Adultism

Introduction

The current use of the term adultism was first defined in 1978 by psychologist Jack Flasher (Flasher, 1978). In was later taken up and established as a meaningful concept by academics, researchers and advocates within the children's right movement and the sociology of childhood. Critical psychologists, critical developmental psychologists and liberation psychologists working at the interface with childhood studies use this term to describe and explain not only children's disadvantaged position within social life but also their positioning within adult-centric research and paternalistic practice generated by the field of mainstream psychology (Burman, 2008; LeFrançois, 2013; Watts and Flanagan, 2007). Not a new term, adultism has been taken up most significantly within Northern Europe.

Definition

Adultism is understood as the oppression experienced by children and young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced/adult-tailored systems. It relates to the socio-political status differentials and power relations endemic to adult-child relations. Adultism may include experiences of individual prejudice, discrimination, violence and abuse as well as social control and systemic oppression. At an individual level, it is characterized by adult authoritarianism toward children and adult-centric perspectives in interacting with children and in understanding children's experiences. Systemic adultism is characterised by adult-centric legislation, policies, rules and practices that are embedded within social structures and institutions which impact negatively on children's daily lives and result in disadvantage and oppressive social relations.

Keywords

oppression; power relations; authoritanism; paternalism; disadvantage; discrimination; adult-centrism; social control

Traditional Debates

Adultism and Mainstream Psychological Research

Since the beginning of the 20th Century we have witnessed a massive proliferation of knowledge about children and childhood, emanating mainly from research in the field of psychology, which has shaped the way adults understand and interact with children (James and Prout, 1997). However, it has been argued that the theoretical underpinnings and methodological commitments of much of this research has been biased by adult interests and adult-centred understandings of children and childhood, producing a body of knowledge that merely represents adult constructions of childhood (Burman, 1997; Mayall, 2002).

Research studies within developmental psychology, traditional sociology and social policy have rarely generated information that has originated from children themselves, both at the individual and structural levels (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta and Winterberger, 1994). Instead, children have either been treated as the by-products of the parents, families or households, or have been studied from the perspective of being primitive forms of adults or future adults, which has overlooked children as complex people in the present who lives are worthy of study from their own perspective (Alanen

and Mayall, 2001; Prout and James, 1997; Qvortrup et al, 1994). Critical psychologists researching at the interface with childhood studies, argue that children's standpoints - their voiced opinion - should form the basis of research with children in order to gain more relevant knowledge about children and their experiences of childhood.

Critiques of research in developmental psychology, suggest that adultist findings result from the adherance to a positivistic methodology that accepts the notion of detached objectivity in research, which excludes children's direct involvement within the research studies (Qvortrup et al, 1994). That is, indirect methods of data collection are mostly used, where adult researchers code, quantify and draw conclusions about child subjects of experiements, without input from children themselves. When interviews are part of the research design, adults such as parents, teachers, psychologists, social workers, etc, often serve as proxies to direct interviews with children, as they are seen to provide more scientifically valid information about children's behaviour, needs and experiences than children themselves. This underscores and perpetuates deeply held adultist views of children as incompetent and vulnerable, whilst producing research findings that are biased and of questionable validity.

Critical Debates

Adultism and Ageism

Some argue that adultism is essentially the same as ageism - the oppression of people based on age - and that ageism should be the preferred term, in particular to draw attention to the similarities between the experiences of children and the experiences of older adults in a society that is arranged in such a way that it privileges adults below the age of 60, to the detriment of others. However, childhood studies scholars have noted that children and older people are often pitted against each within claims for limited public resources (Qvortrup et al, 1994; Mayall, 2002). This has resulted in conflictual intergenerational relations that often disadvantage children within the social arena, given their low socio-political and economic clout in influencing governments and public policy. As such, the term adultism provides for an analysis of children's lives that delineates experiences of disadvantage, status differentials and resultant power relations vis-a-vis adults, as well as drawing similiarities in experiences with older adults.

Other terms with meanings similar to adultism that may be used, but are less established in the literature, include childism (Young-Bruehl, 2012; Willems, 2012a) , transgenerational discrimination (Willems, 2012b) and parentiarchy (Willems, 2012b).

Adultism in Clinical Practice

Adultism appears to be rife within clinical child psychology, given its association with the biological determinism of both developmental psychology and biomedical psychiatry. Devoid from the understanding of child psychopathology is the political context of childhood, as well as the inherent power relations that exist between children and adults which serves as a determinant of children's status in society (Burman, 2008). Psychologist David Ingleby argued in the 1970s that children's functioning should be understood as produced by the totality of power relations within which they are immersed (Ingleby, 1974). Instead, children's thoughts and behaviours are understood within mainstream clinical psychology in relation to genes, biochemical imbalances and child development gone awry. This approach denies the social, cultural, historical and situational variability of the experience of childhood and is inherently adultist in the way it determines and essentializes notions of healthy and 'mentally ill' children (LeFrançois, 2013).

Adultism and Intersectionality

There has been a call within critical psychology for the inclusion of adultism as a form of oppression - along with racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and ageism - when using an intersectionality lens to analyze lived experiences of disadvantage (LeFrançois, 2013).

References

Alanen, L. and Mayall, B. (2001). (Eds.). Conceptualizing child-adult relations. London: Routledge Falmer.

Burman, E. (2008). Deconstructing developmental psychology. London: Routledge.

Burman, E. (1997). Developmenal psychology and its discontents. In D. Fox, & I. Prilleltensky (Eds.)., Critical Psychology. London: Sage Publications.

Flasher, J. (1978). Adultism, Adolescence, 13 (51), 517-523.

Ingleby, D. (1974). The psychology of child psychology. In M.P.M. Richards (Ed.)., The integration of a child into a social world. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

James, A. and Prout, A. (1997). (Eds.). Constructing and reconstructing childhood. London: Falmer Press.

LeFrancois, B.A. (2013). Queering Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Children & Society, 27 (1), 1-12.

Mayall, B. (2002). Towards a sociology for childhood: Thinking from children's lives. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G., Wintersberger, H. (1994). Childhood matters: Social theory, practice and politics. Aldershot: Avebury.

Watts, R.J. and Flanagan, C. (2007). Pushing the envelope on youth civic engagement: A developmental and liberation psychology perspective, Journal of Community Psychology, 35 (6), 779-792.

Willems, J.C.M (2012a). Kindisme en anti-kindisme na Korczak: Kinderrechten tussen vooroordeel en SMECC-model (pp. 37-55), In H. Brouwers and T. Cappon (Eds.). Het verlangen naar een betere wereld, Amsterdam: Janusz Korczak Stichting.

Willems, J.C.M. (2012b), Principles and promises in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (pp59-100), In L. Waddington, G. Quinn, E. Flynn (Eds.). European Yearbook of Disability Law – Volume 3, Cambridge: Intersentia.

Young-Bruehl, E. (2012). Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Online Resources

http://www.crin.org/

http://www.hopeworks.org/mentoring/adultism-what-is-it-and-how-do-we-avoid-it/

http://www.youthrights.org/research/library/understanding-adultism/

http://www.unicef.org.uk/UNICEFs-Work/Our-mission/Childrens-rights/

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px-XfhN4fOA

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cy5Q6-EjLVY

Adultism

Dr. Brenda A LeFrancois   School of Social Work, St. John's, Canada

DOI: 10.1007/SpringerReference_304657

URL: http://www.springerreference.com/index/chapterdbid/304657

Part of: Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology

Editor: Professor Thomas Teo

PDF created on: February, 09, 2013 16:39

© **Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg 2013**