THE DIVERSITY OF MEANINGS OF CHILDREN’S AGENCY

In English-Speaking Childhood Studies and Sociologies of Childhood

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Organisation of the Presentation

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