

The influence of Ariès' discovery of childhood on the historical pedagogics

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Abstract

Since Philippe Ariès published his *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960, a lot has changed in historical pedagogy. There have been supporters of Ariès' work, which led to a change in the paradigm of historical pedagogy. But also Ariès had his critics, who didn't agree with Ariès, as well in his used methodology as in his main conclusions. The present paper gives an overview of the debate that *Centuries of Childhood* caused. Arguments of both the supporters as the opponent will be discussed. The aim of this study is to describe the influence of Ariès discovery of childhood.

Keywords: *Ariès, discovery of childhood, historical pedagogy*

Introduction

In 1960, historian Philippe Ariès published *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*. Three years later the English version, *Centuries of Childhood*, was published. In this book, Ariès describes the genesis of the modern concept of childhood. Publication of this book led, many to call Ariès the "discoverer of childhood" (Stearns, 2011). His conclusions led to a prolonged debate between proponents and opponents of his conclusions (Dekker & Groenendijk, 2012; Sherington, 2010; Stearns, 2011; Weijers, 2007).

The influence of Ariès work is remarkable for two reasons. First of all, his work is unique in its kind, because of the unusual methodology he used. His work was all the more noteworthy because Ariès was not formally trained as either a historian or a social scientist. Ariès is mostly labeled as an amateur historian or a hobby-historian, meaning he carried out his research out of personal interest rather than as a professional pursuit. The methodology Ariès used for *Centuries of Childhood* contains the investigation of paintings and manuscripts originating from the Middle Ages and later (Ariès, 1962; Dekker & Groenendijk, 2012). As part of this investigation, he used sources illustrating the life of French aristocratic families (Ariès, 1962; Weijers, 2007). He specifically examined the way children were portrayed in such works and this led him to his conclusions (Koops, 2004; Sherington, 2010). This sort of methodology was not the norm at that time, and there are many researchers who believe this method is not adequate (De Mause, 1974; Dekker & Groenendijk, 2012; Stone, 1977; Wilson, 1980).

Ariès' main thesis was that childhood is a social construct. He found that until well into the Middle Ages no *sentiment d'enfant*, meaning being sentimental towards children, existed. Ariès concluded this because in pre-modern paintings, he found no differentiation between childlike and adult behavior. In other words, children and adults were represented the same way in pre-modern works. For example, he couldn't find any clothes that were used only by children or literature read only by children. This phenomenon was seen up until humanism established itself at the time of the Italian Renaissance (16th century). It was beginning at that time that children were set apart and seen as more vulnerable creatures (Ariès, 1962; Dekker & Groenendijk, 2012).

Because the conclusions of Ariès were very controversial and new, one might have expected them to have caused an outcry immediately after publication of this book. Yet such was not the case. During the ten years following publication of the original version, his work

was referred to only in passing. But beginning in 1970, a lot of opposition in society rose against traditional authority and hierarchical relationships. This influence also manifested itself in research. Within this movement, more researchers started to use Ariès as a reference. He was primarily cited in the context of discussions that challenged the authoritarian parenting style (Dekker & Groenendijk, 2012). At the same time, critics of his views began to raise their voices, with important authors as De Mause (1974) and Stone (1977) leading the charge.

This article will discuss both the supporters and opponents of Ariès his work. All the researchers that will be discussed had their part in the influence of the work Ariès conducted on the history of pedagogy. First the supporters and then the opponents of his work will be discussed. The main purpose of this paper is to provide an answer to the following question: What has been the influence of Philippe Ariès theses of the discovery of childhood on the historical pedagogy?

Supporters of Ariès

Ariès' work caused a regeneration of historical pedagogy. According to Weijers (2007), he was the first researcher who used empirical data in conducting his research. Before Ariès conducted this sort of research, most studies only used written sources. But these changes in historical pedagogics only refer to the design of his research. However, the work of Ariès also changed the paradigm and the content of the discipline. This mainly led to different perspectives on different subjects (Weijers, 2007).

Pioneer of the current historical pedagogy

Ariès garnered support primarily for the way he implemented the historical pedagogics. Ariès was seen as the pioneer of the current historical pedagogics and the empirical methodology used (Johansson, 1987). After the publication of *Centuries of Childhood*, researchers in the area of historical pedagogy embraced his empirical method, including letting one's own representations lead research (Weijers, 2007).

Ariès' book inspired numerous works on child-rearing. Over the years more aspects of the child rearing process were observed than the interaction between parent and child. Most often, these included social and cultural aspects. This mainly resulted from Ariès' assertion that childhood was a social construct. This development can still be seen in the present day (Johansson, 1987; Weijers, 2007). The principal new perspectives Ariès introduced and which are still seen in research include the history of the family, child-rearing practices by parents and the school environment (Dekker & Groenendijk, 2012).

Researchers who have followed in Ariès' footsteps

Even though there might not be a concrete list of supporters of the work of Ariès, there are a number of prominent researchers who agreed with his central thesis that the notion of childhood is a social construct (Dekker & Groenendijk, 2012; Stearns, 2011; Weijers, 2007). These researchers set out to test this fundamental notion using what they claimed were more solid empirical methods than Ariès himself had employed.

One of those researchers was Johansson (1987). He was an opponent of the methodology Ariès used, namely qualitative research. Johansson therefore collected quantitative data to see if he came to a similar conclusion. Rather than describing the content of medieval painting, Johansson compared data on child mortality rates for long intervals preceding and following the supposed advent of humanism that (in Ariès' view) led children to be seen as vulnerable. He believed that once greater emotional investment was made, the mortality rates would decline (Johansson, 1987), and this is indeed what he found. However, given the questionable link between increased emotional investment and reduced child

mortality (after all, child mortality could be affected by any number of factors having nothing to do with the level of parental involvement), one might well question Johansson's own method.

One attempt to replicate the research of Ariès with qualitative data was that of Koops (2004). He conducted research similar to that of Ariès, also examining paintings and manuscripts as sources. The difference was that he modernized his data collection methodology by using a database containing over a million paintings. With a computer program he was able to compare most of these paintings. Ariès, instead, only used the paintings that were available to him, which merely numbered in the thousands. Perhaps surprisingly, Koops (2004) reached the same conclusion Ariès did.

In sum, Ariès meant a lot for the progress of the historical pedagogics. Not only he did this with his arguments and his main conclusion about childhood being a social construct, but also in his way of thinking and ways of conducting research. He opened a new era full of pedagogues who had a focus on social and cultural factors.

Opponents of Ariès

Despite the degree of change that historical pedagogy experienced since Ariès' 'discovery of childhood', his findings were not supported by every researcher. This resulted in a long-term debate about the validity Ariès' findings. The criticism of some of his opponents is presented in this section.

First opponents

In the 1970s, the period in which the work of Ariès received more attention, two prominent researchers offered detailed criticism of the work of Ariès. Their names were Lloyd DeMause and Lawrence Stone. The extent of the influence of this criticism can be seen in the fact that it continues to be frequently referenced by present-day researchers (Weijers, 2007; Wilson, 1980).

DeMause (1974) discussed Ariès work in his book *History of Childhood*. In this book he describes the work of Ariès as having only two arguments: that childhood is a social construct and that the modern family restricts children's freedom. DeMause described the first argument as too vague, and he therefore expressed surprise that so many people agreed with it. DeMause contented that then second argument runs counter to other assertions that he himself made (DeMause, 1974; Weijers, 2007; Wilson, 1980). This seems a strange criticism because, if DeMause is right, Ariès would be disapproving his own work.

Even though DeMause (1974) had a lot of comments on the work of Ariès, he clearly agreed with the latter's view that childhood is a social construct. That's why the arguments of DeMause against Ariès have to be doubted, and maybe he even can be seen as a follower of Ariès' work.

Another prominent opponent of Ariès is Lawrence Stone (1977). His commentaries were even more influential than those of DeMause (Wilson, 1980). This researcher argues that the work of Ariès showed deficits in both its methodology and its conclusions (Stone, 1977; Wilson, 1980). The reason Stone's publication was so influential, was because it created a stir about the methodology used by which, as mentioned before, was not in accordance with our current standards of conducting research (Stone, 1977; Wilson, 1980). This critic of Stone now seems like nothing than common sense, but he was the first one who came forth with it.

More criticism of Ariès' methodology

Because this influential statement from Stone (1977) about the methodology Ariès used, his influence is seen in the work of later authors. For example his influence is seen in the work of Wilson (1980). Wilson (1980) also had much to say about the work of Ariès. First of all, he

considered Ariès was using not enough written manuscripts, but instead more on printed paintings. Wilson (1980) didn't agree with the extent to which Ariès relied on those paintings. In contrast with this opinion is the work of Koops (2004), because with his research he tried to disprove this argument. While using more modern techniques, he was able to do that.

The second argument of Wilson (1980) is that Ariès only described a few points in history, which gave his plea more content. But in this, he wasn't using one of the other themes in history, meaning there was some 'chronological vagueness' in his argumentation (Wilson, 1980). With this concept, Wilson (1980) was saying that some of the events Ariès used also could take place at another point in history.

The last thing that should be considered, following Wilson (1980), is the fact Ariès wrote his *Centuries of Childhood* with knowledge about the existence of the social concept of childhood in the present. Perhaps Wilson (1980) made a point here. Ariès was, as mentioned before, an amateur historian, allowing him to observe a phenomenon, in this case childhood, from the present. It's a strong argument Wilson (1980) is making here, but it should be noted this argument does not apply only to Ariès, because several researchers conduct research from this point of view.

Current critics

The commentaries against Ariès above are published at least 30 years ago, so it has to be questioned if the case 'Ariès' is still applicable in the present. And by no surprise, it is still a subject of debate. In the last few decades, a lot of knowledge was formed about the biological and psychological factors in childhood. Frijhoff (2012) linked those factors to the work of Ariès, saying that Ariès was not right by implying childhood was mainly a social and cultural construct. Frijhoff (2012) also implies Ariès only focused his research on the fact children barely spoke in history. He was saying that the only thing we know about children is being told to us by adults.

Frijhoff (2012) also mentions in his article there are a lot of commentaries on Ariès as being the 'discoverer' of childhood. Before Ariès conducted research to this subject, few researchers already spoke about childhood in the social and cultural context (Sherington, 2010). One of those researchers was Ellen Key, who called the 19th century the century of the child (Frijhoff, 2012; Stearns, 2011).

All of this points to the fact Ariès had a lot of opponents over the decades. The commentaries on his work do not only focus on the methodology that was being used, like Stone (1977) and Wilson (1980) did. Also there were commentaries on conclusion about childhood being a social construct, mainly by Frijhoff (2012), because Ariès has knowledge about childhood from the present

Conclusion

This paper served as a window to understanding of the debate that arose since the publication of *Centuries of Childhood*. This work came to serve as a role model for the field of historical pedagogy. His view opened a whole new paradigm in the discipline. But this doesn't mean Ariès his work was perfect. It most definitely had its shortcomings, many of which have been discussed in this paper. Both his supporters and his opponents generally acknowledged these shortcomings. The difference is that his supporters, like Koops (2004) and Johansson (1987), credit him with important contributions to be build upon, while his opponents generally discredit his work as a whole.

To answer the main question of this paper, which was 'What has been the influence of Philippe Ariès theses of the discovery of childhood on the historical pedagogy?', Philippe Ariès had a lot of influence on the historical pedagogy. This influence is reflected in the fact that his work lead to a debate in the fields of both history and pedagogy. It's not a bad thing

this happened, because a debate always gives you a critic view on the current paradigm. And the fact the debate is still moving, is also a sign the work of Ariès does have a lot of influence.

The main reason this article was written is because I believe it's important in the social sciences to look at both the past and the future. With a focus on Ariès, it's interesting to see how a single researcher can have such an influence on a current paradigm, even though it was perhaps not his intention to do so. Following the facts, it's imaginable the debate over Ariès work will continue, which may sound like a paradox. It seems that such debates are needed in order to spur the progress of historical pedagogy, and eventually create increasingly plausible paradigms.

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