

Children's Understanding of Society

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Introduction

All children are born into and grow up within particular societies. Each of these societies is a collection of individuals who share common institutions and common economic, political, and legal structures. For the developing child, an important part of the process of growing up is to acquire an understanding of these institutions and structures, so that by the time adulthood is attained, he or she is able to function appropriately within this societal framework.

In addition, all societies contain many different social groups, for example, gender groups, occupational groups, ethnic groups, religious groups, etc. An individual member of a particular society will have multiple group affiliations. Another important task facing the developing child is to learn about these various social groups, to establish a sense of personal identity in relationship to some of the groups which are available, and to internalize those norms, values, representations, and practices appropriate for those social groups to which a sense of personal belonging is established.

This chapter summarizes the research which has been conducted into the development of children's understanding of the institutions and economic, political, and legal systems which characterize the society in which they live, and the development of children's understanding of three large-scale social groupings that characterize most societies: social class, ethnicity, and nationality. (For a more extended discussion of this research literature, see Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, in press.)

Children's Understanding of the School

The school is one of the most significant societal institutions that children come into contact with beyond the family. The school is a complex institution, with many of its workings, structure, and power patterns invisible and unexplained to the young child, and it presents a considerable interpretative problem. Yet, in order to operate successfully in this system, the child must acquire an understanding of the rules, roles, and power/authority relations that apply within the school.

Children's understanding of the nursery school

Corsaro (1990) studied 3–4-year-old children's adjustment to the system of the nursery school. He found that children first had to acquire an understanding of the social organization of the school, particularly the adult rules. However, once this had been achieved, children made "secondary adjustments" to their shared understanding, in particular by adapting and circumventing the adult-imposed rules in conspiratorial relationships with other children. As Corsaro points out, this second stage in children's thinking, as witnessed by their actions, reveals the existence of a peer culture, which can only be established once children have become cognizant of the authority system of the school.

Understanding of the school in older children

Research with older children has also revealed that children recognize the social system which legitimizes the authority of teachers. Emler, Ohana, and Moscovici (1987) looked at children's understanding of the institutional roles of classroom teacher and headteacher, examining, among other areas, the power of the teachers to make or change rules. Children as young as 7 appeared to understand that teachers' powers, with respect to school regulations, were not unlimited, and that authority was hierarchically distributed. The children's responses suggested that they had grasped the basic fundamentals of the teacher's role.

Variations in the social organization of schools may result in differences in children's thinking in this domain. Ohana (1986) examined children's discourse on rules and responsibilities as a function of the type of school attended. She found that the talk of children from so-described "traditional" schools differed from that of children in "experimental" schools, suggesting they held different understandings of such areas as authority, rule function, and the requirements made by the system on both pupils and staff.

Buchanan-Barrow and Barrett (1996, 1998a, 1998b) examined the thinking of 5–11-year-old primary-school children about the school, probing their understanding of rules, community, self-system interaction, and power, and the links between them. The general picture that emerged suggested that children's thinking begins with a simple and narrow focus on a few central features but, as the children move up through the school, their understanding broadens to include more complex aspects of the school system. The children began by first grasping the role of the headteacher, and even the youngest children

understood the position and importance of the headteacher in the school system. Then, around 7–8 years of age, the children began to acknowledge the next layer down in the power hierarchy, that of the teachers. The oldest children suggested that parents have influence in school matters, and also claimed an important role for children. Thus, the oldest children understood the school as a community, in which all members, from headteacher to pupils, had a part to play. Furthermore, the children's developing understanding of each system concept was linked to others, contributing to their overall comprehension of the system of the school.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges in this field is one in which the school-entering child rapidly adapts to the environment of the school, initially learning about the more salient aspects of rules, roles, and power/authority relations. However, children's understanding of some of the more subtle and less visible aspects of the school may take several years to emerge.

Children's Understanding of Economics

Money and economic transactions are omnipresent in the societies within which children live. People carry money around in their pockets and purses; children are given pocket money by their parents; people use their money to buy goods in shops; and adults have jobs that consume many hours of their lives in order to earn money. Children's understanding of these various phenomena has been subject to intense research in recent years.

Children's understanding of money

Understanding of the nature of money is fundamental to all aspects of socioeconomic understanding. Berti and Bombi (1988) examined 3–11-year-old children's understanding of money and work using Piagetian interviewing. They found that 3–4-year-old children have little understanding of money or the origins of money. Ignorant of the link between work and money, very young children believe money is simply obtained from pockets or purses. Between the ages of 5 and 7, children begin to puzzle out connections, as their opportunities to observe the monetary transactions in everyday life increase. Their explanations now reflect this, including such sources of money as the bank, shops, and work. By about 7, children grasp the essential connection with work, and tend to believe that the only way to get money is by working. Finally, by about 10–11 years of age, children understand that it is also possible to inherit money or to obtain money through crime.

The concept of profit also begins to be properly understood by the age of 11, with children recognizing that shopkeepers must charge their customers more than they paid to their suppliers in order to be able to make a living and to pay their employees (Berti &

Bombi, 1988). However, comparing data from Scottish (Jahoda, 1979), English (Furth, 1980), Dutch (Jahoda, 1982), and Zimbabwean children (Jahoda, 1983), Jahoda found a lag in European children in their grasp of the principles of trading, although the stages in their thinking were similar. Using a role-playing situation, Jahoda found that Zimbabwean children display an understanding of profit at around 9, two years before European children. Zimbabwean children's more extensive and relevant experience of trading in their everyday lives may bring about this earlier acquisition of the concept of profit, indicating that cultural context has a role to play in the development of economic understanding.

Children in the United States also appear to acquire an early understanding of economic phenomena. Thompson and Siegler (2000) looked at children's understanding of the causal relations between supply, demand, the price of goods in shops, and the volume of sales (e.g., if something is too expensive, then few people will buy it). They found an understanding of these relations emerging by 7 years of age. They argue that, by this age, the children are constructing a naïve theory of economics, which they use to explain and predict economic phenomena.

Children's understanding of banking

Sociocultural influences in children's economic understanding have also been found in studies of their comprehension of banking transactions. Examinations of children's thinking about interest payments on deposits and loans show that the thinking of Scottish (Jahoda, 1981) and New Zealand (Ng, 1985) children lags behind that of Hong Kong children by about two years (Wong, 1989). Although there are similar stages in their developing thinking about the bank and its activities, Hong Kong children display a comprehension of interest as early as 9 years, as opposed to around 11 years for the other two samples. On the other hand, Japanese (Takahashi & Hatano, 1994) and Black South African (Bonn & Webley, 2000) children show the least mature understanding. Children's development in this domain must be subject to complex influences; while Black South African children have little exposure to banks, this is not the case for Japanese children, who are growing up in a sophisticated economic system and might be expected to display more mature thinking.

Further evidence of the complexities of development in this area comes from a study of the economic thinking of children from 10 countries (Denmark, Finland, France, Poland, Israel, West Germany, Algeria, Yugoslavia, Norway, and Austria) by Leiser, Sevon, and Levy (1990). Differences in the sophistication of the children's thinking about banks did not always reflect the economic standing of their country. For example, while the children of Finland were in the most mature group, the children from the neighboring country of Norway displayed some of the least advanced thinking. Evidently, the development of an understanding of the concepts of banking and interest may be influenced by factors other than the prominence of the banking sector.

Children's understanding of social class

Children are aware of inequalities of wealth at an early age (Jahoda, 1959; Leahy, 1981) but initially at a fairly superficial level. When asked to describe rich or poor people, Jahoda found that 6-year-old children perceive outward differences, mentioning variations in housing, clothing, and lifestyle. Leahy also reported that children aged 6–11 tended to emphasize “peripheral” characteristics (possessions, appearances, and behavior) as opposed to life chances or class differences. Around 6–7, children begin to explain inequalities according to jobs, without reference to income, but by the age of 8, children become aware of the link between social differences and income, and relate the differences in wealth to earnings from work (Berti & Bombi, 1988; Jahoda, 1959). Leahy (1981) also found that there was an increase, with age, in references to the role played by earnings in inequalities of wealth.

Cross-cultural research has revealed variations in children's thinking about social class according to nationality (Leiser et al., 1990). A comparison of Algerian and French children (Roland-Levy, 1990) found that the most prevalent explanation for both poverty and wealth in Algerian children was the personal characteristics of the individual, while for French children poverty was seen as a consequence of the socioeconomic system. Furthermore, while the French children believed that fate played more of a role in being rich than being poor, Algerian children were more likely to attribute being poor to fate. A study of the thinking of Black children in South Africa (Bonn, Earle, Lea, & Webley, 1999) also found differences according to location. Rural children were more likely to say that unemployment was an important cause of poverty and inequality, than children from a semi-urban location. Additionally, rural children had a more fatalistic view of poverty, attributing it to God almost as much as to unemployment. However, Bonn et al. found that age was still a more important factor than social niche. While the social environment may have affected the children's thinking about such concepts as wealth, poverty, inequality, and unemployment, their capacity to formulate causal links between these concepts was more likely to be associated with age than with location.

Evidently, there are culturally based explanations for income inequalities. However, as most research in this area has been conducted from a Piagetian perspective, age is still seen as having the stronger impact, with cultural context playing a more peripheral role by affecting the rate of acquisition. However, there are some findings that suggest that social influences may have a more important part to play in children's acquisition of concepts of inequalities of income (Emler & Dickinson, 1985; Emler, Ohana, & Dickinson, 1990). Emler and Dickinson (1985) found differences associated with socioeconomic class, but notably none with age, in Scottish children's perceptions of wage differentials. For all the occupations under consideration, middle-class children gave higher overall estimates of income and reported a greater spread in incomes, with a much wider division between manual and nonmanual occupations, than working-class children. Furthermore, the explanations offered by the children for wage differentials varied according to socioeconomic class, with middle-class children expressing greater support for income inequality than working-class children. However, while children are developing their thinking about wage differentials, their perceptions of the size of differentials are generally inaccurate. Overall, Dickinson and Emler (1996) argue that children from different socioeconomic backgrounds

are developing in very different social worlds, and that this results in varying beliefs about the extent, the causes, and the justifications for economic inequalities in society.

However, a replication of Emler and Dickinson's study with West German children (Burgard, Cheyne, & Jahoda, 1989) failed to find substantial class differences in the children's thinking, while conversely finding differences associated with age. It may be that there is a greater awareness of class differences amongst Scottish children than amongst German children. Or it may be that class differences partly reflect the greater availability of relevant information to middle-class children, thus allowing them to report a more accurate, rather than a more biased, understanding (Jahoda, 1981).

Children as economic actors

Research has examined children's behavior as consumers, investigating their purchasing and saving strategies. Children aged 6–10, tested on their skills as consumers, gave reasonable estimates of the prices of such items as a pencil or a hamburger, and had some understanding of the need to judge prices in terms of the value of the item (Pliner, Freedman, Abramovitch, & Darke, 1996). Other studies have examined children's behavior in play economies using tokens; while very young children have little concept of the value of saving, between the ages of 6–12, children do develop more complex strategies (Sonuga-Barke & Webley, 1993; Webley, Levine, & Lewis, 1991). By about the age of 9, children understand that savings can be used for future expenditure and that savings and expenditure are not separate activities. The 12 year olds displayed an even better grasp of the flows of funds over the course of the study; not only did they save more, but they also used a greater range of strategies to achieve their goals (Webley et al., 1991).

Children may develop good financial strategies from their parents' approach to money. Observations of children's behavior in a make-believe shop revealed that children who are in receipt of regular pocket-money from their parents demonstrate more mature spending strategies than children who were given money unconditionally by their parents (Abramovitch, Freedman, & Pliner, 1991). Abramovitch et al. suggest that the parents who pay their children regular allowances are teaching their children to be responsible with money and that this contributes to their spending behavior.

Conclusion

Much of the research into children's economic socialization has been conducted from a Piagetian perspective, proposing that children's thinking develops according to a universal series of stages which themselves are grounded in the Piagetian stages of development (Berti & Bombi, 1988; Furth, 1980). This approach has drawn criticism because its emphasis on the universality of stages in children's thinking has resulted in the underrating of social and cultural differences (Emler & Dickinson, 1985; Emler, Ohana, & Dickinson, 1990). However, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the evidence actually suggests that the development of economic thinking proceeds through the child drawing upon both personal economic experience (e.g., dealing with pocket money, expe-

rience in trading) and socially provided information (which may be available, e.g., from discourse with parents). As both economic experience and the social provision of information varies according to sociocultural context, it is perhaps inevitable that the child's understanding of economic institutions and phenomena will exhibit sociocultural variation.

Children's Political Understanding

While children's economic understanding has been extensively researched, children's understanding of politics has been a neglected topic in recent years. This may be partly due to the difficulty in finding a productive research perspective. Extensive research in the 1960s and 1970s from within a political socialization perspective, which was favored by political scientists, failed to elucidate developmental mechanisms and processes. Subsequent research from a Piagetian perspective again drew criticism for its emphasis on universality at the expense of contextual variation. However, there are indications that a more productive line of research may be possible using the naïve theory approach as a conceptual framework.

Content of children's political understanding

Some studies have examined children's political thinking by probing their knowledge of specific political institutions and events through open-ended interviewing. Connell (1971) investigated the political understanding of children and adolescents from a Piagetian perspective. Under the age of 7, children revealed *intuitive thinking*, in which political and nonpolitical issues were undifferentiated. From 7–10, children demonstrated *primitive realism*, in which they began to be aware of areas of political interest. Over the age of 10, *the construction of political order*, children began to show a clearer sense of the tasks of government and to see political power as hierarchically and institutionally structured. However, even the older children still lacked much specific understanding. Moore, Lare, and Wagner (1985) also used a Piagetian approach to investigate political understanding of children from kindergarten to fourth grade. They found an increase in the content of children's thinking over these years, but with girls less knowledgeable than boys. Coles (1986) interviewed children in a variety of countries to ascertain their views of political situations in their respective countries. However, while these studies produced a wealth of detail about young children's knowledge of specific political institutions and events, they revealed little of the meanings underlying the children's responses, nor did they reveal much about the influences involved in their formation.

Children's political concepts

In order to examine more fundamental aspects of children's political cognition, Berti (1988) examined the political concepts of 6–15-year-old children. She investigated their

understanding of a hypothetical island-society, focusing on such concepts as power, conflict, laws, and community. Using open-ended interviewing, Berti found that the children's responses were grouped into four main areas: (1) collective needs; (2) conflicts; (3) political organization; and (4) laws. The youngest children (under 8) were generally oblivious of conflicts, of the need for organization, or of the function of laws. Children aged 8–9, after some prompting, mentioned *chiefs* who would govern by some sort of *orders*. Children aged 10–11 demonstrated a major advance on the younger children and referred spontaneously to collective needs and political organization. By about 12–13, children volunteered that the whole community was responsible for law making in some sense.

Children's understanding of the state

In an examination of the concept of the state, Berti (1994) investigated children's understanding of such concepts as *state*, *democracy*, *law*, and *dominion*, together with a series of public offices and functions, through open-ended interviewing. Children aged 8–9 reported a very simple and loose organization of people, which were under the authority of the chief, but they had little understanding of current political events, nor did they have any sense of a hierarchy of authority beyond the chief. By the age of 10–11, Berti argues that children have some naïve theory of politics. Children now spontaneously offered the word *state* when talking about Yugoslavia, and they also described Europe as a community of states. Furthermore, they displayed a basic grasp of a power hierarchy. However, Berti suggests that their political knowledge was not particularly well organized or accessible, as they still occasionally reverted to less mature responses. Berti postulates that a shift occurs in children's political thinking around the ages of 9–10, as they move from seeing power as generally concentrated in one individual to comprehending that political power is usually hierarchically organized.

Children's understanding of community

Buchanan-Barrow (2000) examined children's understanding of a hypothetical community, using multiple-choice and card-sorting methods to avoid the potential problem of underestimating children's knowledge by relying on their verbal reports. Children aged 5–11 years were given a simple description of the political system of an imaginary island. They then chose a decision maker for each of a series of problems for the islanders. The youngest children tended to choose the highest authority, namely the island Prime Minister, to deal with most of the problems, even the more parochial ones. This supports the view that children develop the concept of the *chief* at an early age, as other studies have suggested (Berti, 1988, 1994; Connell, 1971). However, with age, children began to involve more and lower levels of the hierarchy of authority, spreading the decision-making process to include others, echoing Berti's shift (1994). Finally, the oldest children displayed a belief that all members of the community should be involved in decision making, which would appear to be similar to the views of the oldest children in Berti's earlier study (1988) that all should be involved in law making.

Conclusion

The shift in recent years from the focus on children's political knowledge to investigations of their political concepts (Berti, 1988, 1994; Buchanan-Barrow, 2000) has opened up the possibility of a more fruitful perspective for examining children's political cognition, that of the naïve theory approach (Wellman & Gelman, 1998). These studies suggest that children construct a naïve theory of politics, as they attempt to make sense of systems of power or authority. Children's thinking begins with a simple and narrow focus on the role of a powerful individual, a *chief*, or *prime minister*, exercising absolute power from the highest point in the system. With age, children develop an understanding of the hierarchies of power, as they become cognizant of the parts played at lower levels in the system. Finally, as older children acquire a sense of the community as a whole, their thinking displays a basic grasp of a consent to government, as they propose that all members of a community should be involved in its organization. This "top-down" acquisition of political system understanding echoes children's developing thinking about the school (see above).

Children's Understanding of the Law

Although some findings about children's legal understanding emerge from the studies into children's political cognition, specific research focused on the legal domain has been a fairly recent phenomenon. Interest has been prompted by the increasing levels of participation by children in legal investigations, either as victims in cases of neglect or abuse, or as witnesses to crimes. Research has begun to examine children's perceptions of the legal system, as their legal knowledge may be linked to the effectiveness of their testimony.

Children's legal concepts

Several studies have investigated children's legal concepts. For example, Flin, Stevenson, and Davies (1989) investigated Scottish children's legal vocabulary and knowledge of court proceedings. Children, aged 6–10, responded to 20 common legal terms (e.g., *a law, oath, evidence, trial*), including some legal roles (e.g., *policeman, judge, lawyer, witness*). Overall, children under the age of 10 did not appear to be well informed about the legal system, while the youngest children were only reasonably familiar with four of the terms (*policeman, rule, promise, and truth*). Under the age of 8, there was also considerable negativity about the possibility of attending court, which was perhaps prompted by a generally held belief in the younger children that courts were for "bad" people. Similar findings were obtained by Saywitz (1989) and Warren-Leubecker, Tate, Hinton, and Ozbek (1989), who looked at legal understanding in American children aged up to 14 years old. These studies concur in finding considerable limitations in children's understanding of legal concepts below the age of 10.

Children's legal reasoning

Two studies have examined children's legal reasoning, using scenarios. Peterson-Badali, Abramovitch, and Duda (1997) examined 7–12-year-old Canadian children's reasoning about plea bargaining. They found that the majority of children's plea choices were congruent with legal criteria rather than with morality, suggesting that children do have some understanding of the relationship between important legal variables (such as evidence) and plea decisions. However, the younger children (under 10) were generally unable to give an explicit account for their plea choices. In another study by Berti and Ugolini (1998), Italian children (aged 6–14) responded to a crime scenario. They found younger children to be largely ignorant of legal matters. However, there was a major shift around the age of 11, when children demonstrated a more precise knowledge of the court and the role of the judicial system within the wider state system.

Television as a source of children's knowledge of the law

As very few children have direct personal experience of the legal system, one possible source of children's knowledge about the law is television. Children aged 3–7 years old may watch up to 2 hours per week of programs related to crime and legal activities (Huston, Wright, Rice, Kerkman, & St. Peters, 1990), and Saywitz (1989) found that extensive watching of TV programs influences children's legal conceptions. Durkin and his colleagues have conducted a series of studies examining children's understanding of televised crime and police programs (Durkin & Howarth, 1997; Low & Durkin, 1997). Using both spontaneous script generation and picture sequencing of police stories with children aged 5–13, they found that while younger children's thinking was generally limited to the crime and chase scenes, older children's thinking encompassed much more complexity, often including formal legal processes. Younger children also had difficulty differentiating between their own perspective on an event and that of a TV witness, who had not seen the crime committed, suggesting that children might fail to comprehend the problems and limitations with witness testimony in real life. If TV crime and police programs do provide children with their earliest source of legal knowledge, then it is possible that the nonveridical nature of many TV representations could lead children to misunderstand real-life legal processes.

Conclusion

Children's understanding of the law shows considerable developmental change over the course of middle childhood, with the age of 10–11 appearing to be a significant watershed in their understanding. The role that television may play in fostering children's legal understanding serves to re-emphasize a more general point about children's societal understanding: That in knowledge domains in which children have little first-hand personal experience, much of their knowledge may instead be derived from indirect sources such as television, parents or peers.

Children's Understanding of Ethnic Groups

Nowadays, the societies within which children live are rarely homogeneous in terms of their ethnic composition. Instead, most societies contain individuals from a number of different ethnic groups. These ethnic groups may identify themselves, or be identified by others, by all sorts of different criteria or characteristics, including country of origin, religion, culture, language, skin color, etc. The cognitive task facing the child in mastering this system of ethnic categorization is considerable. Investigations into children's understanding of ethnic groups have tended to focus upon three aspects of the developmental process: the development of ethnic awareness; the development of ethnic self-identification; and the development of ethnic attitudes.

The development of ethnic awareness

One method frequently used to study children's ethnic awareness is to show the child pictures or dolls representing people from different ethnic groups, and to ask the child to point to, for example, the White person, the Black person, etc. This method has revealed that even some 3 years olds can identify the ethnicity of Black and White pictures or dolls; amongst 4–5 year olds, 75% of children can identify Black and White ethnicity; and amongst 6–7 year olds, the figure is usually 90% or higher (Clark & Clark, 1947; Williams & Morland, 1976). These figures are typically obtained when the targets are White and Black, and are exhibited by both White and Black children. Other studies have found that White and Chinese-American children acquire the ability to identify Chinese people between 5 and 7 years of age (Fox & Jordan, 1973); White and Native-American children's ability to identify Native-American people continues to develop up to 9 years of age (Rosenthal, 1974); while White and Hispanic-American children's ability to identify Hispanic people continues improving up to 9 or 10 years of age (Rice, Ruiz, & Padilla, 1974).

One problem with these studies is that they only show that children can identify people from different ethnic categories when asked to do so by an experimenter; they do not show whether children spontaneously use these ethnic categories in their own social judgments. Consequently, other methods have been used to see whether children do spontaneously employ ethnic categories. Yee and Brown (1988) presented 3–9-year-old children with pictures of people who differed according to their ethnicity, gender, and age, and asked the children to group them. They found that by 5 years of age, ethnicity was used spontaneously to group the pictures by a third of the children, while by 7 years of age, ethnicity was used by two thirds of them. Davey (1983), who tested 7–10 years olds using a similar method, also found that ethnicity was used spontaneously more frequently than either gender or socioeconomic status.

The development of ethnic self-identification

The standard method used to study ethnic self-identification has again been to show children either pictures or dolls representing people from different ethnic groups, and in this case to ask the child to point to the one which most closely resembles him or her. This method has revealed that, from 3–4 years of age onwards, White children identify with the White person or doll 75% of the time, rising to almost 100% by 6–7 years (Aboud, 1977; Williams & Morland, 1976).

However, a more complicated picture has been found with Black children. Some Black children identify with the Black doll or picture from about 3–4 years of age. However, a large proportion of 3–4-year-old Black children tend to identify with the White person or doll rather than with the Black one. Indeed, in one widely cited study, Clark and Clark (1947) found that over 60% of the 3-year-old Black children identified with a White doll rather than a Black one; by 7 years of age, this figure had dropped to 13%. Comparable findings have been obtained with Black children in many other studies (see Aboud, 1988, for a detailed review). Similar trends have been found to occur with Chinese American (Fox & Jordan, 1973) and Hispanic children (Rice et al., 1974): In both cases, half of the children identified with the White person at 4–5 years of age, with identification with the ingroup figure only rising to over 80% by about 7 years of age. Thus, it would appear that majority and minority group children may differ in the development of their ethnic self-identification. Nevertheless, it should be noted that by about 7 years of age, most ethnic minority children do exhibit identification with their own ethnic group.

The development of ethnic attitudes

Children's ethnic attitudes have also been studied using pictures or dolls. However, in this case, the children are asked which one they like the best/least. As far as White majority group children are concerned, they display a consistent preference for the White pictures or dolls from the age of 3–4 years onwards, a preference which often grows in strength between 4 and 7 years of age (Aboud, 1980; Asher & Allen, 1969).

However, once again, a more complicated picture arises in the case of Black minority group children. Firstly, in some of the studies which were conducted before the end of the 1960s, it was found that many young Black children preferred the White dolls or pictures over the Black ones (Asher & Allen, 1969; Clark & Clark, 1947). Furthermore, this preference for the ethnic outgroup was found to peak at about 6–7 years of age, before declining and turning into a pro-Black bias instead. Nevertheless, even in these early studies, not all young Black children were found to exhibit this outgroup preference (Aboud, 1988; Banks, 1976). However, the picture has changed dramatically since the late 1960s. The positive bias toward the majority White outgroup seems to have disappeared in 4–7-year-old Black children in more recent years, with Black children now showing an ingroup bias which is equivalent to that shown by White majority group children (Aboud, 1980; Hraba & Grant, 1970; Vaughan, 1978). In order to explain this change in the pattern of Black children's identity development, Brown (1995) draws attention to the fact that, during the

1960s, Black consciousness political movements appeared in countries such as America and Britain, and these helped to foster a much more positive sense of minority ingroup pride amongst Black people. Brown argues that this more positive group image is probably the source of this change which occurred to the pattern of Black children's ethnic identity development in the late 1960s. So, the current picture is one in which both White majority and Black minority children's positive bias toward their own ingroup strengthens between 4 and 7 years of age.

As far as attitudes toward ethnic outgroups are concerned, these tend to be the inverse of attitudes to the ingroup. Thus, as positive ingroup bias becomes more pronounced between 4 and 7 years of age, negative prejudice against outgroups also becomes more pronounced. A peak in negative prejudice against ethnic outgroups occurs at about 7 years of age. After this, there is typically a decline in both positive feelings about the ingroup and negative feelings about outgroups up until about 11 or 12 years of age (Aboud, 1980, 1988).

Using an adjective attribution task in order to study this latter development trend, Doyle, Beaudet, and Aboud (1988) found that, between 6 and 12 years of age, children shift away from assigning mainly positive attributes to the ingroup and mainly negative attributes to the outgroup at 6 years of age, to assigning both positive and negative attributes to both the ingroup and the outgroup by 12 years of age. Similar developmental trends in the attribution of positive and negative traits to ethnic ingroups and outgroups have been found by Takriti, Buchanan-Barrow, and Barrett (2000) in a study of 5–11-year-old Christian and Muslim children. Thus, the decline in children's prejudice toward ethnic outgroups across the middle years of childhood seems to be associated with the increasing acknowledgement that the members of all ethnic groups can exhibit both good and bad characteristics.

Numerous studies have been conducted into the possible sources of children's ethnic attitudes, with parents and peers being the two main sources that have been examined. These studies are reviewed in detail by Aboud (1988) and Aboud and Doyle (1996). The overall picture which emerges is that, while some studies have found positive correlations between the attitudes of children and those modeled by the socialization agents in their environment (e.g., Branch & Newcombe, 1986), many other studies have failed to find any relationship at all (e.g., Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Davey, 1983; Katz, 1976). In the light of these findings, Aboud and Doyle (1996) conclude that children's ethnic attitudes are not strongly related to either their parents' or their friends' attitudes, and that the widespread assumption that children learn their ethnic attitudes from significant socialization agents is not substantiated by the research.

Conclusion

Children's understanding of, and feelings about, ethnic groups show considerable change between 3 and 12 years of age, with 6–7 years of age appearing to be an important transitional age in the child's development. Because children's ethnic attitudes do not appear to be derived from those which are modeled by either their parents or peers, Aboud (1988) has argued that the development of ethnic attitudes is driven by cognitive-developmental

changes rather than by social influences. She postulates that it is changes to the way in which the child is able to conceptualize large-scale social groups which drive the developmental changes in the child's attitudes to ethnic ingroups and outgroups between 3 and 12 years of age, with the onset of concrete operational understanding at 6–7 years of age being the reason why this age is a watershed in the development of children's ethnic attitudes. However, this Piagetian explanation is unconvincing in the light of findings that there is no significant correlation between the development of ethnic attitudes and the development of concrete operations (Doyle & Aboud, 1995), that children are in fact able to exhibit concrete operational abilities in many contexts well before 6–7 years of age (Donaldson, 1978), and that historically the pattern of minority children's ethnic identity development exhibited a significant change in the late 1960s (Brown, 1995), a change which cannot be explained on the basis of Aboud's cognitive-developmental theory. Consequently, this is a domain of development that still stands in need of an appropriate theoretical explanation.

The bulk of the research in this field has focused upon children's judgments concerning those ethnic groups which are distinguished in terms of their physical characteristics such as skin color and physiognomy. Very little research has been conducted into children's awareness of, ability to differentiate between, and attitudes toward, those ethnic groups which are differentiated in terms of their culture, religion, and/or language. Exceptions to this are the studies by Doyle et al. (1988), who studied children's judgments of French-speaking versus English-speaking people, and Takriti et al. (2000), who studied children's judgments of Christian versus Muslim people living in England.

Children's Understanding of Nationality and National Groups

In addition to social class and ethnicity, the societies within which children live today are also structured in terms of nationality. Because the entire land surface of the world, apart from Antarctica, has now been divided up into nation-states, all children nowadays are born within the borders of a particular nation-state, and they have to live their lives in a world which is characterized by the existence of many different national groups. This section describes the research that has been conducted into children's knowledge of, and attitudes to, national groups.

Children's knowledge of their own country and national group

Many studies investigating children's knowledge of their own country and national group have used open-ended interviewing. These studies have shown that, up until about 5 years of age, children often have little knowledge of their own country or national group, and may even be unable to state the name of their own country (Piaget & Weil, 1951). However, from about 5 onwards, children are able to provide the name of their own country, and are able to classify themselves as members of their own national group (Barrett, 2001). Knowledge of emblems such as the national flag, national anthem, national landscapes,

national buildings, and salient historical figures also develops from about 5 years of age onwards (Jahoda, 1963b).

Children's geographical knowledge of their own country develops over subsequent years, but this knowledge is error-prone until at least early adolescence (Barrett, 1996; Jahoda, 1963a; Piaget & Weil, 1951). For example, Jahoda (1963a) investigated 6–11-year-old Glaswegian children's knowledge of Scotland. He found that nearly all of the 6 year olds were familiar with the word *Scotland*, but most of the children had a poor understanding of what this word referred to, many of them believing that it was the name of another town or a place outside Glasgow. And even at 10 or 11 years of age, some of the children were still exhibiting these kinds of confusions. Knowledge of national geography correlates with children's degree of identification with their national group (Barrett & Whennell, 1998); thus, in the case of English children, the more geographical knowledge about England and the UK that these children possess, the more English they feel. The causality in this correlational relationship remains unclear, however.

In a study of the attributes which 5–11-year-old children ascribe to the members of their own national group, Barrett, Wilson, and Lyons (1999) found that the younger children were more likely than the older ones to ascribe only positive attributes to their own national group, with older children being more likely to assign a mixture of both positive and negative attributes to the group. Thus, as the children got older, their perceptions of their own national group became less positive overall.

Children's feelings about their own country and national group

Several studies have investigated how children feel about their own country and national group. Adjective attribution tasks or simple rating scales have typically been used and have yielded a mixed set of findings. Some studies found that children do not have a systematic preference for their own country or for members of their own national group until 7 years of age or even later (e.g., Middleton, Tajfel, & Johnson, 1970; Piaget & Weil, 1951). Other studies have suggested that there is a systematic preference for the child's own country from at least 5–6 years of age (e.g., Barrett, 2001; Bennett, Lyons, Sani, & Barrett, 1998; Lambert & Klineberg, 1967). Furthermore, ingroup favoritism is not a universal phenomenon. In particular, children who are members of a negatively evaluated group may not develop a systematic preference for their own group, a finding obtained with both Scottish and non-European Israeli-Jewish children at a time when these two groups were generally perceived to be of a relatively low social and economic status in Britain and Israel, respectively (Tajfel, Jahoda, Nemeth, Rim, & Johnson, 1972).

The importance which children attribute to their national identity, as well as their degree of identification with their national group, increase between 5–6 and 11–12 years of age. However, these general age trends are exhibited to a different extent by children living in different countries, in different regions of the same country, or in different sociolinguistic groups within the same community, apparently as a function of the specific sociocultural situation in which they are growing up (Barrett, in press; Barrett, Riazanova, & Volovikova, 2001).

Children's knowledge of other countries and national groups

Children's ability to name other countries is also very poor before about 5 years of age, and young children have great difficulty in understanding the concept of a foreign country (Piaget & Weil, 1951). Knowledge about other countries begins to develop from about 5, although even at 10 or 11, some children still have very poor geographical knowledge of other countries (Barrett & Farroni, 1996; Jahoda, 1962).

This growth of geographical knowledge is accompanied by the acquisition and elaboration of stereotypes of the people who live in other countries (Barrett & Short, 1992; Lambert & Klineberg, 1967; Piaget & Weil, 1951). The amount of individual variation which is acknowledged to exist around these national stereotypes increases between 5 and 11 years of age (Barrett et al., 1999). Thus, older children are more willing than younger children to admit that there is much variability amongst the people who belong to different national groups.

Children's feelings about other countries and national groups

Children sometimes acquire strong feelings about particular groups of foreign people before they have acquired any concrete knowledge about those groups (Barrett & Short, 1992; Johnson, Middleton, & Tajfel, 1970). In addition, although many children do seem to acquire a systematic preference for their own country and nationality over other countries and nationalities from about 6–7 years of age, it is clear from many studies that children can feel very positively indeed about some national outgroups (Barrett & Short, 1992; Johnson et al., 1970; Lambert & Klineberg, 1967; Middleton et al., 1970).

The relative order of preference for other countries, once it is established (perhaps at 5 or 6 years of age), remains fairly stable and consistent across the remaining childhood years (Barrett & Short, 1992; Johnson et al., 1970). However, the overall degree of liking for all national outgroups tends to increase between 5 and 10 years of age, while after 10 years of age, this general increase in positive regard for other national groups usually levels out (Lambert & Klineberg, 1967).

Conclusion

The overall picture which emerges in this domain is that there is considerable learning about national groups from 5 years of age onwards. From 5 onwards, strong attitudes and affective biases toward the national ingroup and national outgroups are formed. However, even by early adolescence, children still have a great deal more to learn about nations and national groups.

Piaget and Weil (1951) originally proposed that children's thoughts and feelings in this area are determined by their current stage of cognitive development, but Jahoda (1964) showed that this account was inadequate, with many children violating Piaget's proposed developmental-stage sequence. Since that time, much of the research in this field has been

descriptive rather than theoretically driven (e.g., Lambert & Klineberg, 1967; Tajfel et al., 1970). More recently, there have been attempts to apply social identity theory and self-categorization theory to children's development in this domain (e.g., Barrett et al., 1999; Bennett et al., 1998), but these attempts have shown that these theories may not be applicable in this context. The naïve theory approach to children's cognitive development (Wellman & Gelman, 1998) has recently been considered as an alternative possible framework for conceptualizing children's development in this domain (Penny, Barrett, & Lyons, 2001), but at the time of writing, the detailed implications of this framework for this domain have not yet been established.

Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the research literature on children's understanding of society. As we have seen, a substantial proportion of this literature is Piagetian in orientation. Thus, many studies have relied upon open-ended interviewing to gather data, and stage-based descriptions of the development of children's understanding have been put forward, often with the tacit (and sometimes explicit) assumption that the stage sequence is universal, and that influences from the child's sociocultural context are minimal and can only either accelerate or decelerate the rate at which the child progresses through the sequence of stages. In addition, it is often assumed that development proceeds through the child reflecting upon his or her own personal experience, actively constructing his or her own explanations of the observed phenomena using his or her current cognitive capacities and skills.

However, the child does not always have first-hand personal experience of the phenomena or institutions in societal domains (e.g., of teachers' decision making in schools, of profit generation in shops and banks, of procedures in courts of law), and so the child's own personal experience cannot always function as the source of the child's knowledge. Instead, children are heavily reliant upon indirect and socially mediated sources of information for learning about many societal phenomena, with television, parent and peer discourse, and the school curriculum probably being the most important sources of information (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, *in press*). It is for this reason that children's understanding in many different societal domains exhibits variation as a function of the child's sociocultural context (e.g., the school domain, Ohana, 1986; the economic domain, Jahoda, 1983, Leiser et al., 1990; the ethnic domain, Brown, 1995; and the nationality domain, Barrett et al., 2001).

In addition to this increasing acknowledgement of sociocultural variation in the development of children's societal thinking, a second shift which is currently taking place in this field of research is the introduction of the naïve theory approach to children's cognitive development (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, *in press*; Wellman & Gelman, 1998). According to this approach, during the course of development, children construct naïve theories to explain phenomena in particular domains. These theories are specialized for particular types of conceptual content; provide cause-and-effect explanations of the phenomena in that domain; involve hypothetical constructs of unobservable factors or processes; and are

subject to change during the course of development. Moreover, these naïve theories are often implicit rather than explicit. Thus, children may not always be able to consciously access and verbalize these theories. As a consequence, Piagetian verbal interviewing is likely to underestimate children's reasoning. Instead, in order to reveal the structure of the child's thinking, the child must be presented with scenarios or stories in which variables are manipulated and about which the child has to make a predictive judgment. In several societal domains, researchers are now beginning to use this alternative to the Piagetian approach (e.g., Thompson & Siegler, 2000, in the economic domain; Berti, 1988, and Buchanan-Barrow, 2000, in the political domain; and Penny et al., 2001, in the nationality domain), and it seems likely that further advances in this field will emerge from the broader application of this post-Piagetian theoretical and methodological approach to the study of children's thinking about society.

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