Understanding Childhood through Critical Perspectives

Rabindra Kumar Mohanty[*]

Abstract

It is important, to bring sociological thinking to childhood in order to give due recognition to children as important members of society, not as mere pre-social entities of socialization, rather as vital contributing agents to the greater welfare of society. The sociological study of childhood is a welfare enterprise, aimed at improving respect for children's rights in society, including their rights to distributive justice. The ambition of this paper is to bring a critical perspective to understanding childhood and child protection practices. This is a limited attempt to document intellectual movements, providing some pointers to more detailed and theoretical work on critical childhood. Accordingly drawing upon secondary literature this paper after introduction divides itself to five more sections. The first part talks about The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory and the second section deals with Critical Theory in the context of Human Experience followed by next section with Critical Theory of the Family. Fourth section deals with Critical Theory and Early Childhood Education and penultimate section with Critique of Child Rights. The last section sums up the ideas with an overview.

Keywords: Childhood, Critical Theory, Child Rights, Socialization, Family, Human Experience

Understanding Childhood through Critical Perspectives

"The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born". (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2007, p. 1.)

1. Introduction

We need to begin at the outset as to why sociological perspectives on childhood matter. The theorists may vary in their emphases, while some may put more emphasis on interesting aspects of the social construction of childhood; others will emphasize the social, economic, and political implications of children's status in societies; yet others tend to consider whether children are active agents to con-

* Professor & Head, Department of Sociology, Mizoram University, Aizawl- 796004

tribute to societal welfare or are passive agents to receive care, control and protection. Amidst all, it is important, to bring sociological thinking to childhood in order to give due recognition to children as important members of society, not as mere pre-social entities of socialization, rather as vital contributing agents to the greater welfare of society. There are advantages to all generations and societies if we acquire greater understanding of and respect for children and for childhood for the sake of academic inquisitiveness and practitioner's concerns. Children, after all, represent nearly about one-third of humanity, and, across the globe, help contribute to the economic welfare of families and societies. Most important is to acknowledge childhood as a permanent constituent section of the society, and to appreciate intergenerational relational developments between childhood and adulthood. This enterprise presupposes lifting children and childhood, theoretically, out of families and recognizing them as a social group, with their own interests, and as a social group impacted on, in ways that are specific to it, by macro factors such as social, institutional, economic, and historic in nature. Thus children's rights and their intersections with sociological understandings can be understood as important, indeed central, topics for discussion and dissemination here. In the end, the sociological study of childhood is a welfare enterprise, aimed at improving respect for children's rights in society, including their rights to distributive justice.

One such perspective is the critical theory which stand yet disarrayed in childhood studies. There are two types of debates in the academia today which need to be consolidated. The first issue is to see whether the concept of childhood is a universal and an ideal construct, or a construct that is to be rooted around the changing cultural and historic contexts, which characterize many different variations of childhood. The second issue relates to the questions whether children are actually active-creative subjects, or just objects in the face of structural inequalities that continue to sustain their status of dependency. Essentially there is a debate over 'agency' and 'structure' in the words of Bourdieu which concerns the relationship between the individual and wider social sphere. The relationships between 'agency' and 'structure' reflects on how structure exerts power to determine individual action and how structural constraints limit human freedom and creativity. The ambition of this paper is to bring a critical perspective to understanding childhood and child protection practices. This is a limited attempt to document intellectual movements, providing some pointers to more detailed and theoretical work on critical childhood. Accordingly drawing upon secondary literature this paper after introduction divides itself to five more sections. The first part talks about The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory and the second section deals with Critical Theory in the context of Human Experience followed by next section with Critical Theory of the Family. Fourth section deals with

Critical Theory and Early Childhood Education and penultimate section with Critique of Child Rights. The last section sums up the ideas with an overview.

2. The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory

The Frankfurt School, also known as the Institute of Social Research located in Frankfurt, Germany is the original source of what is known as Critical Theory. The Institute was founded, thanks to a donation by Felix Weil in 1923, with the aim of developing Marxist studies in Germany. The Institute eventually generated a specific school of thought after 1933 when the Nazis forced it to close and move to the United States, where it found hospitality at Columbia University, New York. The academic influence of the "critical" method is far reaching in terms of educational institutions in which such tradition is taught and in terms of the problems it addresses. Some of its core issues involve the critique of modernities and of capitalist society, the definition of social emancipation and the perceived pathologies of society. Critical theory provides a specific interpretation of Marxist philosophy and reinterprets some of its central economic and political notions such as commodification, reification, fetishization and critique of mass culture. Some of the most prominent figures of the first generation of critical theorists are Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Friedrich Pollock (1894-1970) and Eric Fromm (1900-1980). Since the 1970s, the second generation has been led by Jürgen Habermas who has greatly contributed to fostering the dialogue between the so called "continental" and "analytical" tradition. This phase has also been substantiated by the works of Ralf Dahrendorf, Gerhard Brandt, Alfred Schmidt, and Albrecht Wellmer. More generally, it is possible to speak of a "third generation" of critical theorists, symbolically represented in Germany by the influential work of Axel Honneth. The philosophical impact of the school has been worldwide. Early in the second decade of the twenty-first century, a fourth generation of critical theory scholars emerged and coalesced around one of its most proactive representatives: Rainer Forst. The "first generation" of critical theorists was largely occupied with the functional and conceptual re-qualification of Hegel's dialectics. After Habermas, preference has been assigned to the understanding of the conditions of action coordination through the underpinning of the conditions of validity for speech-acts. The third generation, then, following the works of Honneth, turned back to Hegel's philosophy and in particular to Hegel's notion of "recognition" as a cognitive and pre-linguistic sphere grounding intersubjectivity.

3. Critical Theory in the Context of Human Experience: Raymond Guess

Raymond Geuss (1981) take a 'Closer Look at a Critical Perspective' in the context of human experience. The critical theory has its origins in the experience of pain and repression. The experience of pain and frustration is what gives the agent's addressed motivation to consider

the critical theory and to act on it to change the social arrangements. (Geuss 1981:80).

In Geuss' discussion of critical theory, he summarises three theses which comprise the distinguishing features. Firstly, critical theory is ultimately intended as a guide to changing practice, for the aim is to produce enlightenment and to raise within the actor a consciousness of their "true interest". The concept of true interests is both interesting and important in an understanding of critical theory. Geuss discusses how a group or individual could come to know their "true" or their "real" or their "objective" interests. He distinguishes between two different approaches, that of "perfect knowledge" and that of "optimal conditions". By possessing "perfect knowledge" i.e. all empirical knowledge as well as self-knowledge as provided by psychoanalysis, an agent can be brought nearer to a clearer and more correct view of their interests. The "optimal conditions" argument recognises variables in time and place, but hypothesises that given the best conditions possible, an agent (may be a child) would be in a position to truly recognise their interests. This can be compared, for example, with a "malevolent environment". Thus, Geuss comments that where an agent exists in conditions of physical deprivation, or in circumstances where they are unduly coerced, pressurised or influenced, or in conditions of gross ignorance or false belief, they are unlikely to form a view of their true interests. This is because their environment would influence the choices the agent thought possible, and it would appear there were no other alternatives.

The task of critical theory is then to open up free discussion and allow the imagination to consider the range of human activities, in the activity of recognising self-imposed coercion. Hence the premise of critical theory is that present beliefs are used to legitimise a representative set of basic institutions, and by continuing to hold to these beliefs the actor therefore participates in accepting unnecessary pain, frustration and oppression.

Secondly, and related to this, critical theory is a form of knowledge which has an explicit conceptual structure based on a reflective relationship between critical theorist and the actor. It seeks therefore within this relationship, to bring into consciousness the unconscious determinants of behaviour and beliefs. In this way the actor may come to see that a degree of coercion is self-imposed, for the actors themselves have constituted it. This is not to say that objective, material power can be dissolved by critical reflection, but rather that it can be seen as a stage in recognising true interests and needs, and in distinguishing between choice, contingency and necessity. Geuss writes, although reflection alone can't do away with real social oppression, it can free agents from unconscious complicity in thwarting their own legitimate desires. Delegitimisation of oppression may be a necessary precondition of political action which could bring real liberation. (Geuss, 1981:75.) Critical

theory therefore aims to emancipate, rather than merely increase knowledge.

Thirdly, critical theory is opposed to the epistemology of the natural sciences, for as applied to the human world, it succeeds only in objectifying human phenomena. In this way critical theory can be distinguished from other accounts of social and personal reality, for here the concern is both with meaning for the individual for their existence, but as this is informed by social structure. Thus critical theory may draw on the work of psychoanalytic accounts as well as those of Marxism. In this, critical theory accepts the Marxist analysis that materialism informs consciousness, seeing dialectic between the two, but integrates this theory with the notion of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis examines the subjective as it is informed by ideology, and with critical theory can explore the mystification of the social and cultural world as it obscures the exploitive nature of capitalism. Used in this way psychoanalysis enables the analysis to move from the personal to the structural and to explore the relationship between them.

4. Critical Theory of the Family: Mark Poster

Mark Poster (1980) made a detailed analysis of elements of a critical theory of the family which has its own implications for childhood studies. The critical theory of the family begins with self-reflection, grounding the construction of theory in the context of the contemporary situation of the family. The sense of uncertainty and malaise that surround the family today informs the theoretical critic. In advanced capitalist society, the fate of the nuclear (or bourgeois) family is in doubt. Commentators ask if the family is falling apart or merely evolving into a new form. Amitai Etzioni asks if the family is worth saving in any case (Etzioni, 1977:487). Challenged by feminists, child liberationists, advocates of sexual freedom, libertarian socialists, humanistic psychologists and radical therapists, the family is indeed losing its long-standing sanctity. Indicators of family disequilibrium are rising alarmingly: divorces, child abuse, alcoholism, single-parent families, single-person households and mental illness.

Many family analysts conclude that the family no longer provides the context of emotional support it once did (Poster, 1980:140). Compelling questions intrude upon the social scientist. Does the family contribute to the oppression of women and children to sexual repression, to capitalist exploitation and to psychic ailments? Are the values of monogamous love, privacy, individualism, domesticity, maternal child care and emotional fulfilment realized in or corrupted by the family? Are these values themselves in doubt? (Poster, 1980:141).

There are three theoretical questions which must be clarified at this point: (1) To what extent is the domination of children a biological necessity? (2) To what extent are masculine and feminine roles

biologically inevitable? (3) To what extent is the structural model of the family conscious or unconscious? The answer to all three questions is loaded with political significance and determines the extent to which an ideal family form can be based on equality. The answer to these questions defines the limits of domination necessary for the existence of society. Moreover, these questions are inherent in any treatment of the family, and they are best handled theoretically by self-consciously and explicitly articulating answers to them. The difficulty, of course, is that they cannot be answered fully because (1) biological knowledge is rudimentary, (2) the biological and social levels are inextricably mixed, and (3) self-conscious social experiments to test the extent to which domination can be eliminated have not been carried out. Furthermore, answers to these questions are often dependent on the theorist's own society, in particular on his society's norms about what women and men are and what degree and type of authority and love is necessary for children (Poster, 1980:147)

To some degree—a degree which cannot be defined at this point in history—children must be subject to adult authority. This is so because (1) children are born into a world not of their choice to which they must become socialized, and (2) children cannot have the same knowledge or consciousness of this world as adults while they are interacting with adults and growing up. Neither of these limitations, however, legitimates any historical family structure. All known family types fall far short of reducing domination to the bare essentials necessary for these requirements. A third reason for adult authority over children which is normally invoked is that children are biologically dependent on adults. While this is true (adults are also dependent on other adults) dependence does not necessarily lead to domination, although it often does. To conclude this discussion, it can be posited that the construction of a theory of the family (Poster, 1980:149) must not provide grounds for privileging absolutely any particular historical form of the family. Quite the contrary, the theorist must be careful to avoid elaborating categories that justify the existence of a family structure on grounds that reduce ultimately to biology.

The degree of permissiveness in a family is an important issue but not the central one. Types of control of the child's behaviour, from physical punishment to threats of withdrawal of love, are only part of the problem. Adults in a family constitute a pattern of love and authority that provides an emotional context for a child which goes beyond the direct strategies of limiting and sanctioning the child's behaviour. This pattern is always there for the child, even when the parents are not involved in child care. (Poster, 1980:151)

Family as a unit encompasses many unique structures whose changes cannot he explained in a linear fashion. Family history cannot be conceived as evolution

toward small, conjugal units, as an increasing differentiation of instrumental and expressive functions, or as an increasing form of patriarchy tied to the mode of production. Instead, family history should be conceived as the plural, as the history of distinct structures of age and sex hierarchies. The change from one structure to another will require different explanatory strategies, each suited to its own case. (Poster, 1980:164)

Family members must be studied as subjects who internalize structures, but not necessarily in a passive way. Family structures have been oppressive in varying degrees; they have always involved domination. The history of these structures must be written in a tragic mode. It has had its share of brutalities, sacrifices and repressions. But the story also has its moments of conflict. Women and children have not always internalized their inferior roles quietly and obediently. One can assume that, in dealing with human subjects, when there is domination there is also resistance. The history of family will have to include this side of the story along with that of outlining the psychological patterns.

5. Critical Theory and Early Childhood Education

Althusser (1971, 1989), an author of critical theory, asserts that education is one of the ideological components of the state. Through education, children are formed according to the rules and interests of specific groups. Therefore, Althusser, along with other theorists of critical theory, undertake a macro-level analysis, which accepts humans as passive elements of society. Bourdieu (1986) makes a similar argument, stating that education is formed by the cultural capital of a specific group of children. Moreover, this group's academic success is greater than that of other groups. Education, according to Bourdieu (1986) is a tool to maintain the dominance of specific groups. Nevertheless, it is clear that his approach views children as passive agents who are formed through education.

Foucault (1978) also has a critical perspective on this theme. He perceives school, the military and prisons as institutions in which the disciplining of people, including their minds and bodies, occurs. Individuals are monitored, controlled and watched. The boundaries between private and public are blurred. People are dependent on these institutions, which makes children even more vulnerable and dependent. By making a general evaluation about these critical perspectives, Jenks (2005:43) claims that although they critique structuralism in terms of its focus on structural dominance, all of these arguments still accept people and children as agents. However, they still ignore the uniqueness of children. Jenks (2005:45-46) proposes three ways to change the perception of children as passive agents, which prevails throughout the tradition of sociology. Firstly, the development of children should be regarded historically, not as a series of evolutionary steps. Instead, their development should be conceived of as a pattern of images that relate to differ-

ent temporal contexts. Secondly, children should be studied comparatively by employing anthropological material. Finally, a critical perspective could enable us to gain insight into an existential and generative sense of sociality, which emerges from the consciousness of the child.

6.   Critique of Child Rights

Some scholars critique Children as right holders. They are sceptical believing that given the nature both of rights and of children it is wrong to think of children as right-holders (Hart 1973; Sumner 1987; Steiner 1994). They may be called sceptics or critics. Their arguments are advanced under four major heads.

Firstly, sceptics are concerned at the proliferation of rights saying that the list of right-holders has been extensively lengthened. Many more demands are expressed as rights claims. The concern is understood as one that the prodigality of rights attributions is damaging to the cause of rights. If you give away too many rights they may cease to have the value and significance they once had, and ought still to have.

Secondly, while attributing rights to children, the critics assert what reformists deny, namely that children are not qualified as adults are to have rights. The question of qualification is the question of whether children have the requisite capacity for rights. The capacity to exercise choice is a necessary condition of having a right (Steiner 1994). Rights have content. Each right is a right to do, to be or to have something. Arguably only those

rights can be possessed whose content can be appropriately attributed to their owners (Hart 1973). A right to free speech cannot properly be possessed by an entity incapable of speech. One conventional way to think of rights in terms of their content is to distinguish between liberty rights (rights to choose, such as to vote, practise a religion, and to associate) and welfare rights (rights that protect important interests such as health). In this sense those adults who are seriously mentally impaired are also disqualified. This is of course just to say that these adults are childlike. Children are unique in the following regard. Not all humans are seriously mentally impaired, but all humans were once children. Thus every one of us was, during our early years, not qualified to be a holder of rights even if now we are so qualified.

The third is to argue that the ascription of rights to children is inappropriate because it displays a misunderstanding of what childhood is what children are like, or what relationships children stand in to adults. The idea is that talk of children's rights does not capture the truth about their lives or about the family or that such talk encourages a destructive permissiveness that has poor consequences for adults and their society. Claiming rights to children may amount to running away from our moral responsibility towards children including girls. What it means, on this theory, for me to have the right to education is for me to have the option of enforcing the duty of some other person or persons to provide me with an education, or to discharge them from the responsibility of

doing so. This is to see a right as the protection of an interest especially girls of sufficient importance to impose on others certain duties whose discharge allows the right-holder to enjoy the interest in question (MacCormick 1982; Raz 1984; Kramer 1998).

The fourth is to argue that, notwithstanding their lack of rights, children can be assured of adequate moral protection by all means. The argument in defence of the denial of rights to children is to provide reassurance that such a denial is not bad for children. The central, and empirical, premise in this argument is that children do not spontaneously and naturally grow into adults. They need to be nurtured, supported, and, more particularly, subjected to control and discipline. Without that context giving children the rights that adults have is bad for the children. It is also bad for the adults they will turn into, and for the society we share as adults and children (Sumner 1987).

7. An Overview

This section looks back to the issues raised in the beginning and concludes the paper. The sole aim of the paper was to capture the debate over 'agency' and 'structure' which concerns the relationship between the individual and wider social sphere. The relationships between 'agency' and 'structure' reflects on how structure exerts power to determine individual action and how structural constraints limit human freedom and creativity. The total human experience is at stake. Where an

agent exists in conditions of physical deprivation, or in circumstances where they are unduly coerced, pressurised or influenced, or in conditions of gross ignorance or false belief, they are unlikely to form a view of their true interests. This is because their environment would influence the choices the agent thought possible, and it would appear there were no other alternatives.

Foregoing discussion envisages that the critical perspectives on childhood is not without its critics. While adult authority and control over children is considered as socializing necessity in the family, critical theorists tend to consider family as dominating institution limiting the freedom and independence of the child. Children have not always internalized their subordinate roles quietly and obediently. Every domination does not go without resistance. The history of family will have to include this side of the story along with that of outlining the psychological patterns. With regard to early child care education, the critical theorists argue that education is one of the ideological components of the state. Through education, children are formed according to the rules and interests of specific groups and votaries of critical theory accept children as passive elements of society. To them, education is formed by the cultural capital of a specific group of children. Some scholars also critic this critique saying such an approach ignores the uniqueness of children. On the whole, amidst all currents and counter currents, there is a need to change the perception of children as passive

agents and to give due recognition to the uniqueness and consciousness of the children as active agents contributing to the welfare of society. It is an undisputed fact that children are not only biologically dependent for their upbringing on adults, the adults are also dependent on the children for their emotional health.

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