Cross-cultural differences in childhood

- A comparative approach should be taken when analysing childhood.
- Ruth Benedict: children in non-industrial societies were treated differently than those in modern countries.
- They take responsibility at quite an early age; Smantha Punch’s study of children in rural Bolivia found that once five years old they took on work responsibilities, doing tasks with no question or hesitation.
- Less value is placed on children showing obedience to adult authority Raymond Firth; Tikopia of the western Pacific, doing as you were told by an adult was seen as a concession granted by a child, not a right for adults.
- Children’s sexual behaviour is often viewed differently Bronislaw Malinowski; Trobiand Islanders of the south-west Pacific; there was an attitude of amusement and tolerance towards children’s sexual explorations and activities.

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Edward Shorter:
- Argues that high death rates caused indifference and neglect towards infants.
- Not uncommon for a newborn baby to be named after a dead sibling.
- Or refer to the bay as “it”.
- Or forget how many children they had.

Linda Pollock:
- Criticised Aries for saying that childhood did not exist, children were not seen to have different needs than adults, not once they passed the physical stage of dependency.
- Childhood as a separate age was short.
- They entered society on much the same terms as adults.
- Starting work at a young age.
- No distinction.
- Faced severe punishments as adults for crimes.
- Aries analysed art of the middle ages; No characteristics of childhood just shown at a smaller scale. Children dressed the same way as adults and worked and played together.

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Children’s rights

➔ Modern Western Notion: Jane Pilcher
- Most important feature of modern childhood is sepretance
- And is seen as a clear and distinct life stage
- Children in society occupy a separate status from adults.
- -Laws regulating what children are allowed, required or forbidden to do.
- -Differences are also emphasised by a difference in dressing especially younger children.
- -Services specifically for children, such as toys, food, books, entertainments and play areas.

➔ However this separation is in need of protection against the adult world
- Children’s lives are usually live in a sphere of protection from the family and education.
- They lead lives of leisure and play and are largely excluded from paid work.
- This view of childhood as a separate age-status is not found in all societies, so cannot be generalized.
- Different culture define the stages of physical development of children differently.

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Childhood in industrialised societies

➔ Industrialisation:
- The shift from agriculture to factory production as the basis of the economy, this underlies many of the changes in the position of children.
- This is a key factor in bringing about the modern idea of childhood and the changed status of children.

➔ Reasons for changes in the position of children
- Laws restricting child labour and excluding children from paid work: From becoming an economic asset, children are now economic liability dependent on their parents.
- The introduction of compulsory schooling: Raising of school leaving age has extended the period of dependency.
- Child care protection and welfare legislation: 1889 prevention of cruelty to children act; 1989 children act. The welfare of children is the fundamental principle of agencies and social services.
- Declining family size and lower infant mortality rate: have encouraged parents to make a greater financial and emotional investment in the few children they have.
- Children’s development became the subject of medical knowledge: Jacques Donzelot (1977): theories of child development in the 19th century stressed that children need supervision and protection.
- Laws and policies that apply specifically to children: Minimum ages for a wide variety of activities such as smoking/sex, Reinforced the differences between adults and children.

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