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Review:

Newson, J. and Newson, E. (2019) *Childhood into Adolescence: Growing up in the 1970s*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, ISBN 978-1-138-56596-8.

Wendy Russell

Childhood into Adolescence, published posthumously and edited by those who had worked in the Newsons' Child Development Research Unit at Nottingham University, is the fifth in the series charting John and Elizabeth Newson's longitudinal study of parents' accounts of raising children in Nottingham. The study comprised interviews with over 700 parents (mostly mothers) of children born between 1957 and 1959 when those children were 1, 4, 7, 11, 16 and 22 years old. This book looks at the data mostly gathered from interviews when the children were 11.

I have a personal interest in this study for many reasons. One is that it took place in Nottingham, my home city for the last 35 years, so I can identify with landmarks, events and vocabulary. Another is the focus on class as a key unit of analysis (alongside gender), a relatively uncommon feature in childhood research, but one that has interested me since my early days working on adventure playgrounds.

However, perhaps what fascinated me most as I was reading the book was its historicity. The interviews were carried out in the 1970s and the manuscript, discovered after Elizabeth Newson's death in 2014, was probably completed in 1984. The previous four books had proved popular and influential, and even though the manuscript was clearly outdated, it was nonetheless considered worth publishing and I agree wholeheartedly.

Such a historical perspective acts as a reminder that attitudes and practices change over time, offering fresh permission and motivation to question current attitudes and practices. At the same time, many of the issues explored are familiar to contemporary researchers of childhood. One example is children's freedom of movement. Mothers expressed their anxiety about their children being out and about without supervision and spoke of fear of molesters, traffic, dangerous places (railway lines, rivers, etc.) and bullying, citing also the power of the media in shaping these anxieties. Yet accepted practice was that the children could roam within negotiated parameters of local streets and trusted routes and places.

For me, two of the strengths of the study, and of this book, are first, the engagement with the everyday realities of raising children and second, the recognition of circumstance and environment as key players in child rearing practices. In contrast with the rising tide of professional advice for parents, the Newsons were interested in finding out 'what really went on in families' (Barnes and Gregory, 2019, p. 2). This was partly motivated by their own experience of becoming parents, when they realised that the childcare manuals available did not address this very practical aspect of how parents cope day-to-day.

Like its predecessors, the book offers a mix of statistical analysis, narrative and verbatim quotations. The richness stems from the nature and detail of the 195 interview questions, aimed at eliciting the nuanced feelings and attitudes behind everyday practices. They are grouped into seven categories: general personality; social relationships; stress; activities – independence; school; family and interaction; and conflict. The inclusion of 'stress', where questions are about the children's fears and anxieties and whether they show physical symptoms or habits of worry and anxiety, provides another reminder that the concerns of today's parents and professionals regarding children's well-being and mental health are not necessarily recent, but may be of a different order.

There was an effort to use young mothers as interviewers in the first study, including Elizabeth Newson herself, and many were involved over time, returning to the same families. Overall, despite some inevitable changes in both families and interviewers, there is a sense of openness, genuine interest and even companionship that comes through in the writing.

After the introductory chapter from editors Peter Barnes and Susan Gregory, which sets the context for the book, the next six chapters, the original manuscript, look at *continuity and change* (what has happened since the last interview, including housing, family members, employment, changes in children's temperament, children's health, puberty and the school transition); *enduring friends and foes* (exploring what friendship is, parental concerns at mixing with the 'wrong' children); *great busyness* (children's hobbies, interests, activities and contribution to running the household, family recreation practices); *risk, anxiety and frankness as children grow up* (parental concerns including children's freedom of movement, puberty and the beginnings of interest in sexual relationships); *uncertainty and incomplete answers* (the ways that families communicate, the pleasure parents have in their children's company, the hard questions); *making good* (questions of morality, discipline, disagreements). Chapter 8, the final chapter of the Newsons' manuscript (although not of the book) draws on earlier and later data to make some conclusions about the correlation (being careful not to imply simplistic causation) between child rearing styles and later outcomes, including troublesome behaviour and criminality.

In contrast to *Seven years old in the home environment* (Newson and Newson, 1976), which has a very big focus on play, this book has little to say about play explicitly. Insights, therefore, have to be gleaned from the detail of quotes and narrative on topics such as hobbies, friendships and children's freedom of movement.

One such insight, also an illustration of the charming nature of the everyday detail of mothers' relationships with their children, comes from interview questions about children's treasured possessions. One mother says: 'he has football teams of marbles, and each marble has a name, and believe me, I've lost Bobby Charlton before today under the sofa' (p. 66).

Other insights come from what mothers say worry them about where and with whom their children play. One concern was children's choice of playmates, in terms of others being a bad influence, particularly strong in families living in 'rough areas'. Not for the first time, the authors acknowledge that middle class families can afford to be more relaxed about their child-rearing. At age 7, working class children had more freedom to roam than their middle class counterparts, although often out of necessity rather than parental choice, yet at age 11 there is less difference as middle class children make their own way to organised activities. Half of working class children were not involved in any organised activity, although more working class children attended youth club than did middle class children. The detail of examples, however, shows the many variables involved in negotiating parental permission to be out and about without their supervision and control. Included is a classic example of one mother telling of her son going fishing in the Trent and how worried she was for his safety: she had only allowed him to go because he said his friend's mother had said it was ok. Of course, his friend had said the same thing to his mother.

The main argument of the book regards the correlation between authoritarian styles of child-rearing (including corporal punishment) and later 'troublesome' behaviour, particularly delinquency and criminality. We see this argument begin to develop in chapters 6 and 7 and presented more emphatically in chapter 8, which brings together previous data from earlier and later interviews, alongside data from Home Office records to consider outcomes.

Chapter 6 opens with a discussion on the value of conversations with children, included here because it offers an example of how the Newsoms take account of the everythingness and everydayness of child rearing as well as the narrative on cause and effect and class. In talking about communication between parents and children, they acknowledge not only the explicit communication (often about discipline and control), but also highlight the importance of

the patterns a child experiences of inquiry, debate, casual chat, anecdote, affectionate gesture and response, statement of opinion and belief, expressions of desire and fantasy, jokes, teasing, evasions, threats, sulks, blackmail, guile and downright lies (p. 113).

‘Lower’ classes (sic) have fewer conversations, and although it is recognised that this may be because there is less space, privacy and time, it is seen as a ‘deprivation’. Information on this is brought together with information from previous chapters to develop an index of family cohesion. There is a clear class difference in this index, and this is linked directly to general styles of child rearing that are presented in terms of two dimensions: ‘democratic versus authoritarian principles and child-centredness’ (p. 125).

When presented in table form, the statistics seem harsh and judgemental, raising questions of middle class bias and research ethics. Yet one of the things I appreciated about the style of this book is that such data are generally accompanied with a frank discussion warning of oversimplifying cause and effect, pointing out how material, geographical and social circumstances make it much easier for middle class families to take up opportunities, and to ‘take the calm, consistent, relaxed attitude to child-rearing so beloved by professional advisors’ (p. 62). There is an extended ethical reflection on how researchers report the information that participants give freely and repeatedly in the intimate and non-judgmental atmosphere of the interviews, when the statistics show a clear correlation between the authoritarian styles more prevalent in working class families (including smacking) and later ‘troublesome behaviour’. Their conclusion is that the ‘facts’ are important and need to be reported, but that this should not descend either into an oversimplified cause and effect that isolates child-rearing styles from context and opportunity or into a moral judgment about ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothers. The interviewers were in no doubt that mothers want the best for their children. ‘That’s what we strive for – to bring them up into decent people’ (p. 160).

Chapter 7 discusses approaches to discipline, including the use, and intent behind, corporal punishment. In Chapter 8, commenting on the statistics that show a correlation between mothers who punish more often or more heavily and later delinquency, they say such causality is ambiguous: ‘it could be that punishing parents produce naughty children or, equally, that naughty children drive their parents to adopt punitive means of control’ (p. 173). In a further analysis of the data, they argue that the correlation between disciplinary philosophy and troublesomeness can be seen *within* and not only *across* class differences. When allowances are made for class, gender and family size, mothers’ (and even more so fathers’) reliance on smacking and their use of ‘bamboozlement’ (an evasion or distortion of the truth in order to maintain authority) were significantly correlated to later delinquency. In particular, ‘the frequency and the degree of severity of corporal punishment show the most outstanding association with later criminal record’ (p. 181).

The final chapter of the book is a reflection from Charlie Lewis, another member of the Child Development Research Unit, on the contribution the Newsoms’ work made both at the time and now. He highlights the significant influence that it had on policy and practice rather than on theory and research, as it was not in tune with accepted psychological methods of the period which tended to be more experimental. He raises a number of criticisms, including why particular lines of enquiry were followed, the interpretation of data and the approach to statistical analysis. Yet he also sees a

strength in what he terms the 'naïve realist' approach, including their ability to ask questions that respondents see as important, and their focus on validity (in-depth conversations) rather than reliability (standardised questions across the sample and triangulation through interviewing other family members). I agree with this analysis; for me the strength of this book is in the micro detail of different parents' experiences, beliefs, feelings and practices.

References

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Notes on contributor

Dr Wendy Russell is an independent researcher and educator on children's play and also works part-time on the MA Professional Studies in Children's Play at University of Gloucestershire. She has worked in the play and playwork field for some 40+ years, initially on adventure playgrounds and then in development, research, training and education with local, national and international organisations. Her research focuses on supporting children's right to play, particularly in terms of the politics of space, policy and ethics. She is a co-founder of the biennial international Philosophy at Play conference.

wendyrussell@ntlworld.com