Children's Construction of National Identity: "New" Social Studies of Childhood Paradigm

Charu Sharma

Assistant Professor, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT : *The paper critically reviews the emerging paradigm of "new" sociology of childhood as opposed to the dominant developmental psychology perspective in the background of construction of national identity by children. The development of national identity can be considered as a significant theme to be investigated with children as they form preliminary understanding of their nation quite early in life, through various direct and indirect sources. Moreover, the theme of nation may manifest in the form of nationality, nationalism, national attitudes, national identity and even citizenship, depending upon the socio-cultural context of a particular study, with children. In the paper, the researches on children's conceptualisation on the theme of nation have been examined in a critical and comprehensive manner. The theoretical orientation that has evolved from the research studies on national identity highlights "new" social studies of childhood paradigm. It further explores how children's understanding of nation gradually develops and changes through the course of childhood, keeping their diverse socio-cultural contexts into consideration.*

KEYWORDS : *Childhood, Constructivism, Nation, National Identity, "New" Social Studies of Childhood*

I. INTRODUCTION

The dominance of developmental psychology in the discourse of early and middle childhood research is quite evident from the vast research literature available in this domain. However, the perspective of developmental psychology has been increasingly criticized by sociologists of childhood for universalizing childhood. These earlier developmental studies were situated in relatively static European societies at a time prior to the profound socio-cultural changes which emerged from the emigrational shifts of recent decades, media expansion, and massive globalization. Some researchers note that there is a historical tendency to present findings of studies conducted in Western Europe and North America as though they applied universally (Scourfield *et al*, 2006). Most importantly, conventional developmental psychology has been accused of seeing children as human *becomings* not *beings*, and therefore not worthy of study in their own right. This effectively denies them all agency to articulate their own experiences (James & Prout, 1997). This developmental psychology based studies tend to ignore children's own worldview because of its strict focus on cognition-- narrowly defined-- rules out taking seriously the subjective dimensions of childhood that in other traditions, such as the "new" sociology of childhood, are seen as constitutive of children's identity. Developmental research on children's identity formation explores only the "what" of children's knowledge, and neither the "why" nor "how". By focusing on stages of development, researchers in this area are concerned primarily about whether children comprehend a concept (hence showing that they have 'successfully' transitioned from one state of understanding to the next) rather than about how children have made that transition (Scourfield *et al*, 2006). Another critique of developmental psychology that is often raised is its downplaying of the role of exogenous influences- such as the family, media or schools in the process of children's identity formation. Many scholars (George, 2007; Madan, 2003)express discomfort with this line of reasoning is its almost complete disregard of the role of education.

The "new" social studies of childhood perspective have emerged during the last decade of twentieth century in response to the weaknesses of previous paradigms while accounting for children's development. This perspective, sometimes also known as the "new" sociology of childhood stands strikingly apart from the conventional sociological tradition of understanding children pioneered by classical sociologists in the first half of the twentieth century. The "new" social studies of childhood suggest that children are competent and active participants in all kinds of social scenarios. Such a perspective acknowledges children as developing beings, but at the same time validates their agency in their everyday lives. (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998).

II.   EMERGENCE OF "NEW" SOCIAL STUDIES OF CHILDHOOD PARADIGM

The dominance of socialisation theory in the field of childhood researches initially meant that children were seen as incompetent and incomplete, as 'adults in the making rather than children in the state of being' (Brannen & O'Brien, 1995), it was the forces of socialisation – the family and school – which received greater attention with 'little or no time' being given to children themselves (James et al. 1998). The intensity of recent work means that James, Jenks and Prout (1998) set out a paradigm for the "new" social studies of childhood. The epistemological break for the "new" social studies of childhood was the understanding of the child as 'being' - the child is conceived of as a person, a status, a course of action, a set of needs, rights or differences – in sum, as a social actor. The new phenomenon, the 'being' child, must be understood in its own right. It should not have to be approached from an assumed shortfall of competence, reason or significance. This change in terminology – from the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997) to the "new" social studies of childhood (James et al., 1998) – is important, reflecting a growing cross-fertilisation of ideas between researchers in a variety of social science disciplines. These linkages have contributed to a growing interest within geography in children as social actors (Holloway and Valentine, 2000), and an emerging interest in sociology in the spatiality of childhood (James et al, 1998).The rapid changes in the ways by which sociologists think about children, and growing cross-fertilisation of ideas between researchers in a variety of social science disciplines was traced by Holloway and Vallentine (2000). Their study built upon these developments by exploring what three inter-related ways of thinking about spatiality might contribute to the "new" social studies of childhood. First, these scholars argued that working with progressive sense of place, in which global and local are understood to be embedded within one another rather than as dichotomous categories. It could result in productive cross-linkages between currently separated 'global' and 'local' studies, and thus produce more fully contextualised studies of childhood. Second, by building upon existing interests in the ways in which children's identities and lives are made and remade through the sites of everyday life. In particular, they argued that schools and homes need to be thought of not as bounded spaces, but as porous ones produced through their webs of connectedness with wider societies which inform socio-spatial practices within those spaces.

Moreover, Holloway and Vallentine (2000) suggested that in highlighting the spatial disciplining of the school and the control of parents in the home, children's agency, both in terms of their ability to resist adult control and their potential to make strategic alliances with adults to avoid domination by other children, should be given further attention by researchers in the "new" social studies of childhood. Finally, they demonstrated how ideas about childhood inform our understanding of particular spaces, showing that the idea that children's place in the home and that they are either at risk, or need to be considered risky, within public space is dependent upon ideas of children as angels (innocent and lacking competence) and less often, as devils (unsocialised beings whose activities need to be controlled). These spatial discourses are important as they inform socio-spatial practices in these sites, socio-spatial practices which then reinforce, or occasionally challenge, our understanding of childhood. The material and ideological consequences of this dialectical relation between our spatialised ideas of childhood and the socio-spatial practices surrounding childhood warrant further academic attention (Holloway & Vallentine 2000).

III.   CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

There have been few previous investigations of children's responses to questions of national identity, and most of these researches have had as their subtext a concern with otherness, difference and the potential for racist attitudes being revealed. A cross-national comparison of self-identification was carried out with German children and English children as participants, and relied on the contrasting profiles generated by the children's responses in terms of self-perception. The British children were revealed as more confident of being well received outside their own country than their German counterparts, whereas the children of Turkish guest workers in Germany had a significantly lower estimation of their positive reception in places other than Turkey. In this study, national identification emerged from the different profiles rather than being an explicit focus of the research. A series of studies in the United Kingdom was carried out by Carrington and Short (1995, 1998) which focused explicitly on children's sense of national identity and showed this sense to develop in complexity as the children grow older. These researchers adopted a three-part construct of national identity which first relies on the existence of a distinctive group of people defined in terms of tangible characteristics such as language or religion or other cultural practices; second, the assumption that such groups occupy or lay claim to a distinctive territory or place; and third that a 'mystical bond' is forged between people and place to form an immutable whole: the nation. Among the more significant of their findings was that children across the studies appeared relatively uninterested in the question of 'being British', and that only rarely were responses encountered that carried a potentially racist overtone.

The development of children's relationships with their nation at different ages was examined by Kevin Nugent (1994) who described the manner in which this relationship unfolded and the possible stages in its development. Content analysis of children's narratives, at different age levels (10, 12, 14 and 16 years), suggested that the relation of the child to her country is a developmental phenomenon which is mediated by cognitive processes. However, he observed that the affective quality of the child's attachment to her country is influenced by the cultural-historical and political milieu in which it emerges and develops. The study indicated a loose fit between Piaget's stage of formal operations and Erikson's stage of identity achievement and the development of the highest levels of national perspectivism (Nugent, 1994). In his comparative study of Turkish, German and British children, Hengst (1997) focused on the 'us' and 'them' dynamic in the construction of national identity among children. He suggested that while there were differences between the groups studied in relation to the importance they assigned to national identity, there was also evidence of another alignment, in that children, in many cases, saw themselves as more similar to other children across nationalities than to adults who shared their nationality. Hengst suggested a 'children's international' and points to the role played by globalised media, entertainment and consumer industries in establishing a 'basis for the establishment of global solidarity' (Hengst, 1997). The research into childhood, nation and national identity should take the pluralizations of the context of childhood into account and in their exposure to a globalised world through mass media, migration and tourism, today's children constitute 'a new type of generation (Hengst, 1997). Participating as consumers in a globalised economy and actively engaging with a transnational media-based culture, the current generation of Irish children is negotiating and constructing its views of the world in an environment characterized by fluidity and diversity.

IV. DISCOURSES ON CHILDREN'S NATIONAL IDENTITY

The position of children was little different in British sociology as pointed out by Brannen and O'Brien (1995), where children tended to be ignored, with children only being studied indirectly in sub-disciplinary areas such as the family or education. Brannen and O'Brien (1995) observed that while the sociology of childhood may not be coming of age, it is certainly an innovative growth area. Important in this respect have been a number of texts each pushing forward this agenda in slightly different ways. In a qualitative study of Australian children's perceptions of citizenship, public power and politics, Sue Howard and Judith Gill (2001), investigated their talk about the articulation of power in the wider society inevitably raised issues of citizenship, and this in turn led to the question of national identity. The focus was not so much whether they identify as "being Australian", but rather how they feel about doing so, what images they use, their language, their expressions, their inconsistencies and so on. In this way, the research may begin to reveal the ways in which 'the nation' operates as an imaginary construction for the participants. In terms of the substance of their responses to the question of what it means to be Australian, the children appeared to adopt a fairly practical approach. They listed things that were uniquely associated with Australia (animals, landscape, flag etc.) – things that have come to be used in the wider culture to signify Australia in such things as advertisements, films, books, art and so forth. In relation to citizenship, the children were reasonably well informed about the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen – a state that these respondents believe entails a respectful attitude towards one's country. It was particularly encouraging to note that in the multicultural nature of Australian society and the numbers of visibly different groups constituting it, the children never questioned non-Anglo-Australians right for citizenship. Howard and Gill (2004) concluded that that children may be begin to adopt new forms of national identity – forms that involve an easy slippage between the global and the local, the national and the international.

An interesting dimension to the concept of individual agency and to the idea of an international culture of children was added by Scourfield and Davies (2003). In their empirical study of national and ethnic identities in children in Wales, they emphasise agency in the construction of identity, particularly in relation to children of mixed nationality. It was noted that the 'culture of children' may act to restrict agency in some instances, making it more difficult for individuals to challenge the dominant discourse. The empirical basis was a qualitative research project on children's national and local identities in Wales, conducted with 8–11 year olds in six primary schools across the country, with schools selected to provide diversity of region, language, social class and ethnicity. The research focused on the aspects of the children's talk that highlight 'race' and the position of minority ethnic children within Wales. There is discussion of Welshness as racialized, children's views on being white and on being a minority, and evidence of inclusivity amongst children. It was found that the aspects of children's talk pose a barrier to the development of an inclusive Welsh citizenship and to the aspects that support it. There is consideration of children's agency in the construction of nationhood and the limited repertoires they can draw on for this process.

Later, Scourfield et al. (2006) extended their study to include an ever more diverse population of children (8-11 years) all across Wales. They realised that children were not only conscious of stereotypes and images, they also recognized the pressures to conform to them. An ethnographic fieldwork with children on the development of national identity in a Palestinian refugee camp situated in Jordan was undertaken by Hart (2002). Sharon Stephens (1997) argued that an examination of the relations of children within conflicting contexts should be multi-dimensional: There should be better structural/historical understandings of the roles children and childhood have played in the development of modern nation-states and transformations of these phenomena in the ways that children themselves have experienced and understood imagined national communities and some of their historical consequences (Stephens, 1997). The young people in Hussein Camp might be considered as 'deviant' according to the criteria suggested by Stephens, far from fitting into any single 'mould', national identity, in such cases, remained ambiguous and potentially multiple. In such setting, they automatically acquired the status of both United Nations' registered refugees *and* citizens of the Jordanian state. A lot of research needs to be done to understand the range of ways in which children's lives are shaped by the wider political and economic forces of nationalism and the global market in better ways. While conducting ethnographic enquiry into this subject the researchers must always be attentive to the experiences and activity of the young children themselves who resist or reshape the complex, frequently contradictory cultural politics that inform their daily lives (Hart, 2002).

V.   CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDREN'S VOICES, AGENCY AND POWER

The "new" sociological perspective of studying children which views children as competent and active participants in all kinds of social scenarios, such as making social distinctions, expressing or withholding judgment, drawing and redrawing boundaries between here/there, self/other, and so forth was carried forward by Scourfield et al. (2006). This paradigm of understanding children and childhood is validated by an emerging body of largely qualitative sociological studies that have analyzed children as active social beings. According to Scourfield *et al*, there is a historical tendency to present findings of studies conducted in West Europe and North America as though they applied universally. It is argued that the cognitive-developmental account of the development of national attitudes is insufficient to explain the patterns of findings which were obtained, but that social identity theory can explain the correlation between the strength of national identification. A study by Barrett (2007) investigated the development of national identification in children growing up in the Basque Country. The attitudes towards national out-groups which were exhibited by these children did not show any changes as a function of age. This study highlighted that national identification in Basque children is associated with the languages spoken in the family home. It also revealed that Basque children's evaluations of feelings towards national in-groups and out-groups are associated with the home linguistic situation. Thus, in the Basque Country, the use of language was associated with different ways of thinking and feeling about national groups. This relationship applied not only in adults but in children as well. The traditional cognitive-developmental account, which postulated that there is a reduction in in-group bias between 6 and 12 years of age, was unable to explain the lack of age-related changes in attitudes towards national in-groups and out-groups that was found in the present study. However, the study did yield evidence to support the prediction made by social identity theory that the strength of national identification would be related to the positive distinctiveness ascribed to the national in-group. The fact that this prediction was supported using both an evaluative and an affect measure, with respect to both Spanish and Basque identifications, and despite the variability in the national identifications which occurred within the sample as a function of the language used in the family home, suggests that this relationship is robust in these children.

While conceptualising the influences that help to shape children's ideas about their identity, Waldron and Pike (2006) sought to engage children in a questioning and an exploration of what being Irish means to children and, in the process, to come to some understanding of children's ideas of identity. The study supported the view that media conceptions of Irish identity are particularly influential. The commodification of national identity through product advertising and branding was pervasive, while the children's drawings also indicated a further identification with product symbols and slogans. Throughout the research, children gave evidence of real engagement in the construction and negotiation of their ideas of national identity. This research would substantiate the view that children are not passive receivers of popular culture, while socialisation and the flagging of 'banal nationalism' influence children's sense of national identity, they do not determine it. The ideas relating to identity and belonging are central to the public discourse around citizenship that has emerged internationally in recent years. In a peculiar way, the discourse relates to the role of national identity in societies that are increasingly diverse and multicultural. In view of the growing importance of citizenship education, understanding children's ideas about national identity is vital if educators are to engage children in the construction of a hospitable, critical and reflective citizenry (Madan, 2003).

Premised on a social constructivist view of children and childhood, the research drew on participative and democratic methodologies. Though many studies suggest the existence of an essentialist conception of nationalism, it also demonstrates the capacity and willingness of children to engage in critical reflection on their constructions of their own national identity.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paradigm on "new" social studies of childhood emerged which reflects a growing cross-fertilisation of ideas in a variety of social science disciplines towards the last decade of the twentieth century. This paradigm evolved in response to the growing dissatisfaction among researchers with previous perspectives on different aspects of development in children, including representation of concepts, such as nation or national identity. The theme of nation may be conceptualised as social, political, historical, geographical, subjective and as a more holistic construct in the form of national identity for children. The development of national identity in children has been critically examined using "new" social studies of childhood paradigm through several research studies. The research methods applied under different perspectives for studying children's national identity have immense differences. It is quite significant to evaluate the research methods applied in research studies as they may either limit or expand the horizon of researches undertaken within those perspectives. The "new" social studies of childhood apply various methods - individual interviews, narrative inquiry, discourse analysis and ethnography to collect and analyse data with children depending on the context of the research. It gives prominence to children as "subjects" of research by collecting in-depth data on limited participants through qualitative methods. Therefore, it integrates diversity of research approaches with children and considers children as social actors and active participants with their set of needs, rights, individual differences and subjective dimensions. On the criteria of giving agency to children, "new" social studies of childhood evolved as an interdisciplinary perspective of studying child as a developing "being" – which is conceived of as a social actor or participant, who can be understood in her/his own right. Therefore, the "new" social studies of childhood perspective provides due significance to different socialisation factors and foregrounds the social context of children.

REFERENCES

[1] Brannen, J. & O'Brien, M. (1995). Childhood and the Sociological Gaze: Paradigms and Paradoxes. *Sociology.* 29: 729-737.
[2] Barrett, M. (2007). *Children's knowledge, beliefs and feelings about nations and national groups*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.
[3] Carrington, B. & Short, G. (1995) 'What makes a person British? Children's conceptions of their national culture and identity', *Educational Studies,21*(2), 217–238.
[4] George, A. (2007). *Children's perceptions of sarkar: A critique of civics textbooks.* Bhopal: Eklavya.
[5] Gill, J. & Howard, S. (2001) Still calling Australia home? Children's constructions of place and identity.
[6] Hart, J. (2002) Children and nationalism in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, *Childhood*, 9(1), 35-47.
[7] Hengst, H. (1997) Negotiating 'us' and 'them': Children's constructions of collective identity. *Childhood*, 4(1), 43-62.
[8] Howard, S. & Gill, J. (2001) It's like we're a normal way and everyone else is different: Australian children's constructions of citizenship and national identity. *Educational Studies.* 27(1), 87-103.
[9] James, A. & Prout, A (eds) (1997). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood.* Falmer Press: London.
[10] James, A., Jenks, C. & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorising Childhood*. Polity Press: Cambridge.
[11] Madan, A. (2003). Old and new dilemmas in Indian civic education. *Economic and Political Weekly.* 38, (44), 4655-4660.
[12] Nugent, J. K. (1994). The development of children's relationships with their country. *Children's Environments.* 11, 281–291.
[13] Scourfield, J., Dicks, B. Drakeford, M. and Davies, A. (2006). *Children, place and identity: Nation and locality in middle childhood.* London: Routledge.
[14] Stephens, S. (1997) Editorial introduction: Children and nationalism. *Childhood.* 4(1), 5-18.
[15] Waldron, F. & Pike, S. (2006). What does it mean to be Irish? Children's construction of national identity. *Irish Educational Studies*, 25(2), 231-251.