Book Review : Growing Up in a Divided Society

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The brutality of South African society in the present political conjuncture forces memories upon our consciousness that might otherwise become part of our social amnesia. However a 'memory' that has by and large escaped our social and political consciousness is the 'contexts of childhood'. The campaigns around the plight of detained children and the general publicisation, from the left predominantly, of the problems facing children and their families in the townships since October 1984, have to some extent rehabilitated our memories about the childhood contexts of social struggles. "Growing up in a divided society", edited by Sandra Burman and Pamela Reynolds is therefore a most timely and welcome reminder about the contexts and repression of childhood in the social struggles of many communities in South Africa at

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the moment. The nature of political struggles in this country are often so intense and ruthless that we are horrified as adults at their effects, and hence do not imagine the implications and effects on children. It is this interesting and important notion of the social 'invisibility' of childhood in apartheid South Africa that Burman raises in her introductory chapter to this volume. She says, 'It is true that children are often invisible socially and seem to be so unimportant in the progress of a nation that they do not appear at all in the pages of most history books.' (p. 1 - 2), and she may have added, most books on politics. The significance of these omissions is that our understanding of social relations is incomplete. Following this up, Burman remarks that '...to understand control in South Africa we must examine power in the basic units of society: the family, the classroom, the playground, the clinic, the street corners, the prison cells. Children are dominated and learn to dominate - and to resist - within these units. They carry their knowledge with them into adulthood.' (p. 7 - 8).

It is through these 'units' that social relations are mediated, and hence Burman makes a case for the importance of understanding and studying the processes and mechanisms of socialisation. She argues that 'Apartheid ideology is usually analyzed so exclusively in abstract terms that there is a tendency to ignore social reality for the smallest

building blocks in society: the family, the home, and the children.' (p. 8). The significance of this volume is that there has been a death of research on children with regard to the socialisation context of the South African social formation. Unfortunately this also applies to what the discipline of psychology has produced in terms of research on children in apartheid South Africa (cf. Don Foster's article - Chapter 8).

'Growing up in a divided society' serves as a window onto the world of childhood, and more especially it opens up a range of important research questions and areas for social scientists concerned with social justice to begin to address, or rather redress. While there is much of interest and importance in this edited collection, it is also a frustrating and uneven collection. For example the editors could have prepared the readers for what is a large collection, twenty chapters in all, of very diverse and wide-ranging papers. I am thinking of the very readable and accessible piece by Frank Chikane on the effects of the unrest on township children on the one hand, compared with the more academic and turgid pieces by Foster on the development of racial orientation in children, and Kay McCormick's study of children's use of language in District Six. This is not a criticism of the work of Foster or McCormick, but rather a query about whether the important points that they make in their respective chapters, and there are other chapters, have not been missed, depending,

of course, on who this collection is aimed at. If it is aimed at a general audience then I think that the over-academic form of many of the papers is quite inappropriate, if not confusing, and unfortunately detracts from the very important insights and findings contained in much of the research reported in this collection.

For those not schooled in reading dense literature reviews of complex research areas the chapter by Foster is going to involve the most stoic of intellectual efforts, which might lose readers by the way and hence the valuable points that he makes remain within the closed world of academia. He concludes his very thorough review of the development of racial attitudes in children by making a number of important political and theoretical points. for example, he says, 'Few attempts have been made to understand the situational demands, normative constraints, rules and ideological processes that mediate between attitude, intention, and action. In addition, not much attention has been given to children's own understanding of ethnic relations; children therefore continue to be seen exclusively as passive victims of circumstances rather than as active agents.' (p. 182). This aspect of children's lives is reinforced by a number of the contributions in this volume, that is, that children are carving out their on realities in the context of everyday life and struggles. And that for many children, especially teenagers, the most important socialisation influence on their lives is their peer group. This process of children

making their own lives cannot be read innocently nor only benignly. Children taking their lives into their own hands is an important aspect of seeing children as independent, active and responsible agents in giving meaning to their lives and social worlds. However, as we know, and as many of the contributors to this volume show, children are taking their lives into their own hands for very diverse and often troubled reasons. The nature of social struggles in the townships has left many families in disarray: children have broken away from their parents, often accusing them of being politically conservative and unsupportive; families are living apart as a result of vigilante attacks; the detention of family members has been yet another stress on family life; and we must not forget the 'normal' problems of being black in apartheid South Africa - migrant labour, influx control, housing shortages, etc. And it is in these circumstances that children are forging out some kind of existence and identity for themselves. These contexts are not easy ones for developing children and youths, and hence there is also a dark side to the positivity of children actively creating their own worlds.

There is not much detail on the nature and processes of township family life, and especially at the level of the day to day experiences of families/households and their members. The social psychology of family life, township or other, is a neglected area which has hardly got started in this country.

Another area where the editors could have been of more assistance is in the contextualising of some of the 'family/household research' that appears in this volume. A lot of political, sociological and even sometimes psychological pronouncements are made with regard to family life with very little structural evidence or information to back up these important inventions. In this regard Charles Simkins' article on household composition and structure offers an enormous amount of essential empirical information that is necessary to make sense of the complex world of family life in South Africa. Much of his data is taken from national census information and is qualified by other demographic and sociological research. An important 'finding' in this work is that in newer and especially urban African settlements there is a higher proportion of nuclear households. If this is true, and to some extent the chapter by Cock et al 'contests' this, the significance of this in terms of its impact on social organisation, or rather, disorganisation of African communities and households needs to be investigated. Simkins, in his conclusion, points to four main determinants of household structure, namely, tradition, class, housing policy, and influx control (cf p. 38 - 39). However, what is missing from Simkins' analysis are the forms of resistance and struggle engaged in by African communities in trying to control their own (family) lives. There is a certain sense in which the empirical and census data which Simkins presents 'lies'

about the reality of family life and household composition in a country like South Africa where even the toast is political. Edwards (1979) has referred to the workplace as a 'contested terrain', but there is very little in South Africa which is not contested by African working class communities, and housing and family life is certainly one of those contested terrains. This means that we have to be very careful of the kind of information that we get about household structures and the nature of family life as the politics of this sphere does not easily facilitate an accurate account derived by social researchers.

This more uneven and contested dimension of family life comes out in the Cock et al chapter where they looked at the arrangements which working women have made in relation to child care. For example, they say, 'Almost 40 percent of the women left their children with adult relatives, particularly grandmothers, and 10 percent left their children with older siblings. Thus the main form of child care amongst working-class women was the extended family.' (p. 81). What emerges from the Cock et al study, which was based on a very large sample of 885 African women, is that because of the politics of child care which confronts women in terms of both class and gender relations, is the 'need' to transform family and household relations and structures to best accommodate the material conditions facing these women.

Throughout the book, when the family is spoken about, the terms 'nuclear' and 'extended' are often used. Sometimes they are used with caution and qualification, but nevertheless used. These terms seem to have outlived their usefulness in capturing the myriad forms and structures that make up contemporary families, especially in African working class communities. There is a danger that the complexity of family life will be missed if we continue to conceptualise family forms in terms of the binary opposites of nuclear and extended. I hope this is not just a pedantic point, but rather one which will result in a rethinking of the analytic categories which we use when trying to capture the complexity and flexibility of social reality.

There is much in this volume which I have not even mentioned. For example the fascinating pieces on growing up as an Afrikaner; on growing up Jewish; the street kids of Cape Town; and Paul Alberts' revealing photographs. There are also chapters on childhood health (chapters 2 and 7); education; legal issues; and other interesting topics. No judgment is intended on the pieces I have not directly referred to. It is obviously not possible to adequately review a book with 20 very diverse chapters in a short space. I have tried to concentrate on some of the chapters and issues which might initially at least appeal to social researchers in psychology and sociology. While I have criticised the lack of thematic coherence and the rather specialist nature of some of the articles, I still think

this is a very important text for people concerned with what it means to grow up in apartheid South Africa. "Growing up in a divided society" fills a gap in our understanding of childhood and family/household life, and I hope the many issues which its contributors raise stimulates further careful and committed research into the contested terrain of growing up in South Africa.

REFERENCE

Edwards, R. (1979) Contested terrain: The transformation of the workplace in the twentieth century London: Heinemann.