THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHILDHOOD

BOLOGNA, ITALY—MAY 1985 BILL CORSARO AND ITALIAN CHILDREN

It was a bright, sunny day, and I was sitting with a group of boys who were digging in the outside play area of an Italian preschool. This was my second time doing research at the school. I had spent 9 months with the children and their teachers in the previous year, and now I was back for a 2-month follow-up. The boys were talking about military matters—the navy, warships, and the boss or *il capo* on such ships—as they dug holes and buried rocks in the dirt.

At some distance I saw three children marching around the yard carrying a large, red milk carton. The teachers used the carton to carry play materials to the yard, and I had seen the children playing with it before. What I did not know was that the carton was now a forbidden object. As I was to find out later, earlier in the year, before my arrival, a child had placed the carton on her head and chased after several other children. She eventually fell and suffered a minor injury. After this incident, the children were prohibited from playing with the carton.

But they were playing with it today. In fact, they were now marching in my direction, and I could begin to make out their chant. It sounded like *Arriva la barca! Arriva la barca!* (Here comes the boat! Here comes the boat!) I was not sure about the last word, though; it could have been *barca* or *banca* (bank). They were right up close to me now; Antonio was leading the way, and Luisa and Mario were helping him carry the carton. There was a bucket inside the carton, and it was filled with rocks.

"*La barca?*" I asked Antonio.

"*No, la banca coi soldi!*" (No, the bank with money!), he said as he cupped his hand in a familiar Italian gesture.

I was intrigued. These kids had created a whole new dimension in banking, a bank that makes house calls! "Give me some money," I said to Antonio.

The children now put the carton down, and Mario took out the small bucket with rocks and said, "I'll give the money to him. How much do you want? There are thousands."

"Forty thousand," I quickly responded. (This sounds like a lot, but 40,000 lire were only about 25 dollars.)

Mario began counting out the rocks, doing exactly as they do in Italian banks by announcing the final sum as he counted out each 10,000 lira note: "Forty thousand, forty thousand, here's forty thousand."

But he counted only three rocks. "No, no, three—thirty thousand. I said forty!"

"Four," said Luisa. "Four!"

Mario then reached in the bucket to get more rocks and counted, "Thirty, forty, here." And he handed me three more rocks and then a fourth.

"Sixty now," I said laughing. "Seventy. I said forty!"

"How many?" Mario asked.

Luisa was now getting impatient with Mario and seemed to think she could be a better bank teller. "Four, he said four!" she exclaimed as she reached to take the bucket from Mario.

The three children now struggled over the bucket; Antonio scooped the rocks from my hand and dropped them back into the bucket. "Let's go," he commanded. And the children marched off again, chanting, *"Arriva la banca! Arriva la banca!"* I waved and called out, *"Ciao la banca!"*

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma—April 1995

At 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995, a major explosion destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. In the blast, 168 lives were lost, including the lives of 19 children and a nurse who was killed during the rescue attempt. More than 600 people were injured. The explosion was caused by a car bomb containing an estimated 4,800 pounds of explosives. The children ranged in age from 6 months to 5 years and attended the America's Kids Day Care Center in the building. Two teachers and the administrator of the day care center were also killed.

Two suspects, Timothy McVeigh, and his accomplice Terry Nichols, were arrested, and their trials began in June 1996. McVeigh was convicted of the bombing and received the death penalty. He was executed on June 11, 2001. Terry Nichols was convicted and is now serving a sentence of life imprisonment. The reason for the bombing was linked to McVeigh's deep anger at the federal government's raid on a religious group in Waco, Texas, which left some 80 members dead. It appears that all the victims in Oklahoma City, including the children, died because they happened to be in a U.S. government office building that was targeted for destruction.

We purposely selected these two incidents because of their stark contrast. (We should point out that events like the first [children's joyful and creative reproduction and embellishment of the adult world within their peer cultures] and the second [the vicious and cowardly taking of children's lives by adults in an act of terrorism in which the most children lost their lives in the United States] can occur anywhere in the world.) My reason for presenting them is to illustrate two central concepts of a new sociology of children.

First, children are active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children's cultures while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult societies. Take the Italian preschoolers. They were not supposed to play with the milk carton. But they did not like the adult rule, so they played with it anyway. They created a unique "traveling bank"—an idea taken from the adult world but extended and given new meaning. Their bank is especially interesting because it predated the existence of ATM machines in Bologna and can even be seen as a sort of a precursor to this adult invention. After this incident, one of the teachers told me that she saw the children playing with the carton but overlooked the rule violation because, like me, she was so impressed by the children's ingenuity (see Corsaro, 2020).

Second, **childhood**—that socially constructed period in which children live their lives—is a structural form. When we refer to "**childhood as a structural form**," we mean it is a category or a part of society, like social class and age groups. In this sense children are members or incumbents of their childhoods. For the children themselves, childhood

is a temporary period. For society, in contrast, childhood is a permanent structural form or category that never disappears, even though its members change continuously, and its nature and conception vary historically. It is somewhat difficult to recognize childhood as a structural form because we tend to think of childhood solely as a period when children are prepared for entry into society. But children are already a part of society from their births because childhood is part and parcel of society.

As a structural form, childhood is interrelated with other structural categories such as social class, gender, and age groups (Qvortrup, 1994a). Thus, the structural arrangements of these categories and changes in these arrangements will affect the nature of childhood. In modern societies, for example, changes in social structural arrangements of categories such as gender, occupation or work, family, and social class have resulted in many mothers working outside the home and their young children spending much of their time in institutional settings such as day care centers and early childhood education programs, which did not exist in the past. The young Oklahoma City victims and the kids in the Italian preschool inhabited such settings; their experiences remind us that children both affect and are affected by society.

The first part of this book further develops these two basic tenets of a new sociology of childhood: Children are active agents who construct their own cultures and contribute to the production of the adult world, and childhood is a structural form or part of society. Chapter 1 contrasts the first tenet—that children are active social agents—with traditional views of socialization in sociology and psychology. Here, the notion of interpretive reproduction—the idea that children actively contribute to societal preservation (or reproduction) as well as societal change—is offered as an extension of the heretofore almost exclusive focus on the individual child's development and adaptation to society. Chapter 2 integrates the notion of interpretive reproduction with the general assumptions of the second tenet, which holds that childhood is a structural form or part of society. We examine the importance of children's contributions to their own childhoods (and to childhood as a more abstract structural form) through their negotiations with adults and through their creative production of a series of peer cultures with other children. Chapter 3 reviews and evaluates a variety of research methods for studying children's peer cultures and documenting the quality of children's lives in contemporary society.

1   SOCIAL THEORIES OF CHILDHOOD

This chapter examines the reasons for the resurgent interest in children in society and, especially, in sociology. We review traditional theories of socialization and child develop-ment and examine basic assumptions in these theories that have now been called into question. Finally, we present an alternative theoretical approach to childhood, one that reconceptualizes the place of children in the social structure and stresses the unique con-tributions that children make to their own development and socialization.

SOCIOLOGY'S REDISCOVERY OF CHILDHOOD

As recently as 30 years ago there was a near absence of studies on children in mainstream sociology (Ambert, 1986; for recent reflection on childhood studies also see Alanen et al., 2015; Canosa & Graham, 2020; Cook, 2018; Gabriel, 2017; Leonard, 2015; McNamee, 2016; Prout, 2005, 2019; Qvortrup et al., 2009; Wells, 2021; Wyness, 2018). Today the situation is different. A large and growing number of monographs, edited volumes, and journal articles addresses theoretical issues and reports empirical findings related to the sociological study of children and childhood. Childhood socialization has been given expanded coverage in basic introductory texts in sociology, new journals and sections of national and international associations devoted to the sociology of childhood have been established, and courses on the sociology of childhood now frequently are offered in uni-versities around the world.

These developments are long overdue and encouraging. But why were children so long ignored in sociology? Jens Qvortrup (1994a, 2010) aptly noted that children have not so much been ignored as they have been marginalized. Children are marginalized in sociol-ogy because of their subordinate position in societies and in theoretical conceptualiza-tions of childhood and socialization. As we will discuss more fully in this chapter, adults most often view children in a forward-looking way, that is, with an eye to what they will become—future adults with a place in the social order and contributions to make to it. Rarely are they viewed in a way that appreciates what they are—children with ongoing lives, needs, and desires. In fact, the current lives, needs, and desires of children are often seen as causes for alarm by adults as social problems that are threatening, that need to be resolved. As a result, children are pushed to the margins of the social structure by more powerful adults (including social theorists) who focus instead on the potential and the threat of children to present and future societies.

Another question prompted by the resurgence of interest in childhood is why ideas are now being put forth that reconsider, challenge, refine, and even transform traditional lay

and theoretical approaches to children and childhood. One reason is that consideration of other subordinate groups by sociologists (e.g., minorities and women) has drawn attention to the lives of children. Unlike other subordinate groups, children have no representatives among sociologists; however, the work of feminists and minority scholars has, at least indirectly, drawn attention to the neglect of children. Barrie Thorne noted that in some ideological constructions, "*women are closely and unreflectively tied* with children; womanhood has been equated with motherhood in a mixing of identities that simply does not occur for men and fatherhood" (1987, p. 96, emphasis in the original). Indeed, feminists who find themselves labeled (most especially by political conservatives) as selfishly negligent of children have responded that children should be the responsibility of women and men. In their call for recognition of more diverse and equitable roles for women and men, feminists have been slow to note the marginalization of children in sociology. However, feminist analyses of gender ideologies have provided a lens for what Thorne (1987) has called the "re-visioning of children," resulting in several important recent studies of children, gender, and identity (Alanen, 1994; Eder, 1995; Jensen, 2012; Mayall, 2002; Thorne, 1993; also see Oeur & Pascoe, 2023, for the just published edited volume *Gender Replay* in which more than 20 international scholars contribute articles building on Thorne's work on childhood studies, peer culture, gender, early education, and feminist theory).

New ways of conceptualizing children in sociology also stem from the rise of **constructivist and interpretive theoretical perspectives** in sociology (Connell, 1987; Corsaro, 1992, 2020; James et al., 1998; Prout, 2005). From these perspectives, assumptions about the genesis of everything from friendship to scientific knowledge are carefully examined as social constructions rather than simply accepted as biological givens or obvious social facts. What this means is that childhood and all social objects (including things such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity) are seen as being interpreted, debated, and defined in processes of social action. In short, they are viewed as social products or constructions. When applied to the sociology of childhood, constructivist and interpretive perspectives argue that children and adults alike are active participants in the social construction of childhood and in the interpretive reproduction of their shared culture. In contrast, traditional theories view children as "consumers" of the culture established by adults.

TRADITIONAL THEORIES: SOCIALIZATION

Much of sociology's thinking about children and childhood derives from theoretical work on socialization, the processes by which children adapt to and internalize society. Most have focused on early socialization in the family, which views the child as internalizing society. In other words, the child is seen as something apart from society that must be shaped and guided by external forces to become a fully functioning member.

Two models of the socialization process have been proposed. The first is a **deterministic model**, in which the child plays a basically passive role. In this view the child is simultaneously a novice with potential to contribute to the maintenance of society and an untamed threat who must be controlled through careful training. In the second, a **constructivist model**, the child is seen as an active agent and eager learner. In this view, the child actively constructs their social world and their place in it. Let's look first at the deterministic model.

The Deterministic Model: Society Appropriates the Child

Early theorists of socialization had a problem. In their day, the philosophy of individualism held sway; it was popular to focus on how individuals relate to society. Yet society was also recognized as a powerful determinant of individual behavior. How were these theorists to resolve the contradiction (Wentworth, 1980, pp. 38–39)? The solution to this problem was a theoretical view describing appropriation of the child by society.

Appropriation means the child is taken over by society; they are trained to become, eventually, a competent and contributing member. This model of socialization is seen as deterministic because the child plays a primarily passive role. Within the deterministic model, two subsidiary approaches arose that differed primarily in their views of society. The **functionalist models**, on the one hand, saw order and balance in society and stressed the importance of training and preparing children to fit into and contribute to that order. The **reproductive models**, on the other hand, focused on conflicts and inequalities in society and argued that some children have differential access to certain types of training and other societal resources.

Functionalist Models

Functionalist models, which were popular in the 1950s and 1960s, focused on describing rather superficial aspects of **socialization**: what the child needed to internalize and which parental childrearing or training strategies were used to ensure such **internalization**. Functionalists had little concern for why and how children become integrated into society. Alex Inkeles, for example, maintained that the study of socialization must be inherently "forward looking," specifying what the child must become to meet requisites for the continued functioning of society (1968, pp. 76–77).

The major spokesperson of the functionalist perspective, Talcott Parsons, set the tone for Inkeles's forward-looking view of socialization. In Parsons's view, the child is a threat to society; they must be appropriated and shaped to fit in. Parsons envisioned a society as an "intricate network of interdependent and interpenetrating" roles and consensual values (Parsons & Bales, 1955, p. 36). The entry of the child into this system is problematic because, although they have the potential to be useful to the continued functioning of the system, they are also a threat until socialized. In fact, Parsons likened the child to a "pebble 'thrown' by the fact of birth into the social 'pond'" (1955, pp. 36–37). The initial point of entry—the family—feels the first effects of this "pebble," and as the child grows older, the effects are seen as a succession of widening waves that radiate to other parts of the system. In a cyclical process of dealing with problems and through formal training to accept and follow social norms, the child eventually internalizes the social system (1955, p. 202).

Reproductive Models

As sociological theory developed, the functionalist view of socialization lost favor. Some social theorists argued that the internalization of the functional requisites of society could be seen as a mechanism of social control leading to the social reproduction or maintenance of class inequalities (Bernstein, 1981; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). These reproductive models, as they are known, focus on the advantages enjoyed by those with greater access to cultural resources. For example, parents from higher social-class groups can ensure that their children receive quality education in prestigious academic institutions. Reproductive theorists also point to differential treatment of individuals in social institutions (especially the educational system), which reflects and supports the prevailing class system.

Weaknesses of the Deterministic Model

Reproductive theorists provide a needed acknowledgment of the effect of social conflict and inequality on the socialization of children. However, both functionalist and reproductive theories can be criticized for their overconcentration on the outcomes of socialization, their underestimation of the active and innovative capacities of all members of society, and their neglect of the historical and contingent nature of social action and reproduction. In short, these abstract models simplify highly complex processes and, in the process, overlook the importance of children and childhood in society.

A key question is, where do children and childhood fit into these abstract theories of social structure? Not surprisingly, some of these social theorists downplayed the importance of children's activities, which they considered to be inconsequential or nonfunctional. Other determinists looked to theories of child development and learning that fit their views for explanations about the mechanisms of socialization. Parsons, for example, linked his views on socialization to Freud's theory of psychosexual development. In his model, socialization takes place as the child learns to act in accordance with social norms and values rather than according to innate sexual and aggressive drives. Inkeles opted for another type of determinism, behaviorism, and pointed to the importance of explicit training in the skills needed for living in society, supported by a system of rewards and punishments (1968, pp. 97–103).

Both functionalist and reproductive models overlook the point that children do not only internalize the society they are born into. As we saw in the example of the Italian preschoolers' traveling bank at the beginning of this part, children act on and can bring about changes in society. Reproductive theorists are, however, more inventive than functionalists in their views of socialization. Bourdieu (1977), for example, offers the complex and intriguing notion of the habitus to capture how members of society (or social actors), through their continual and routine involvement in their social worlds, acquire a set of predispositions to act and to see things in a certain way. This set of predispositions, this habitus, is inculcated in early socialization and plays itself out reproductively through the tendency of the child and all social actors to maintain their sense of self and place in the world (Bourdieu, 1993).

Bourdieu is on a track that usefully leads us away from determinism and provides a more active role for the child (see Alanen et al., 2015; Salgues, 2018). However, this conceptualization of socialization limits children's involvement to cultural participation and reproduction while ignoring children's contributions to cultural refinement and change in their everyday lives and peer cultures. However, although Bourdieu never directly studied children, recent French scholars influenced by him have. Especially interesting is Wilfried Lignier's (2021) ethnographic research with 2- to 3-year-old children from different social class groups in Parisian preschools. We will return to discuss Lignier's work in detail in Chapter 8. His work extends Bourdieu's views on social reproduction not only from deterministic to constructivist views of children and childhood but also to more interpretive views where we see children as social agents appropriating and extending adult society while still being affected by their places in social and cultural hierarchies.

The Constructivist Model: The Child Appropriates Society

Much of the early sociological study of childhood socialization was influenced by the dominant theories in developmental psychology at the time. The theories that sociologists

most often turned to, most especially varieties of behaviorism, relegate the child to a passive role. In these theories development is basically unilateral, with the child being shaped and molded by adult reinforcements and punishments. Many developmental psychologists, however, have come to see the child as active rather than passive, involved in appropriating information from their environment to use in organizing and constructing his or her own interpretations of the world.

Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development

Perhaps the best representative of the constructivist approach is the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. He studied the evolution of knowledge in children, which was a way of integrating two of his enduring interests: biology and epistemology (the study of knowledge; Ginsburg & Opper, 1988). Piaget's many empirical studies of children and their development had a major impact on the image of the child in developmental psychology. Piaget believed that children, from the first days of infancy, interpret, organize, and use information from the environment and come to construct conceptions (known as **mental structures**) of their physical and social worlds.

Piaget is perhaps best known for his view that intellectual development is not simply an accumulation of facts or skills but rather a progression through a series of qualitatively distinct stages of intellectual ability. Piaget's notion of stages is important for the sociology of children because it reminds us that children perceive and organize their worlds in ways qualitatively different from the ways of adults. Consider, for example, the following incident, which occurred in Bill Corsaro's first ethnographic study of young children. A 3-year-old boy, Krister, drew a squiggly line on a chalkboard. Bill asked him what it was, and he responded, "A snake." "A snake!" Bill replied and then asked, "Have you ever seen a snake?" "Sure," said Krister, pointing to his squiggly line, "right there!" Bill then realized that his perspective of the squiggly line as a representation of a snake was different than Krister's perspective of his creation, which was that the line was exactly what he said it was—a snake!

As a result of many similar experiences, we have gotten much better at adopting children's perspectives in our fieldwork. We have also come to appreciate, in line with Piaget's theory, that any sociological theory of children and childhood that attempts to explain children's understanding and use of information from the adult world as well as children's participation in and organization of their own peer worlds must consider the child's level of cognitive development.

Although Piaget's conception of stages of development is the best-known element of his theory, the most important element of his theory is his conception of **equilibrium**. Equilibrium is the central force that propels the child through the stages of cognitive development. Unfortunately, not only is this concept often overlooked; it is also frequently misunderstood. Many sociological and psychological theorists (such as Parsons) use the idea of equilibrium to explain societal, behavioral, or attitudinal change as a return to a state of balance (in other words, an occurrence that creates disequilibrium will be followed by attempts on the part of a society or an individual to regain balance). Piaget, however, is concerned with the process of equilibration, or the actual activities the child undertakes to deal with problems in the external world. Piaget conceives of equilibrium as the "compensation resulting from the activities of the subject in response to external intrusions" (1968, p. 101). Intrusions are compensated for only by activities, and the maximum equilibrium involves not a state of rest but rather a maximum of activity on the part of the child.

Piaget believes that the tendency to compensate for disequilibriums is innate. This biological or nativist assumption does not mean, however, that Piaget is a biological determinist. Biological determinists hold that things such as innate tendencies, processes, or knowledge are the causes or determiners of children's development. For Piaget, the innate tendency to compensate for disequilibriums is only one part of his complex model of intellectual development. Although Piaget believed children have an innate tendency to compensate for environmental intrusions, the nature of the compensations is dependent on the activities of children in their social-ecological worlds.

We can get a more concrete understanding of Piaget's concept of equilibrium as well as his developmental stages by considering the following case study of a Piagetian experiment of children's understanding of the conservation of mass.

UNDERSTANDING OF CONSERVATION OF MASS

In a classic experiment, Piaget would present a child between the ages of 4 and 9 with two identical balls of clay. The child would be asked if each ball contains the same amount of clay. If the child did not think so, they would be asked to take away or add some clay to make the balls identical. Then, Piaget would change one of the balls into a sausage shape as the child watched. The child would then be asked if the ball and sausage now contain the same amount of clay. This experiment can be seen as illustrating the process of equilibration, with the child attempting to compensate through a series of strategies. We can capture the nature of the series each child will go through by examining how children of different ages deal with the problem:

1. The very young child, age 4 or 5, concentrates on one characteristic or dimension of the objects, usually length, and is apt to say with a great deal of conviction, "This one has more 'cause it is longer!" The child is unaware of the notion of conservation of mass and refers only to one dimension. Again, the child shows a great deal of certainty, and there is limited mental activity or thinking. In fact, the child may even claim that the problem is too easy, silly, or possibly a trick.

2. The slightly older child, age 6 or 7, tends to reverse their original claim because they notice a second dimension (width or thinness). At this point a new strategy becomes probable because the uncertainty of the child leads to more activity in dealing with the intrusion. In thinking about the intrusion, the child oscillates back and forth in their thinking and may become vaguely aware of the interdependence of the sausage's elongation and its thinness. Here a child might start out with confidence: "This one has more 'cause it's longer. No, no wait, this one 'cause it's fatter. Oh, I don't know!"

3. The 7- to 9-year-old child acts on the insight of interdependence. They place a mental emphasis on the transformation rather than the static configuration with dimensions. They will make them both the same and will now claim that they are equal. Here the child will often be careful, rolling the ball into a second sausage and holding the two next to each other to see if they match. If not, they will go back to work, shortening one or lengthening the other until convinced that they are the same. Here there is a maximum of activity in the equilibration process as the child approaches the mental insight of conservation of mass.

4. For the 9- to 11-year-old, the strategy begins with the discovery of the compensations of the transformation (i.e., as clay lengthens it becomes thinner; as it broadens it becomes shorter). Here the child may scoff at the question, saying, "They are obviously the same!" or, "See, it makes no difference. I can make this ball a sausage or the sausage a ball," doing so as they talk. At this

point, conservation is accepted, and the child understands reversibility. Certainty now returns, and related problems in the future will seem simple (adapted from Piaget, 1968, p. 112; Ginsburg & Opper, 1988, pp. 150–151).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural View of Human Development

Another important constructivist theorist is the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Like Piaget, Vygotsky stressed children's active role in human development. Vygotsky, however, believed that children's social development is always the result of their collective actions and that these actions take place and are located in society. Therefore, for Vygotsky, changes in society, especially changes in societal demands on the individual, require changes in strategies for dealing with those demands. For Vygotsky, strategies for dealing with changes in societal demands are always collective; that is, they always involve interaction with others. These collective strategies are seen as practical actions that lead to both social and psychological development. In this sense, the child's interactions and practical activities with others lead to their acquisition of new skills and knowledge, which are seen as the transformation of previous skills and knowledge.

A key principle in Vygotsky's view is the individual's internalization or appropriation of culture. Especially important to this process is language, which both encodes culture and is a tool for participating in culture. Vygotsky argues that language and other sign systems (e.g., writing, film, etc.), like tool systems (e.g., material objects such as machines), are created by societies over the course of history and change with cultural development. Thus, argued Vygotsky, children, through their acquisition and use of language, come to reproduce a culture that contains the knowledge of generations.

Vygotsky offered quite a different constructivist approach to human development than that of Piaget. Although both theorists viewed development as resulting from the child's activities, Vygotsky made no nativistic assumption like Piaget's notion of equilibrium to account for the motivating factor that generates the child's activities. Vygotsky saw practical activities developing from the child's attempts to deal with everyday problems. Furthermore, in dealing with these problems, the child always develops strategies collectively—that is, in interaction with others. Thus, for Piaget human development is primarily individualistic, whereas for Vygotsky it is primarily collective.

Other differences exist between the two theorists. Piaget concentrated more on the nature and characteristics of cognitive processes and structures, whereas Vygotsky emphasized their developmental contexts and history. As a result, rather than identifying abstract stages of cognitive development, Vygotsky sought to specify the cultural events and practical activities that lead to the appropriation, internalization, and reproduction of culture and society (see Lourenço, 2012, for a more extended discussion of comparisons of the theoretical views of Piaget and Vygotsky).

How, specifically, do these processes of internalization, appropriation, and reproduction occur? Two of Vygotsky's concepts are crucial. First is the notion of internalization. According to Vygotsky, "Every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (1978, p. 57). By this, Vygotsky meant that all our psychological and social skills (cognitive, communicative, and emotional) are

always acquired from our interactions with others. We develop and use such skills at the interpersonal level first before internalizing them at the individual level.

Consider Vygotsky's conceptions of self-directed and inner speech. With *self-directed speech*, Vygotsky is referring to the tendency of young children to speak out loud to themselves, especially in problematic situations. Piaget saw such speech as egocentric or emotional and serving no social function. Vygotsky, in contrast, saw self-directed speech as a form of interpersonal communication, except that in this case the child is addressing themself as another. In a sense, the child is directing and advising themself how to deal with a problem (see Gillen, 2000, for an interesting comparison of Piaget and Vygotsky's views of self-directed speech in the play of preschool children with toy telephones). In experimental work, Vygotsky found that such speech increased when children were given tasks such as building a car with construction toys or were told to draw a picture. Vygotsky believed that over time, self-directed speech was transformed or internalized from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal, becoming inner speech or a form of thought. We can grasp his ideas when we think about how we first learn to read. Most of our early reading as young children is done out loud as we read to ourselves and others. Over time we begin to mumble and then to mouth the words as we read, and eventually we read entirely at a mental level. In short, the intrapsychological function or skill of reading has its origins in social or collective activity—reading out loud for others and oneself. For Vygotsky, internalization occurs gradually over an extended period of time.

In a second important concept, Vygotsky builds on his view of language as a cultural tool. According to Vygotsky, human activity is inherently mediational in that it is carried out through language and other cultural tools. A significant proportion of children's everyday activities take place in what Vygotsky calls the "**zone of proximal development**": "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Let us go back to our example of learning to read. A child's actual level of reading ability would be measured by their ability to read, summarize, and talk about a story such as *Cinderella* or *Snow White*. A child's potential level of development would be estimated by their ability to read, summarize, and discuss the story with help from teachers, parents, and more developed peers. The first indicates the child's full mastery of a particular ability or skill, whereas the latter indicates their potential level of mastery. The distance between the two levels is the zone of proximal development, as depicted in Figure 1.1.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Zone of Proximal Development

Actual Developmental Level

Potential Developmental Level
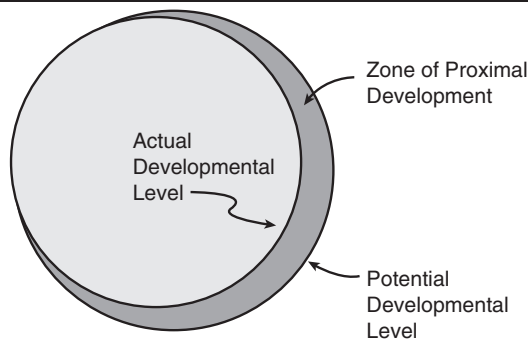
As we can see in this figure, the child in interactions with others is always a step ahead in development of where they are alone. In this sense, interactions in the zone of proximal development "are the crucible of development and culture, in that they allow children to participate in activities that would be impossible for them alone, using cultural tools that themselves must be adapted to the specific activity at hand, and thus both passed along to and transformed by new generations" (Rogoff et al., 1989, p. 211). Thus, the model of development is one in which children gradually appropriate the adult world through the communal processes of sharing and creating culture (Bruner, 1986).

Weaknesses of the Constructivist Model

Although the general acceptance of constructivism moved theory and research in developmental psychology in the right direction, its main focus still remains squarely on individual development. We can see this in repeated references to the child's activity, the child's development, the child's becoming an adult. In Piaget's theory, the focus is on the individual child's mastery of the world on their own terms. Constructivism offers an active but somewhat lonely view of children. Even when others (parents, peers, and teachers) are considered, the focus remains on the effects of interpersonal experiences on individual development. There is little, if any, consideration of how interpersonal relations reflect cultural systems or how children, through their participation in communicative events, become part of these interpersonal relations and cultural patterns and reproduce them collectively.

Another limitation of constructivist developmental psychology is the overwhelming concern with the endpoint of development, or the child's movement from immaturity to adult competence. Take, for example, research on friendship. The focus of nearly all of the research is on identifying stages in the child's abstract conceptions of friendship. These conceptions are elicited through clinical interviews, and a child's underdeveloped conceptions are compared to those of the competent adult (Damon, 1977; Selman, 1980; but as we see in Chapter 3, Rizzo and colleagues (2020) have extended these methods in important ways). Yet few psychologists study what it is like to be or to have a friend in children's social worlds or how developing conceptions of friendships are embedded in children's interactions in peer culture.

This emphasis on the endpoint of development is also apparent in many developmental psychologists' interest in Vygotsky's notion of internalization. As we saw previously, Vygotsky stressed both children's collective interactions with others at the interpersonal level and their internalization of these interactions at the intrapersonal level in his theory of children's appropriation of culture. Yet much research by constructivists places so much emphasis on the second phase of internalization that many view the appropriation of culture as the movement from the external to the internal. This misconception pushes children's collective actions with others to the background and implies that an individual actor's participation in society occurs only after such individual internalization.

Extensions of Piaget and Vygotsky

Recent theoretical discussions and research by both Piagetians and sociocultural theorists influenced by Vygotsky have extended constructivist theory to focus more on children's agency in childhood and the importance of peer interaction. For example, Tesson and Youniss (1995) argued that there has been too much emphasis on the details of stages in

developmental psychology. They maintain that Piaget did not place great importance on the stages and that his later work investigated the interrelationship between the logic and social qualities of children's thought. Expanding on Piaget's work on moral development, Tesson and Youniss argued that Piagetian operations enable children to make sense of the world as a set of possibilities for action. Thus, Piaget attributed agency to children and further argued that children's relationships with peers were more conducive to the development of cognitive operations than the authoritative relationships with adults (see Furth & Youniss, 2000). Along these lines, Piaget made a distinction between practical and theoretical modes of behavior.

> The practical occurs on the plane of direct action, the theoretical on the plane of consciousness. Piaget proposed a developmental relation between the two. First the child works out the conception of rules in the course of actual play with peers, then later the child grasps in consciousness a symbolic representation of this once practical concept. (Youniss & Damon, 1994, p. 417)

As we will see later, the interpretive approach to childhood socialization gives special emphasis to children's practical activities in their production of and participation in their own peer cultures.

As we discuss in Chapter 3 the work of Rizzo and colleagues (2020) expanded the constructivist views of Piaget especially on moral development as related to equity and inequality in terms of effort, race, and gender. But here again the emphasis is on how development is related to children's experience and interpretations in their social worlds with adults and peers (Rizzo et al., 2020; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; also see Dahl, 2018, for a review of his observational and quasi-experimental studies on his interactionist and constructivist approach to early moral development).

Recent work by sociocultural theorists develops the theoretical work of Vygotsky in a similar vein, also stressing children's collective activities with peers and others. Rogoff, for example, building on Vygotsky, has argued that "human development is a process in which people transform through their ongoing participation in cultural activities which in turn contribute to changes in their cultural communities across generations" (2003, p. 37). Rogoff has argued that as children move across settings that demand different forms of participation, they develop their own "repertoire of practices." According to Rogoff and her colleagues, this concept "helps us to focus on children's own agency in selecting, rejecting, and transforming multiple ways of engaging in the world. In the process, children in turn contribute to the formation of the routines and practices available to the next generation" (2015, p. 474-475).

To capture the nature of children's involvements in sociocultural activities and practices, Rogoff (1996) suggested that they be studied on three planes of analysis: the community, the interpersonal, and the individual. However, Rogoff noted that these processes must be analyzed not separately but together in collective activities. In line with this view of human development, Rogoff introduced the notion of "participatory appropriation" by which she meant that "any event in the present is an extension of previous events and is directed toward goals that have not yet been accomplished" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 155). Thus, previous experiences of collectively produced and shared activities are not merely stored in individual memory and called on in the present; rather, the individual's previous participation contributes to and primes the event at hand by having prepared it.

In a more recent work Rogoff et al. (2018) "argue that the field of developmental research needs a course correction, to focus more on describing the cultural paradigms

of children's lived experiences—children's participation in the settings of their everyday lives" (p. 5). The authors went to present a critique of standard experimental methods in developmental research as well as more recent methods relying on brain sciences. They do not call for the rejection of such methods but rather for a recognition of their limits regarding ecological validity. They point to the importance of mixed methods and the recognition of interpretive ethnography as seen in much of the work of Rogoff as described previously as well as similar work in anthropology and sociology. A recent example of using such methods can be seen in comparative study of Mexican-heritage and European American children's prosocial helping in their families (Coppens & Rogoff, 2022).

In a recent monograph based on Vygotsky's cultural historical perspective and much in line with Rogoff and colleagues (2015) call to study children's lived experiences (see Adams & Quinones, 2020). Extending most research studying children's friendship in schools, the authors study young children from internationally mobile families moving into Malaysia and established families in Mexico. In impressive analysis they capture varying perspectives of children, parents, teachers, and principals presenting a holistic understanding of friendship in early childhood.

Here again, in these extensions of the constructivist approach, we see new emphasis on collective actions in social context as essential for the development of children and all humans. To capture more fully the importance of collective action and children's construction of their own peer cultures, we now turn to a discussion of the notion of **interpretive reproduction**.

INTERPRETIVE REPRODUCTION: CHILDREN COLLECTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN SOCIETY

Sociological theories of childhood must break free from the individualistic doctrine that regards children's social development solely as the child's private internalization of adult skills and knowledge. From a sociological perspective, socialization is not only a matter of adaptation and internalization but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction. Central to this view of socialization is the appreciation of the importance of collective, communal activity—how children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and each other (Corsaro, 1992; 2020; James et al., 1998).

However, to say that a sociological perspective of socialization stresses the importance of collective and communal processes is not enough in constructing a new sociology of childhood. The problem is the term *socialization* itself. It has an individualistic and forward-looking connotation that is inescapable. One hears the term, and the idea of training and preparing the individual child for the future keeps coming to mind (Thorne, 1993, pp. 3–6; also see James et al., 1998, pp. 22–26; but see Guhin et al., 2021 for arguments for preserving the concept of socialization especially for research on older children and adults and race and gender). Instead, we offer the notion of interpretive reproduction. The term *interpretive* captures the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society. In fact, as we shall see throughout this book, children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture but are actively contributing to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their

participation in society, constrained by the existing social structure and by societal repro-
duction. That is, children and their childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures
of which they are members. These societies and cultures have, in turn, been shaped and
affected by processes of historical change.

As we can see from this discussion, there is a central focus on children's peer cultures
in interpretive reproduction. We define peer culture as a stable set of activities or routines,
artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers
(Corsaro, 2003, 2009b, 2020; Corsaro & Eder, 1990).

Let's pursue this notion of interpretive reproduction and children's peer cultures fur-
ther by looking at two of their key elements: the importance of language and **cultural
routines** and the reproductive nature of children's evolving membership in their culture.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ROUTINES

Interpretive reproduction places special emphasis on language and on children's participa-
tion in cultural routines. Language is central to children's participation in their culture
both as a "symbolic system that encodes local, social, and cultural structure" and as a
"tool for establishing (that is, maintaining, creating) social and psychological realities"
(Ochs, 1988, p. 210). These interrelated features of language and language use are "deeply
embedded and instrumental in the accomplishment of the concrete routines of social life"
(Schieffelin, 1990, p. 19).

Children's participation in cultural routines is a key element of interpretive reproduc-
tion. The habitual, taken-for-granted character of routines provides children and all social
actors with the security and shared understanding of belonging to a social group. In con-
trast, this predictability empowers routines, providing a framework within which a wide
range of sociocultural knowledge can be produced, displayed, and interpreted. In this
way, cultural routines serve as anchors that enable social actors to deal with ambiguities,
the unexpected, and the problematic while remaining comfortably within the friendly
confines of everyday life (Corsaro, 1992).

Participation in cultural routines begins early, almost from the minute children are
born (see Stern, 2004). Early in infancy, at least in Western societies, when children's lan-
guage and communicative abilities are emerging, social interaction proceeds in line with
an **as-if assumption**. That is, infants are treated as socially competent (as if they were fully
capable of social exchanges). Over time, because of this as-if attitude, infants quickly move
from limited to full participation in cultural routines.

Consider, for example, the well-known parent-infant game of peekaboo. In their study
of six mother-infant dyads, Bruner and Sherwood (1976) identified four basic phases
in peekaboo: (a) initial contact or shared attention (usually established by the mother
through vocalization and/or gaze); (b) disappearance (usually the mother hiding her or
her child's face with her hands or a cloth accompanied by vocalizations such as "Where's
baby?"); (c) reappearance (removal of hands or cloth, usually by the mother); and (d) the
reestablishment of contact (usually with vocalizations such as "Boo," "There's the baby,"
and so on by the mother, gaining a response such as a smile or laugh from the child).
Bruner and Sherwood noted that what the child appears to be learning "is not only the
basic rules of the game, but the range of variation that is possible with the rule set" (1976,
p. 283). Thus, by participating in the routine, children are learning a set of predictable
rules that provide security, and they also are learning that a range of embellishments of the

rules is possible and even desirable. In this way, children gain insight into the generative or productive nature of cultural participation in a play routine from which they derive great pleasure. Furthermore, we know from later work (Ratner & Bruner, 1977) that there is a movement from the as-if function of these games in the first months of life, when children's participation is often limited to a responsive role, to a point when the same children at 1 year old are initiating and directing the games and even creating and participating in other types of disappearance-reappearance games alone and with others.

To say that adults always strive for shared understanding with children and that the adoption of an as-if attitude in parent-child games is crucial in attaining joint activity does not mean that shared understanding is always achieved and maintained in adult-child interaction. What is important is not that shared understanding is always achieved but rather that attempts by both the adult and the child to reach such understanding are always made. Often, especially in adult-child interaction, children are exposed to social knowledge and communicative demands they do not fully grasp. Interaction normally continues in an orderly fashion, and any persisting ambiguities must be pursued over the course of the children's experiences with adults and peers.

DO CHIPS HAVE BLOOD ON THEM?

To illustrate the power and importance of cultural routines, let's consider a real-life example: an everyday interactive routine between a 2-and-a-half-year-old boy, Buddy, and his mother, which Bill video recorded in their home as part of his dissertation research. Buddy and his mother talked every weekday at this time as she prepared lunch. During this conversation, Buddy was still curious about blood from his cut finger the day before:

Mother: What?
Buddy: Chips [potato chips] have blood on them? Do they have blood on 'em?
Mother: No, I don't believe so.
Buddy: Kids and people do.
Mother: Um-hum.
Buddy: And monsters.
Mother: Yeah.
Buddy: Like Grover has blood on him.
Mother: Well, Grover's a pretend monster. He's really a puppet, you know?
Buddy: Yeah.
Mother: So, he wouldn't have any blood on him.
Buddy: But Harry does.
Mother: Well, they're just like your puppets. Your Big Bird and your Cookie Monster.
Buddy: Yeah.
Mother: They're made out of cloth and furry things.
Buddy: Yeah, like—
Mother: Somebody made them—
Buddy: Harry has blood.
Mother: I don't think so. Pretend blood maybe.
Buddy: Yeah, maybe—maybe Grover and Cookie Monster and Harry have pretend blood. Maybe they do—maybe they have real blood.
Buddy: Mommy, someday I wanna go to Sesame Street, and we can see if those monsters have blood.
Mother: You do?

> **Buddy**: Yeah.
> **Mother**: I don't know. We'll have to see about that. But you know what? Sesame Street is really a make-believe land.
> **Buddy**: Oh, I didn't notice that.
> **Mother**: You can pretend a lot of things about Sesame Street.
>
> (Adapted from Corsaro, 1979b)

Several issues are raised in this short episode that are relevant to interpretive reproduction:

1. Why is this a routine?

   Everyday talk of this type and at this time of day is recurrent and predictable in this family. In fact, this recurrence and typicality provide an opportunity to pursue issues that are problematic and confusing in the everyday activity of having lunch. Through their participation in this everyday routine, the mother and child reaffirm their relation to one another and address problems and confusions about the world.

2. How is Buddy using the routine?

   First, Buddy uses the opportunity to address his curiosity about blood and who does and does not have it. At a surface level, his confusion about blood concerns a distinction between animate and inanimate objects. But soon the discussion moves beyond that distinction to a discussion about real and pretend animate objects. Second, the routine allows Buddy an opportunity to display his knowledge and to discuss his interests with a receptive and supportive adult caretaker. In this sense, the repetitive enactment of such routines reaffirms these bonds and Buddy's status as an active member of the family.

3. How does Buddy's mother use the routine?

   First, on one level the routine provides her with information about a confusing concept that Buddy is trying to deal with (the distinction between animate and inanimate objects). On another level, however, Buddy's mother gains insight into the tie-in (for Buddy) between this distinction and a more general and complex distinction between real and pretend in modern culture. Consider the complexity: animate versus inanimate; pretend animate objects (dolls, puppets, etc.) versus inanimate objects (potato chips, apples, a flower pot); and the dramatic characters from a familiar television show. Second, the mother sees that the issue has a larger cultural significance when Buddy proposes to go to Sesame Street. She sees that her knowledge of the Sesame Street culture is different from her child's: She knows it is a fabricated television culture; he does not. She must now decide how far to push in addressing these distinctions given our culture's beliefs and values (and her interpretation of and commitment to such beliefs and values) regarding the existence of certain pretend figures (such as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and Big Bird). Third, the mother uses the routine to reaffirm the close relationship and bonding she has with her son. She takes the opportunity to display openness to his curiosity and concerns. In fact, this routine of talking at lunchtime may have been created by Buddy's mother for this reason.

4. The emergent nature of routines

   This example demonstrates how the predictability of routines provides a framework for producing, displaying, and interpreting cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs. We see how quickly the participants move from a basic question about blood to a discussion of a wide range of cultural facts, values, and relationships. Although the general framework of the routine itself (talking at lunchtime) is recurrent and predictable, what emerges in this talk (extensions and embellishments of the routine) is not. What we see here is that children, as they become part of their cultures, have wide interpretive latitude in making sense of their places in the world. Thus, almost any everyday routine interaction is ripe for children to refine and extend their developing cultural skills and knowledge.

5. Remaining ambiguities

   As in most cases involving young children, confusions are addressed but not resolved in routines. In some cases, the confusion may increase. However, the structure of routines allows participants to move ahead (in this case to go on with lunch), while the confusions are left behind to be pursued at other points in time.

FROM INDIVIDUAL PROGRESSION TO COLLECTIVE REPRODUCTIONS

As we discussed earlier, many theories of child development focus on the individual child. These theories take a **linear view of the developmental process**. In the linear view, it is assumed that the child must pass through a preparatory period in childhood before they can develop into a socially competent adult. In this view, the period of childhood consists of a set of developmental stages in which cognitive skills, emotions, and knowledge are acquired in preparation for adult life (see Figure 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2 ■ The Linear View of Development

ADULTHOOD

Stage Four: Cognitive Skills, Emotions, and Knowledge

Stage Three: Cognitive Skills, Emotions, and Knowledge

Stage Two: Cognitive Skills, Emotions, and Knowledge

Stage One: Cognitive Skills, Emotions, and Knowledge
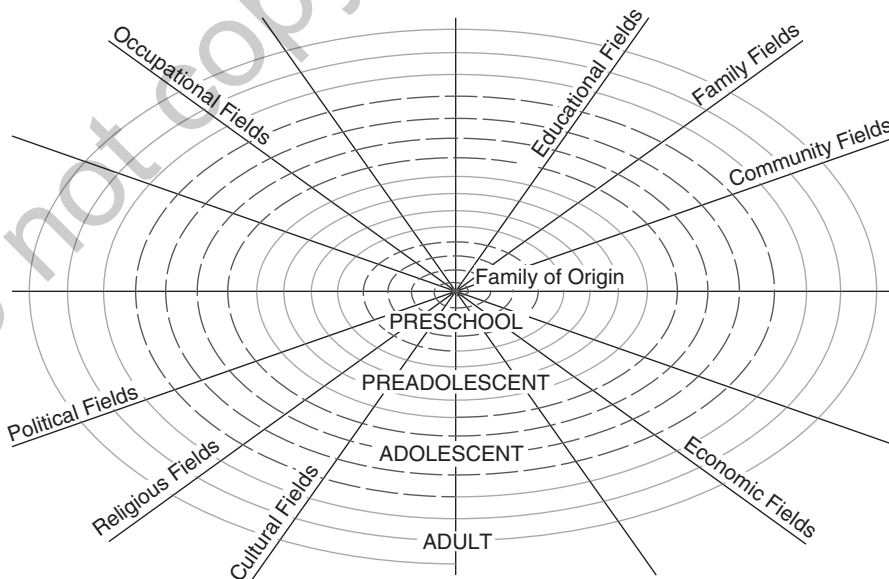
BIRTH

CHILDHOOD
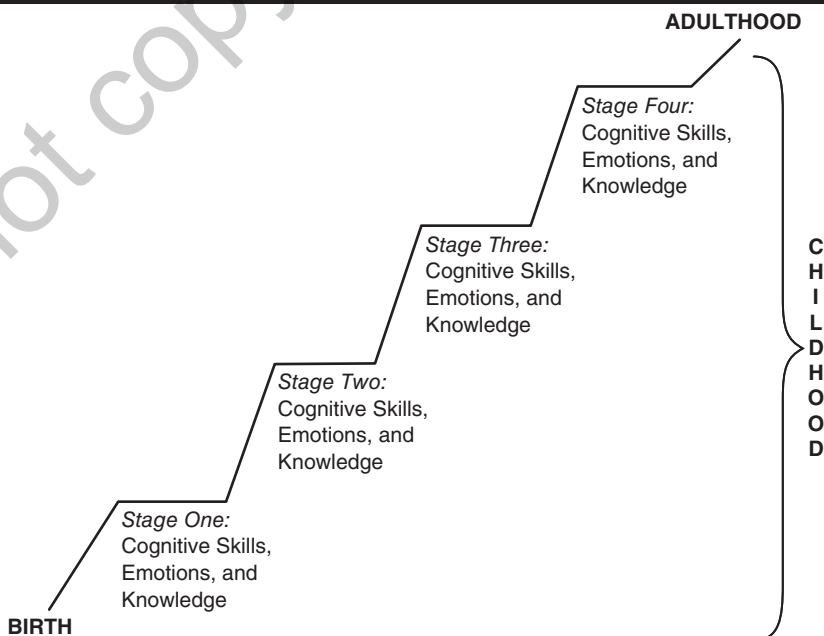
Interpretive reproduction views children's evolving membership in their cultures as reproductive rather than linear. According to this reproductive view, children do not simply imitate or internalize the world around them. They strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and to participate in it. In attempting to make sense of the adult world, children come to collectively produce their own peer worlds and cultures.

The Orb Web Model

The notion of interpretive reproduction can be presented graphically in a way that captures its productive-reproductive characteristics. The key is to use a model that captures interpretive reproduction as a spiral in which children produce and participate in a series of embedded peer cultures. I've found the "spider web" to be an effective heuristic device or metaphor for conceptualizing interpretive reproduction. Of the different varieties of webs that spiders produce, the orb web, produced by common garden spiders, is the most useful for our conceptual needs. Several features of the orb web make it a useful metaphor for conceptualizing the process of interpretive reproduction. Let's look at Figure 1.3. The radii or spokes of the model represent a range of locales or fields that make up social institutions (family, economic, cultural, educational, political, occupational, community, and religious). The fields illustrate the diverse locations in which institutional interaction or behavior occurs (Bourdieu, 1991). For example, family interaction takes place in a wide range of actual locales such as in the home; in the family car; at neighborhood parks; at family reunions, weddings, and funerals; and so forth, whereas educational activities take place in classrooms, libraries, gymnasiums, music practice rooms, and many other locations. It is important to note that these institutional fields (the radii of the web) exist as stable but changing structures on which children will weave their webs. Cultural information flows to all parts of the web along these radii.

FIGURE 1.3 ■ The Orb Web Model

At the hub or the center of the web is the family of origin, which serves as a nexus of all cultural institutions for children. Children enter the culture through their families at birth. Thus, families are important to the notion of interpretive reproduction. Children in modern societies, however, begin to participate in other institutional locales with other children and adults who are not family members at an early age. It is in these institutional fields, as well as in the family, that children begin to produce and participate in a series of peer cultures.

The differently shaded spirals represent four distinct peer cultures, which are created by each generation of children in a given society: preschool, preadolescent, adolescent, and adult. Although aspects of peer culture may be passed on to younger children by older children, peer cultures are not preexisting structures that children encounter or confront. It is in this sense that these cultures differ from the institutional fields (radii) on which they are woven. Although affected by the many experiences that occur through interactions with the adult world and encounters in institutional fields (or crossings of the radii), children's peer cultures are innovative and creative collective productions. In this sense, the webbing or spirals of peer cultures are collectively spun on the framework of the cultural knowledge and institutions they come in part to constitute.

These collective, productive, and innovative features of children's peer cultures are captured in the basic features of spiraling and embeddedness in the **orb web model**. Peer cultures are not stages that individual children pass through. Children produce and participate in their peer cultures, and these productions are embedded in the web of experiences children weave with others throughout their lives. Therefore, children's experiences in peer cultures are not left behind with maturity or individual development; rather, they remain part of their life histories as active members of a given culture. Thus, individual development is embedded in the collective production of a series of peer cultures that in turn contribute to reproduction and change in the wider adult society or culture.

Finally, it is the general structure of the model that is most crucial. As is the case for garden spiders, whose webs vary in terms of number of radii and spirals, when we use the web as a model for interpretive reproduction, the number of radii (institutional fields or locales) and the nature and number of spirals (the makeup or age diversity of peer groups and cohorts, the nature of the encounters and crossings of institutional locales, etc.) vary across cultures, across subcultural groups within a particular culture, and over historical time.

Children's Two Cultures

Although the orb web model is useful for visualizing the nature of interpretive reproduction, like any metaphor it tends to reify a highly complex process; in other words, it regards as concrete something that is, in fact, an abstract concept. However, the model does capture the idea that children are always participating in and are part of two cultures—children's and adults'—and these cultures are intricately interwoven. To capture the complexity of children's evolving membership in these two cultures, we need to examine their collective activities with each other and adults. We also need to consider children part of a social group that has a place in the larger social structure. Here our focus will be on childhood as a structural form that has a permanent place in society. In this book we will continually shift back and forth between these micro and macro levels, examining both children and childhood.

SUMMARY

Until recently, sociology has paid relatively little attention to children and childhood. The neglect or marginalization of children in sociology is clearly related to traditional views of socialization that relegate children to a primarily passive role. Most of these theories were based on behavioristic views of child development that have been severely challenged by the rise of constructivism in contemporary developmental psychology. Best represented in Piaget's cognitive developmental theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, constructivism stresses the child's active role in their development and eventual participation in the adult world. Although constructivist theories of individual human development provide sociology with a lens for refocusing our images of children as active agents, these theories until recently have focused primarily on developmental outcomes and failed to seriously consider the complexity of social structure and children's collective activities. Interpretive reproduction and its emphasis on the importance of children's peer culture provide a basis for a new sociology of childhood. Interpretive reproduction replaces linear models of children's individual social development with the collective, productive-reproductive view that is illustrated in the orb web model. In the model, children spontaneously participate as active members of both childhood and adult cultures.

In Chapter 2, we will extend the notion of interpretive reproduction by examining its relationship to structural and relational approaches to children and childhood.

KEY TERMS

As-if assumption

Childhood

Childhood as a structural form

Constructivist and interpretive theoretical
   perspectives

Constructivist model

Cultural routines

Deterministic model

Equilibrium

Functionalist models

Internalization

Interpretive reproduction

Linear view of the developmental process

Mental structures

Orb web model

Reproductive models

Socialization

Zone of proximal development