The Little Society of Children

by Nicolas Sallée

How do children perceive the world around them, from the circles closest to them – their friends and family – to the most distant spheres – work and politics? In a recent book, two French sociologists open up a critical dialogue with psychology to describe the socially differentiated processes through which children learn to think and think about themselves.

In this sociology of children's perceptions of the social world, Wilfried Lignier and Julie Pagis put to the test the commonly held notion that because children are in the process of *being socialised,* they are simply future social beings and everything is ultimately a question of age, or, to use psychological terms, of 'developmental stages'. The authors draw on substantial empirical data to show what children's perceptions in fact owe to their interactions with their social environment from the moment they take their first steps. By looking in detail at the mental operations that constitute children's habitus, or at least its cognitive dimension, this book reveals the heuristic potential of using a sociological lens to examine something – in this case, child development – which has long been left to the remit of psychology.

Wilfried Lignier and Julie Pagis conducted a study over two years with children in two primary school classes (CP & CE1 / Years 2 & 3 and CM1 & CM2 / Years 5 & 6[1]). They used an elaborate investigative protocol combining speech collection – through interviews conducted with pairs of children and class discussions – and written exercises – for example, asking the children to rank occupations and, in the part of the study focusing on childhood

---

[1] The translation refers to the British education system: children are aged 6 to 8 in Years 2 & 3 (CP & CE1), and 8 to 10 in Years 5 & 6 (CM1 & CM2). It should be noted, however, that in France, children can repeat a year.

perceptions of politics, to explain what they understood by 'left wing' and 'right wing'. The authors' analysis of this qualitative material is systematically related to the children's social characteristics and those of their families, as well as to the socio-demographic make-up of their class at school and during the research. While the authors emphasise on several occasions the limitations of a study that is based mainly on interviews and sets aside ethnographic methods, observations are not entirely absent from their work. In reality, the interviews and group discussions also provided them with an occasion to observe interactions between children. Far from being considered as 'biases', these interactions – in which the children sized each other up, judged one another, imitated one another, or distinguished themselves from one another – are broached as part of the everyday means through which children form their perceptions of the social world and their self-awareness.

Socially differentiated childhood perceptions

One of the guiding threads in the book consists in challenging – or putting into perspective, at least – the dominant psychological theories of development that reduce the latter to a maturing process mainly determined by age. Although the authors underscore the importance of socio-genetic factors, detectable in the capacity that older children have to engage in abstract and general reasoning, they nonetheless situate these observations in the social environments in which such cognitive dispositions are constructed. On the classic psychology question of the dispositions to 'order' and 'rank', the authors emphasise that while age effects are undeniable, it is important to put them in context in two ways: first, far from simply corresponding to an endogenous maturing process, they are also the product of 'social processes […], such as schooling, which make the general practice of ranking familiar and seemingly reasonable' (p. 117); second, and this is a logical consequence of the previous remark, they are linked to the effects of other social relations: the authors mainly stress class, gender, and migratory origin.

The book's central argument is as follows: children's perceptions of the social world differ according to the social environments in which they are immersed from the earliest of ages. While this might seem self-evident, it nonetheless had to be proved empirically. The first chapter – 'An ordered childhood' – delineates the boundaries of a two-dimensional social space of perception. The first dimension relates to dispositions to perception and the authors' approach examines the social determinants of children's dispositions (or lack thereof) in relation to their study. The second dimension, described in a section adopting a more pragmatic tone, relates to the objects, people, and practices that children perceive on a daily basis. It entails tension between diversity and standardizing factors. On the one hand, the socially constructed diversity of different domestic spheres (size of home or homes, regular holidays or not, etc.), of family configurations (parents together or separated, whether aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, etc. are near or far) and of channels of access to information

(depending, in particular, on how important television or radio is within the family). On the other hand, the standardization that is institutionally constructed by schools, imposing both a 'common space' and converging criteria for social valorisation and devalorisation linked to the legitimacy of school hierarchies.

The authors contextualise and interpret childhood perceptions of the professional sphere (chapter 2), of friendship (chapter 3) and of politics (chapter 4) by placing them in this social space of perceptions, at the intersection of structural socio-psychological determinants principally linked to age, class, gender, and migratory origin, as well as the lived experiences embedded in each child's socio-biographical path. In doing so, they show how children think about the world around them, how they judge, rank, and order it. These perceptions also allow children to classify themselves and those around them. The book therefore maps out one of the means through which children become self-aware, in a process where objectivation (of relationships to others, to the world) provides a material substrate for even the most personal forms of subjectivation.

Children's judgments about the social world are far from exempt from the symbolic violence inherent to exposing social relations. This is evidenced by the pages devoted to discussions about the job of cleaning lady, where several children from working-class backgrounds were confronted with the shameful nature of a job done by one of their own. Among them, the boys tended to discredit it as a girl's job, using gender violence to protect themselves from class violence (p. 144).

A childhood world?

The debate about children's autonomy from the adult world runs through the sociology of childhood as a whole. The authors explicitly distance themselves from one branch of this sociology which 'emerged in the 1990s-2000s' and which, running counter to the idea of primary socialisation perceived as children's submission to the social order (of adults), focused instead on 'restoring children's "agency" […] or [on] the singular nature of "children's culture"' (p. 10). However, their analytical framework nevertheless offers a 'way of taking seriously the question of children's autonomy' (p. 193). Taking an empirical approach to the socio-genesis of schemata of perception of the social world, they not only examine the role played by adults but also the extent of the interactional fabric in which the children are embedded, thereby also including interactions *between children*.

As long as one keeps in mind that 'the spaces where and times when children are left to their individual and collective autonomy are largely defined by adults' (p. 11), there is no reason to deny that there is such a thing as a childhood world. Chapter 3, focusing on childhood friendship and enmity, unveils the rules structuring this world. For the authors, it

was less a question of 'assessing the children's degree of isolation' than of 'asking whether there are not social forces *closer* to them that also contribute […] to the symbolic elaboration of their perceptions' (p. 193). Chapter 3 shows, in particular, that children's judgments of their peers 'seem above all to contribute to constructing the (socially differentiated) gender order' (p. 194). The children, who play a lot, tend to 'play the gender game' (p. 195) as illustrated by the isolation of one particular child, Violaine, considered by her peers as a 'tomboy' (p. 197). She 'combined a disadvantaged social background with a marginalised style of femininity – or masculinity, for the boys' – and did not 'have any real male or female friends at school' (p. 198). Here again, children reproduce the violence constitutive of social relations, in this case of gender and class.

From where do means of thought derive?

This 'little society made up of children' (p. 205) is not entirely removed from realities that one might imagine extremely distant for them. This is evident when children's relationship to politics is examined. The authors focus particularly on how children read the left(-wing)/right(-wing) divide. This opposition – understood by the youngest children 'in terms of laterality' (p. 256) – is progressively associated with the political field through a process of 'political redefinition' – or 'politicisation' – of a perceptive schema associated from an early age with the use of their own body (right hand, left foot, etc.). Here again, the authors show what this process owes not just to age but also to class, gender, and migratory origin.

While this example, like many others, illustrates the social differentiation of children's perceptions, it also offers a way of examining, from a more theoretical perspective, the mental operations through which they think about the social order. This issue, along with the question of children's autonomy, is present throughout the book. The authors show that children take the schemata of perception (and judgment) acquired in the spaces most familiar to them and apply them to the realities with which they are presented: in order to rank occupations and judge their peers or politicians, they tend to *recycle* symbolic forms initially formulated by the adults they frequent. This is the case, for example, for the oppositional pairs structuring the childhood genesis of tastes and distastes in the domestic space: clean and dirty, healthy and unhealthy, beautiful and ugly, etc. For example, 'an indirect and unexpected consequence of the constant bodily education to which they are subject' is that children recycle hygiene-based arguments as the grounding 'for a very general rationale of rejection, of symbolic degradation' (p. 123).

> By emphasising the link 'McDonalds' = '*caca*' [yucky, or literally 'poo'], Luigi, Louison, Vivien, children from well-off families, mark their social distance from a working-class line of work (p. 124).

The authors also note the prevalence of more specifically school-based schemata, linked to marks or, for older children, more abstract symbolic forms: careful and messy, obedient and disobedient, etc. The children use these school schemata to judge their peers but also draw on them to ground their political judgments. This is the case, for example, when they associate electoral results with 'a sort of mark' (p. 283) or disparage 'ways of doing politics that move away from school-prescribed ways of discussing things and voicing an opinion – not interrupting others, not speaking too loudly, never getting annoyed, etc.' (p. 284).

In the many examples discussed in the book, these recycled schemata mainly serve to give subjective grounding to the legitimacy of existing preferences or rankings – but this theoretical point, linked to the productive dimension of the schemata, would probably have warranted more explicit discussion. This is the case for the example of Jawad, criticised by Elise and her friends, who use school-based criteria to discredit him. The authors note that 'while it cannot of course be said for certain that Elise's distance towards Jawad was caused by his failure to respect school rules […], when it came to signalling this – socially predictable – distance, the girls expressing it found symbolically efficient resources by turning to the school environment' (p. 176). This role ascribed to the recycling of internalised schemata is particularly evident in the chapter devoted to children's perceptions of politics. Due particularly to family discussions, some children express political preferences and aversions at a relatively early age, without necessarily being able to explain them. The names of politicians therefore first constitute 'symbolic forms that are relatively empty of content and at the same time permeated from the outset with a normative orientation' (p. 276). 'Politicisation' takes place on this foundation: by drawing on recycled schemata, the 'children "fill", as it were, the empty but oriented forms of these names' (p. 279).

Conclusion

This book by W. Lignier and J. Pagis makes a contribution not only to the sociology of childhood but also to sociology more broadly. If certain sections, concerning specific empirical points, perhaps warrant further development, this is because above all the book outlines a theoretical proposition. Devised patiently, based on complex and detailed research, this theory has the merit of being open to further developments. This is certainly what the authors expect, after having moved forward step by step, carefully laying each brick of their argument without making any claims to exhaustiveness.

By exploring the formation of children's habitus, the book opens up a rich sociological dialogue with developmental psychology. The role that the latter plays in the Bourdieusian concept of habitus, via Piaget's concept of 'schemata', is well known.[2] Jean-Paul Bronckart

---

[2] See in particular Omar Lizardo, 'The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu's Habitus', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 34: 4 (2004): 375-401.

and Marie-Noëlle Schurmans have nonetheless underlined the fundamental differences between these two approaches: 'For Jean Piaget, innate biological differences produce the initial schemata […]; For Pierre Bourdieu, it is the already present functioning of society and its modes of operation that give shape to the habitus'.[3] This question of the 'already present' functioning of society is crucial. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who was a contemporary critic of Piaget, laid the groundwork for a psychological perspective based on 'social interactionism'[4] which inspired, in particular and more recently, an 'ethnographic psychology'[5] attentive to the social conditions of thought development.[6] This minority branch in psychology shows that, from birth, children are surrounded by socially differentiated linguistic units that provide them with the keys to interpreting the world. Whereas for Piaget the first elements of language, in which children speak to themselves, is the sign of a structuring of thought that is not yet very socialised, Vygotsky views it as an already social means through which children organise their relationship to the world and to themselves. Building out from the general hypothesis outlined in the introduction to the book, namely that a perspective on the social world 'is devised *based on* language, as it is imposed and called upon' (p. 18), W. Lignier and J. Pagis make Vygotsky's psychology into the cornerstone of their reflection. Their book draws from this psychology a fresh perspective on the socio-genesis of cognitive dispositions. It therefore illustrates the value for sociology in crossing disciplinary boundaries and positing the role it has to play in understanding the mechanisms through which individuals are created and create themselves.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 27 October 2017. Translated from the French by Lucy Garnier with the support of the Institut Français.

Published in booksandideas.net, 18 January 2018.

---

[3] Jean-Paul Bronckart and Marie-Noëlle Shurmans, 'Pierre Bourdieu – Jean Piaget : habitus schèmes et construction du psychologique', in. B. Lahire (ed.), *Le travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu. Dettes et critiques* (Paris: La découverte, 2001), p. 168.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

[5] Nicolas Mariot and Wilfried Lignier, 'Où trouver les moyens de penser ? Une lecture sociologique de la psychologie culturelle', in B. Ambroise and C. Chauviré (ed.), *Le mental et le social* (Paris: EHESS, 2013), p. 191-214.

[6] See, for example, Peggy J. Miller & al., 'Ethnographic methods: Applications from developmental cultural psychology', in P.M. Camic & al. (ed.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (Washington, DC: APA, 2003), p. 219-242.