

REVIEW ARTICLE

# *Developmental Psychology in cultural historical context – overview and further reflections<sup>1</sup>*

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ABSTRACT

From Bill Kessen's idea of the child as a "cultural invention" (Kessen, 1983) it follows that developmental psychology cannot function fruitfully without historical analysis. Developmentalists should stop "positivistic dreaming" and develop a historical developmental psychology. The history of childhood shows how a historical process of infantilization has taken place since Rousseau and the 19th century pedagogical and educational theories and institutions. In the 20th century a new process of de-infantilization took place, caused mainly by the modern mass media (Postman, 1982). It is demonstrated how this led to the "disappearance of childhood". Babies no longer were considered and studied as "empty-headed" (William James' conception of the baby experiencing "one great blooming, buzzing confu-

sion"): impressive new research methods and data "filled the baby's brain" and made the baby much more human than ever before in history. With the narrowing of the gap between childhood and adulthood adolescence as a bridge is less necessary than before. Not only the disappearance of childhood is going on; at the same time there is a correlated disappearance of adolescence. The conclusion must be that the study of cognitive, social and personality development should take into consideration the cultural historical embeddedness.

KEY WORDS

history of childhood; infantilization; disappearance of childhood; historical developmental psychology

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION – A: Study design · B: Data collection · C: Statistical analysis · D: Data interpretation · E: Manuscript preparation · F: Literature search · G: Funds collection

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Koops, W. (2023). Developmental Psychology in cultural historical context – overview and further reflections. *Current Issues in Personality Psychology*.

RECEIVED 04.08.2022 · REVIEWED 23.11.2022 · ACCEPTED 20.01.2023 · PUBLISHED 18.04.2023

## BACKGROUND

In this essay I try to defend the idea that childhood and child development are cultural historically changing objects. It is therefore not acceptable to base scientific developmental research on a positivistic philosophy of science. It was the great scholar Bill Kessen who defended this position. This essay will firstly summarize his approach. Then it will describe how our conceptualization of childhood is based on the historical process of infantilization. The infantilization process came to an end in the 20th century, mainly due to the development of mass media. The de-infantilization in the 20th century was followed by the disappearance of adolescence, that is by the untenability of the original conception of adolescence as described by Hall.

## BILL KESSEN'S INSPIRATION

The oft-cited developmental psychologist William Kessen (1925-1999) considered the American child a "cultural invention" (Kessen, 1983). The implications of this view have been analyzed and described by Koops and Kessel (2017), here summarized as follows.

Understandably, scientists who study children wish to continue to pursue what Kessen referred to as a 'positivistic dream', in which such multiple variations in the definition of the child are considered the "removable [correctible] error of an [as-yet-] incomplete science" (Koops & Kessel, 2017). Kessen's view, however, was that developmental psychologists needed to finally attempt to bridge what he considered the "abyss of the positivistic nightmare" (Kessen, 1983). Therefore developmental psychologists should take into consideration and investigate the cultural-historical background of child development as well as developmental science as such.

Kessen himself described in his classic essay three historical developments in 19th century USA that shaped foundational ideas of developmental psychology through the present. These are: the division between the domains of work and family; a strong separation of masculinity and femininity; and because children were excluded from the professional world and were strongly linked to home and mother, they were sentimentalized. Kessen made clear that such cultural historical foundations are seldom recognized.

In developmental psychology the importance of a harmonious family, the significant role of mothers, and the decisive role of early experience in the development of the child are conventionally considered as principles anchored in the laws of nature, for which researchers seek and find empirical evidence.

Let me now write a few words about the meaning of the concept of positivism. Kessen's critical notion of "positivistic dreaming" implies that we as devel-

opmental scientists should not believe that empirical analytic research automatically leads to finding universal laws. Instead of this simple belief in induction they should follow Popper's falsificationism (Popper, 1935, 1959, 1963). What I want to advocate is "methodological liberalism": anti-positivistic and seeking carefully for falsification of hypotheses. And that can be done quantitatively as well as qualitatively. For a more extensive explanation of this liberal position, I refer to Koops and Kessel (2017).

## THE HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD AND INFANTILIZATION

What I learned from Bill Kessen is that the child is not only a biological being but *also* a cultural invention, a product of the 'Zeitgeist'. For the study of the historical context of childhood and for the study of the cultural historical context of developmental psychology as a discipline we need what I like to call historical developmental psychology. I will now indicate the kind of study that I am referring to.

Let us first try to understand how the history of childhood has been since the Middle Ages a history of infantilization. The concept of infantilization comes from the field that is indicated as the history of childhood. It refers to the process of the increasing duration of the childhood stage (a cultural historical process between the 14th and the 20th century) and at the same time a growing distance between childhood and adulthood. I will outline the European roots of the present-day developmental psychology. I will have to return to the period of the Enlightenment, the growth of community schooling and Romanticism.

A scholar who wants to think, speak and write about children has no choice but to come to terms with the Enlightenment. This call takes us to the greatest Enlightenment philosopher of all: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Kant's admiration for Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) will serve as the basis of the description of the history of developmental psychology. Rousseau's *Émile, ou de l'éducation* from 1762 was called "the birth certificate of pedagogy" by Kant (see Prins, 1963).

What message did Rousseau wish to convey? He claimed that pedagogy should be child-oriented; and that there are age-related stages, to which the approach towards the child, including the pedagogical and educational approaches, must be tailored. In short, Rousseau put developmental psychology at the fore of thinking about children for the first time in history.

The first 4 books (sections) of *Émile* describe the stages of a child's cognitive and moral development, and how the parent or guardian must respect and be in keeping with these stages. There is a striking

correspondence here with the theory of the later founder of developmental psychology, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), in his lifetime the director of l'Institut J. J. Rousseau in Geneva. It should be realized that Piaget's stage theory is the result of unprecedented large-scale and worldwide, albeit mainly Western, empirical research. Rousseau's boy *Émile*, on the other hand, is a mere literary concoction. So: how can it be that Piaget and his followers discovered in empirical research what Rousseau had made up in the process of writing in his armchair? At least part of the answer is: European education, particularly in public schools, was shaped according to Rousseau's ideas. I will now summarize that shaping process.

The most important source of Rousseauian education was located in Dessau, Germany, home to the Philanthropinum, a model school, also teacher training school, founded by the educationalist Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724-1790). The Philanthropists were dedicated to "natural education" and aimed at (I quote Basedow, see Reble, 1965) "developing a child's possibilities as freely as possible, creating a cheerful development and learning atmosphere, stimulating autonomous thinking, and facilitating a world orientation and practical attitude to life which are focused on the present". The Philanthropists adopted these principles from Rousseau. Well-known educators connected to the Philanthropinum are: Campe (1746-1818) and Salzmann (1744-1811); linked to their ideas are Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and the "Pestalozzians" such as Fröbel (1782-1852) and Herbart (1776-1841).

In the second half of the 18th century, the complete reform of upbringing and education self-evidently led to the establishment of community schools. As early as in 1763, Frederick the Great (1712-1786) introduced compulsory learning in Prussia, supported by legislation. More than anything, it was the shock following Prussia's defeat against Napoleon in 1806 (the Battle of Jena) which nourished this new zest for *Nationalerziehung* (national education).

The Jena defeat was so crushing that philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) spoke about "the end of history" (see Fukuyama, 1989, 1992). In response, the intellectuals in Prussia withdrew into Romanticism, which was mainly founded on Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and which was a countermovement against the French Enlightenment – a countermovement that worshipped the German *Volksgeist* (the soul of the German people), but also a countermovement that was most definitely based on Rousseau's sentimentalism. In this invigorated post-Jena Romanticism, the romanticized Child as hope for a better future became the very focus of attention.

After the Battle of Jena, the people in Germany were very susceptible to the romantic educational concepts of the Philanthropists and the Pestalozzians. Rousseau's *Émile* had a large impact on the devel-

opment of modern European community schooling, the modern European teaching institutions under national supervision, and general compulsory education. All children had to attend school from the age of six until they were about 12 years old. From the 20th century, they had to attend school until an even older age and eventually also from a younger age as a result of merging with Fröbel's *Kindergartens*.

The Rousseauian organization of the Primary School (originally a Prussian initiative), institutionalized and, in a culturally historical way, realized the ideas on child development that Rousseau devised at his writing table to the extent that, in the 20th century, Piaget's empirical research reveals a developmental course that is comparable to the prototypical development of Rousseau's *Émile*.

This history of developmental thinking and setting children apart from the adult world, by sending them to schools for ever longer periods, is the source of the infantilization process.

A question that is often asked is: will the historical infantilization process go on forever? The answer is: no.

#### DE-INFANTILIZATION: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CHILDHOOD

The infantilization process came to a stop around the nineteen sixties. From then on, children again became part of the adult world. With respect to the past, a developmental jump has taken place that is entirely new: the accessibility in every way of everyone, including children, to the fully adult-like mass media.

The first author to identify a fundamental link between the concept of childhood and the mass media was Postman (1982). He pointed out that in a non-literate world it is not necessary to make a sharp distinction between children and adults. It was in fact the art of printing books which created a new world of symbols, which in turn required a new concept of "adulthood". Adulthood had to be learned. It became a symbolic, not a biological, achievement. The concept of the child enjoyed its finest hour, in fact its finest century, between 1850 and 1950. Maximal infantilization took place in this period. From then on, the concept of the child has gone downhill, and the childless period has begun. According to Postman, telegraphy started a process that made information uncontrollable, and which freed it from parental control. This development was reinforced "by an uninterrupted flow of inventions: the rotary press, the camera, the telephone, the phonograph, the movies, the radio, television". Postman felt that particularly television destroyed the boundary between children and adults: supported by other electronic media which do not depend on the written word, televi-

sion recreates the conditions of communication that existed in the 14th and 15th centuries. Furthermore, since Postman's book the internet has afforded the final opening of the adult world to the child.

It is, according to my insights, not incidental that from the sixties on there has been an incredible amount of research data about cognitive and social competencies of babies and very young children. I will now shortly describe here how the empty brain of the baby was filled with communicative competencies. Originally, their perceptual competences, for instance, were deemed utterly limited. The American 'father' of psychology, William James, wrote that "the baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion" (James, 1890, vol. 1, p. 488).

James' view of a 'blooming buzzing confusion' in the head of the baby has a long tradition. In his *Émile*, Rousseau imagined that a child would be born the actual size of a strong man. What would this newborn be like? Rousseau's answer is as follows: "This man-child would be a perfect imbecile, an automaton, an immobile and almost insensible statue. He would see nothing, hear nothing, know no one, would not be able to turn his eyes toward what he needed to see" (Rousseau, 1763).

The scientific developments in developmental psychology in the second part of the 20th century called an end to this 'empty-headedness' and/or complete chaos in babies. Increasingly quickly, impressive numbers of new research methods and data were generated and rapidly 'filled the baby's brain'.

I here just refer to the work in the field of the child's theory of mind. The shortest explanation of what the child's theory of mind is about was beautifully formulated by Harris (1977), who gave a speech titled *The child as a psychologist*. Wellman's classic book (Wellman, 1990) explains that, in principle, young children follow a naive psychological theory that helps them to understand the behavior of other people and makes them accessible interlocutors. From very early on, the structure of the thinking about the behavior of other people in children is not principally different from that in adults. After 1990, an enormous amount of research literature was published about the child's theory of mind, which was summarized in Wellman's latest book (Wellman, 2015), as the sequel to the book he published in 1990. Perhaps most striking is the study into one-year olds who already appear to have more than a rudimentary theory of mind (ToM). In order to give an impression of the enormous number of publications about theory of mind, I like to point out that if you google the phrase *theory of mind* you will get over 700 million hits! We can wholeheartedly assume that the baby brain has since the 1960s on been filled with psychological knowledge, as the pondering expression on the face of the child on the cover of Wellman's book

clearly shows. It is also visible in the child on the cover of the scientific bestseller by Gopnik (2009). I quote the following from that book:

"We used to think that babies and young children were irrational, egocentric, and amoral. Their thinking and experience were concrete, immediate, and limited. In fact, psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered that babies not only learn more, but imagine more, care more, and experience more than we would ever have thought possible. In some ways, young children are actually smarter, more imaginative, more caring, and ever more conscious than adults are" (Gopnik, 2009, p. 13).

The scientific developmental psychological research of the last fifty years leads to the conclusion that young children have far more human characteristics in common with the adults than we assumed for the past 200 years. This de-infantilization, I mean this ending of the historical infantilization process, results from cultural historical developments that have brought children back into the adult world.

## HOW ABOUT ADOLESCENCE?

If children come back to the world of the adults, adolescence as a bridge to adulthood is not anymore necessary. Let us look at the history of adolescence.

First of all: throughout the Middle Ages there was no such thing as adolescence. This concept of adolescence in its modern significance was first referred to by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had such a great impact on our present-day thinking about development and upbringing. It was again Rousseau who pointed out that his *Émile* was not born once, but twice. First, he was born from his mother, and then again as a grown up and sexually mature man. Rousseau described adolescence as a period of crisis. I quote (Rousseau, 1763, p. 236):

"The child who is maturing is moody and erratic, and has a more or less strong aversion toward parental authority; it does not want to be led any more. In this period it does not want to have anything to do with the adult, it is unreasonable and mutinous; in short, it is unmanageable. It should be kept in mind, however, that all this is of the greatest significance. The child is maturing; after this crisis nothing human will be foreign to it".

Rousseau's description closely dovetails with the current general notion. The only issue that a modern-day reader of Rousseau's work would be surprised about is that he speaks about a brief crisis (literally: *ce moment de crise, bien qu'assez court*). Since Rousseau, the period of adolescence has continuously increased, not only in its duration, but also in intensity. If you open any book or paper on adolescence, you will find that the authors refer to a phase of the lifespan that starts at 12 and ends about 25 years of age,

as can be seen in the recent important book by Meeus (2019) on all the advanced longitudinal research of his team. The intense emotionality that has been attributed to adolescence starts with the description by Stanley Hall, who, in 1904, wrote the first groundbreaking two-volume book of 1300 pages on adolescence. He introduced the term adolescence in its modern meaning. I quote:

“Adolescence is a time of oscillations and oppositions, between inertness and excitement, pleasure and pain, self-confidence and humility, selfishness and altruism. Society and solitude, sensitiveness and dullness, knowing and doing, conservatism and iconoclasm, and sense and intellect” (Hall, 1904, p. 40; White, 1994, p. 119).

Hall’s thinking was of a strong biological nature and, as a result, his work on adolescence to a large extent has contributed to adolescence often being considered a biologically embedded, universal developmental stage in human development. Hall acquired his theories in Germany. In his time, American students used to go to Germany to study psychology; now the German students travel to the United States. In Germany, he picked up the notion of *Sturm und Drang*, an allusion to the movement of poets who, according to the standards of the time, demonstrated rather anti-social behavior: they dressed in a bohemian style, sometimes practiced partner swapping, etc. Hall translated the concept of *Sturm und Drang* into *Storm and Stress*. That is why now, in American textbooks, our students read that adolescents experience a period of Storm and Stress, usually without having the faintest idea where this term originated from.

According to Hall, storm and stress are unavoidable: we all must pass through this phase, and growing into adulthood is not possible without it. Ever since Stanley Hall’s work, the term “normative turmoil” has been readily used. The term implies that a turbulent adolescence is the norm.

Despite Hall’s theory of the biologically necessary “normative turmoil”, it makes rather more sense to understand modern adolescence from a culturally historical point of view. The 19th century industrialization had put children outside the scope of the adult world like never before.

Epstein (2010) explains that Hall’s adolescence predominantly is the outcome of the American industrialization. The factors that he discusses and documents at length include: the urge that women and men have to protect their children against the long working hours in the new factories; the new assumptions about the weakness, helplessness, and incompetence of young people; the deliberate attempts by the new trade unions to protect the jobs of older employees by excluding youngsters; the ambition of leading industrialists to create new generations of trained laborers through mass education; the founding of new companies and industries geared to

youngsters that created a new youth culture (Disney, Fisher-Price, the pop music industry, youth fashion, gaming, etc.); and numerous toy industries. Both the exclusion from the work in the factories and the creation of youth-oriented industries placed the youngsters outside the adult world.

Stanley Hall, as we may assume, did not discover a biologically based developmental stage, but described a relatively new culturally historical phenomenon.

The first and most successful author who wrote about the cultural specificity of adolescence was the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978). The book that made Mead instantly famous – her book about growing up on Samoa (Mead, 1928) – is the most interesting one. It led to the notion accepted worldwide that Mead had proved that adolescence is a cultural phenomenon created by us Westerners. It was aimed at a wide audience and was very successful; more than a million copies were sold, and it is still being printed.

However, Mead was attacked by publications by Freeman (1983, 1998). I will not go into this very fierce and awful debate, but simply state that despite the controversies between Mead and Freeman, Mead’s assumptions about adolescence as a cultural phenomenon still stand.

Mead’s original claims have been confirmed by the contemporary studies of Schlegel and Barry (1991). These researchers studied the data about youngsters from 186 pre-industrial societies. The following appears: 1) 60% of these cultures have no word for adolescence and no terms that point to any type of “turmoil” whatsoever between puberty and marriage; 2) most of the youngsters in these cultures spend most of their time with same-sex adults and hardly any time with same-sex peers; 3) anti-social behavior by young men is of a very mild nature (compared to their American peers); 4) teenagers in these cultures rarely demonstrate aggressive, violent, or pathological behavior. To this classic, often-cited study, many cross-cultural data can be added. I only mention Dasen’s work here. Dasen (2000) presents studies that show that the Westernization of countries always goes hand in hand with the conception of Western adolescence. Religious missions and the introduction of Western education in Kenya, for instance, led to an increase in the number of young, unmarried mothers. The same is seen in Morocco as well as among the Aborigines in Australia, accompanied by serious conflicts between the generations. For the Inuit in Canada, the introduction of Western education, television, and a social security system managed to destroy the traditional culture and led to the conception of modern adolescence. Comparable developments took place in the Ivory Coast.

These developments are characterized by one and the same mechanism, i.e., teenagers in these countries

are faced with the following notions when Western education and Western media are introduced there:

“...teens are cut off from adults and from the centrality of adult culture; they’re prevented from working, or at least from making work the center of their lives; they become controlled by adults rather than part of adult life; teens, rather than adults, become their role models” (Epstein, 2010, p. 86).

Epstein in this way perfectly describes the infantilization process, resulting in adolescence. However, in our time the situation of adolescents is rapidly changing. It seems that, ever since the last few decades, the classic adolescence in Northwestern Europe is disappearing. Numerous studies, all of which I cannot discuss here, show that adolescents demonstrate far less rebellious behavior than before: generation conflicts have clearly decreased.

Research further shows that the much-discussed mood swings are not more prominent in adolescents than in other age groups (see e.g. Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Offer, 1969; Rutter et al., 1976). The contact between the generations has become far more informal than in the past 200 years; generation conflicts are no longer widespread (see e.g. Adelson, 1979; Bandura, 1964; Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Meeus, 1994). These new insights into adolescence came into being in the nineteen sixties and seventies and are now accepted broadly. Overviews are to be found in several handbooks, such as Meeus (1994) and Epstein (2010). All this applies predominantly to European youngsters, and perhaps I should say Northwestern European youngsters.

It looks as if the developments in Europe are ahead of those in the United States. For the particularly strong infantilization of adolescents also has a commercial cause: the creation of a special market for children and adolescents perpetuates a separate youth culture, cut off from the adult world. This commercial foundation of infantilization is nowhere as soundly grounded as in the US.

On an annual basis, more than 200 billion dollars are spent by teenagers (Epstein, 2010). The market leaders proclaim this money as “pester money”, i.e., moaning money, money for products that teenagers moan for. One out of three high school students owns a credit card as well as 84% of college students. A quarter of the mobile phones are bought by youngsters, for a total amount of about 35 billion dollars. We can, therefore, conclude that:

“The isolation of teens from adults brought about by the Industrial Revolution has been a boon for American business, which has, in turn, widened the gap between teens and adults” (Epstein, 2010, p. 361).

Despite all this, we still come across increasingly critical observations about adolescence both in scientific research and in the media in the United States. The above-mentioned book by Epstein plays a large role here.

In a nutshell, his proposals suggest that we should refrain from age determinations. Commands and bans should not be based on age but rather on what Epstein calls competencies. He uses many chapters of his book to explain that the adolescent competencies continue to be seriously underestimated.

One of the most important measures that Epstein proposes is the termination of long-term compulsory education from a young age. He suggests exchanging this for lifelong learning linked to acquiring professional experience and training. This would prevent youngsters from virtually only being in contact with peers for such a long time. Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, is a passionate follower of Epstein. He developed political proposals to accelerate the development of adolescents. I will not discuss his political proposals, but only note the fact that even within the United States traditional adolescence is being discussed in depth. I just wish to stress that Epstein’s book extraordinarily clearly indicates that, in the US, too, adolescence is coming to an end, or at least that a strong desire exists for this to happen.

## CONCLUSIONS

Hopefully it is clear from the foregoing that *childhood* came into being by a long historical process of infantilization. In the last century however a new process of de-infantilization, caused by the mass and social media, brought children back to the adult world. That is to say children got (again) access to the adult information world. This is mainly a result of the mass media and the internet.

At the same time adolescence, that is the bridge between childhood and adulthood, is not needed anymore and indeed is disappearing. That is to say: the original conception of adolescence, introduced by Hall, is not valid anymore. The idea of “normative turmoil” is not biologically unavoidable as Hall thought, but is linked to cultural historical contexts. The two main aspects of Hall’s normative turmoil are generation conflicts and rebellious behavior.

Paying attention to the cultural historical context of developmental psychology has profound consequences. It makes clear that psychological development changes over time. It implies that age-related behavior and emotions are less biologically “fixed” than traditionally has been suggested, but at least partly result from the cultural historical context. I just refer back to the cultural historical changing conceptions and findings of the development of infants as well as to the rise and fall of normative turmoil in adolescence. Cognitive development in infancy, social development in adolescence and age-related personality development should be considered and studied as culturally historically embedded.

For this approach of developmental psychology, I suggest the concept of historical developmental psychology.

ENDNOTE

1 This essay is based on an invited address at the 29th Annual Polish Conference on Developmental Psychology, Warsaw, May 22, 2021, and on two invited addresses at the Conference of the Japan Society of Youth and Adolescent Psychology at Sendai (on “Miraculous babies”) and at Tokyo (“Does adolescence exist?”) on March 24 and 27, 2018.

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