

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Gabriel, Norman. *The sociology of early childhood*. London, UK: SAGE, 2017. \$43.00, 176 p, paper (9781446272992).

In this concise new volume, based on a strong philosophical and historical structure and supported by examples from contemporary research, Norman Gabriel constructs a framework for understanding the social worlds and experiences of children in early childhood. In doing so, he engages with two issues that challenge the sociology of childhood. The first of these, as pointed out by McNamee and Seymour (2012), is that much of the contemporary research in the field of the sociology of childhood has focused on middle/older childhood, and has not investigated the social experiences of early childhood. The second is a far deeper issue – Gabriel bravely tackles the widespread rejection by sociologists of childhood of any knowledge or theory emerging from developmental psychology or bio-medical research, recalling Prout's (2005, 2011) criticism of the narrow confines of the field. Given that the sociological modes of thinking and working with children emerged in reaction to those perspectives in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this attitude within the field is not that surprising. However, Gabriel and other contemporary sociologists of childhood suspect that the social studies of childhood suffer from not considering what these fields may have to offer to a holistic understanding of childhood.

To contend with these thorny issues, Gabriel proposes a *relational sociological approach to early childhood*. This is a theoretical framework and practical approach that 1) focuses on the social lives and worlds of young children in particular; and 2) takes an interdisciplinary and synthetic approach to theorizing young children's social dynamics by incorporating insights from and making connections between developmental and sociological perspectives. Drawing on ideas of philosophical thinkers and methodological scholars from development psychology and sociology, Gabriel brings them into conversation with each other to develop a strong relational theoretical foundation. It is a delicate balance, but a deeply important one, recalling discipline-crossing explorations made by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault.

In fact, Gabriel draws on both Foucault and Bourdieu throughout the book. He employs Foucault's ideas of the dispersed nature of power and the disciplining and normalizing dynamics of discourse. He

also works with Bourdieu's synthetic and interdisciplinary approach to understanding social life, as well as his conceptual tools of habitus and capital throughout the entire book. In addition, he engages with the ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget, Benjamin and Elias, Bowlby and Bakhtin. Throughout the volume he emphasizes relationships – how different theories or thinkers or perspectives can work together, contrast with each other, and promote further thinking and questioning – modelling a relational scholarly approach that values openness, intersection and collaborative knowledge production. Using Gabriel's native UK as a backdrop for examples of policy, interventions and everyday life, this book is perceptive and thought-provoking. It is an accessible read, incorporating discussion questions useful in an educational setting and further reading lists to support interested readers in delving deeper into particular aspects of early childhood research.

In Chapter 1, he introduces the reader to the field of early childhood studies, examining its main issues and questions: what does early childhood consist of; some of the ways childhood has been institutionalized; how play is understood; issues of private/public regulation of children and families; and children's health and well-being.

In Chapter 2, Gabriel digs further into the histories of childhood and how a sociological approach to understanding children and childhood developed. He explores some of the dominant images of childhood – how it has been understood, and how those understandings have shaped the framing of children's capacities. This chapter is rounded out by a thought-provoking exploration of the limitations of the sociological approach to childhood, calling attention to the important insights other disciplines can offer to help us understand childhood as an element of human existence, straddling biological and social experiences.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Gabriel lays out the main thesis of the book – that a sociology of early childhood must synthesize theory and practice from developmental and sociological research to more holistically understand the experiences of young children. He challenges sociologists to overcome “some of their deeply held suspicions about the role of biology in the historical development of human beings” (56). He investigates the relationship between the biological and the social by exploring how both interact in theoretical thinking about young children – most notably in Bowlby's theory of attachment. He carefully discusses how Bowlby refined his theory throughout a lifetime of research, moving attachment away from an initial reductionist and biological connection between an idealized mother and her child, to a

more inclusive element of a constellation of important relationships, and with a stronger social element.

In Chapter 4, he elaborates on the foundations he builds in Chapter 3, in several innovative ways. First, he engages Vygotsky and Elias in a conversation about young children's language acquisition, pointing out the significant ways their ideas support a deeper understanding of children learning language. Using Bourdieu, he then looks at how young children absorb cultural messages and values, and begin to improvise within social spaces with that cultural material. Bourdieu's ideas of capital and habitus receive a careful treatment. Chapter 4 also features one of the most fascinating sections of the book, in which Gabriel repositions Piaget's developmental theory as relational thinking. This is a beautiful section, that goes a long way in bridging the divide between developmental and sociological approaches to understanding early childhood.

In Chapter 5 Gabriel examines young children's play, first reviewing the established perspectives on the subject – play as learning; play as development; play as socialization – before delving into an important counter-perspective – play as resistance. To do this, he relies on Benjamin's ideas of the dimensions of play as primary impulses that lay beneath adult- and experienced-imposed habit, and Bakhtin's concept of the carnival as a place of freedom, exploration, and a space to struggle with new interpretations and against rigid norms.

Chapter 6 is an investigation of the relationship between young children and their families, and the relationship between state and family in the spheres of private/public control. Gabriel examines how changes in gender roles, the workforce, and the definitions of family have influenced parenting and childhood. He looks at parenting practices and dominant themes in parenting trends in the Global North, and concludes that there is an increasing emphasis on adult and child self-regulation in all realms of social life.

Chapter 7 explores two primary concerns of childhood in societies in the Global North – debates around new technologies and media, and widespread anxieties regarding issues of children and sexuality/sexualisation. In this chapter, Gabriel points out how these issues are related, and historicizes them both, as neither of these anxieties are new. Gabriel proposes that supporting children's relationship building skills is an important element to addressing these complex issues.

Throughout the volume, Gabriel turns the reader's attention to understanding the social dynamics of early childhood in relational ways. The volume makes an important contribution to further theorizing childhood in general, and in particular the under-theorized dimen-

sions of early childhood. It offers practical conceptual tools to bring into service in future research with young children and about early childhood.

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