

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

James, Allison, *Socialising Children*. New York: Palgrave, 2013. 204 pp., \$95.00 hardcover (9780230300330)

This book provides a critique of traditional ways of understanding how children are “socialized” by agents such as the family or school. It argues that while the concept of socialization seems to have fallen out of fashion within current sociological research, it is vitally important and worthy of our attention. Even the title of the book points to dual understandings of socialization: 1) the notion that children actively “come to know and understand the world and their place within it”, and 2) the more popular, competing notion that socialization is the process whereby society “writes its script” on children (2). James does not see socialization as a one-way process, or something that is done to passive young children by others. Instead, James conceptualizes socialization as much more dynamic and child-centred, whereby children actively participate in their own “socializing experiences”. James aims to add to the scholarly literature in the field of childhood studies to enrich the concept of “socialization”.

James relies on two sets of data from the North of England. What James refers to as the *Children and Time Study* consists of participant observation and interviews with 10 and 11-year-olds between 1997 and 2000. The second data set, the *Family Food Study*, collected interview data from 11 and 12-year-old children between 2006 and 2008. Overall, the data appear to encompass an ethnically diverse sample of middle-class, working-class, rural and urban children, although details are scant. The reader can only guess how many children were interviewed or how they were recruited. James does not indicate whether the few quotes she relies on extensively for analysis are typical or common statements. It is not clear how James chose which narratives to highlight: she often relies on only a few narratives to fuel her conclusions. James does not indicate how the data were coded, making it difficult to trace the links between James’ empirical data and her conclusions. For instance, James does not explain how she comes to interpret children’s narratives about mundane experiences, such as time spent eating or watching TV with their family as “family time”. Yet, she concludes from this “close analysis of some children’s narratives” that “it is not ‘the family’ that can be said to so-

cialise the child in one way or another as traditional socialisation theory would have it” (72).

James looks to several arenas as settings for children’s narratives, including the family, schools, and children’s local communities. Each chapter relies on a few children’s narratives, which James interprets to show how children actively participate and shape their own socialization experiences. Broadly, the book aims calls attention to socializing experiences as processes that are not simply top-down, or imposed upon passive children. This is a vital point developed throughout the book. Its focus on ordinary, everyday experiences (e.g. taking the school bus, eating supper with their families, going to the store) is its strength; James provides poignant narratives of adolescent culture.

James provides an interesting discussion of peer pressure as a means of socialization. She gives support for her claims about how children learn about power and authority outside of the family context. She also constructs a reasoned critique of attachment theory. James’ citation of British authors is thorough, but the literature she relies on is a bit thin in places. For instance, James mentions Bourdieu’s ideas about social reproduction, but fails to engage with his notion of habitus, which feels like a missed opportunity.

There were some confusing and inaccurate passages. At the beginning of her discussion of Family Lives in Chapter 3, James points to the “decline of the traditional nuclear family – two heterosexual parents living with their natural children” (49). The reader is left to infer what James means by a “natural” child, while scholars of the family might take issue with this depiction of the nuclear family as an enduring institution that has only recently experienced dramatic change.

This book may be of greatest interest to a more specialized readership, namely scholars of socialization, or those already engaged in the nuanced question of how children are socialized. The book offers a weighty preamble, as James assumes a good deal of prior knowledge when it comes to the literature on socialization. In the first two chapters she offers few examples and case studies to demonstrate her arguments, which may pose a challenge for undergraduates. Overall, this book would be well suited as a resource for graduate teaching in the field of childhood studies, sociology of childhood, or on the topic of socialization.

This book has lofty aims. It tackles an inherently sociological issue that brings forward questions of structure and agency. James includes much material about what socialization is *not*, but the book does not offer weighty traditional research findings. While she makes a solid contribution with respect to theorizing about socialization, James’ findings offer limited empirical data. She reveals that bodily functions and especially

parents can be highly embarrassing to 11-year-old girls. James looks at what she calls “snippets of data”, and holds to the notion that each child exists in a unique set of circumstances, which prevents her from discerning patterns (148). Readers seeking research findings that illuminate broad empirical sociological patterns about children’s socialization experiences may be disappointed, as James’ aim is not to generalize. James’ argument that nearly every social experience must be considered important when thinking about children’s socialization experiences may be of interest to theorists of childhood, but may not be engaging for all readers. The strength of this book is in the narratives of children, who give a rich perspective on their daily lives.

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