

**First ISA Forum of Sociology**  
**Sociological Research and Public Debate**  
**Barcelona, Spain**  
**September 5 - 8, 2008**

**Research Committee on  
Sociology of Childhood RC53**

**Main theme**

**Childhood in scientific and public debates.**

**Exploring the relationship between actorship and social problems**

The organizers of the First ISA Forum of Sociology have chosen the subject “**Sociological Research and Public Debate**”. RC 53 takes this as a reference to formulate its own subject for this conference entitled “**Childhood in scientific and public debates - exploring the relationship between actorship and social problems**”.

This encompasses a broad range of important questions about childhood, its social construction and institutional structures that should be analyzed with reference to the logic and content of scientific and public debates. We aim to explore the interconnectedness of scientific thoughts and public rhetoric, of protagonists and their institutional embeddings and interests.

We will considerate the trajectories, contingencies and effects of debates and the actual arenas in which they are worked out. – In doing this we will promote the analysis of global childhood in a specific and possibly fruitful way.

Some preliminary thoughts may be added:

(a) An important difference between (and therefore dynamic within) actual sociological debates on childhood on the one hand and public rhetoric on the other might be that the former insists on the child as a (competent) social actor, while the latter points to children’s innocence, and therefore all the dangers and risks threatening children. However, public discussions are also inconsistent and extreme in their way of depicting children, and there is a tendency to adopt, amalgamate and sometimes instrumentalize scientific results concerning children quickly and very selectively, to serve a range of public and adult defined-agendas.

(b) The diffusion of scientific knowledge and concepts has its own logic and is probably also based on a range of strategic and bargaining processes. The results are often enough astonishing: Some scientific results expected to be influential in public debates and political decisions as they relate directly the key issues at stake are not yet accepted, whilst others remain important although they have become falsified long time ago.

(c) While exploring the connections between scientific and especially sociological knowledge production and public debates we also have to be attentive to the many advocates of children who are currently setting the agenda concerning children’s issues. Their actions and even the mere existence of the corresponding institutions they represent is legitimated by social problems which are declared to severely endanger children’s development . Such advocates operate within

the interface between the public and scientific arena, and quite frequently are involved directly in the production of scientific knowledge.

(d) The number of reports concerning children's health, behavioural problems, conditions of living, attitudes and orientations etc. is growing quickly and many of them become central parts of public discourses. They are mostly produced by scientists, but they are also often produced in a specific constellation of interests and definitely they are recognised in such a constellation of interests.

(e) The definition of children, of their character, their development, and their needs happens in a way, that may be called a "naturalization" of childhood, i.e. such definitions are assumed to have the status of natural laws and to be valid for any child and under any circumstances. The claim of sociology to explain children's issues is therefore on a weaker base as the claim of psychologist, pedagogists and nowadays of the so called "neuro-sciences". But, maybe this is changing in the last few years as childhood problems are increasingly seen in the context of poverty, of structural problems, and of social change.

The papers may deal with the following questions:

- political decisions concerning children and their accompanying discourses in the interplay of public opinion and scientific research
- defining and assessing children in law, medicine, social welfare (generally and in specific issues)
- the role of 'experts' and 'advocates' in public debates – on what scientific base are they drawing?
- acting within the interface between the public arena, science and governments, the case of welfare leagues, child savers etc.
- the place of expert reports as instruments of political decision making on international, national, regional and local levels, what are the conditions of their production and do they really "help"
- moral panic, the rhetoric of innocence and processes of moral exclusion;
- images of children (scientific, moral, commercial, pedagogical ) and their influence on decisions concerning children and in shaping children's self-definition
- which studies mattered? Are there scientific, especially sociological studies that have provoked real change in children's conditions of life? Why have they become so influential?
- children's voice in public debates – participation and representation

Beside the sessions of our own RC we intend to organize two joint sessions:

- one with RC11 Sociology of Aging  
**Children and old age people - actors or objects of concern**
- one with RC10 Participation, Organizational Democracy and Self-Management  
**Young people and children - participation and victimization**

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