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Historical Context of Childhood (America)

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FULL ARTICLE

American childhood is a rich story that comprises multiple narratives of the numerous groups that constitute the United States. In 2018 there were 74.3 million children in the United States, making up 22 percent of the population (US Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2018). With the number of children from immigrant and non-English speaking families rising, the nation's children are more diverse ethnically and racially than ever. When studying the history of childhood in America, one can see two things: (1) There is no one "American child"; American children are of different racial, economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds; and (2) there is no one "childhood" as it shifts in meaning and is understood differently across time and place. These two major themes of childhood in America are evident since the Colonial period in the sixteenth century.

Childhood in colonial America

During the colonial period, children of African descent who were sold into slavery in the New World colonies were frequently separated from family members. These children were put to work at an early age and suffered from exhausting labor and high mortality rates. Burials reveal many who died from malnutrition, dehydration, and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and influenza (Mintz 2004). Young children, starting from age three, slept and worked in the owner's house until they were old enough to work in the fields, care for infants, serve food, polish furniture, swat flies, and fan their master or mistresses (Mintz 2004). From age five, enslaved children worked on plantations until they reached age twelve, at which point they worked full-time, receiving "a full ration of food and adult clothing" (Mintz 2004). While a small number of boys became apprentices to blacksmiths, carpenters, ironworkers, and shoemakers, some girls became attendants to their mistresses after learning to spin, weave, make dresses, and cut and arrange hair (Mintz 2004).

Puritan children, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were known to have experienced a repressive and stringent childhood. The beliefs that drove Puritan parents to "break and beat down the wills" of their children were the notions of original sin and human depravity.

According to these doctrines, all infants and young children who died unconverted would go to hell, and as the result of the Fall were inherently corrupt and sinful (and in need of salvation) or unable to willingly follow God, refrain from evil, and accept the gift of salvation. By the 1740s, the belief that unconverted infants were condemned to hell, started to fade away (Greven 2007). By the mid-eighteenth century, society's portrait of the inherently sinful child eventually was replaced by the image of the pure and innocent child, precipitating a transition to the Romantic period in the nineteenth century.

The Romantic childhood

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, US society's perspective of children and childhood changed in significant ways. No longer were children seen as inherently sinful. Rather, due to the influence of eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–78) work, particularly *Emile* (1762), children and childhood were viewed as inherently good, pure, and innocent.

Efforts to shelter children from "adult realities, such as death, profanity, and sexuality" resulted in the establishment of child-saving and child-centered institutions such as orphanages, children's hospitals, reform schools, Sunday schools, private schools, juvenile courts, and legislation ending child abuse and promoting the rights and welfare of children. From the 1850s, orphanages were built to house orphans (orphaned mostly from the Civil War) and destitute children.

The Children's Aid Society was established in 1853, in New York City, it aimed to find foster parents for homeless children by sending children to live with families in rural areas across the country. The trains that carried these orphans to the Midwest were known as "orphan trains" (Reef 2002). Other institutions and organizations included the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC), juvenile courts, and settlement houses. From the 1870s to the 1930s, the issue of child labor was highly contentious and was an onset to a "moral revolution" in which the economic and sentimental value of the child was shifting in the early twentieth century (Zelizer 2000).

Scientific childhood

During the late nineteenth century, children drew the attention of scientists and physicians. Darwinian thought inspired the first systematic and scientific studies of child development, in the 1880s and 1890s, inspiring psychologist G. Stanley Hall to establish the "Child Study" movement. Children's physical growth, psychological development, and sexual maturation became objects for scientists and parents, especially mothers, to study and closely monitor. The scientific study of child development advanced a developmental framework and norms about weight, size, and cognitive development. Such norms, Mintz suggests, inspired physicians and psychologists to promote new "rationalized" and scientific child-rearing methods (Mintz 2004) that would cause many women to doubt their personal intuitions and traditions.

Raising the "normal" child

While the nineteenth-century mother aimed to keep her infant alive free from disease and death, the twentieth-century mother (with the decline in the infant mortality rate) focused on having a "heathy" and "happy" child. Once infant survival became attainable, parents, childcare experts, and the government concentrated their efforts on the scientific study of "child development," an enterprise now centered around the "normal" and "well-adjusted" American child (Fass 2016). During the end of the 1920s, the concept of "normal" child development became a focus for paediatricians and scientists, with paediatrician and psychologist Arnold Gesell (1880–1961) establishing the norms and developmental sequences of "normal development" of the child's physical, intellectual, and social skills (Yang 2020).

Parents, especially mothers, intent on raising their children in step with the latest scientific knowledge, earnestly drew from experts such as John Watson, a child psychologist known for his behaviorist views that promoted the formation of habits in children and more stoic interactions with the infant. In his best seller, *Psychological Care of the Infant* (1928), Watson advised mothers never to hug, kiss, or let the baby sit on their laps. Rather, he recommended mothers treat their babies as though they were young adults (Watson 1928).

Postwar childhood

On the heels of a victory from the Second World War, postwar childhood in America witnessed a vibrant economy, stability, and suburbanization. As the middle class expanded, manufacturers, educators, and entertainment moguls concentrated their efforts to appeal to and equip the "exceptional" (Ogata 2013) American child. Birth rates and consumerism for children's things soared (Mintz 2004). The children born during this era became known as the baby boomers. Children's clothing, baby food, milk, and toy manufacturers experienced high profits as the culture grew to cater to children's needs and desires. Through television programs and commercials, these companies appealed to children who would persuade their parents to buy them the latest fads such as "Patty Playpal," the "Slinky," "Silly Putty," the "Hula Hoop," and "Barbie" (Reef 2002).

At the same time, in large American cities there was also an increased awareness of a "culture of poverty" particularly among low-income Blacks (Williams 1985). In 1965, as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society campaign, the Head Start program was launched by the Office of Economic Opportunity to help counter the effects of systemic poverty in the United States through early intervention in the lives of poor children. Led by psychologist Edward Zigler and paediatrician Robert Cooke, Head Start provided early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent-involvement services to low-income children and their families in an effort to help them conform to middle-class values and elementary school norms. Serving rural and urban communities in all fifty states, Head Start has enrolled more than 25 million children since its launch in 1965 (Office of Head Start 2008).

Childhood in the early twenty-first century

Childhood in twenty-first-century America has been increasingly difficult to generalize as children are more ethnically and economically diverse than ever. According to William Frey, an analysis of the 2018 US Census Bureau shows that non-Hispanic whites made up less than half (49.9 percent) of the country's children under age fifteen, with the racial diversity increasing every year. For Generation Z (children under age fifteen), the combined nonwhite population—Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, multiracial, and other races—comprised the majority of the population (50.1 percent) (Frey 2019).

While the number of children in America is projected to increase from 78.5 million to 93 million by 2030 (including immigrant children), there is a countervailing trend of interest. Americans overall are having fewer babies in keeping with overall lowered fertility rates across developed countries. As an indicator, the number of births greater than the number of deaths dropped below 1 million in 2019 for the first time in decades (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, December 2019). Driven by fertility declines in Northeastern and Midwestern states, the number of school-age children five to fourteen years old has declined within the US population. The implications of this decline are not widely recognized in America; nevertheless smaller cohorts of children point to a possible need for more concentrated investments in children (including poor children) to sustain the future productivity of this cohort (Myers 2017).

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Glossary terms

Behaviorism

Philosophy or movement in psychology that aims to explain causes of behavior without reference to internal psychological processes or mental events such as thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Data of a scientific psychology, for behaviorists, must come from things that can be measured from a third party, not by the subject. A person's observations about their own actions, motives, and mental processes are considered unreliable and scientifically irrelevant.

The Child Study movement

A movement popular in the 1890s and early 1900s in Western countries that promoted the application of modern science to discover the laws of normal child development. Child study leaders aimed to reform public schools, fashioning them accordance to the latest scientific findings and a more child-centered approach.

Colonial America

America, during its early colonization by European countries, from the late 1490s to 1776 and the events leading up to the American Revolutionary War and the establishment of the US Constitution.

Culture of poverty

A phrase originally coined by Oscar Lewis, the theory aims to explain the reasons why poverty continues through generations and why the United States, despite its great wealth, has long struggled with poverty. The theory suggests that children growing up in poor families perpetuate the values and norms associated with a life of poverty in their own lives and the lives of subsequent children, creating a cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Darwinian

Related to English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–82), known as the father of the scientific study of the child, as well as his "survival of the fittest" theory of evolution.

Mortality rate

The number of deaths during a particular time period in a given area, or from a particular cause.

Puritans

A group of English Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who aimed to reform the Church of England and to rid the church of Roman Catholic influences. In 1630, they set sail for America and arrived in Massachusetts, founding the town of Boston. With the Bible as their sole authority, they applied scripture to every aspect of their lives. They were the most dynamic Christian force in the American colonies.

Systemic poverty

Poverty, or the problem of living below the federal poverty line. As of 2013, the federal poverty line was \$19,530 annually for a family of three, an assumption applied to the whole of a country and not just particular parts of it.