

What is a Child? Exploring Conceptualization of Pakistani Adolescents About Children

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This study aimed to investigate the responses of university students (late adolescents) about their conceptualization of a child, exploring the characteristics they associate with being a child. The study was conducted in two phases. In phase 1, responses to one open-ended question, what is a child? (N=75), were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. In phase 2, students (N=90) filled in an online closed-ended survey that was derived from the subthemes that emerged from the qualitative data collected in phase 1. Findings revealed multiple interconnected aspects of the conceptualization of the child, making it a complex whole. This study is helpful for understanding the concept of the child grounded in various theoretical and mythological categories that portray the complexities of existing dichotomies that often come up as interconnected in traditional societies.

Key words: *child; evil child; innocent child; agentic child; human-being; human-becoming*

“Concepts” as tools for analysis (Nilsen, 1990) help to dig deeply into the social construction process in specific sociocultural contexts. Conceptualizing children in childhood studies is significant to understand childhood in diverse cultures. Every child has a childhood that varies depending on social context and differences regarding the conceptualization of children and their characteristics. In the sociology of childhood, research about children in their social context requires an investigation of the conceptualization of children (Christensen & Prout, 2005; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996; Punch, 2002; Sommer et al., 2010). The new sociology of childhood emphasizes studying children as social actors in their social contexts who are conscious, thinking individuals with the capacity to shape their world in a variety of ways by reflecting on their situation and the choices available to them at any given time (James, 2007). Being a child is not a universal experience; it is socially constructed and shaped by a range of social, cultural, and historical dynamics (Franklin, 1995; James & Prout, 1990; Punch et al., 2012). In most societies there is a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood, and different norms, values, and expecta-

tions are attached to them (Franklin, 1995; Montgomery, 2003). Hence, the question “What is a child?” brings to light people’s understanding of the “child” as a concept that may be useful to investigate parenting practices, children’s lives, and childhood in their social context.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) is considered a successful UN convention about children recognized by the whole world (except Somalia and the USA). The UNCRC defines a child as a human being below the age of 18 (UNCRC, Article 1). This numerical definition does not include a minimum age; hence, it may extend to considering a fetus as a child (as is seen in several cultures). Social research, in general, refers to a group of children (and young people) who are defined as children under UNCRC (Punch et al., 2012). However, Mayall (2012) emphasizes studying children as a social group like other major groups in the society, “not defined by age, but as one defined by social, economic and political class” (p. 348). This emphasis spotlights the contested issue of the universality of numerical age (James & James, 2012) and the tendency to see childhood as a social and cultural construct. The concept of chronological age seems universal when observed by international

laws; however, in practice, contrary to traditional societies where age is perceived in its biological perspectives, the modern Western construct of age links the chronological and social age of the child (Halcrow & Tayles, 2008). In traditional (particularly agrarian) societies there is a close link between children's biological age and their social participation. Several children's activities require physical competence to participate in domestic tasks seen as a process of learning cultural and vocational skills to enhance the continuity of the socialization process (Abebe, 2007; Chant & Jones, 2003; Priblisky, 2001; Punch, 2001, 2002; Kesby et al., 2006). Similarly, children's biological growth places them in categories of boys and girls, explicitly segregating them into two different social groups. Hence, the biological changes in the body are seen as a standard by which to both measure the child's physical strength to perform different activities and to assign gender roles and structured boundaries. Though these roles and boundaries are context specific, they make a difference in the perceptions about children and childhood, emphasizing the connection between biological and social age.

Even though the numerical definition of the child is used in legislation and is a part of policy documents about children, I am looking into the conceptualization of a child beyond this general definition. In the following passages, I present important theories about children and childhood that will provide a top-down conceptual stance of the study. I begin with mythological images of children that perceive innocence and evil as "natural" constructs defining the "child" and constituting parenting practices accordingly. Later, I present the understanding of children and childhood as theorized in the new sociology of childhood that contests the socialization and developmental theories in sociology and psychology.

Innocence versus evil: Mythological images

The innate nature of the child (as perceived by the society) affects the conceptualization of the child and different issues related to parenting and child-rearing practices. For example, considering the child as "naturally good" emphasizes the society's responsibility to protect the child, particularly during early childhood, from corruption by developing the child according to his or her "natural" needs (Cunningham, 1995; Fass, 2004). Conversely, a child who is "naturally evil" needs strict discipline to get rid of the evil disposition and to become a good adult (Jenks, 1996; Sorin, 2005). The views about children's innate nature range from seeing them as sinful, polluted creatures to seeing them as innocent beings born naturally good (Hartas, 2008). Jenks (1996) described these two (at different times) popular traditions of conceptualizing the child as mythological images and named them Dionysian child and Apollonian child. He linked these images with the exercise of social control in Europe and a shift from an "old European order to the new order of modern industrial society" (p. 74). The two images are contrasted to each other with their descriptions of a child born innately evil (Dionysian child) or innately innocent (Apollonian child). Note that these are concepts leading to subsequent constructions of childhood; they do not mean that a child is necessarily evil or innocent. Jenks made it clear that these are powerful images that empower "normal" discourses about children, but they do not contribute to intrinsically different children.

Dionysian child: Evil

The Dionysian child is associated with the doctrine of Adamic original sin, a dominant discourse in Christianity (Jenks, 1996; Sorin, 2005). According to the discourse of original sin, "the new-born baby is full of the stains and pollution of sin, which it inherits from our first parents through our loins" (DeMause, 1974, p. 10). Jenks explains that the concept of the evil child existed in the 16th century when children were vulnerable to corruption and parenting consisted of unfriendly and harsh moral supervision and strict discipline. Nevertheless, Sorin (2005) points out that current concepts of discipline and punishment in schooling connect with the notion of the evil child. She describes the reinforcement of the "evil child" image in teachers' disciplinary actions aimed at teaching behaviour as expected by the adults. The disciplinary power that parents and teachers exercise is a mode of socializing the child into a "good" adult. In the school setting, the explicitly decisive adult control and passiveness of the child construct childhood as a stage for learning to be an adult. Training through punishment and discipline is a practice that can be found in empirical findings. During my research on primary schooling in rural Punjab, Pakistan (Qamar, 2010), I visited a public primary school and noticed a statement written on the school gate: "No beating, only love." This was a slogan emphasized by the government to stop corporal punishment in the schools. During an

informal discussion with a group of teachers, two children who were fighting came to them with complaints about each other. One of the teachers slapped both the children. When I asked him about it, he told me that these two kids were naughty and always destroyed discipline in the classroom. The teacher's description discloses an action he engaged in to maintain discipline. However, it shows a conceptual stance that children are naughty and that punishment is a mode of training and teaching discipline. I met several teachers and parents who believed in punishment to correct children, even though they were not clear about "how much" punishment. A general thought was, "it depends on how naughty or disobedient the child is." "Discipline" and "obedience" are two perceived traits of a "good" child that help children grow into successful adult members of Punjabi society. Hence, punishment (or at least the fear of punishment) is a "useful" parenting and teaching strategy in this context.

Apollonian child: Innocence

The Apollonian child is a Western way of viewing infants as naturally angelic and innocent. An Apollonian child does not inherit the original sin but is a descendant of "a humankind before either Eve or the apple" (Jenks, 1996, p. 73). Children, in this image, are born good with natural virtues and disposition; hence, they should be encouraged and facilitated. Jenks views the formalization of the Apollonian child in line with the manifesto *Emile*, authored by Rousseau. In this perspective, children, due to their innate innocence, deserve special care and attention. Childhood (for an innocent child) is a pure time of life separate from adulthood when children need protection and care by adults (Sorin, 2005). This image reinforces the right to life and the healthy development of a child before birth (Jenks, 1996). There are several serious social concerns (such as sexual harassment, molestation, violence) that conceptualize children as being at risk. The concepts of a "sacred" child and a child at risk strengthen the discourse of innocence and the perception that children need adult protection. There are several protective measures that adults adapt to shelter children from the harmful influences of the world. Children without adult protection are exposed to violence, molestation, fear, and anxiety. However, adult protection is provided at the cost of limiting children's participation and agency through an adult view of children as fragile, incompetent, and dependent (Sorin, 2005). Nevertheless, the notion of weakness and dependence is central to the children portrayed as sick, poor, and hungry in the Global South. Hence, "what a child should be" resists the idealized notion of the child as an "independent" human being who can resist their "childish" status (Burman, 1994).

The discourses of evil and innocence persist in different social issues regarding children in society. A child as a victim is seen as innocent, and a child committing a crime may be seen as an evil child. Innocence is linked with the vulnerability that leads to the child's weak social status and gives space for adults' demand for obedience (Meyer, 2007). Viewing children as evil or innocent shares a conceptual similarity, and children in both images are dependent on adults (Sorin, 2005). In the case of children's evil nature, adults shape them to learn obedience and submission, and children are required to listen to whatever adults command, advise, and expect. This is seen as a key to becoming a good adult. On the other hand, an innocent child needs adult protection. Children, with their innocence, are ignorant and fragile. In both cases, children's voices are muted in these two mythological images.

Conceptualization of children in sociology of childhood

To study children and their childhood with a sociological lens, a researcher identifies the commonalities of childhood in different societies. A universal understanding of these commonalities that constitutes children as a social group includes the difference of children from adults and their submission to and dependency on adults (Mayall, 2012). In the global model of childhood, this distinction between children and adults is seen as natural and universal. Children's smaller, weaker status is defined by the things they "cannot do." In this model, the notion of "competency" (or lack thereof) is defined by comparing what children "cannot" do with what adults can do. This adult-centric comparison is tied up with a future orientation of children (Jenks, 1996; Qvortrup, 2009). Hence, the traditional perspective in the sociology of childhood constitutes the "child" as a human becoming who is dependent on adults due to its vulnerability, incompetence, and powerlessness. Several developmental and socialization theories support this conceptualization. A taken-for-granted biological immaturity and psychological incompetency imply a stage-like progression of a human becoming (the child) gradually developing into a human being (the adult). Moreover, the developmental paradigm informs the early educational system, placing children

as underdeveloped cognitive biological bodies and incorporating predetermined pedagogies to shape children as perceived and required by the system (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020). This “colonization” of childhood undermines children’s experiences as individuals in their own right and universalizes the psychological construction of development placing children as human becomings (Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). The developmental discourse and adult-child dichotomy “naturalized” the notion of the “incomplete child” and established a formal education system where the child’s perceived incompetence determines the stages of progression towards a complete, finished, and civilized human being who is not a child any more (Cunningham, 1995; Vucic, 2017). Hence, until recently the defining parameters for being a child in almost all fields of enquiry (such as child psychology, child labour, child abuse, child welfare, early education) were restricted to the developmental markers conceptualizing children as physically, psychologically, and socially vulnerable and developing. It is a recent development (at the end of the 20th century) that systematic approaches engaged constructionists’ epistemological position to reexamine the so-called natural boundaries of childhood in connection with the reciprocal relationship between children and social forces that shape children and childhood in sociocultural contexts (see Boyden, 1990; Corsaro, 2000).

Before the emergence of the new sociology of childhood, academic experts in different disciplines viewed children as learners to be socialized into adults (Montgomery, 2003). In a social world, constructed by adults, children are identified as non-adults, and adults structure their lives as objects of socialization (Mayall, 2001). Early socialization, in this respect, is a process to shape the child to become a functioning member of society. On the other hand, the universalization of modern childhood has increased the sensitivity about children’s vulnerability, and the line drawn to differentiate between children and adults has become thick and clear. Children are seen as a restricted group dependent on adults to protect them from abuse and violence. Parents and teachers are provided with skills and knowledge to reinforce children’s appropriate behaviour, and on the other hand, children’s access to knowledge that can corrupt their behaviour is restricted (Buckingham, 2009; Cunningham, 1995).

However, during the last three decades, the social construction of childhood that is the basis of sociology found its place in scholarly debates that were dominated by medical and psychological discourses on the concept of a universal childhood with a stage-like progression toward adulthood. According to Nieuwenhuys (2013), these postcolonial theories challenged the Eurocentric constructs of “modern” and “universal” childhoods by contextualizing children’s lives in diverse sociocultural contexts. Consequently, it exposed the parallels of developmentalism and colonialism, while at the same time it gave voice to children’s perspectives and experiences by reconceptualizing childhood in its diversity and uncertainty (Nieuwenhuys, 2013).

Discourse on the socially constructed child considers the interconnected social realities that may be used to conceptualize children and interpret childhoods by contextualizing the lives of children and how those lives are situated in specific contexts (James et al., 1998; Kjørholt, 2004). The interconnected social realities include, but are not limited to, parenting, families, gender roles, and childcare practices. It is noted that the statuses of socially constructed children, who are in no way universal children, should be considered in empirical analyses that use the contexts of children’s lives and examine how children are conceptualized in those contexts (Kjørholt, 2004). These discourses encouraged the emergence of the new sociology of childhood and the social construction of childhood as contesting responses to the global model of childhood. The new sociology of childhood challenges the notion of the child as dependent on adults because of its vulnerability and powerlessness. In contrast, it considers children as social actors and social agents who coconstruct their childhood with adults (James et al., 1998; Corsaro, 2010). Childhood is a variable of social analysis that is not entirely separate from other social variables, such as gender, ethnicity, and class. Conceptualizing children as social actors and childhood as a social construct encourages parents and educators to focus on children’s agency. The new sociology of childhood insists on understanding children as active beings who contribute to the social construction of their lives and the lives of others in society. Children can negotiate their roles, make social relationships, and present themselves as active human-beings (James, 2007; James & Prout, 1990).

The neglect of children and their voices in traditional views of socialization and the failure of developmental psychology to consider children in the complexities of social structures gave rise to the new sociology of childhood

(Corsaro, 2010). This paradigm emerged in the 1990s. However, it has its roots in several theoretical resources, such as 1960s/70s interactionist sociology that problematized the notion of the passive child in socialization; 1980/90s structural sociology (primarily in Europe) that saw childhood as a social structure; and social constructionism (in both Europe and the USA) that problematized taken-for-granted concepts of childhood (Prout, 2005). Mayall (2012) identifies other contributing conceptual developments, including identity politics, inclusion and exclusion, and power relations. Nevertheless, the new paradigm offers an explicitly distinctive conceptualization of children and childhood contrary to the view of a child as “becoming” in socialization theory and developmental psychology (see Jenks, 1996). Consequently, the methodological frameworks investigating children’s matters were also emphasized to include child-friendly research methods to give voice to children as human beings. Clark and Moss (2011), in “Listening to Young Children: The Mosaics Approach,” conceptualized children as “skillful communicators, experts in their own lives, right holders and meaning makers” (p. 6). Hence, the new sociology of childhood offers a shift from a conditioned, controlled, and developing child (child as an object) to an authentic and political child (a child-centered perspective to view children as subjects) who authors himself/herself with an inherent sense of self-growth (Barter & Renold, 2000; Christensen & Prout, 2005; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996; Lee, 2001). Table 1 compares the new sociology of childhood’s conceptualization of the child as a human being with the traditional “child as becoming” approach.

Table 1. Child as “Human Being” and “Human Becoming”

New Sociology of Childhood	Traditional Perspective
The child is an individual and childhood is socially and culturally constructed.	A child is a minor who goes through a natural process of childhood to become an adult.
The child is a contributing member of society and childhood is not a separate entity.	Childhood is the child’s world before the child becomes a contributing member of the society.
Children are competent beings. They are active social actors and contribute as capable members of the society.	Children are incompetent, weak, incapable, and passive. They cannot contribute actively until they become capable to act.
There is no comparison of children and childhood with adults and adulthood. Children should be seen independent of adults’ perspectives, and their rights, relationships, and interactions should be equally valued.	Childhood is a phase in the journey to adulthood (i.e., becoming an adult), and children are dependent on adults, thus childhood is viewed from an adult’s perspective.
A child as an individual is unique and every child has his or her childhood (depending on the social and cultural context) that cannot be universalized.	The child as a “human becoming” is a universal approach, and childhood is a universal category.
Children do not passively absorb the adult world; they are active meaning makers who contribute with their creative and interpretative capabilities.	Children learn values as passive learners and contribute later.
Children’s perspective is very important to understand childhood and their views are valued as much adults’ views.	Children’s perspective is not respected. Children need to learn from adults.

Conclusively, the new sociology of childhood conceptualizes children as competent social actors and *agentic* children and values children’s voices (Sorin, 2005). Considering a child as a “whole” and “complete” human being does not mean a child is indistinguishable from an adult; however, children should have the same value as adults (Nilsen, 1990). Moreover, competency cannot be seen in terms of age, hence, cannot be differentiated on the basis of numeric age definitions. The social, psychological, and physical competency that a child is born with is affected by different sociocultural factors. The idea of an active child who has their own perspective is neither dependent

on chronological age nor is it universally attained (Burr & Montgomery, 2003; Punch, 2002).

Method

I employed a mixed-method approach in this study. Primarily, in phase 1, I did a qualitative content analysis of the responses collected through a questionnaire with one open-ended question. Respondents (who were undergraduate university students) wrote 4 to 10 sentences to describe a child; of these, 95% wrote more than 6 sentences. All 75 responses included 588 sentences that were coded according to emergent characteristics of the child and clustered in subthemes and themes. In the second phase, I used the subthemes to prepare a closed-ended online survey containing statements describing the child. Ninety students (different from the 75 respondents in phase 1) filled in this online survey. The results of the survey were analyzed using descriptive quantitative analysis to extend the validation of phase 1.

Sampling

Using a convenience sampling technique, I approached undergraduate university students within the age range of 19 to 23 years (M=20.5) studying social sciences in three universities and requested them to fill in the online questionnaires used in the two phases of data collection. I was interested to know how the students, who themselves were considered to be in late adolescence according to the numerical definition of a child, conceptualized the child.

In phase 1, I visited students in their classrooms (after seeking permission from the class teacher and head of the department), and invited them to fill in an online questionnaire. Besides basic demographic information (age and gender), the respondents were asked to answer one open-ended question (*What is a child?*) in an online survey. I briefed them about the topic of the study and the question they were requested to answer. I made sure that respondents understood the question, that is, they were supposed to describe their own understanding of the child. They could write short sentences or a paragraph to describe the child. Receiving responses through an online qualitative survey was useful to gain a diversity of young adults’ perspectives. Using only one specific question was helpful to narrow down the responses and encourage respondents’ focus on a single idea. I received 75 responses (N=75) including 28 responses from female students (47 male, 28 female). The medium of instruction in Pakistani universities is English. Therefore, all the participants responded in the English language. Only 12 participants included one to four sentences in Urdu while responding to the question. However, their answers were similar to those who reported the same words describing a child in the English language.

In phase 2, a closed-ended online survey (Table 2) was designed using the subthemes that emerged from the qualitative data during phase 1. Thirty-one (31) statements were derived from the subthemes with three options: (i) agree, (ii) disagree, and (iii) not sure. During phase 1, none of the respondents mentioned numerical age to describe a child. However, during phase 2 one statement was added to find the respondents’ opinions regarding the numerical definition of the child, with four options: (i) below 18 years, (ii) below 15 years, (iii) below 10 years, (iv) numerical age does not define the child. The survey was sent to student email groups and it was expected that about 200 students would receive the survey in their emails. However, only 90 students (22 male, 78 female) responded and filled in the survey.

Table 2. What is a Child? Closed-Ended Survey

The child is a human below the age of ----- years.					
18 years	15 years	10 years	Numeric age does not apply		
			Agree	Disagree	Not sure
The child is a physically immature human					
The child is social and expressive					
The child learns through imitating (copying) adults					

The child is self-confident			
The child is energetic and active			
The child is crying and demanding			
The child is delicate and fragile			
The child is a helpless human who depends on adults			
The child is a curious explorer			
The child is beautiful and attractive			
The child is intelligent and sharp			
The child learns by following adults			
The child is stupid and nonsense			
The child is an inexperienced human			
The child is stubborn and inflexible			
The child is selective and choosy in his/her matters			
The child is jealous			
The child is loving and adorable			
The child has an imaginary world			
The child is naughty and wild			
The child can set goals and follow them			
The child is a teacher			
The child is disturbing and irritating			
The child is sensitive			
The child is clever and smart			
The child joyful and funny			
The child is creative			
The child is innocent			
The child is selfish			
The child is playful			
The child is cute and sweet			

Data analysis

Qualitative data collected during phase 1 was analyzed using inductive (bottom-up) qualitative content analysis and theoretically directed categories (top-down). All the sentences used to describe the child were underlined as meaning units. I carefully assigned codes to the meaning units (see Table 3) and clustered the codes in subthemes and themes. Themes were placed in their corresponding theoretical categories derived from the literature (as described earlier). To improve analytical validity, I shared the codes and clusters with one of my colleagues to get her feedback. Her feedback helped to remove ambiguities and refine codes and clusters.

Table 3. Content Analysis of the Responses. Examples of Meaning Units and Emerging Codes

Meaning units	Codes
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Children are naughty and they make too much mess. They become irritating to seek attention.	naughty, disorganized, irritating, attention seeker
Children are easy-going. They play in the mud and do not care how they look like. They enjoy their life. They do not know right or wrong.	comfortable, playful, joyful, indifferent, ignorant, innocent
Children are <u>cute</u> and <u>innocent</u> . When they start talking, they talk too much. Sometimes, they are <u>annoying</u> too.	cute, innocent, talkative, annoying
The children are beautiful and lovely. However, when they start crying they do not stop until they do not get what they want.	beautiful, loving, stubborn, demanding
A child is a flower, beautiful but can wither if mishandled. Children need adults to take care of them. They cannot walk and talk themselves.	cute, beautiful, delicate, fragile, vulnerable, dependent, developing

Before data collection in phase 2, the survey items were examined by the same colleague who provided feedback during phase 1, and a few items were revised for clarity. Data collected during phase 2 was quantitatively analyzed, and the percentages of the responses were calculated to describe results in connection with the themes and theoretical categories that had emerged in phase 1.

Findings

The findings convey key points to build an understanding of the multiple, interrelated, and contextual aspects of the conceptualization of the child, explaining how respondents view and describe a child. Asking only one open-ended question during phase 1 helped to narrow down the data in line with a theoretical understanding of the concept of the child. Corresponding to four theoretically directed thematic categories, 12 themes emerged from the data (see Table 4), with 31 subthemes. It was an interesting aspect of the findings in phase 1 that none of the participants mentioned any numerical age to define child, whereas all the sentences revealed the child described to be an infant or toddler. It appeared that, contrary to adults (parents or grandparents), who may conceptualize children based on their responsibilities towards children and the value of children in their lives, late adolescents described children as they had observed or interacted with them in their everyday lives. For example, one of the participants wrote:

They are innocent but they are also wild. They cry too much and want to play all the time. Children are naughty and create troubles for the adults. Sometimes it is amusing to play with them, but they can get wild too. They look cute when they are playing.

Another participant described the child as weak and vulnerable:

The child is cute. The child is a beautiful innocent human. The child is weak and sensitive. The child needs adults’ protection to grow strong. The child is a future adult. The child is also naughty, and act smartly sometimes.

It was also noted that several participants provided contrasting characteristics of the child in their responses, for example, portraying a child as an idiot and nonsense and at the same time describing it as naughty and clever. Similarly, participants described the child as “active” and “passive” simultaneously and did not draw a distinctive line between human-being and human-becoming.

Table 4 shows themes and subthemes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis during phase 1 and the percentage scores against each subtheme that were collected through the online survey during phase 2.

Table 4. Concept of a Child: Themes, Subthemes, and Survey Results (%)

Category	Themes	Subthemes	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
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Human Becoming	Immature	Physically immature	56.5	33.7	9.8
	Passive	Learns by following	80.4	12	7.6
		Inexperienced human	69.2	23.1	7.7
		Learns through imitating	91.3	4.3	4.3
	Dependent	Helpless and dependent	64.1	25	10.9
Human Being	Active	Social and expressive	69.6	17.4	13
		Energetic and active	50	35.9	14.1
	Agentic	Self-confident	41.6	41.6	16.9
		Sets goals	51.6	39.6	8.8
		Selective and choosy	64.8	25.3	9.9
		Curious explorer	74.7	12.1	13.2
	Competent	Creative	84.4	8.9	6.7
		Imaginative	53.3	35.6	11.1
		Clever and smart	74.7	16.5	8.8
		Intelligent and sharp	76.9	11	12.1
		A teacher	48.4	34.1	17.6
Evil Child	Idiot	Stupid and nonsense	16.5	71.4	12.1
	Possessive	Stubborn and inflexible	42.9	33	24.2
		Crying and demanding	37	55.4	7.6
	Evil	Naughty and wild	60	17.8	22.2
		Disturbing and irritating	33	50.5	16.5
		Jealous	54.5	29.5	15.9
		Selfish	27.8	53.3	18.9
Innocent Child	Beautiful	Beautiful and attractive	89	5.5	5.5
		Cute and sweet	90.1	5.5	4.4
	Vulnerable	Innocent	87.9	6.6	5.5
		Delicate and fragile	83.3	3.3	13.3
		Sensitive	92.3	4.4	3.3
	Romantic	Loving and adorable	92.3	4.4	3.3
		Joyful and funny	92.3	4.4	3.3
		Playful	92.3	3.3	4.4

The evil child and the innocent child

Several responses described the child as “naughty.” However, the word “naughty” as it emerged from the data was not related to “cuteness.” It was linked with irritating behaviour. Similarly, describing the child as an idiot (such as nonsense and stupid) and possessive (such as stubborn) were seen as negative characteristics that respondents associated with being a child. Interestingly, respondents also described jealousy, selfishness, and wildness as innate behaviours of the child. Hence, I clustered the codes representing negative descriptions of the child as an “evil” child who is idiotic, possessive, naughty, and innately evil. Overall, this thematic category was comparatively less reported in the data.

The most-reported words describing the child were cute, beautiful, joyful, loving, and innocent. Beautiful and romantic are two subthemes that are closely connected and that give a romanticized image of childhood. However, I clustered the words presenting a physical view of a romanticized “beautiful” child (such as cute, attractive, sweet) separately from the words presenting an interactive view of a romanticized child (such as adorable, joyful, playful). Respondents who described the child as “innocent” contradicted the concept of the child as “evil.” The data also showed a close connection between the romanticized image of the child with the notion of fragility and vulnerability of the child. This conceptualization leads to the protective role of adults.

Comparing the “agreed” and “disagreed” responses in the survey results (Phase 2, see Figure 1) showed that the majority of the respondents conceptualized children as “innocent,” whereas the number of responses agreeing on the “evil child” was significantly low. Interestingly, conceptualizing the child as “innocent” romanticized the image of the child, but also placed them in a fragile and vulnerable group who are dependent on adults for their protection. This idea necessarily draws a distinctive line between adults and children, separating them based on power and strength, as well as the “innocence” that is connected with the romantic world of the children that amuses adults. It was also reflected in the responses as the percentage of responses in favour of conceptualizing children as human-becomings is slightly higher than conceptualizing children as “human-beings.” One reason that I see is that the perception of “innocence” (as disclosed in both phases of data collection) is closely connected with children’s immaturity and their dependence on adults. As I already said that respondents in this study assumed that a “child” is an infant or toddler, their understandings of “innocence” and “human-becoming” seem relative.

Child as human-becoming and human-being

Another significant finding in this study is the dichotomy of human-being and human-becoming that appeared in contrasting responses in qualitative and quantitative data analysis. While the difference between the percentage responses of subthemes related to human-becoming and human-being was not significant, it was evident in open-ended responses during phase 1. For example, one participant wrote:

The children are good learners. The children are quick in processing information whatever they observe. They copy others’ behaviours. The children are players. They are clever and play with the adults. They can manage their time and tasks while doing different things.

Another participant views children as passive and active simultaneously.

The children are dependent on adults. They are helpless. The children are intelligent and creative. They are expressive. They are naughty but look cute. They are loveable. They are energetic.

Respondents conceptualized the child as a human-becoming based on the stage-like progression of the child’s development. The child is physically incompetent and lacks several developmental milestones that it can reach over time. A biological immaturity, such as being unable to talk, walk, and eat unassisted is linked with being a child. This biological immaturity upholds the dependence of the “developing” child on adults, particularly at an early age. Another aspect of the concept of a developing child is its cognitive passiveness that respondents related to the imitative learning behaviour of the child, describing it as “naïve” and “copycat.”

Contrary to viewing a child as a human-becoming, respondents also described the child as active, agentic, and competent, which leads the concept of the child to its existence as a human being. However, responses showed that respondents were referring to a child who is not an infant. For example, they described the talkative and expressive child as confident, active, and social. Hence, there was a biological competence in terms of language development that they connected with an “expressive” child who seeks attention by acting smartly and setting goals. Many respondents pointed out that the characteristics of a child are curiosity, smartness, and creativity, qualities that represent an agentic and competent child.

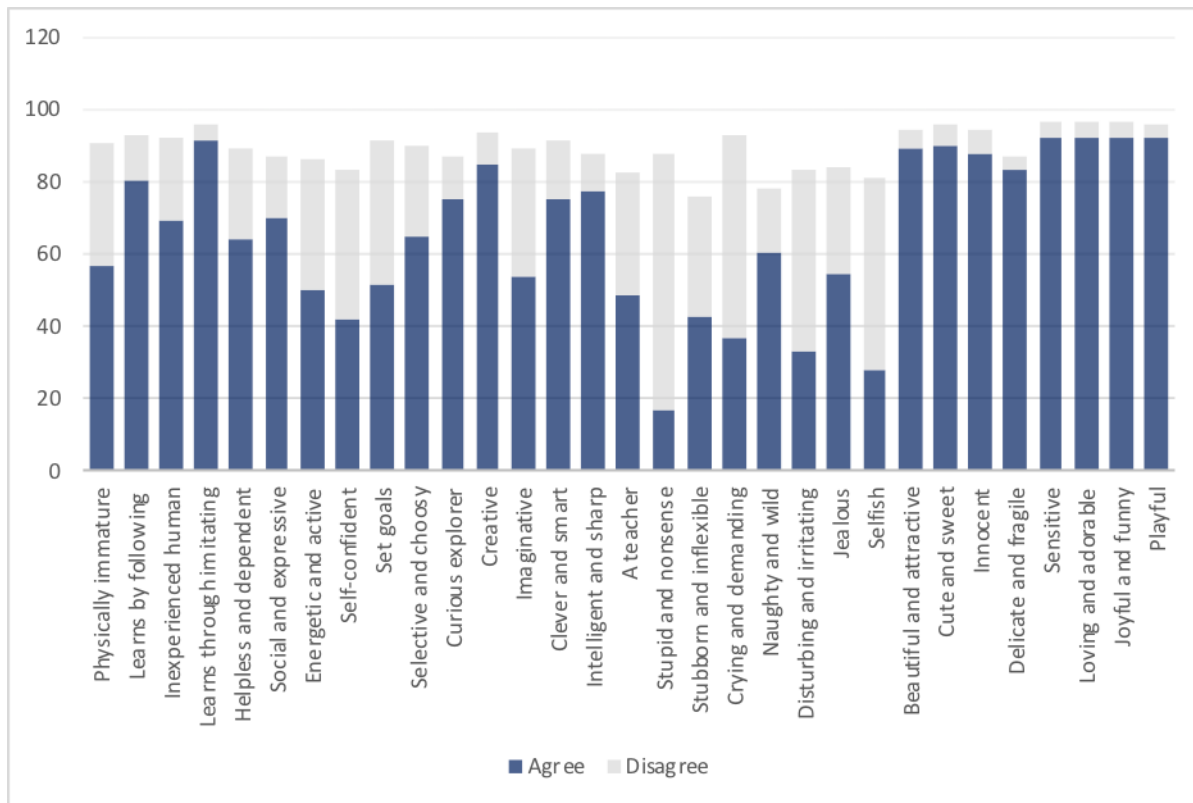


Figure 1. Adolescents' conceptualization of the child.

Discussion

The concept of the child is more complex than the numerical definition of a child that is seen as universal in its legal perspective (see Figure 2). Even though a universal conceptualization of children is prevalent in international child rights policies (influenced by the UNCRC), a distinction among conceptualizations of children (that vary according to the context of the children's lives) is helpful to examine the successes and limitations of international policies. In this connection, Erica Burman (1996) emphasized the distinctions between local, global, and globalized conceptions of childhood. She raises concerns about the inadequate conceptual resources that inform international policies on children's rights and well-being. To understand and manage the conflict that a universal conceptualization of the child (as appears in international legislation) may cause while transcending sociocultural constructs of childhood, it is important to bridge the gap between cultural imperialism and cultural relativism. This is possible if the distinctions between local, global, and globalized conceptions of childhood are explicitly visible and central in policymaking (Burman, 1996).

The conceptualization of children in different social and cultural contexts situates the value of children, parenting, and childcare practices. The four theoretical themes that emerged in this research (as described earlier) present mythological images of the child as evil or innocent and debated concepts of the child in the sociology of childhood (human-becoming and human-being). In three of the theoretical themes, the child is seen as dependent on adults. The evil child needs to be corrected and disciplined. The innocent child needs to be protected and nurtured. The child as human-becoming needs to be socialized and developed. Hence, these three themes present a child as a human-becoming where adults have a role to shape the naughty, fragile, and incompetent child into a civilized, independent, and competent adult. A shift from the Christian discourse on original sin and the evil child to the innocent child of the romantic period significantly influenced parenting practices. Despite the change in the "natural" status of the child from "devil" to "angel," children remained dependent in an adult-centered world where adults commanded and controlled the child's world. On the other hand, both traditional developmental and so-

cialization theories conceptualize a child as a human becoming, an incomplete, biologically immature, vulnerable, and incompetent human. The child as human-becoming needs to be protected and cared for, as well as shaped and moulded by the society for the society. Besides several articles of the UNCRC (1989) mentioning the fragile nature of childhood and the vulnerability of the child, the aim of education, as described in UNCRC (Article 29), is to develop and prepare children to reach their full potential and contribute as responsible members of society. The developmental markers place the child as a human-becoming who develops in a stage-like progression. However, the development of children's capacities corresponding to their numerical age is derived from Western models. When they are applied in non-Western settings, they will not necessarily produce the same results. Similarly, the socialization process in relation to non-Western children's livelihood and education needs (local and academic knowledge) varies significantly when compared to children's lives in the Western context. Overall, the rights-based approach (in connection with provision and protection rights that are mostly undisputed) conceptualizes the child as a human-becoming who needs protection and training.

An interesting aspect of the UNCRC is its recognition of the rights of the individual child in their own perspective and best interest (Articles 3, 12). The best interest of the child, as stated in Article 3, restricts the power practices of adults towards children through legislative bodies to ensure the protection and well-being of children. At the same time, it recognizes children's physical incompetence to protect themselves and their psychological incompetence to make decisions in their own best interest. Hence, an adult should find out the best interest of the child in different situations. Article 12 emphasizes listening to children's voices, respecting children's views, and recognizing their right to express their concerns in matters related to them. However, these rights are subject to the child's "capability" to form views that relate to "age" and "maturity." The only marker that informs this "capability" is the numerical age of the child that is used to define a child in UNCRC. Here, the new sociology of childhood questions the universality of the rights-based approach as stated in UNCRC and presents the child-centered notion of an "agentic" child whose world is coconstructed with the adult world. The child is a member of the adult world and a "knowing subject" (see James, 2007) who contributes as a social actor in the adult world. The child holds a social value that shifts their powerless position to a self-authored status. The agentic child is a human-being who coconstructs the world as an active participant. However, because the child is not free from biological and psychological developmental stages, the human-being and human-becoming dichotomy is problematic. Recognizing a child as a social actor in their sociocultural context and considering their physical and psychological developmental needs does not result in a dichotomy (Lee, 2001; Prout, 2004). The child is also a human-becoming in connection with child-rearing practices and the socialization process.

Dominant scientific theories include cognitive development theories and socialization theories. Piaget's work on cognitive development described a universal stage like progression of the child's cognitive development (from immature to mature thinking) that significantly influenced scientific academia (Montgomery, 2008). On the other hand, socialization theories presented a "passive learning" approach that focused on child-rearing practices that are diverse (in different societies) and not natural (Lee, 2001; Montgomery, 2008). Nevertheless, both perspectives conceptualize children as "human becomings" who are in the "learning phase" of becoming an adult. This conceptualization, applied as "natural" and "universal," presents children in a category different than adults due to their innocence and need to be protected from the adult world. This Western model of childhood presented as a global model by international agencies, conventions, and policies could not address the significantly different experiences of children and diverse models of childhood in the majority world (Montgomery, 2008; Qvortrup, 2009). Respondents in my study were students residing in urban areas. The survey results show that 36% of the respondents believed that a child is a human below the age of 10, and 35% thought that numerical age does not define a child. Hence, their perception of the child as a human becoming probably revolves around the biologically and psychologically developing child that can be explicitly observed during this age or early childhood. During my ethnographic research investigating infant healthcare beliefs and practices in rural areas of Pakistan, I found that people perceive a child as an adult according to their participation in everyday life. For example, a child who can help with agricultural activities, managing livestock, and taking care of domestic chores and responsibilities is perceived as grown up, and the "biological" boundary (based on biological maturity) of childhood is gradually diminished (Qamar, 2010, 2019).

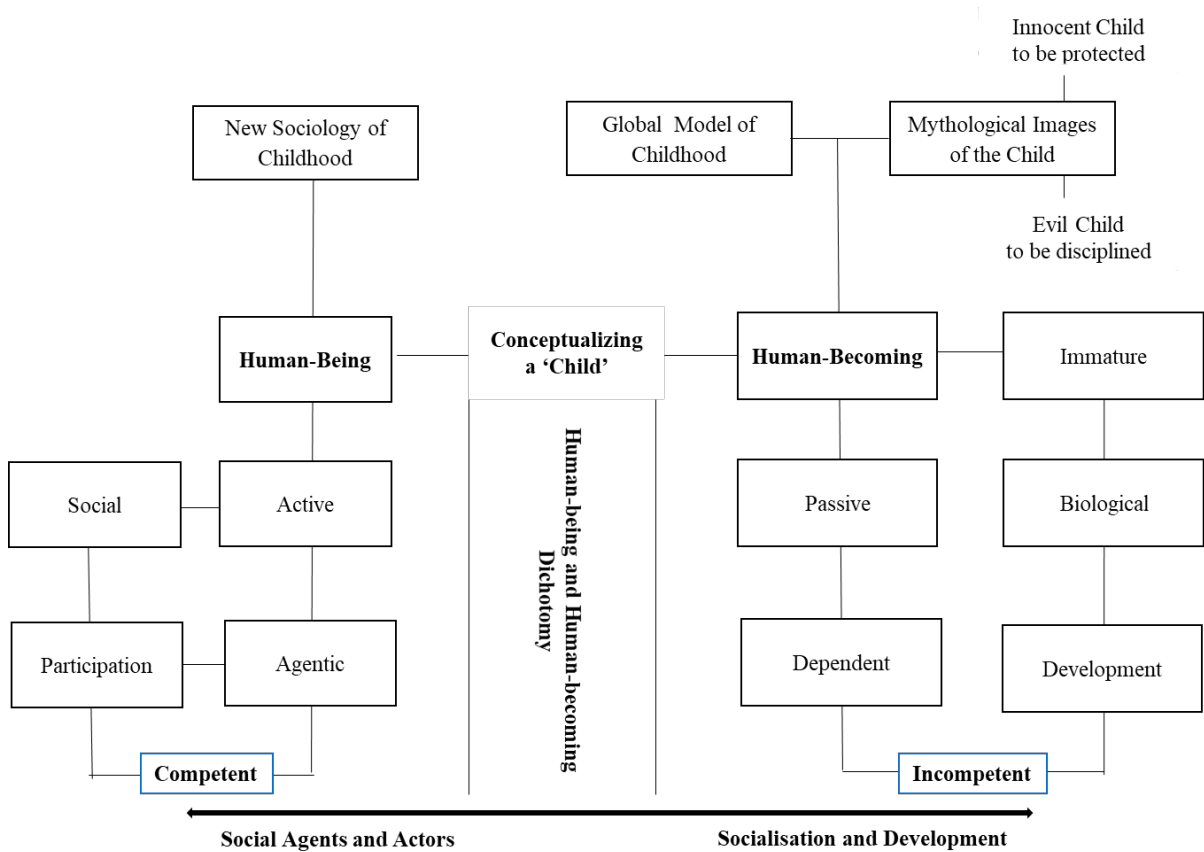


Figure 2. The concept of a child – theoretical connections.

The UNCRC has been criticized for its so-called universalized conception of children’s lives and parents as primarily responsible for children’s upbringing and well-being. However, children in the global south live in extended families, and parenting practices and responsibilities are not limited to parents. The pattern of socialization of children, interdependent households, and multiple caregivers make childhood in the global south significantly different from childhood within the nuclear families of the global north (Burman, 1996). Childhood in non-Western contexts provides a complex picture of economically and culturally contextualized socialization and development of children. School and family are seen as institutions for formal education and traditional socialization respectively. However, besides preparing children to be adult members of society, the traditional socialization (particularly in rural contexts) also includes children’s participation in the domestic economy and their recognition as competent and agentic children. In traditional societies where interdependency is considered the strength of the society (and the community) and children are brought up to maintain this strength, we have to look into the concepts of being and becoming side by side (Abebe, 2007; Antoniou, 2007; Punch, 2001; Qamar, 2010, 2015).

The codes (subthemes) that emerged in this study provide a variety of words to describe a child that correspond to several conceptual categories. The majority of the responses indicate that the child was conceptualized as “innocent” and a “human-being.” Responses also revealed that the respondents conceptualized the child as a human-becoming in terms of early age development, where the child is seen as biologically immature. A few responses were related to the child as “evil,” mostly considering the child as naughty and irritating. The concept of the evil child (seen as jealous, possessive, selfish, demanding, and irritating) suggests an “innate competence” of the child to manipulate and exploit adults. The idea of innate competence also supports the notion of an “agentic” child who has a perspective that should be respected, and whose world should not be separated as a category of passive minors who must be shaped before their membership in the adult world. On the other hand, even though the innocent child is physically and psychologically fragile and vulnerable, the aesthetic aspect attached to a romantic child

presents a socially visible and active child who is playful and interactive. In either view, the child is a social actor who actively contributes to the adult world.

Advances in the new sociology of childhood presented four research approaches and theoretical paradigms (that may overlap) that consider children as human beings and social actors. These four approaches are the socio-structural child, the minority world child, the socially constructed child, and the tribal child (James et al., 1998). The socio-structural child approach views childhood in a structural form that in a wider structure remains uniform despite their varied manifestation across different societies. In this approach, childhood has shared commonalities and remains a phase of life that never disappears. The minority world child is a politicized version of the socio-structural child that views children as active beings. Living in the adult-centered world, children are distinguished from adults and marginalized. Their perceptions are explored in connection with children's rights putting them in age-based categories; hence, elements of universality and being "global" are there. In contrast, the socially constructed child approach conceptualizes childhood as historically and culturally varied and focuses on local conceptualizations of childhood with reference to several contextual elements such as class, age, gender, geography, ethnicity, religion, etc. As a relativistic analytical approach, socially constructed childhood (as a historical and social construct) illuminates the particularities of childhood in time and place. The tribal child approach is a politicized version of the socially constructed child. The tribal child approach places children in their own cultural world that is different than adults' but is not adult-centered. Hence, the focus is on the otherness of childhood and children's everyday lives independent of adult-child relations and adult concerns. Childhood is seen as a real social world of children and their autonomous participation in it makes their world unique and distinctive (James et al., 1998; Kjørholt, 2004). However, ignoring adult-child relations is not as simple as seen in this approach because of the frequent adult-child interactions between children, parents, and teachers in home and school settings.

Multiple aspects of the concept of the child provide the diversity of adults' perspectives on children and childhood that make it too complex to give a single universal definition of the child. This study's findings provide a broader canvas on which to paint childhood beyond the limitations of numerical age that restricts the conceptualization of children through chronological aging. The diversity of responses revealed in this study places the conceptualization of children in various epistemological domains that presents childhood studies as a field of interdisciplinary inquiry.

Conclusion

Mythological images of the child describe children as "evil" or "innocent" and influence parenting and teaching strategies. Since both of these images separate childhood from "real" adult life, adults play an authoritative role to discipline and protect children. Children are seen as weak, vulnerable, and incompetent. A shift offered by the new sociology of childhood liberates children from the conceptualization of incompetency and vulnerability and positions them as "beings" in their right. The conceptualization of children in this new perspective is undergoing debates about the diversities of children's competencies in different social contexts and contested chronological perspectives of the majority of legal policies. Findings in this study revealed a variety of concepts that young adults associated with children. Their descriptions of the child showed a multidimensional yet interconnected image of the child that adds to the complexity of the concept of the child and the nature of childhood in any social context.

Considering diverse interconnected regional and global conceptualizations of childhood, the new sociology of childhood emerged as a response to wide changes to global political and economic challenges that affected regional contexts. An interdisciplinary childhood study can use diverse theoretical concepts of childhood and children in rich interconnected discussions to develop holistic pictures of childhood.

Limitations

The conceptualization of children significantly affects parenting practices, adult-child relationships, and children's schooling. The qualitative questionnaire used in this study had only one open-ended question to be answered by late adolescents studying in Pakistani universities. The idea was to capture first-hand spontaneous thoughts of the

adolescents, narrowing the focus to a description of the child as they perceived it. Later, a closed-ended survey derived from the emergent subthemes proved to be a valuable instrument to be used for maximum variation samples. This study should be taken as a pilot study to initiate mainstream projects related to parenting, schooling, and parent-child attachments studies.

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