and secrets' which kept children innocent and separate from the adult world. Historical analysis suggests that Postman is wrong: that some children have in the past committed 'adult' crimes (Pearson 1983) and that children have not always been kept apart from adult sexuality (Aries 1962). Nevertheless, there does seem to be widespread agreement amongst sociologists that there has been a 'blurring of the category of childhood', visible not only in children's activities, but also in the current debates about the interests and rights of children, and in arguments which press for the independence, the enfranchisement and the economic autonomy of children (Jenks 1996: 119). This perspective will be explored more fully in the next section.

Children – individual consumers or members of an exploited class?

As childhood has become more regulated, and as children's lives have been seen to adopt patterns which resemble more closely those of adults, so some sociologists have stressed the increasing individualisation of childhood; others have explored the emergence of children as a separate, exploited class.

Frones (1994) argues that childhood has become more individualised: as children's lives have become increasingly compartmentalised, they have become consumers in their own right, with their own special clothes, books, games and television programmes. Frones locates this development in the context of the emergence of the individual in modern society. This process, he suggests, involves two dimensions: individuation (that is, the tendency of the modern state and organisational system to treat the individual as the basic unit) and individualisation (that is, an emphasis on the individual as a psychological personality) (1994: 147).

Frones argues that the individualisation of children is a postwar development, which can be identified first with teenagers and then later with ever-younger groups of children. Qvortrup (1995) puts this graphically:

> children are being individualised in a way themselves – exactly as parents and other adults have been individualised. Children spend more and more time as representatives for themselves rather than for their family; they have their own ID-card, their own key, their own money, and some experiments have already been made with plastic cards to be used each day for children in kindergartens to control children's time use for economic reasons.
>
> (1995: 196)

The individualisation process can be clearly demonstrated in the movement for children's rights. From the 1970s onwards, campaigners for child liberation have fought for children to be treated the same as other people (that is, adults), with the same rights and privileges, including the right to vote, work, own property, and rights to make sexual and guardianship choices. In contrast, others have argued that children cannot be seen as self-determining agents; they cannot make rational choices and adults must therefore make decisions in their best interests (Archard, 1993, calls this the 'caretaker thesis').

Pilcher (1995: 50) claims that the 'liberationist' perspective is

gaining ground. She evidences this in the emergence of organisations which seek to listen to children's grievances, such as Childline; in the redefinition of corporal punishment as physical violence; and in the legislation which promotes the rights of the child (for example, the Children Act of 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by which the UK government in 1991 agreed to be bound).

Oldman (1994) presents a very different approach. He argues that children's experience is best understood as the experience of a subordinate class, exploited by an adult class. Their activities are structured so as to serve the economic interests of adults; their work at home and school is no less 'work' than that of adults. Oldman suggests that the two basic mechanisms of the exploitation of children by adults are the unsupervised activity of children (which frees parents from childcare) and formal supervision outside the family (which provides adults with paid 'child work'). Ennew (1994) gives support to this conceptualisation. She writes:

> By trivializing childhood activities, marginalizing and economically devalorizing children, adults in industrial societies reproduce the power relations that enable them to take hold of children's time, organize it, curricularize it and simultaneously control the next generation on behalf of an economic system that depends for its very existence on the subdivision of human energy into units of labour time.
>
> (1994: 143)

Social work and children's rights

Although recent childcare legislation in the UK illustrates an acceptance of the idea of children as individuals with rights and choices, how far this has actually developed in practice remains open to question. The Children Act of 1989 and the Children (Scotland) Act of 1995 both place the child at the centre of the legislation. The child's welfare is said to be paramount and must be considered in context of his/her physical, emotional and educational needs, age, gender, background, and the capacity of his/her caregivers to perform their task adequately. There is an imperative on the part of social workers to find out what the child's wishes are – the child's voice must be heard. But there is also an expectation that parents and other significant adults will be given increased respect and consideration, thus giving additional support to the status quo in terms of balance of power between

adults and children (Colton *et al.* 1995, Hill and Aldgate 1996, Tisdall 1996). This demonstrates the importance of the context within which childhood takes place. While the rhetoric of childhood may conceptualise the child as a unique person with rights to claim and choices to make, those rights and choices may be executed within the context of a rather circumscribed and limited range of options.

Hill and Tisdall (1997) argue that there are numerous gaps in meeting children's rights in the UK. Far from moving forwards in relation to children's rights for protection and provision, they state that the UK may be seen to be moving backwards, as children's poverty is increasing; more children are unemployed or underemployed; more children are to be found homeless and on the street (1997: 256). Scraton, a Marxist sociologist, is even more critical of the UK's record on human rights for children. He writes:

> whatever the relative material benefits, quality of life and opportunities self-evident within advanced capitalist societies, structural inequalities, ritualized abuse and the systematic denial of citizen's rights to all under the age of 18 are deeply etched into Britain's social and political landscape.
>
> (1997: 179)

Scraton concludes that an analysis of power is the only way forward: adults must address their position as oppressors, and expose 'the dominant lie that adult power and its manifestations are conceived and administered for the benefit of children' (1997: 186).

Children – angels or demons?

Society's ambivalence towards children and childhood is clearly apparent in the categorisation of children as either innocent victims in need of protection ('angels') or bad children from whom society needs protection ('demons'). This dichotomy between children as innocent victims and children as demons or criminals lies at the heart of childcare legislation and practice.

We have already considered Ennew's characterisation of childhood as a time of innocence and separateness from the adult world of sex, violence and work. Those children who do not conform to this stereotype – children who are themselves troublesome and who commit crime – are demonised as delinquent and 'unnatural'. Davis and Bourhill (1997) argue that media portrayal of children's involvement in crime, whether as perpetrators or victims, is 'central in creating and

reinforcing public perceptions of childhood. While this has consequences for children, individually and collectively, its derivation lies within a broader context of media and political concern over a perceived breakdown in law and order' (1997: 29). Davis and Bourhill locate attitudes to children who commit crime in the context of the sociological study of moral panics and delinquency, which began with the groundbreaking investigation by Cohen in the early 1970s into the explosion of press attention about Mods and Rockers (Cohen 1972). (This subject is explored more fully in Chapter 4.)

Bringing the discussion up-to-date, Davis and Bourhill assert that the abduction and subsequent murder of two-year-old James Bulger in Liverpool in 1993 by two ten-year-old boys was a key moment which overshadowed all that had gone before. The fact that the killers were children themselves led to a new conceptualisation. Not only were the child killers 'evil', they were indicative of a 'crisis' in childhood. The solutions proposed were, predictably, reactionary and authoritarian, leading to sentences of a minimum of fifteen years' imprisonment for the two boys, and an expansion in secure accommodation for young offenders more generally.

While accepting the general thesis that children who kill become symbols of a breakdown in beliefs about children, human nature and society, the reaction to James Bulger's death was not in fact a wholly new scenario. An earlier incident of child-killing caught the public (and the media) imagination in the same way as the Bulger case. The murder of two boys aged three and four years by Mary Bell in Newcastle in 1968 received as widespread media coverage (though, of course, there were undoubtedly fewer televisions in people's homes at that time). The Mary Bell case continues to exercise public concern, as evidenced in 1998 by the furore over the publication of Bell's biography, *Cries Unheard*, written by Gitta Sereny.[7]

Taking a very different perspective, Gittins (1998) argues that by defining children as 'angels', we create a need for devils, 'because those aspects of children and of ourselves that we cannot accept as good must be directed, projected somewhere else' (1998: xvi). In her analysis of fictional literature, she points to the complex juxtaposition of innocence and guilt, good and evil, light and dark, Christ and the devil. By placing the blame out there, external to ourselves, as 'Other', we hide from the 'cruelty and corruption within ourselves'. She argues that only by facing up to this can we begin to move on and change. Gittins also explores the ways in which children learn and begin to understand about sexuality and adult morality. She suggests that children perceive and understand in different ways from adults, and that by trying to

'protect' children, we may in reality be prolonging not their 'innocence', but their 'dependency, ignorance and disempowerment' (1998: 172).

There is one final point to be made in an analysis of children and the idea of innocence. Kitzinger's research (1990) into children who have been sexually abused challenges the mythology around children as innocent, passive victims. She argues that ideas of innocence titillate abusers, stigmatise the knowing child and present an ideology of childhood which is used to deny children power. She demonstrates that children are anything but 'passive victims': they fight back in whatever way they can. This connects with earlier accounts of the importance of an approach to understanding childhood that takes on board issues of both power and resistance.

Implications for practice

I have argued that the way we construct childhood has real consequences, not only for children themselves, but also for the agencies and institutions that work with children. Children are constructed as separate from adults: innocent, vulnerable and unequal. They are also increasingly constructed as individual consumers, with individual preferences and rights, which must be addressed. These developments may be seen to have positive aspects for children who are the subjects of social work intervention. Children who are 'looked after' are now routinely invited to attend care reviews; children's views are sought in both Children's Hearings in Scotland and in divorce courts. But there is a sense in which a sociological imagination urges us not to be complacent about any progress, which may have been made here. Children's rights continue to be exercised in a very limited, controlled setting; any decision-making on the part of children takes place in a firmly adult-led, paternalist environment.

It is also important that we place in context the shift from punitive, corporal punishment in schools and at home to a more disciplinary form of control. Foucault (1977) and Donzelot (1980) have convincingly demonstrated that the removal of punitive measures of control does not necessarily imply a freer society. On the contrary, children's lives in Western societies today, as we

have seen, are more tightly regulated and monitored by a whole range of educational and health professionals than ever before. As social workers we play a part in that regulation, whether through voluntary measures of support or through compulsory measures, such as supervision or even the removal of children from home. This is one of the main paradoxes within the social work discourse. Social work is not in practice about care *or* control: it is instead about care *and* control.

There is another point here, however. With its traditional emphasis on individual (and family) pathology, social work with children has paid insufficient attention to issues of culture, class and gender, to discrimination and oppression on the grounds of 'race', sexuality and gender, and to growing inequalities in income and wealth.[8] Children who use social work services are predominantly poor, working-class children, often from lone parent families and from minority ethnic communities. They are also structurally disadvantaged in society on the basis of their age, a reality that social work with children has largely ignored to date.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered a wide range of material in relation to childhood and children. I have argued that childhood is a social and historical construction: that it changes over time, and that it is specific in terms of class, 'race', gender and culture. Traditional sociological theories based on ideas of socialisation and children as 'becoming adults' have been criticised as functionalist and inherently conservative, working from the basis of a white, Western notion of an idealised childhood. I have suggested that more recent sociological perspectives offer new understandings of childhood as a separate, familialised and individualised institution. Because definitions of children and childhood vary historically, socially and culturally, it can be difficult to quantify the nature and extent of the issues faced by children and young people across countries and over time. However, there is an even greater sense that 'our historical perspectives on childhood reflect the changes in the organisation of our social structure' (Jenks 1996: 80). In other words, we build the frameworks that create the very concept of childhood itself.

I have asserted that social work practice with children has in the past betrayed its psychologically based, paternalist and adultist origins. Pringle (1996, 1998) argues even more forcibly that welfare systems may actually reinforce and maintain social oppression rather than challenging it. This is because welfare systems are structured by the same oppressive power dynamics as societies themselves. In his analysis of child welfare systems across Europe, Pringle concludes that both the European model of family support and the English model of child protection fail to address adequately the issues of structural social oppression that characterise the lives of children.

I believe that the ways forward for social work with children lie in a genuine attempt on our part to confront both the diversities of experiences of children, and their shared experience as members of an oppressed group in society. We must then attempt to redress some of the inequalities experienced by children: to seek to empower children to make realistic and positive choices, and at the same time to trust that children, given the freedom and space to be themselves, will spend their time in no less creative ways than we might expect of other human beings. We must also, I believe, seek to challenge poverty and discrimination in the lives of children with whom we are working.[9] By operating from a critically aware, anti-oppressive framework, I believe that there are possibilities for the future in terms of the development of a more empowering practice with children. Waterhouse and McGhee express this well:

> Perhaps the question for the future is not just how we can find those children who are likely to be seriously injured or abused by their carers but how all children in need can be supported and protected in our society.
>
> (1996: 129)

Recommended reading

- Cannan, C. and Warren, C. (1997) *Social Action with Children and Families: A Community Development Approach to Child and Family Welfare*, London: Routledge (a good practice guide for social work with children and families).
- Gittins, D. (1998) *The Child in Question*, Basingstoke: Macmillan (a thought-provoking, personal and well-theorised account).
- Hill, M. and Tisdall, K. (1997) *Children and Society*, Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman (a useful overview of the subject).

- Mayall, B. (1994) *Children's Childhoods: Observed and Experienced*, London: Falmer Press (an insight into current sociological concerns).
- Scraton, P. (1997) *'Childhood' in 'Crisis'?*, London: UCL Press (an edited collection, with a strong line of argument expressed throughout).

4 Youth

Introduction

In Chapter 3, I argued that the study of childhood and children has been, until recent years, neglected in sociological research and literature. Nothing could be further from the truth when considering sociological interest in youth and young people. There has been a huge investment of sociological time and energy in scrutinising youth, much of this based on the assumption that youth and young people are problems requiring analysis. This chapter aims to 'unpack' ideas of youth as a social problem and young people as 'troubled' and 'troublesome', developing further the thesis that age is best understood not simply as a biological fact, but as a social, historical and cultural construction, mediated by relations of power in society.

The chapter will outline dominant approaches to youth and young people, drawing on influential psychological and sociological approaches that have set the parameters for past and current conceptualisations of youth. It will be argued that our common-sense ideas about youth are created by the coming-together of psychological and sociological discourses which name and set boundaries on expectations and behaviours. The chapter goes on to discuss current themes in the sociology of youth. The chapter begins, as ever, with a question: what is youth?

Definitions of youth

If it is difficult to make absolute claims about childhood as a fixed period in the life-span, then this is even more evident with the notion of youth. For young people in today's Western world, we might expect youth to begin with the start of puberty. But when does puberty start? We know that puberty has lowered by several years because of improvements in diet and living conditions (Osgerby 1998). We also