

## **The Ontological Insecurity of Childhood : A Case Study**

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The concept of childhood keeps being re-invented. It has been argued (Aries 1962, Elias 1978 and 1982) that it is only comparatively recently that the concept of a separate period in the stages of life was developed. The way in which childhood is discussed varies according to the fundamental attitudes taken towards the very young; are they to be seen and not heard, are they amusing, in their curious sayings; are they the mainstay of the educational industry? More importantly what are the demarcation lines in development? Are their certain rites of passage, like adolescence, which show shared common characteristics?

Some of the atavistic and pseudo-scientific assumptions about the limitations of children, for instance in the research of Piaget, have recently been questioned (e.g. Donaldson 1978). There are alternative ways of understanding development, for instance in moral terms, like those of Plato (see Egan 1970 and 1997). More importantly the accommodation of research evidence demonstrates two important themes. One is the significance of the early years of childhood in its formative influence over the subsequent life span. Jesuits have long pointed it out but is now enshrined in official reports (Pugh 1997, Ball 1993) even if the implications have not been understood. The other significant insight into the nature of early childhood shows why those years are so important. It is the sheer mental capacity even of young babies in their scrutiny of the world (Pinker 1994). The understanding of social phenomenon, such as distinctions between truth and falsehood, is demonstrated as early as it can be researched (Dunn 1988).

Acknowledging the importance of the formative years should make us question what we are actually doing about it. To what extent should there be intervention programmes. Is what children experience in schools, let alone homes, adequate? In a largely anonymous education system based on grouping numbers of pupils together, on disseminating facts and testing retention of knowledge, it is not always easy to bear in mind the needs and attitudes of individual children. The fact that they are rarely seriously listened to is part of their formative experience. There are, of course, times when insights into the psyche of early childhood become important, and this is in hindsight of psychiatry. Psychoanalysis, whether developed from Freudian or Jungian concepts, depends heavily on the experiences of early childhood, the inner and inadvertence as well as the more obvious socio-economic environment.

Looking back for what is significant and formative out of a mass of complex experiences, is, of course a very important method of enquiry. The question remains whether it is also possible to predict, to understand the nature of the experience of childhood as it happens. Psychiatrists have long dealt with troubled children (Winkley 1982). What of the rest, the whole population of young people, learning about the world in an ostensibly untroubled way? This paper explores some of those early experiences which are shared by all children. Some of them become extremely disturbed by them. The case study analysed here also shows how significant is the way an individual reacts to experience.

Whilst we are looking here at one case study it is important to note the research from which it is drawn. The material lies mainly in the transcripts of several hundred semi-structured interviews, gathered over several years. The particular transcripts of an 8-year-old boy are fairly typical in terms of length, depth and the amount of issues covered, and the consistency of the findings. All the research is aimed at trying to find out both how young individuals (5 -

20) adjusts to their world, which formative influences are most significant and how the experience is explained in terms of idiosyncratic understanding and individual behaviour.

There are three main texts in which the overlapping results of the research can be found. The first is the *Human Experience: The Early Years* (Cullingford 1999a). This reveals the way in which young children observe the world they live in, at home, in their neighbourhood and in school. The application of intelligent observation of other people's behaviour and the sources of information reveal the potential for trauma. The young people described not only personal experience but observed the way in which they saw the larger world operating. The themes that are also revealed in this case study include observations of their environment and the contrasts between rich and poor, as well as the personal experience of bullying.

In *The Causes of Exclusion* (Cullingford 1999b) some of these themes are taken further, particularly the experience of the home, and relationships with people in and around the school. The context studied here was with people somewhat older. The crucial influence of the way in which connections are made with adults, like parents, is a theme which re-emerged here and which connects to other research studies (Wells Richman et al, Heath). The ways in which young people formulate attitudes to society and discriminate between role and personality are explored. The development of self-concepts, morality and young people's views of their own styles of living are major themes.

In *Prejudice* (Cullingford 2000) there are further insights into the relationship between individual identity and the cultural patterning of groups, including nations. The experience of home, including sibling rivalry, and the ways in which friendship patterns develop in school (Davies 1982) are also significant themes which also emerge in this particular case. All the themes which will be explored in this study of one boy emerge consistently in the materials that the books discuss, across gender, across age, and across socio-economic circumstances. There are certain experiences shared by all.

At the same time each individual has a unique perspective. The themes of attitude and influence might be pervasive but each person reacts and behaves in a distinct way. It is the way in which the experience is used, and the formulation of attitudes and styles of thought which makes each case different. In all this actual work the results were carefully analysed to bring out valid and reliable data, allowing for a variety of witnesses. In this particular case we see the themes emerge, but we see them also working alongside each other in a way which, if typical, and representative, is nevertheless unique (as is, of course, each person). What we see here is a case study of a boy of eight who summarises not only his own experiences, but more importantly his attitudes towards them. We see a certain cast of mind, and a series of comments that inadvertently reveal the potential for certain kinds of behaviour.

The nostalgic vision of childhood as a permanent period of warm security is something widely shared. It is even shared by children themselves, contemplating the safety of being babies before having to accept the responsibilities of being seven. Such a view ignores the fact that children live in the same world as the adults, a world which is full of threats. This broadcast news underlines the many disasters; crime is a constant worry. Children are aware of this. The particular case which we are looking at - it might be more convenient to call him Stan, aged eight - typically observes the realities of what takes place in his neighbourhood.

"One thing I don't like is at night because I hear like bangs at the windows, like that [knocking on the table].. so I get a bit scared 'cos I think somebody's there".

The possibility of being burgled is not an abstract one but turned into a palpable fear. This demonstrated the observation of insecurity, not just sounds to 'scare' but people causing them, and people threatening.

"As you could just climb right over the fence, 'cos the fence is only this high. And I sometimes sneak round there to get round the shops and things in the morning".

Personal experience suggests what people could do. The word 'sneak' gives some indication of the view of burglars. These are real people who could do actual damage.

"cos sometimes I think people are hiding against the walls and stuff. And hiding where theres places like this and you can't see and things. Sometimes you think like someone's gonna get you".

The association of certain sounds with being scared in general are sometimes relished. The safety of the cosy bed contrasts with the outside world of the imagination. But here there are people who are causing the fear, and actions which are actually threatening. Stan's view of people includes the possibility of deliberately cruel motivation : someone's 'gonna get you'. We read about burglary all the time, and more occasionally about child abuse. Usually these events are distant. For some they are carried out by real people who could be close. Some people are in fact a personal threat.

"Like I wish cars couldn't go up as long as somebody wants to pick you up or something because then you can't just play around on the roads".

This theme of threat in the neighbourhood is not just a passing fancy, designed to surprise. There is a worry about people entering his home which is based not on knowledge that this can happen but on assuming that some people will want to carry out such an action.

"Because quite a lot of people live round our area and these people asked how many bedrooms in next door and things and I thought like they were stealing or something. So I thought they're gonna be sneaking in this house and steal something at night".

There is a basis of insecurity, of observing people's behaviour, like drunks in the street which has a deeper effect than the images of television. People are not only a potential threat, but behave in a manner which is personally understood. All children understand the insecurity of communities. What is unusual about Stan is that his fear is also based on experience. The word 'sneak' is applied to himself or other people's actions of a more ordinary kind, as well as to thieves.

"Like grown-ups sometimes and sometimes children can sneak, because children know where they put their things don't they because they live with them, so they sometimes can steal a fifty pound note without letting the adults know. So they can buy that computer game without letting you know".

To 'sneak', to steal, to be surreptitious, are all viewed here not as external threats but every day possibilities. What makes Stan unusual is not his view of the neighbourhood where he lives, but his view of himself and of other children. Stealing is an actual fact. It is something that can happen to you more if you understand the motivation, and understand what it is like. Many children look objectively at their own homes, and long for more space on their own. They have their ideals of the perfect, unthreatened space. (Hart 1979, Matthews 1992, Cullingford 1999a). They see space as a symbol of security. Most realise that where they

actually live is relatively small, or unsafe, compared to others. Contracts are accepted. There is a tendency to long for something different as well as to accept the reality of what is.

"I like just big houses really and a good, what you can't even break in, and a wall against there and a wall against the sides and stuff... I'm living in a flat now".

There is always the possibility of something better. Stan, like so many others, thinks that people are 'happier' in America essentially because they are seen as richer.

Whilst there are factors which make their own community acceptable - this is where they and their friends live, sharing the cultural understandings - children are always aware of contracts, like that between the riches of the United States and the poverty, as in the Oxfam images, of Africa. Stan, like others, witnesses the very poor, the downs and outs, and glimpses the rich.

"I know one man and he's really rich...and he gave me a ten pound note for my birthday...he tells us and he's got two really good cars. One about two thousand and fifty thousand pounds...."

What Stan sees he desires. He sees the power of money. It becomes more important because of the contrast with those who suffer from its lack.

"They a bit very poor, especially in India and countries like this. And um they have really... and other kind of countries. They have really poor, you hear it on the news and things..."

The world is observed in all its contrasts. There are the rich and poor, in people and countries. Nothing is equitable.

This is generally observed and accepted. What makes Stan unusual is the way he translates what is observed into personal desire. He sincerely wishes to be rich.

"Yeah, because you can get what you want. Like you can get two bikes. Like two gear ones and a BMX or something. And um you can get the toys you really want. Computer games you really want and videos you really want and stuff like this, and a house you really want and clothes you really want, and shoes you really want..."

The desires go on and on. All know the sometimes subliminal desire for acquisition, for the possession of a host of toys. Stan, however, shows openly his unselfconscious greed. He really wants a host of things, and sounds as if he is not only aware of the power of money but wanting to act on it. He knows the prices of various goods. He knows he 'really wants to get it'.

The desire to possess goods can be for some children an abstract wish. This is not the case with Stan.

"quite bad because there's something's like in supermarkets that you really like and you really wanna get but you can't afford it..."

Being poor has its consequences. It means relying on other means in order to acquire what is wanted. This could be in the form of presents from people who have money and who are

cajoled, even pressed into giving. It is the rich who will be approached for a 'Christmas present' like a Nintendo computer game. Stan is aware that some are rich and this is a state that is desirable.

"I'd like to change so I could get rich... and I had a good car and a Porsche or a Lamborgini... and good shoes that are fifty pounds and nice clothes, really nice clothes".

The power of money is defined as getting what you want.

"And a thing that you can just say....and it just comes down and gives you it and you can have as much as you like".

There is a kind of greed beyond everyday desire. It is linked to palpable objects, and associated with prices. In this awareness of what things cost, and the almost aggressive wish to have possessions, Stan is unusual. There is a realisation that he would not let such desires remain in the realm of the fanciful, but that he would need to act on it. He has talked about the way in which people can 'sneak' their way to money. Stealing is a clear option. Children are assumed to do so if they can. There is a suspicion of everybody, including parents.

"I don't know really [if they are poor]. Because sort of they say, "I can't afford it" and things. And sometimes I think they're lying or something. And sometimes they're not and stuff like that".

He doesn't know if his parents are rich, but he knows that people in America are 'really rich and they can buy really good cars and stuff'. His parents, whatever they say, are still a source for his demands. There is little trust.

Stan is full of jealousy for those who have money. This can make life difficult for him. Everyday circumstances that he experiences mean denial, an absence of what is wanted was undergone by others.

"Well sometimes I'm a bit bad and sometimes I, whether I'm bad, I try to be really good and I get pocket money from my Mum and Dad, £1 and I save it up so I can get what I like, like computer games or something.... I'm saving up for a really lot of money... I can save pounds and so I can always save up and stuff".

The difference between regular saving and the amounts needed to possess what is desired is clear. One wonders whether he has the patience to accumulate enough in a normal way. He can, after all, become frustrated.

"Sometimes I throw things even if people are there, like last night I threw the chair really badly and I nearly hit the TV and I dared to throw it through the window or something 'cos I get really angry sometimes".

Anger and frustration can lead to a connection with greed, and difficult relationships.

"Some people like hurt me, like kick me, like my Dad sometimes and, um , or smacks me. So I get really mad, so I dare to do things and kick them".

A lack of rationcinitive dialogue in the home as well as in the school means that the powerful emotions are not controlled or directed. His suspicion of the parents, and anger with them, as well as the notion that they might be lying suggests that there are other actions, like 'sneaking' that tempt Stan.

"because sometimes I used to steal as well, so he [Dad] used to say 'Come on, lets have my money back'. And sometimes he used to take, I had loads of pens and stuff and he used to say 'Where's all my money?' I said, "I can't give you the money back" so he took all my money and I say "Hey, I only took a few of your money all that's mine, about that much." And I only took about one pound fifty, ninety nine pence from him and all the rest was mine. And he wouldn't believe me, so he took all the rest of mine".

The importance of early relationships lies in the sharing of intellectual understanding and in being able jointly to define what is meant and in being able to analyse circumstances.

The kinds of transactions being described here are at once full of emotions, like mistrust and anger, and held together by concerns with possession. The possibility of his turning into a thief is clear. The fact that he *assumes* people steal in the normal course of things and the fact that being found out makes him the more resentful gives an edge to his view of himself. The resentment rests on two linked reflections. One is on himself - on not being 'liked'.

"Probably the way I behave or how I look. I don't know really... some people don't really like me and be nice to me or anything".

The other is the way out of this.

"but I wish I was rich and stuff. Really, a rich kid or something. I could get the things I want really."

He doesn't like being himself. He wishes he were someone else; rich.

The general insecurity with circumstances is really an insecurity about other people, and himself. Greed is supposed to a primary function, and possessions the purpose of life. This means the relationship with others are essentially mechanistic. Those who are generous are liked. There are no signs of prejudice based on colour. It all comes down to money. These views of people and their motivations can lead to volatility. We have noted the propensity to argue and fight and throw things in the home. School is equally difficult. Peer groups are consistently changing and individuals challenged. In some cases the resulting disaffection is strong.

"Some things make me sad like people being horrible and saying "no, you can't have this". And I say "Well, they musn't like me or something". Like you say like "No, you can't have this", and then I feel a bit upset. And say "Why can't I play?" and I just say "Well, you can't play okay". And shout and things. I get a bit upset 'cos I don't really like it, so I just do the things back. And I really want things like oh please and they don't let me....."

Here we have a demonstration of a widely stored experience, and a particular reaction to it. The experience of teasing and bullying is unfortunately a part of the social world of the school. The testing of friendships and the exploration of other people's emotional weaknesses is a widespread phenomenon. Those who are most easily provoked are especially vulnerable to such treatment. Here, however, we have the experience linked

closely to the strong desire of someone who wants to get his own way, another form of possession. He wants things 'really badly' and he takes his revenge if he does not get them.

School enforces adaptability, to the requirements and demands of other pupils as well as to those of teachers. One of the successful strategies of survival is to conform by not standing out. This can be a result of the general competition that pupils undergo, in which those who are too good are considered 'snobs' and those who are particularly inept singled out for humiliation.

"[They finish their work first]. Sad, because they think like "we're the best". They say like " I know more things than you!" and stuff like this, and I sometimes say "so what".

There are other times, clearly, when to accept what people say laconically and without provocation is difficult. Stan keeps referring to the philosophical reflection that:

"It's only a game if you win, isn't it...and games like rolling the dice and stuff, it's only a game, it doesn't matter who wins. Don't need to moan about it or anything."

This becomes a kind of mantra that indicates his vulnerability. It is as if the more he repeats the cliché, the more likely it is he will believe it. This is not the case. He, like others, adapts to expectations. This is equally true of teachers. He says it is important for teachers to do well at school.

"To the teachers, yeah, but to me, not really."

It is to please teachers.

"That's why I try to do my work right. And that's why I want to do it good."

Of course, he also wants to please himself.

The desire for possessions which pervades his reflection on life is like a longing for distraction, for something different. When Stan was asked about his present life and circumstances he tends to come back to one overall description:

"I don't know really. A bit boring sometimes, playing the same computer game and things..."

School is described as "a bit boring and stuff really". The demands are to be escaped from:

"because some things are a bit because and I like playing and things really. And laughing and stuff."

It is easy to call things "boring", but when we consider the kind of experience that are being described, we have to remind ourselves how this, too, is a real and significant part of childhood. Not all is rosy, or there would not be such desires for alternatives let alone nostalgia for the past.

The other escape lies in the future. How, then, does Stan see his own? We have already encountered his view of how people behave and how it applies to him. This will probably continue:

"Taxi diver or something because sometimes, ...or a cash till man, like shopkeepers. Sometimes you can like sometimes steal the money. Not steal, but take some and put it in your pocket."

Q: Would you do this?

"Yeah. I'd just take a tenner because I could get something like a computer game or something. That's all."

Q: What will happen when you've grown up?

"Don't know really. Do fighting and arguments really..."

The morality that he applies to himself seems set to remain. The desire to possess, to buy if possible, to take if need be, is as strong as the awareness of the power of money. Computer games, even if boring, remain desirable.

In this case study we have some representative experiences, widely shared. The conflicts of home and school, and the awareness of the contrast between the rich and the poor are as central as the significance of relationships and the perception of their unseemly own particular milieu. Here, however, we see ontological insecurity taken one stage further. The discomforts and the uncertainties are turned into immediate desires and instantaneous solutions. Like, all children, Stan is aware of the difference between right and wrong. He knows what he *ought* to do. This does not prevent him from falling into temptation; indeed, even looking for it. One can only speculate what will happen to him next.



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