

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

GERALD HANDEL, SPENCER E. CAHILL and FREDERICK ELKIN, *Children and Society: The Sociology of Children and Childhood Socialization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, xv + 372 p., index.

This book, which focuses on the socialization of children from birth to adolescence, is thorough and thought-provoking. It systematically details not only the influence of family, media, peer groups, educational institutions, and social class on children's development, but also emphasizes cultural influences and gender differences. The authors include several psychological and sociological approaches to help explain the behaviour of children and offer insights into various methodologies that could be used to study these young individuals. Information regarding the way children are raised in other countries (outside of the United States) are also incorporated within the various chapters as are historical facts concerning whether boys and girls were viewed positively or negatively in the societies in which they were raised. In short, this book covers a vast amount of information, all of which is relevant to those who wish to understand the childhood socialization process.

For the sake of brevity, there are four key topics in this volume which should be noted in detail as they are compelling, unique and informative. First, as mentioned above, the authors have included a number of theoretical approaches all of which help to explain and clarify childhood socialization. They discuss the way the recapitulation theory of societal evolution has impacted our understanding of the intellectual and moral development of children. They also highlight Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, Talcott Parson's perspectives relating to the internalization of roles and structures of motivation, and George Herbert Mead's work on children's acquisition of a sense of "self" through "the actions of others toward the child and ... from the child's own impulses in interactions with others" (21). Not surprisingly, given the inclusion of such theorists, Handel, Cahill and Elkin argue that they favour a symbolic interactionist approach when studying children given its emphasis on interpretation, interaction, and the social development of the "self." As a result, they use this approach throughout many chapters of the text.

Second, the authors delve into the various agencies of socialization (i.e., families, schools, peer groups, and mass media) which exist in society and discuss each agency in detail, paying particular attention to how they influence children. For example, in their discussion relating to family influences, not only do the authors consider status inheritance, parental role exchange, day care, and family composition (i.e., stepfamilies, single mothers, teenage mothers, and grandparents), but they also discuss various types of parental authority. Examining the influence of the school environment, the authors highlight the

inequalities associated with educational opportunity when comparing children from poor and working-class families with middle- and upper-class families. They note the tracking of students based on their intellectual abilities, the hidden curriculum of educational institutions, the moral climate within classrooms and the increasing use of computers and internet access within schools. The authors identify an age-limited subculture of peer groups which tends to exist among children and influences how they respond in play groups, interact with their friends, and handle cliques and bullying. With regard to the mass media, Handel, Cahill, and Elkin focus their attention on the correlation between the ever-increasing number of hours of television viewing (including video and DVD) and the higher incidents of children's aggressive behaviour. They also consider the negative effects of advertising on children, and gender and racial stereotyping.

Third, the authors emphasize the effects of social class. They suggest that the American population can be divided into six social classes (upper, upper-middle, middle, working, working poor, and the underclass) and they elaborate on the various differences which exist within each of these categories by highlighting the variety of children's educational experiences (i.e., private schools vs. public schools), the disciplinary techniques (or lack of discipline) within each category, and the acquisition of language skills. They also consider the different opportunities available to children in various classes, particularly in terms of their involvement in organized activities. In addition, children's social skills and motivational levels within each social class are reviewed.

As a final point, in their last chapter the authors reveal the importance of the socialization process which occurs during the early years of life. They suggest that this early socialization has a great impact on children's behaviour and that these early influences have far-reaching effects into adulthood. As they succinctly state in a concluding sentence: "We are constantly being socialized, socializing others, and actively participating in our own socialization. Thus socialization in childhood ... is far from being a determining process, yet it is always the foundation on which subsequent development and growth are based. It covers the early stages of an ongoing life course" (330).

Given this comprehensive analysis of children's lives, I would suggest that this text could be used in undergraduate or graduate sociology courses relating to families as it offers explanations for behaviour, discusses how children's attitudes can be studied, and highlights the influence of various socialization practices on social development. Since this book has a broad appeal, it would also be beneficial for those involved in social work and for anyone who has an interest in childhood development practices. In terms of weaknesses, this book is limited in the sense that it does not include any critical analyses relating to exploitive family relationships or gender inequalities (both of which would have an effect on the socialization of children); however, given the amount of detail that is included, the logically formatted structure of the chapters, and the quality of the studies which have been identified, this book was a pleasure to read. I highly recommend *Children and Society* for either classroom or research use.

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