1: Historical and Contemporary Definitions of Childhood

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you will

1. Appraise the historical and contemporary definitions of childhood.
2. Brainstorm issues concerned with the well-being of children.

What is Childhood Studies?

James and James (2012) define Childhood Studies as the interdisciplinary study of the early period of the human life-course that is legally recognized, socially, and scientifically defined as childhood, as distinct from adulthood (p. 18).

Why study Childhood?

Would you agree that childhood experiences have a lifelong impact? I believe that childhood experiences build the foundation for learning and life. I studied child development as an undergraduate student. In my program, I learned how development occurs within the context of family, community, culture, and relationships as well the complex interaction among developmental domains of the child and the role of environmental factors. I was able to use my understanding as a preschool teacher. I was able to identify, interpret, and respond to a child’s individual differences, needs, challenges, and capacities to support families in giving children a positive start in life. As you progress through this course, think about how your increased understanding of children will prepare you for possibility working with children and families.
How do you study childhood?

Understanding the concept of childhood is complex and must consider many influences and perspectives. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach is most beneficial. What is an interdisciplinary approach? First, we need to define a discipline which is a branch of knowledge; an area of study. An academic discipline or field of study is a branch of knowledge that is taught and researched as part of higher education. Figure 1 lists disciplines involved in the study of childhood.

![Disciplines involved in the study of childhood](https://socialsci.liberetexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Childhood_Studies_(Elias...)

**What disciplines study children?**

Different disciplines have developed unique ways of approaching the study of children, using different research methods driven by research questions. For some disciplines (such as sociology and cultural studies) childhood as a concept is specifically addressed looking at childhood as a social construction and a variable of social analysis. They would study children’s relationships and cultures; and children as active social agents. A research method used by sociologists is ethnography. In contrast, other disciplines, such as psychology and education, the focus of research is on the child or children. I engage in interdisciplinary research to study childhood with a registered architect. To see our work you can read the brief article: [Seven Home Design Elements To Help Children Learn Language](https://socialsci.liberetexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Childhood_Studies_(Elias...)

I compiled a chart to illustrate how disciplines can contribute to the understanding of childhood. Explore at the journals listed below, found from a [comprehensive list at Rutgers](https://socialsci.liberetexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Childhood_Studies_(Elias...)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Example of contribution to Childhood Studies</th>
<th>Possible Journal to Investigate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Psychology       | All aspects of   | Theories of Piaget and Vygotsky explain how children                              | [Developmental](https://socialsci.liberetexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Childhood_Studies_(Elias...)

https://socialsci.liberetexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Childhood_Studies_(Elias...)

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<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Defines child as anyone between the ages of 0 and 18.</td>
<td>Are/should children under the age of 18 years exempt from criminal liability?</td>
<td>Children’s Legal Rights Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/Biology</td>
<td>Biological or physical development of children (stages of growth).</td>
<td>How much physical activity do children need to maintain health and mobility?</td>
<td>Children’s Health Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Mental health &amp; quality of life Human rights are at the heart of social work.</td>
<td>Helps children and families more effectively cope with the stresses of life and to deal with systemic problems such as child abuse and homelessness.</td>
<td>Child Abuse and Neglect Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Cognitive development of children or learning.</td>
<td>Could focus on topics such as: curriculum, child care programs, administration, staff development, family-school relationships, equity issues, multicultural education, facilities, and special needs.</td>
<td>Childhood Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Sees children as social actors in their own right and seeks to document their perspectives on, and participation in, the social world. They study different kinds of childhood in different societies.</td>
<td>Should childhood be seen as a cultural universal?</td>
<td>Children’s Geographies</td>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Compares children’s lives as they were in the past paralleled to how children may live their lives in the modern day.</td>
<td>Children in the past worked at a younger age than is acceptable now.</td>
<td>Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>English/Communication</td>
<td>Looks at representation of children in media and literature.</td>
<td>Look at the history of children’s literature. How has the Cinderella story changed over time?</td>
<td>Red Feather Journal:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Concerned with understanding the nature of children.</td>
<td>Theories by Jean-Jacques Rosseau (1762) who believed that children should be kept away from the corruption of adults and left to develop in a manner which would keep them good. Philosophy contrasts this view with the philosopher John Locke (1690) who saw children as being neither good nor bad believing that children’s behavior and personalities are molded by giving children strong discipline and education.</td>
<td>An International Journal of Children in Popular Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arts (visual, dance, music, &amp; theater)</td>
<td>Focuses on the connection between arts-participation and human development</td>
<td>The Importance of Art in Child Development</td>
<td>Questions: Philosophy for Young People</td>
</tr>
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</table>

An interdisciplinary approach is beneficial to understanding the lives of children and youth; because it enables researchers to gain information from different sources and compare the ways children are viewed, understood and taken care of in different parts of the world. An interdisciplinary approach also enables us to look at and compare children’s lives in the modern day and in the past, and to look at the way in which children are diverse and how these diversities affect the speed they move through the different stages of childhood development at different rates. Nissani (1997) promotes interdisciplinary knowledge and research listing several benefits. Some the benefits include: Creativity is enhanced in an interdisciplinary study. Errors and assumptions are often detecting when working with people from outside our discipline. Many topics related to childhood intersect traditional disciplines. And, by using an interdisciplinary approach we may bridge communication gaps helping to mobilize resources in the cause of greater social justice.

To begin our interdisciplinary look at childhood, consider these questions and how you might examine childhood from a variety of perspectives.

- Did you have a *normal* childhood?
- What is a normal childhood?
According to Oxforddictionaries.com:

**Multidisciplinary** is an adjective that describes, “combining or involving several academic disciplines or professional specializations in approach to a topic or problem.”

**Interdisciplinary** is an adjective that describes, “of or relating to more than one branch of knowledge.”

**Transdisciplinary** is also an adjective that describes, “relating to more than one branch of knowledge.”

So what exactly is the difference?

According to Lakehead University’s “Essential Guide to Writing Research Papers,” multidisciplinarity contrasts disciplinary perspectives in an additive manner, meaning two or more disciplines each provide their viewpoint on a problem from their perspectives. Multidisciplinarity involves little interaction across disciplines.

Interdisciplinarity combines two or more disciplines to a new level of integration suggesting component boundaries start to break down. Interdisciplinarity is no longer a simple addition of parts but the recognition that each discipline can affect the research output of the other.

Transdisciplinarity occurs when two or more discipline perspectives transcend each other to form a new holistic approach. The outcome will be completely different from what one would expect from the addition of the parts. Transdisciplinarity results in a type xenogenesis where output is created as a result of disciplines integrating to become something completely new.

Take a look at the video below and compare the practices to your own research. Do you engage in multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary research? Could your output benefit from one or more of these practices? Are there barriers or obstacles within your discipline that prevent cross-departmental collaboration? Are there opportunities for collaboration in your research?

I conclude this entry with a quote from American architect, Buckminster Fuller, “in order to change an existing paradigm you do not struggle to try and change the problematic model. You create a new model and make the old one obsolete. That, in essence is the higher service to which we are all being called.”
Video \(\PageIndex{1}\): A brief look at the differences between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary.

To explore an interdisciplinary approach where the author uses her knowledge of social anthropology with the tools of history to study children. Read the 2013 article *Different Cultures, Different Childhoods*. Montgomery gives a brief overview of how the historical context and culture influence what is considered typical for a child. **How might you describe an ideal childhood?**

Now, view the 75-minute video *Babies (2010) Bébé(s) (original title)*. BSU students can view the video on Blackboard. The PG rated documentary focuses on four newborns, photographed in their natural habitat in distinctly different parts of the world. Hattie is in San Francisco, Mari’s in Tokyo, Baryarjargal lives out in the Mongolian steppes, and Ponijao is born amid the simple straw huts of Namibia. You will follow the babies through their first year of life. As you watch the video, you may want to complete the reading reflection form available on Blackboard as a way to take notes and organize your thinking.

**After reading this chapter and completing the activities you should be able to**

1. Appraise the historical and contemporary definitions of childhood as seen the discussions either in class or online
2. Brainstorm issues concerned with the well-being of children to explore in two projects during the class.

**Challenges**
Challenge 1 Discussion Ideas

Think about:

- What is childhood?
- How would you define “child” and “childhood”?
- How do time and place influence your definition?
- How is childhood different from other stages of life, and what does it share in common with them?
- When does childhood begin and end?
- What are children capable of? What abilities and understandings are beyond the reach of children? How pliable are they?
- What are your assumptions about and perceptions of children?
- How would you complete these sentences?
  - Children should ….
  - Children should not ….

Now you are ready to type in Pages or in a Word document, a minimum of 3 paragraphs explaining your connections, extensions, and curiosities. Copy and paste your response in the Blackboard discussion about “child” and “childhood” or bring to class.

References
