

Childhood as cognition

- or taking Ariès at his word

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*“In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist.” So wrote Philippe Ariès (1962, 128) in *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (hereafter, *Centuries*). Originally published in the French (Ariès 1960), Ariès’s book was a watershed in childhood studies, the first widely-read work [1] that argued children and childhood were socially constructed.*

Ariès presented evidence that modern western understandings of children as naïve but emotionally treasured, and childhood as a carefree place that must be sheltered from the adult world, were not natural and universal but were relatively recent phenomena that had only appeared since the middle of the 18th century or so. Before that, Ariès said, childhood was an insignificant stage of life, children (particularly infants) were not “counted” as family members, and those who did survive were privy to and participated fully in adult life from the age of seven, often earlier.

Ariès’s provocative statement spawned many pages of academic debate, especially in history, where medieval scholars argued over its meaning and veracity.[2] Many interpreted Ariès’s statement as a “slur on the Middle Ages” (Cunningham 1998, 1197) and sought evidence to rescue parents of the period from disgrace by demonstrating that they did indeed hold a conception of childhood. Contrary to what they believed Ariès was claiming,[3] these scholars maintained that medieval parents noticed their children, loved them, showed them affection and invested emotionally in them.

If Ariès inspired new debates in history, he also motivated researchers in the social sciences to begin to look at children and childhood in a different way. He is by most accounts the father of the “new sociology of childhood” [4] whose adherents relocate childhood studies from their traditional place in education and psychology to the centre of social scientific inquiry. Although their focus and methods may vary, they share two broad aims: to demonstrate that children and childhood are socially constructed, i.e. that modern western understandings of these phenomena are not essential, but have emerged out of the particular historical, political, economic, social and religious circumstances that have characterised western development; and to emancipate children and childhood from the bounds of these modern constructions. They wish to acknowledge children as “beings” rather than “becomings” (Qvortrup 1994) and celebrate their agency and their role(s) in social life as creators rather than just passive receptors of culture. For many, this involves study of the different childhoods that exist within countries and around the globe to show that children who depart from the western model cannot so easily be dismissed as deviants or victims (see for example O’Connell Davidson 2005).

New sociology of childhood researchers thus follow the path of scholars of race and ethnicity, of gender, and of other mis- or underrepresented perspectives: to challenge “common sense” and “natural” understandings of people and show how they vary across time and place; and to “empower” the powerless by bringing to light their hitherto ignored contributions to history and to social life. Thanks in part to Ariès, these researchers have produ-

ced some excellent scholarship that has gone a long way toward deconstructing western notions of children and childhood as universal and “natural.”

But have they gone far enough? As much ground as new scholars of childhood have covered elaborating upon Ariès’s thesis, some of the possibilities of his study remain unanalyzed. This is because the field has not taken Ariès at his word and considered the *cognitive* implications of his (in)famous statement. Reflecting on how the recent “cognitive turn” in the social sciences might inform childhood studies, and drawing upon work by scholars whose research has pioneered or been informed by that “turn,” such as Rogers Brubaker, Karen Cerulo, Paul Dimaggio and Eviatar Zerubavel, I argue that to more fully deconstruct childhood, scholars of childhood should continue to press past their (albeit illuminating) accounts of how the conditions and classification of childhood have varied across time and place, and ponder why and how modern westerners have come to enact “childhood as a condition” in the first place, what forces and factors have encouraged modern westerners to “think” young people in this way.

Ariès can help in this task because *Centuries* makes the case that it has not always been so. If, as he says, the idea of childhood did not exist in the past, it follows that people did not “think” children in the same way as modern westerners do: they were *cognitively unaware* of childhood in the modern sense, as the condition suffered by people of a particular age. This means that childhood in the Middle Ages was not only different from its modern version (it obviously was, as historians have established), but that it really was inconceivable; the cultural tools on which modern westerners draw to evoke and sustain childhood were unavailable. After elucidating the notion of childhood as cognition, I explore Ariès’s text for evidence supporting the contention that medieval society lacked a cognitive awareness of childhood. I find that *Centuries* does indeed support a conception of childhood as cognition, and end on some of the implications that such an approach for childhood studies more generally.

Childhood as cognition

I begin in what may seem an unlikely place: the scholarship of a political sociologist. In some of his recent works, Rogers Brubaker (2004; Brubaker et al. 2006) ponders the influence of social constructivism on race and ethnic studies and on the study of nationalism. Scholars in this field, he says, now routinely assert that “race,” “ethnicity,” and “nationalism” are fluid concepts, the features of which vary with time and place. Nevertheless, these same scholars often continue to write about “races,” “ethnicities,” and “nations” as if they constitute real and uniform groupings of people. Thus, while they reiterate that “race” is meaningless from a biological perspective and is a socially constructed phenomenon (accounting for its invariable enclosure in parentheses), many still, for example, include “race” as an independent variable in their analyses of social phenomena. Although they acknowledge the “fluidity” of ethnicity and ethnic belonging, they continue to engage in studies of “ethnic conflict” between “ethnic groups.” These scholars recognise that such classifications are contingent, but they end up confirming those classifications through analyses that treat them as an objective reality.

The result, says Brubaker (2004, 10), is that “race” and ethnicity as categories of ethnopolitical practice are endorsed as categories of social analysis. Now there is nothing wrong with exploring how “race” and ethnicity are used by people to understand and explain their own and others’ self-perceptions and actions in day-to-day practice. Such research has shed important light on aspects of behaviour and identity that were hitherto hidden. But social

scientists that study the construction of these phenomena across time and place must be careful, says Brubaker, not to verify and perpetuate them in the process of explaining them. Analysing a conflict between “ethnic groups,” for example, invariably homogenises members of those groups. Ethnicity is approached as a sort of “condition” with which a group is uniformly afflicted (the manner in which ethnicity tends to be understood and conveyed in practice), rather than the mutable, actively negotiated and differentially salient phenomenon that constructivists have demonstrated it to be (and that researchers should confirm in their scholarly analyses). Ethnicity is thus overdetermined and the complex and varied interactions required to evoke and sustain its many guises as a basis for social action (conflict in this case) in any particular circumstance are muted.

Brubaker and his colleagues (2006) have demonstrated empirically the analytical limitations of this “ethnicity-as-condition” approach in their years-long study of a community that failed to erupt in ethnic violence despite the sustained presence of numerous predictors. Attempts by community leaders to foster ethnic animosities among citizens failed because people did not “live” their ethnicities day to day in ways that might transform such ethnic “calls to arms” into group action. The study confirms that ethnicity must not only be a salient means by which people “know” themselves and others to incite conflict but needs also to be enacted in ways that resonate with individuals in their daily interactions and interpretations of their social worlds. Still, researchers who should know better continue to express frustration that ethno-nationalism resists “systematic study” by manifesting itself in so many and in such varied forms (Smith 1994, 3). It appears that scholars who employ the “ethnicity-as-condition” approach to analyses of ethnic conflict risk forgetting that real ethnicity (or “race” or “national identity”) is not “donned” so much as enacted, and is thus a more fickle purveyor of social action than their analyses may suggest.

I would offer that something similar happens in studies of childhood. It is now standard practice to cite Ariès and reiterate the uncontested part of his thesis: that children and childhood are not universal or natural conditions but socially constructed. But there remains a tendency among scholars of childhood to talk about childhood as a “condition” afflicting individuals within a certain (albeit somewhat elastic) age range. This is perhaps most evident among scholars concerned with children and childhood (as well as youth and adolescence, adulthood and “the elderly” – see Laz 1998) as social problems, a focus that can perpetuate the notion that people can “really” be divided into such homogeneous age categories even as it reveals the historical and cultural fluidity surrounding the treatment and experiences of people thus classified. But it is also evident in more nuanced understandings of childhood such as those employed in studies that explore how age categories themselves are social rather than simple extensions of biology.

Although these studies draw important attention to the fact that periods of life are and have been variously conceived, they can still hold at their base a notion of development that presumes continuity in the way people conceive of aging across time and place. Scholars concerned with the sociology of age (as opposed to “aging”) note an inclination in sociological research to treat age as an objective chronological fact even while the meanings attached to different ages are permitted to vary historically and culturally (Laz 1998, 91-94).[5] This research takes as given that human development “really” coincides with years since birth. But chronological age is no more a fact than are the features associated with age categories in modernity. Chronological age, like all conceptions of age, are “*made* important in particular social and historical contexts and in interaction” (Laz 1998, 92, emphasis in the original).[6] By treating chronological age as fact, this research forgets that however age is perceived at a particular time and place, it is enacted, “accomplished” as Che-

ryl Laz (1998) puts it, through interaction with others and surrounding culture and institutions. In childhood studies, it can perpetuate the “natural-ness” and immutability of the modern propensity to link chronological age and development or maturation and so privileges, however unintentionally, modern conceptions of childhood over other possibilities.

All this is not to say that research on children and youth as a social problem, or on the stages of childhood as flexible (yet still chronologically bound) categories is misinformed or illegitimate. Such research has revealed previously hidden assumptions surrounding modern western understandings of young people and dispelled tendencies, among academics at least, to approach these categories (and the beliefs and behaviours associated with them) as if they are natural. Nor is there anything wrong with social researchers acknowledging that people may spontaneously perceive and understand themselves and others according to these classifications, and studying the outcomes of actions taken in accord with these perceptions. But using these classifications of practice as the foundations for analysis is unhelpful when it is their unproblematic nature, their seeming “natural-ness” as bases for social action, that scholars are trying to explain. So what Brubaker says about “race” and “ethnicity” applies to children and childhood: it is not that these phenomena have been deconstructed improperly, but that they have not been deconstructed *enough*. To do this, Brubaker advocates treating such concepts as cognitive rather than concrete, as mental means by which we categorise the world rather “given” phenomena or conditions “out there.” This goes beyond pondering how and why “race” or “childhood” are understood and acted upon in a particular way in a particular context (although this is still an important step), toward contemplating the foundations of how modern westerners come to “think” of their own and others’ identities and behaviours in terms of “race” and “childhood” (as opposed to something else) and the processes and conditions that call them to mind.

Brubaker draws upon the literature comprising the recent “cognitive turn” in the social sciences to help explain his perspective.[7] Very generally, the cognitive turn is represented by social science researchers concerned with the intersection of cognitive psychology with their fields. In sociology, the approach has had the biggest impact on the study of culture. Sociologists of culture recognise that culture is not the uniform phenomena it was understood to be forty years ago; it is more than just the “stuff” that people acquire through socialisation and evoke unproblematically when needed (Dimaggio 1997, 264). Rather, culture is fragmented and inconsistent. It is comprised of “rule-like structures” to be sure, but these structures are enacted by individuals differentially and often strategically, used as a sort of “tool kit” (Swidler 1986) in social action.

Some sociologists of culture have noted that this more complex conceptualisation of culture and its active (if not always conscious) employment by people in different circumstances melds well with the discovery by cognitive psychologists that humans perceive and interact with the world “out there” according to mental frames or schemata that they acquire through varied social experiences. While cognitive psychologists continue to focus on elucidating the individual or universal components of these schemata, sociologists try to understand their social determinants, the social factors and forces that influence their development and that shape the way people come to “think,” organise and negotiate a world that is, without schemes, a chaotic jumble of stimuli. Of obvious and special interest to sociologists is the consistency evident in schemata and consequent social action across groups of people, the uniformity displayed by people in the ways they make sense of the world. Cognitive sociologists explore how and why particular schemata (because individuals hold many, even contradictory, schemata on which they draw to make sense of their circumstances) become more or less salient in certain contexts, as well as the conditions under which some

schemata become so normalised, evoked so automatically across populations, that they are sustained in institutional form. Such schemata are most likely to be understood by their “thinkers” as natural, inherent, rather than socially-acquired means to classify the world.

To clarify, we can look to how Brubaker says the cognitive approach can be effectively applied to the study of ethnicity. Instead of talking about “ethnic groups,” he says, scholars of ethnicity should, in addition to specifying how people conceive of ethnicity in a particular instance (the characteristics of ethnicity that are of import in this case), ask when, how and why they evoke this “ethnicity scheme” as the means to help them organise the world and make sense of their and others’ actions. To understand an ethnic conflict, researchers should ask about the conditions that have contributed to that conflict being conceived by participants and/or observers (because these do not always coincide), as an “ethnic” one. In other words, how and why has ethnicity acquired a salience so significant in this case that people have evoked the “ethnic scheme” to interpret and act upon the hostilities as opposed to some other frame? Notice that this approach conceives of ethnicity as enacted rather than a condition that people either “have” or “do not have,” a view more consistent with current understandings of ethnicity as contingent and culture use as active, often strategic. Also, by allowing the cognitive salience of the ethnic scheme to vary with interpersonal, institutional and other conditions, it permits (as Brubaker and his colleagues (2006) themselves have demonstrated) analysis of the negative case: why the “ethnic scheme” has *not* been evoked in any uniform manner in other cases.

This same approach can inform the study of childhood. Just as scholars of ethnicity should examine the “ethnic scheme” and the conditions under which it has become especially salient in people’s understanding and interpretation of social action, scholars of childhood should ask why and under what conditions modern westerners have come to enact childhood, how they have come to evoke, automatically, the “childhood scheme” to “think” and act upon young people, as opposed to something else. That there could be a “something else” is, however, more difficult to grasp in this case than when discussing ethnicity; that a negative case is possible, circumstances under which the childhood scheme is not evoked in response to youngsters, is harder to imagine, so naturally is it executed.

This is where we can turn to Ariès for help. For if, as he says, the *idea* of childhood did not exist in medieval society, then it follows that people of that era were cognitively unable to conceive of childhood and hence (re)enact it in their everyday lives. This means that medieval culture must have lacked the cultural “tools” for people to construct, employ and sustain a cognitive map of childhood; absent were the norms, values, symbols, conventions, institutional frameworks, macro structures and so forth that would have compelled them to “think” childhood and use it as a basis for their understandings of themselves and others.

Note that this is not the same thing as saying that medieval society did not notice youngsters or even conceive of them differently than adults, nor does it mean that its members did not love or cherish children. Rather it means that medieval society was unable to conceive of childhood as a condition distinguishable from adulthood by the “particular nature” (Ariès 1962, 128) of its sufferers, a nature so exceptional that they required an ever-expanding inventory of separate and special considerations and treatments. The Middle Ages lacked the cultural instruments on which people could draw to sustain “childhood” as a distinct category to organise their lives and use as a consistent basis for their actions and understanding the actions of others.

To conceive of childhood as cognition, then, is to conceive of childhood as enacted in people’s day to day lives as they employ culture and individual (culturally-acquired) knowledges to help them evoke and sustain this cognitive scheme that allows them to make sen-

se of their world. What evidence does Ariès provide to support the contention that such mechanisms did not exist in medieval society?

Ariès as cognitive historian

To discern the cultural tools that were absent in medieval society to fashion and sustain the cognitive scheme of “childhood” we must be aware of the cultural tools that are present in modern society that help to reproduce it. What is the cultural basis of the propensity of modern westerners to see and think and treat young people as suffering a nature distinct from, adults?

It is useful here to highlight what James *et al.* (2005) have termed the *temporality of childhood*, the reality that a society’s perception of children is a product of the way that society perceives aging, and in a broader sense, time. In western modernity, time is understood to be linear and commodified (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, cited in James et al. 2005, 61-62). Aging is perceived in much the same way, a linear and limited process, understood to advance chronologically in a regular sequence of months and years toward death. But in modern culture as in any culture, time and aging signify more than the simple calculation of time passing; people assign meaning to these processes. In modernity, time can be managed, made the most of, or squandered. The aging process is similarly judged. The death of a child in modernity is not dispassionately noted for its brevity with respect to years or months lived. It is mourned as a life “cut short,” a “waste” of a life/time. The result is that, in modernity as “[i]n any particular culture or at any specific historical moment, ‘the child’ is a product of the ways in which the process of ageing is qualitatively, rather than simply quantitatively, accounted for” (James et al. 2005, 62-63). The view that people engage with age, actively evaluate and interpret it in their interactions, is encompassed in Cheryl Laz’s (1998) notion of “age as accomplished.” To accomplish age, one’s own and others’, involves attaching cultural meaning to the “objective” criteria of aging; it “[r]equires that individuals use and interpret available resources, have emotional reactions, and act accordingly” (Laz 1998, 106).

It is modern understandings of time and hence aging as linear and limited phenomena that press forward relentlessly, as irreversible trends whose earlier/younger manifestations, once endured, are irretrievable, that lend modern childhood its particular complexion and urgency. Childhood is where the potential that is embedded in these modern conceptions of time and aging is clustered, in the bodies of the young; their maturation is observed as their (and ultimately society’s) progress and possibility, or alternatively its failure. Thus chronological age – months or years since birth – is more than an objective characteristic of an individual in modernity. It is a proxy for where on that measurable and limited continuum that comprises the modern life course the person resides and hence a crucial marker of childhood. Chronological age signals to modern individuals the host of cultural meanings affiliated with modern childhood, permitting them, as Laz (1998) says, to formulate an emotional reaction and act accordingly.

Notice that this conception of childhood does not derive from the characteristics of *children*. That modern children are taken to be irrational, incompetent, naïve, dependent and so on constitutes, rather, people’s *response* to the condition of childhood (which scholars have confirmed is historically and culturally variable), not its determinant. These features comprise the perceptions and bases for social action that derive from the classification. While they are associated with the childhood scheme in that they may be evoked when that

scheme becomes salient, the scheme itself derives from and is conditioned by “deeper” forces: modern conceptions of time and aging.

It would follow, then, that if medieval societies were cognitively unaware of childhood, then the notions and representations of time and age that permeate and organize modern life must have been absent. In other words, cultural cues indicating that time and age are linear, limited and quantifiable, and that youngsters, as embodiments of the progress and potential lodged in such a conception of aging, possess a particular nature that demands they be considered apart, understood and treated in special ways, were unavailable to people in the Middle Ages. Ariès presents evidence in *Centuries* (1962) that this was indeed the case. Certainly, medieval society did not conceive of aging in the strict chronological, calculable manner it is in modernity. Ariès writes about the popularity and persistence of the pseudo-scientific model of the “ages of life” or “ages of man” (Ariès 1962, 18–25). The model was originally conceived by philosophers and scientists of the 6th century B.C. but had by the 16th century “become common property...its concepts had entered into mental habits...in everyday life” (Ariès 1962, 19). The “ages” varied in number over the centuries and were not bound by chronological age, but corresponded roughly with “childhood” (which could extend to middle age), “youth” (which encompassed people in the “prime of life”) and “old age.” They continued to be represented in profane iconography throughout the middle ages and into the 19th century. It was not until the modern period, Ariès suggests, that the seemingly fixed and natural association between chronological age and aging began to take hold.

This “looser” understanding of aging – an understanding that modern westerners might consider lax and inexact – is evident in Ariès detailed discussion of the emergence in France of a vocabulary to describe children (Ariès 1962, 25–30). Until the 17th century, the French had words to refer to only three ages: childhood, youth, and old age. Before that the word “child” was not associated with chronological age but the condition of dependence; it was only by leaving the state of dependence that one could leave “childhood.” Indeed, such ambivalence toward childhood and chronological age continued well into the modern period, the 19th and even 20th centuries, with respect to the smallest children (the word for infant did not achieve widespread use until the 1800s) and adolescents, whose “awareness” as a stage of life characterised by the “combination of purity, physical strength, naturism, spontaneity and *joie de vivre*” (Ariès 1962, 30) only appeared in the 18th century and did not congeal until after WWI.

Never mind its association with aging, chronological age itself, as a descriptive feature of individuals, was of little significance in medieval and early modern societies. Indeed, Ariès speaks of the “hostility” of the people of France toward the recording of chronological age in parish records, and the two centuries (16th–18th centuries) that it took for them to accept this method of “abstract accounting” as a regular practice (Ariès 1962, 16); he describes the regular appearance of dates on family portraits (to establish the family and its members in time) as occurring only after the 16th century and how before that “it was an uncommon and difficult thing to remember one’s age exactly” (Ariès 1962, 18). In fact, Ariès writes, it was considered impolite to refer directly to one’s chronological age until into the 18th century.

But if medieval and early modern societies lacked the cultural tools to enact aging as the modern process of “counting down” chronological age – and childhood as the earliest and hence most significant, developmentally-speaking, stage of that process – it was none so evident as in the absence of institutions organised on the basis of chronological age. Perhaps most significantly, given how much of modern childhood is expected to unfold in edu-

cational institutions, and that modern schooling systems are structured almost exclusively by means of chronological age, medieval schools did not differentiate students by chronological age; people of various of ages could be found in the same classroom. This was not because there were not enough students for separate classes, but because “the correspondence between age and studies [was] a concept foreign to the Middle Ages” (Ariès 1962, 152). “It was the subject being taught that mattered,” writes Ariès (1962, 153); one was just as likely to see an adult as a “precocious boy” studying the same lesson, and “children between ten and thirteen sitting next to adolescents between fifteen and twenty” (Ariès 1962, 330). Interestingly, Ariès notes that indications of precocity disappeared between the 16th and 19th centuries with the gradual establishment of an age-graded education system. While children who had finished their schooling by the age of twelve or thirteen may have struck 17th century observers as unusual but admirable, “at the beginning of the nineteenth century precocity was regarded with suspicion” (Ariès 1962, 228). “Performances [of precocity] would not longer be tolerated,” writes Ariès, “once they were regarded as infractions of the special nature of childhood” (Ariès 1962, 196).

Such indifference to chronological age in the schools continued into the 18th century, a “resistance to other factors of mental transformation [that] marks it as a fundamental attitude to life” (Ariès 1962, 154). The mixing of ages in schools reflected the more general “mixing” of people in medieval society, a life that Ariès describes as exceedingly sociable and “collective” and that “carried along in a single torrent all ages and classes” (Ariès 1962, 411). It was an existence in which “people lived in a state of contrast; high birth or great wealth rubbed shoulders with poverty, vice with virtue, scandal with devotion.” Yet, “this medley of colours caused no surprise” (Ariès 1962, 414); “the old society concentrated the maximum number of ways of life into the minimum of space and accepted, if it did not impose, the bizarre juxtaposition of the most widely different classes” (Ariès 1962, 415). Reading Ariès’s descriptions of medieval life it appears that such structures would not support the same sorts of categories of belonging and exclusion that characterise western thought and institutions today. Certainly the structures that sustain childhood as a category of being defined by chronological age were unavailable, unnecessary, indeed inconceivable.

So Ariès work presents some evidence that medieval society – into early modern society – lacked the cultural tools to enact childhood. The fixed and perceived-natural link between chronological age and aging that is present in modernity did not exist in the periods Ariès describes. Aging seems to have been understood as a much looser process of lessening dependence, differently experienced, and chronological age an insignificant, for a long time deliberately ignored, characteristic of individuals. Such an understanding of aging could not uphold a conception of childhood as obviously and perceptively distinct, as chronologically specified, as in modernity, the “place” where potential and possibility is clustered. The cultural cues that could evoke and sustain such an understanding of childhood only appeared gradually, over the very long term, as modernity encroached.

Ariès (1962, 16) points to the growth of the modern state and the “exactness...[it] requires of its registrars” as a key force institutionalising chronological age as a key signifier of a person’s being, a view later echoed by others including Pierre Bourdieu (1994). More important here, however, is how Ariès’s evidence aligns with the conception of childhood as cognition. Because the cultural “tools” required to conceive and employ the childhood scheme to social understanding and action were unavailable or at best insignificant in medieval into early modern societies, childhood could not exist.

Implications

Ariès's explosive statement concerning childhood can now be reformulated in light of a cognitive approach to childhood: "In medieval society the fixed and seemingly natural link between chronological age and aging that exists in modernity was not enacted because aging and time were not understood in the modern sense – linear, limited and quantifiable. Hence, the idea of childhood – the scheme or mental frame by which people perceive and understand youngsters within a certain range of chronological age as categorically distinct and possessing a special nature – did not exist." This lacks the parsimony of the original. But stated in this way, his statement becomes less controversial. For it does not suggest that there were no children in medieval society, or that medieval society did not notice children, or grant them any special dispensations for their age. Neither does it only suggest that the expectations associated with medieval childhood and the experiences that followed them diverged from modern western childhood, although this is incontrovertible in light of his study and later histories of childhood. Rather, to take Ariès at his word means to conceive of *Centuries* as supporting a conception of childhood as cognition, a mental scheme that is enacted, created and reproduced by individuals continually seeking to make sense of themselves and others' actions by drawing on cultural resources both personal and structural. In concluding that childhood did not exist in medieval society, then, Ariès can be understood to have meant that medieval society could not enact childhood, it did not have the resources on which its members could draw to "think" and act upon childhood.

Holding them back was a very loose conception of aging as progressing in broadly defined stages defined more by dependency than age, and a widespread indifference to the significance of chronological age as an indicator of a person's being. In such an environment, it seems the features of childhood – incompetence, irrationality, dependence, naivety and potential – could be more widely distributed, disconnected from chronological age. This is in contrast to modernity where, somewhat perversely, observable manifestations of age are secondary in evaluative importance to chronological age; it is, in the final instance, on chronological age that modern westerners and their institutions depend to assess themselves and others and on which membership in childhood is based. This is none so evident as in the emergence and institutionalisation of "chronometrical childhood" by the early twentieth century, a psycho-medical practice that spread gradually into larger western society that classified children of different chronological age – down to the month in the case of the very young – against the "normal" child (LaRossa and Reitzes 2001). In this process, elaborate boundaries were drawn to break down the naturally rapid yet notoriously variable i.e. actual development of children, into a more orderly and quantifiable process, further privileging chronological age over any other marker as an indicator of a child's development. Today, so automatic is this conception of children as maturing chronologically according to an average prescribed path of stages of development, so routine are the assumptions surrounding the kind of childhood that should flow from this path, so omnipresent are the institutions that sustain these conceptualisations, that they are understood in modern western societies as natural and self-evident.[8]

How and why modern western culture and institutions have unfolded in a way as to make chronological age such a significant mental "trigger" to understand and organise our behaviours and expectations is a compelling question, but here I just wish to highlight the reality that it has not always been thus, as Ariès has shown us. Indeed, others have shown us as well, although they have not elaborated upon the cognitive implications of their re-

search. Recall the observation by James et al. (2005) that childhood is temporal, linked to a society's understanding of time and how its members "comprehend and evaluate, rather than simply calculate, the passage of time" (James et al. 2005, 62). The authors emphasise the influence of the structural arrangements of society on this process of "age making." But given the "brainwork" obviously required from people to, as they say, "comprehend" and "evaluate" time and age in the manner they suggest, activities to achieve "age consciousness," the authors imply that these phenomena are as much cognitive as structural. Certainly the "gestalt shift" in people's conceptualisation of newborns that they relate accompanied structural changes in medical science and healthcare in 19th century England suggests this process of "redefining" the very young (from creatures naturally susceptible to death to beings whose death can be prevented) altered the way people "think" newborns. Indeed, according to the research they cite, the change modified the way people perceived infants so well that it "made it hard indeed for those who had shifted to understand how other might see things differently" (Wright 1987, 197, cited in James et al. 2005, 64) suggesting real change to the mental schema brought to mind by an infant and the social actions that ensue. We can further ponder the cognitive implications of the well-known and well-studied decline of infant mortality on understandings of children and childhood more generally, their meaning and possibilities. The far-reaching social-structural consequences of the increase in longevity during the twentieth century (of which infant survival was a part) that one sociologist of age relates (Riley 1987, 7) was surely accompanied by changes to the cognitive "maps" by which people made sense of young people as the personal/experiential resources as well as the structural resources from which people drew to qualify "childhood" were transformed.

And it is this, perhaps, that is the most exciting feature of a cognitive approach to childhood: it encourages us to deconstruct modern childhood to the extent that we can approach and recapture the other understandings of childhood, the discarded "possibles" as Bourdieu (1992) calls them, that existed before the calcification of the modern version. We can thus retrieve "the possibility that things could have been (and still could be) otherwise" (Bourdieu 1992, 4). And we know that other "possibles" existed, thanks again to the histories of childhood inspired by Ariès. Reading *Centuries*, one is struck not only by how dissimilar childhoods of the past were from the modern western model, but by how long it took for modern notions of children and childhood to even begin to settle into stable configurations. Until then, different – many opposing – understandings of children and childhood existed together. Even as children were appearing more regularly as children (rather than miniature adults) in paintings, as writers were elaborating on the charms of childhood, as middle-class parents were delighting in their children as a form of entertainment, the mortality rate of children remained high, and people regularly expressed an open callousness toward youngsters (Ariès 1962, 39-40, 130-131). And we have already seen how vestiges of the medieval tendency to disregard chronological age continued to influence the organisation of schooling until at least the 18th century. The competition among "possibles" is also evident in Karen Sanchez-Eppler's (2005) recent work on childhood in nineteenth-century America. Sanchez-Eppler paints a fascinating portrait of the many representations of children and childhood in America between the 1820s and 1870s, a period of "flux" in American culture when the meaning and experience of childhood was changing rapidly but unevenly across class, region, gender and race. How and why other possible characterisations were eventually discarded for the modern model are now questions that become open for analysis.

Philippe Ariès's revelations in *Centuries* shook the field of childhood studies. This paper suggests that the extent of his contribution to childhood studies may have yet to be fully realised. While Ariès himself may have been an "accidental" cognitive historian, rereading his work in this light can open new doors in childhood studies.

Endnotes

[1] One of the first to note the historical variation in understandings of children and childhood was Norbert Elias (1978 [1939]; 1998 [1980]), who perceived a growing "separation" between children and adults in Western societies over time. He attributed this change to the larger "civilising process" he argued Western societies had suffered since at least Medieval times, a long-term movement in Western cultures to suppress "uncivilised" behaviours by internal, moral regulation.

[2] The scholarship is considerable, but is consolidated in Hugh Cunningham (1998) and Margaret King (2007).

[3] As Hugh Cunningham (1998, 1197) has noted, "idea" was the translation of Ariès's original term in the French, *sentiment*, which conveys a somewhat different meaning.

[4] Key scholars in this field include Allison James, Chris Jenks, Alan Prout and Jens Qvortrup (see especially James, Jenks and Prout 2005; James and Prout 2004; and Qvortrup 1994).

[5] Laz (1998) compares this tendency to the distinction made in 1960s and 1970s feminist literature between "sex" and "gender" that conceived of the former as objective and biological and only the latter as socially constructed.

[6] There are (acknowledged) similarities in the way Laz (1998, 87, n. 3) conceives of age as "accomplished" and Judith Butler's (1990) work on gender as performative.

[7] The following draws upon Paul DiMaggio (1997), and Eviatar Zerubavel (1998), and on Karen Cerulo's (2002) edited volume of contributions to cognitive sociology.

[8] this has changed somewhat with the (1989) signing by most countries of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2008). The Convention includes a provision (Article 12) stipulating that children's views must be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child," thus separating the institutionalised link between childhood (as in "not adulthood" and hence irrationality) and age. Easier said than done, however, as signatories of the Convention continue to either ignore or struggle with implementation of this principle (see Lee 1999).

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