

# Age and Maturity

*The number of years a person has lived.*

Although in contemporary western societies age is commonly regarded as a fundamental aspect of a person's identity and is calculated numerically in terms of the passage of years since birth, this reckoning of time passing is not universal. Neither has it always been regarded as significant. In this sense, age can be regarded as one of the ways in which the passage of time across an individual's life-course is **socially constructed**. The historian Gillis (1996) argues, for example, that in western Europe it was only in the late 19th century that age became an important marker of social identity within the life-course. Prior to that, a person's chronological age might bear little relationship to the kinds of expectations and experiences that people had. So, unlike today, the pattern of life-course transitions was not fixed according to numerical age. Thus, for example, starting **work**, and then later marriage, did not always follow on from finishing attendance at school. Rather, boys and young men (though this was not so often the case with girls and women) might go in and out of school over a long period of time, taking up work in-between times, as their personal circumstances dictated. Thus, as Aries (1962) notes, the term '**child**' was traditionally not an age-related term; instead, it was more often used to describe a person's social dependency upon another.

In the modern world, however, as Hockey and James (2003) observe, there has been an increased institutionalisation of chronological age within the life-course and age is now key to the definition of what a child is:

[F]rom legal imperatives through to consumer practices, age consciousness has intensified, such that what it means to be a child, for example, has become highly contextualized in relation to the age of criminal responsibility, consensual sex, leaving school, consent to surgery, access to contraception, participation in work and the right to vote. (2003: 64)

Although age is regarded as a key definitional marker of the status of 'child', when used to try to describe the lived experiences of children, age is revealed to be a less useful concept for a number of reasons. The first reason lies in the ways in which biological age has been used to chart out children's physical, psychological and indeed social development. Clearly, children share a common trajectory of physical change and development over time that is largely age-based, so that children achieve different stages of motor skills at different ages. Toddlers usually crawl before they walk, and may do this from around nine months old. However, the mapping of an age- and stage-based categorisation schema on to children's social, intellectual and psychological development, irrespective of social context, is now regarded as problematic. Not all children achieve the same stages at the same age,



albeit that new research focused on **developmentalism** is shedding further light on the broad developmental changes that occur in the brain during childhood and adolescence. Nonetheless, age-grading remains a fundamental aspect of the ways in which, in modern society, children's lives are structured, because what the calculation of numerical age permits is the establishment of uniformly applicable boundaries to separate children from adults in particular cultural contexts.

The **school** system in many countries provides a prime example of age becoming institutionalised in this way. Schools divide children into different age-based classes, usually structured in relation to the annual intakes of children into the school system, ranging from early childhood through to the school-leaving age. Different age classes study different curricula, with different standards set for children's achievement. The result of this process is, however, to establish a process of age-based standardisation (James, 2004) such that some children may come to be judged as failing, as being 'behind' or 'backward' for their age, while others may be regarded as 'gifted' or 'precocious' because they achieve more than would have been expected *for their age*.

The second problem associated with the concept of age arises when it is used to define 'the child' and, through doing so, to place restrictions or protections on, or to give permissions for, children's activities. Not only does this place children of the same age together in the same group, irrespective of the differences among them, it also means that when age is used in this way, in a legal context, different ages may be used as boundary definitions for 'the child' in different social contexts. In relation to children's **rights**, for example, the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989** defines a child as a person under the age of 18. Given the rather different social and economic circumstances that children across the world experience, such a universalising, age-based definition is problematic since it implies a commonality of experience that is not there. For example, the ages for consensual sex, for getting married and for leaving school vary enormously among different countries, and some **working children** of the majority South may enter the adult workplace at a very young age. But even within a single society, there may be little consistency about age-based definitions of 'the child'. In England, for example, within the youth justice system, a child is now deemed to be competent and responsible for his or her actions from the age of 10. In terms of the **welfare** system, however, children up to the age of 18 may not have their wishes and feelings taken notice of if it is thought that to accede to these may not be in their **best interests**.

This use of age to define 'the child' also raises issues in relation to ideas of maturity. While maturity can be defined in relation to developmentalism – for example, the achievement of sexual maturity – it is also commonly used to make a qualitative assessment or judgement about a child's actions, thoughts or behaviour. Indeed, 'maturity' describes the extent to which a child appears to behave or think more as an adult does. Thus, for example, when a child is described as being 'mature' for her/his age, the suggestion is that they are behaving more competently than would normally be expected of a child of that age. Maturity, then, is in effect a social construction and, as a consequence, understandings of what counts as 'maturity' are culturally relative. Notwithstanding the considerable problems that this raises for global childhoods, Article 12 of the UNCRC assumes that 'maturity'



is something that, like 'age', can somehow be objectively assessed: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.' This is just one of the many examples of the problems that arise when trying to implement the UNCRC at the local level since what counts as evidence of 'maturity' in one setting may not in another.

Finally, age can also be problematic when seen from a child's **standpoint** since it may, for the reasons noted above, restrict children's activities. Solberg's (1997) study of Norwegian children shows, for example, how 10-year-old children manage to negotiate their parents' perceptions of their 'age'. By carrying out household tasks with **competence**, some children, she argues, act 'older' than their age, leading their parents to trust them to be alone in the house. In this way, through their everyday actions and interactions, these Norwegian children transformed age into a relative concept and circumvented the restrictions that fixed, numerical age can place upon them.

Age as a classificatory marker of identity has become, therefore, particularly important for children, since it is used not only to separate them out as a special group in society, but it may also restrict the kinds of activities and social **spaces** to which they have access. Indeed, many contemporary concerns about children's access to the **internet** and the **sexualisation** of children are underscored by views about age appropriateness and ideas about children's relative maturity and immaturity.

## FURTHER READING

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# Agency

*The capacity of individuals to act independently.*

The idea that children can be seen as independent **social actors** is core to the development of the new paradigm for the study of children and young people that



emerged in the social sciences during the 1970s. It underscores children's and young people's capacities to make choices about the things they do and to express their own ideas. Through this, it emphasises children's ability not only to have some control over the direction their own lives take but also, importantly, to play some part in the changes that take place in society more widely. As Mayall describes it, a focus on children's agency enables exploration of the ways in which children's interaction with others 'makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints' (2002: 21).

The concept of agency is important for **childhood studies** for two reasons. First, it illustrates the significant links that this relatively new interdisciplinary area has with wider theoretical debates within the social sciences. Second, it draws attention to some of the new ways of thinking about children and young people that have enabled recent research and policy perspectives to be developed. These have not only widened our understanding of childhood, but also had benefits for children themselves. We shall turn our attention first to sociological theory.

Discussions of agency within sociology form part of what is known as the structure–agency debate that has a long history within the social sciences. Stretching back to the different theoretical perspectives initiated by Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, this debate is, in essence, a struggle to evaluate the competing claims made about the extent to which individuals can act independently of the social **structures**, institutions and value systems that make up the societies in which they live. For both Durkheim and Marx, for example, society was seen as overarching, as determining what people do through the various constraints that collective moral ideas and social institutions place upon their actions. For Durkheim, the 'conscience collective' framed a people's way of thinking about the world, while for Marx, famously, it is not the people's consciousness that determines their social being but their position as social beings, as members of society, that determines their consciousness and ways of thinking.

Max Weber, by contrast, was more concerned to explore society from the perspective of those who live in it. In his view, it is the meanings that people attribute to their social actions and events that help structure the nature of society. In this sense, a Weberian perspective offers perhaps the greatest insight into ideas of agency, given its focus on social action, although from a Durkheimian or Marxist perspective, it is arguable whether people are as free to act and make meanings as the Weberian model implies.

This long-standing and difficult struggle to evaluate the relative weight of the effects of 'structure' on people's capacity to act freely has led theorists to attempt to reconcile these positions, and to argue that both structure and agency are important. Anthony Giddens's (1979) work on structuration theory is perhaps the best-known example. Giddens suggests that structure and agency cannot be seen as stand-alone concepts since they are irrevocably intertwined: social structures provide the means through which people act, but the form these structures take is a result of their actions. In this sense, social life is not only reproductive, in terms of both the continuity of structures and institutions, but also potentially transformative. People can and do have the power, through their actions, to change the



very social structures and institutions through which they have to live and work. Critical realists such as Bhaskar argue, however, that such a view downplays the historical dimension. They maintain that the capacity of structures and institutions to endure and to act as very material constraints upon people's actions, as well as to offer a variety of opportunities for change, is not really developed sufficiently within structuration theory. Martin and Dennis (2010), on the other hand, reject such dualist thinking altogether, suggesting instead that what is needed is a focus on the ways in which people's lives are embedded in social relations and processes of different kinds.

The significance of these different theoretical positions for understanding the capacity of children for agency and also their potential effectiveness as agents should not be under-estimated (Valentine, 2011). Indeed, James et al. (1998) outline a schematic model that identifies the different ways in which both structure and agency have influenced how children are seen. However, given the long-standing sway which traditional **socialisation** theory has held over the study of children and childhood, in which children were so often positioned as passive receivers of society's messages, it is important to consider the different ways in which children's agency might be conceptualised.

For some researchers, children's agency is seen as a function of their role as **social actors**. Here the concept of agency draws attention to children's subjectivities as independent social actors within the social, moral, political and economic constraints of society. In his research on the role of **ethnicity** and **gender** in young children's everyday lives, Connolly, for example, is keen to show 'how competently and with what complexity the children are able to appropriate, rework and reproduce racist discourses in relation to a variety of situations and contexts' (1998: 5). In particular, he explores how cultural ideas of race are articulated differently by boys and girls within the school context leading, for example, to black boys foregrounding an assertive masculinity, while black girls use ideas of femininity to downplay wider cultural stereotypes about the 'volatile and aggressive nature of Black girls' (1998: 15). Through exploring children's agency, Connolly shows how race as a social and cultural marker of identity is subtly transformed by children in and across the varying contexts of their everyday lives.

Other researchers, by contrast, are concerned to explore agency in the context of structure's constraining influence, which shapes children's collective position as a **minority group** in society. Mayall (2002), for example, discusses children's agency and their ability to act as agents in relation to their **generational** position vis-à-vis adults. In her view, the fact that children's agency is not generally acknowledged by the adult world is something that not only contributes to children's minority social status but also shapes children's subjectivities and therefore helps reproduce their relative powerlessness. In her research she discovered, for example, that although children reveal themselves to be capable moral agents, 'able and willing to take account of other people's views ... and [to] put aside their own immediate interests with the aim of helping others', they did not 'give themselves credit for their own moral agency' (2002: 110). This, Mayall argues, both reflects and refracts their subordinated structural position within the generational order.



This latter perspective raises a number of questions about the extent to which children are able to exercise their agency and the effect that this might have upon society. To what extent do – and can – children contribute to social change? Are they outside the **cultural politics** of any society or can the things that children do, either as individuals or as a group, have an impact upon society, instigating processes of social transformation, as well as social and cultural reproduction?

### FURTHER READING

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## Best Interests

*The yardstick by which decisions relating to children and their rights under the **UNCRC** are made.*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**), drawn up in 1989, contains a wide range of provisions relating to different **rights** for children, rights which all the States that have signed up to the Convention agree to support. None of these rights, in principle, is more important than any other. The provisions of Article 3 of the Convention, however, which requires a commitment to determining issues in the best interests of the child, have assumed the status of a general principle, in that they underpin all of the other provisions of the Convention. Article 3 states that:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Several points are worth noting about this. The first is its reach: the best interests principle encompasses not just official organisations and departments of State, it also embraces legal, legislative, judicial and regulatory bodies, as well as private and charitable bodies concerned with children's **welfare**. The second is its

