

THE DIVERSITY OF MEANINGS OF CHILDREN'S AGENCY

In English-Speaking Childhood Studies and
Sociologies of Childhood

Organisation of the Presentation



- Context and objective
- Methodological design
- Agency / childhood studies
- Agency / sociologies of childhood and children
- Conclusion

Context and Objective

- ❖ **CONTEXT** : linking the French « sociologie de l'enfance » to the English « sociologies of childhood and children »;
 - ▣ questions /empirical research with 2-3 years old children
 - ▣ from a problem of language translation / **agency** ('puissance d'agir') to a sociology of translation
- ❖ **OBJECTIVE** : to understand the different meanings of the notion of **agency** in the field of childhood studies and sociologies of childhood and children, and the debates it invokes.

Methodological Design

- Corpus of English texts : British / American, Scandinavian...; (simplifications / authors)
- Theoretical papers / empirical analysis
- An analysis of both definitions and critiques of the notion of **agency** (situated within a sociology of critique)
- The dynamic of a double field : childhood studies and the sociology of childhood

Agency / Childhood Studies (CS)

- Agency as a « paradigm » of CS : present / future beings (Jenks &,)
 - ▣ Critique of developmental psychology
 - ▣ Critique of the classical concept of socialisation (teleological concept of childhood / adulthood; transmission / passive reception)
 - ▣ A new conception of children : as social actors, active; a « competence paradigm » (Moran-Ellis & Hutchby)
- A double project : political and scientific
 - ▣ The claim for recognition (« a priori ») / empirical inquiries
 - ▣ Critique as unmediated and presupposed human characteristic (Prout)
- Critique of the social uses of the notion of agency
 - ▣ The diversities of the conceptions of children and childhood (gender, social classes..) / Western, middle class, white...
 - ▣ A neo-capitalism perspective of the individual situated in new forms of power (new public management) (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne De Bie)

Agency / Sociology of Childhood (a)

□ **Four different meanings :**

1. **Choice** : motivation, interest, decision..; reference to one's self as subject ([James, Jenks, Prout](#))
2. **Production of changes** : agents (/ actors) : power over the other ([Mayall](#)) : related to situations
3. **Collective actor as Social Minority Group** ([Wyness](#))
4. « **Agent for** » & « **Agent of** »; tension between children and adults ([Cook](#))
- 5? **Performativity** (feminist studies, [Buttler](#))

Agency / Sociology of Childhood (b)

Agency / Structure (= touch stone of « classical sociologies ») :

1. Antagonism : liberty/constraints (**Jenks**)
2. Processes : reproduction / transformation (**Giddens**)
3. Interpretation : role of peer-culture (**Corsaro**)

Critiques (Actor Network Theory, **Latour**)

1. Agency as dependency (**Lee**)
2. Agency as hybridity (non/humans) (**Prout**)

Conclusion : some perspectives (P.G)

- For a pragmatically and reflexively critical sociology
 - ⇒ **Agency** as a question of 'test' (épreuve) : what are children able to do or not (/ adults) : to analyze how actors (parents, professionals, sociologists) improve (test) children's agency : a plurality of « agencies » : different degrees and scales
 - ⇒ Hybridity of **agency** : between people and situations, (including material culture) : a « meeting » (Spinoza)
 - ⇒ **Agency** as an anthropological difference between « act » and « potential » (acte et puissance); impossibility to qualify a person definitively and exhaustively

Thank you for your questions

