

Contextual Studies

Children & Young People

Module ref: SS2023

In **part one** of this essay I will explain the concept of “social construction of childhood” and will analyse its changing nature over time as a result of societal and state attitudes and activity. Finally I will relate these changes to the provision of institutional care for children and young people.

Childhood and its **Construction** is a transition through different stages of life, a biological development process from growing up and ageing.

The construction of childhood, firstly we must look at the society that we live in and equally important the cultural background we come from. These factors help shape and construct childhood, some good and some bad. Child Care, Social Work, Poor Laws and poverty has come a long way and has evolved into what we know today in that social policy plays a big part in the attempt to eradicate poverty. If we look back in history and to the Victorian period, it gives us some understanding of how childhood and society has changed. Care Work or Social work in this period had its roots in the Poor Law and the voluntary organizations such as the Church. **The Poor Law Act of 1834** was based on the idea that people were poor through their own fault, but what the Poor Law did was to help those capable of work, and that was to help them and support them in the workhouses where conditions were harsh and labour was long. In other words it could be said that the Poor Law administrators were the first state social workers in that they were responsible for providing very basic welfare. Professional care however was a long way off!

The Victorian period was based on power due to the attitude at that time and especially the class system. Children from rich families had a better standard of education wore better clothes, better housing and had food. In contrast to the poor families the children were subjected to hard labour at a very young age, they received less than adequate education and more importantly their life span was shorter than those children from wealthier families due to various illnesses. Childhood in this period was very short, children were leaving school at an early age and what was expected of them was to go to work and help the family, and work was long and hard. Children were looked upon as adults within the family; they were not seen as children. **Phillipe Aries** in his book **Centuries of Childhood**, states his view that the cultures back then “lacked the concept of childhood” he goes on to call children “little adults”, as their learned process, attitudes and mannerisms were that of adults including the way they were dressed. An illustration of this can be seen in historical paintings, it is as though there were no children at all, as the artists painted them as they saw them, adults.

As society was changing and moving fast, the government were looking at improving their social policy and make provisions better for poor people and in particular children and young people. The Poor Law was becoming the main provider of care to a growing population, and a major provider for poor children offering education and care. This was a way to release churches and charity organisations with the strain on child care. The Poor Law changed a number of times since 1388 and

certain aspects remained with regard to child welfare, until the **Children Act in 1989**.

Work houses were set up during the 1800 which appeared to be the birth of providing residential care and accommodation for children and young people, but these were seen as children's homes or institutions. Despite all the work the Poor Law was doing, significant changes at the end of the Victorian period were beginning to happen as a number of reports and surveys from Sociologists such as **Rowntree** on their research on poverty. The results of the research began to acknowledge the contribution made to poverty by such things as low earnings, unemployment and illness to name a few. As a result, direct pressure by **Rowntree** and others on their findings was for the government to take collective responsibility for social problems holistically.

Social reform at the turn of the century brought with it new policies and a change in thinking and attitude towards childhood and in particular child care. All aspects were looked at, as well as the family, and the **Children Act 1908** saw a wide range of provisions coming together for the betterment of childcare in terms of needs and rights.

“In the twentieth century public policy shifted from its Poor Law origins with a focus on removing children from failing parents, providing them with subsistence and equipping them to earn a living, to a concern for children's welfare, resulting in substantial growth in public authorities' statutory responsibilities.”

(Scottish Executive Publications.)

In 1942 the **Beveridge Report** and many of its recommendations were aimed at eliminating the five giants of **want, squalor, ignorance, illness and disease, and** to provide basic security. At this stage the Poor Law was officially at an end.

It considered the whole question of social insurance, arguing that want could be abolished by a system of social security organized for the individual by the state. Beveridge recommended the establishment of a National Health Service, national insurance and assistance, family allowances, and stressed the importance of full-employment.

As a result of these recommendations, children's departments were established at this time, with the Welfare departments providing training and centres. Homeless families now had a right to be accommodated by local authorities and children had to be looked after.

In 1961 **Lord Kilbrandon** and his working party made recommendations to create a hearing system in order to look at children's welfare, especially children in need. With this object in mind **The Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968** was formed. This was a major act in itself covering social work and its activities; however **The Children Scotland Act 1995** addresses most of the provisions concerning children. The Social Work Act of 1968 progressed to local authority social work departments, aiming to provide an effective community based service available to all. For that reason there was a need for more professionally trained Social Workers, with the aim to study the needs of many different client

groups, and progress to a more efficient and professionally orientated service within a family and community framework.

Child Care since the introduction of the **Poor Law Act of 1834** has come a very long and significant way, even the **Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959)** gives further impetus that children are valued individuals. Article six, goes on to say that children need love and understanding, to grow up in a secure family unit and that society and authorities have a duty to care to families and children with inadequate means of support. Residential schools also have a duty to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, by giving them an educational curriculum that suits their individual needs, and care staff that are trained to help and understand them.

To summarize, child care has come a long way and major improvements have taken place, we only need to look back in history to see how far it has come and the many legislations that have come and gone all for the betterment of children. There were poor houses, work houses and large institutions where children either worked or lived. Their life span was shorter, due to illness and small children having to go to work in very hard and harsh conditions. Children were not seen as children but more as adults. So we can see over the years, how change has taken place and now, within residential settings children and young people are given the opportunity to be safe, thrive and have an equal existence in life. The various acts over the years on Child Protection raises the issue that children should be protected from any form of abuse, physically or mentally, given them the chance to meet their own individual needs. However, even though legislative frameworks have now trained care workers and social workers to help these children, discrimination continues to this day, discrimination from society whom looks upon these children differently just because they are looked after. All these major improvements that have seen the transition of child care from poor houses and institutions, to a more humane way of living and educating children, and keeping them safe in a some what homely environment, must have looked a long way of when people like Beveridge, Kilbrandon and Rowntree completed their research. But what was significant, was that these were crucial steps in the right direction and with Government policies and law making the way to achieve them, rights of the children were being recognized. But we must not forget that no matter what law is passed and what the white papers say, children from even the most deprived backgrounds their families remain the corner stone in the care of the children. We see this daily in residential care, children always want to go home the attachment is always strong regardless of class, religion, race or background.

Part two of this essay is going to examine and analyse how poverty impacts on the lives of children and young people. There are facts, figures and estimations to how many children are living in households where income is much less than the average wage. I will also look at factors relevant to poverty such as Class stratification, Education and Employment.

For this purpose and in order to understand the concept of who is poor and in poverty and how this impacts on peoples lives, we need to know what poverty is.

Poverty

Poverty is the “condition of being poor “, and Sociologists define this as **Relative poverty**, **Absolute poverty** and **Relative Deprivation**. Relative poverty is related to the standards of a particular society at a particular time. It depends on the society a dividing line, which separates the poor from other members of society. Individuals are said to be in poverty because they lack resources to acquire different types of diet, lack education, high unemployment and participate in activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are accustomed, encouraged or even approved, in society to which they belong. But its also about the fact that nowadays people could be considered poor if they don't have two cars, where as fifty years ago only “better off” people had one, what was a commodity has become an necessity. Absolute poverty is usually based upon living, people are in poverty if they have no resources to help maintain life, for example no job or means of income. Absolute poverty is measured in terms of resources and is concerned with establishing the quality and amount of food, clothing and shelter needed for a healthy life. Relative deprivation which is closely linked to poverty is related to Material deprivation, including such things as clothing, location and work deprivation. It also includes Social deprivation and its lack of employment, family activities and education. However the argument goes on that poverty can not be measured as just one thing, because there is no agreed definition of poverty, there can be no agreed measure, only indicators or signposts, the most commonly used measure however is based on income.

“... Official statistics do provide valuable information about the extent of poverty, or at least low incomes. They also give some indication of how poverty is distributed between different social groups”.

(Haralambos and Holborn (1995) pg 137)

It is arguable to say that poor people should take responsibility for living in poverty especially if there is no willingness to find jobs, and so are happy to stay on state benefit hand outs. But at the same time young people living in poverty stricken areas, see no aspirations to do well, instead follow their parents and remain in poverty. And yet poverty is a social problem, people or groups who are classed in poverty also need help to change their situation. It is true to say that a majority of “looked after children are drawn overwhelmingly from families with multiple disadvantages” where only the basic needs are met, shelter, nutrition and health. Consequently these young people come into care labelled, and therefore feel socially excluded at being cut of from every day involvement with their

families and their society to which they are accustomed to. All these oppressive burdens must be carried by the people, some are capable of bearing this load, but the majority are not. Poverty does not make exceptions to status, colour or age, it can affect anyone, though it mainly oppresses on the weaker elements of society, such as the unemployed, elderly, disabled and single-parent families to name a few.

Class Stratification.

“... A large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead”

(Giddens (2006) pg 300)

The structure of class can be seen through ownership, wealth and also the ability to climb the financial ladder. We can argue that poverty exists through class stratification in society, in spite of society constantly changing. As society changes so does the family, in class and poverty, it adopts, it moves and is evolutionary. The family is not the cause of social change. Accordingly sociologists agree of the existence of upper class, middle class and lower class or working class. The mass of population are working class, who do not own the means of their own livelihoods, but have employment provided by owners of industry. There will always be conflict between classes, but it is important to recognize that there is also an under class due to high unemployment, social changes and also the standard of living. Upper class, middle class and working class can have some comfort in knowing they have some kind of income but can the under class feel this way. Studies have also shown the advantages over the under class and working class, for example they are more likely to enjoy a higher standard of living, be healthier and live longer and own their own house. They are also less likely to commit a criminal offence. This is all related to income.

Due to socio-economic factors, children coming from poor backgrounds do not have the desire or willingness to get out of the poverty trap, instead they do as their parents have done and rely on state benefit rather than finding a job. Family structure is very diverse and the normal nuclear family is not always the case. Lone parents are another family structure that can become another statistic in the poverty trap. There has also been an increase in teenage pregnancy which goes hand in hand with the lone parent, and this group due to factors live in depressive housing conditions, in areas of high unemployment where health issues will contribute to these factors. All these factors lead families and children facing poverty. The lack of finance and the ability to work, leads to emotional and financial pressure, not having money to pay for child care and decreasing the ability for single parents to provide for the needs of their children. Therefore all these circumstances have resulted in many of the children entering the care system where their chances of a somewhat normal life are enhanced.

The government's strategy on eradicating poverty became prevalent in 1942 after the Beveridge report, which formed the bases of the welfare state on its aim to reduce poverty. In 1945 many policies were introduced, National Insurance and National Health Service are still prominent to this day.

Social Exclusion can be looked upon as not being wanted and being shut out within certain parts of society due to a combination of linked factors such as unemployment, poor skills/housing, low income, high crime environments and bad health.

Poverty in what ever form it takes can leave children, young people and even families feeling socially excluded. Certain people find it hard to integrate into a society through no fault of their own, in particular looked after children. They may be excluded because they live in Local authority housing, families dependent on Income Support, households with no paid workers or Separated or Divorced households. Out of 58 million people in Britain today, 9.5 million can not afford adequate housing conditions to keep their home heated or free from damp. 8 million can not afford one or more essential household goods and 7.5 million can not engage in common social activities.

(Gordon, D 2000)

On the whole, my conclusion to this essay is to recognize that social issues have a more major impact on children and young people. Through my own experience and work within a residential care setting, I can see that children who are “looked after” come from very disadvantaged backgrounds and disadvantaged sections of society. They see at first hand high levels of poverty, experience discrimination and live in an oppressive environment where there is high level of unemployment.

They will feel socially excluded from mainstream life, not only have they felt let down by social policies, they may well have been labelled and stereotyped by society through cultural assumptions without any attempt being made to look at their personal or family backgrounds. Due to personal values, lack of education, oppressive social policies, these young people I work with could remain as their parents are, in a state of poverty and a feeling of helplessness. The continual cycle of deprivation will continue if not broken by the young people themselves or by governmental policies and the eradication of poverty. Young people come into care oppressed and will leave without any goals to help change their life chances. Governments need to do more and keep doing so in order to get the poorer people to enter the labour market. Part of this must be the continual fight against social exclusion from lone parents to inclusion of young people into education, but there must also be a shift in aspiration from young people not to emulate their parents and remain stuck in the poverty trap but use the government strategies to have a better chance to find a job and move out of poverty and into a way of living that will enhance their life chances and undoubtedly their health and way of living.

Word Count3177

MN 0612137

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