'Imperfect Children' in Historical Perspective

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The health, well-being, and welfare of children are pressing modern issues. Whether the vehicle is ballooning figures linked to childhood obesity, the intractable decline in British educational standards in comparison to the rest of the world, unaccompanied child migration, historic child abuse allegations or (and most prominently) the mental health of the young, it is clear that children and young people occupy a unique place in the public psyche and are never far from the social and media spotlights. We have come to realise, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau put it, that "Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs."[1] Historians do not agree on when this 'modern' sense of childhood as a distinct phase in the socio-cultural, economic, and demographic life-cycle emerges, nor about how far parents invested emotional capital into the lives of their children in the past.

For some, it was the breaking of the link between work (and associated practices such as apprenticeship) that led to a definable and discretionary period of childhood. Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt suggested that child labour was the by-product of industrialisation and that youngsters were ubiquitous in the early-factory system, even more so than had been the case in agricultural communities before the emergence of widespread proto-industrialisation.[2] In this sense, children were assets either to aspirational households or those just about managing, compromising any defined age bracket of childhood and certainly any sense of children as innocents. Peter Kirby has extended this view demonstrating that child workers could be found across industries in the broadest sense, and were most likely found in traditional occupations such as domestic labour, workshop production, messenger work, and agricultural labouring.[3] Similarly,

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[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile: Or on Education*, (London: Basic Books 1979; originally published in English 1763), p.189.
[2] Margaret Hewitt and Ivy Pinchbeck, *Children in English Society*, vol.II, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1973).
[3] Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1850*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2003).

Katrina Honeyman has reconsidered the apprenticeship system, demonstrating that they were better organised and managed, and more extensive quantitatively, geographically and chronologically, than had previously been thought.[4] Indeed, it might be argued that apprentice children were central to the developing industrial economy in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-England. Certainly the contributors to Nigel Goose and Honeyman's edited collection on childhood and child labour range over a multitude of child employment opportunities, as well as suggesting that children were not just unwitting participants in adult schemes but active participants and protagonists in the industrial workplace.[5]

Set in this context, the key issue has been to explain, and trace chronologically, the decline of such child labour and thus the *de facto* emergence of an observable 'childhood'. Kirby, for instance, contends it declined not as a result of intervention by individual reformers and governments influenced by Rousseauesque ideals of childhood innocence and the need for the state as well as parents to invest in the lives and human capital of future generations, but as a consequence of shifts in production methods and the organisation of labour.[6] Jane Humphries has also traced a decline in the intensity and extensivity of child labour from the mid-1870s, suggesting that this decline reflected rising male wages and father's fulfilling the role of family breadwinner for longer.[7] A century after Rousseau depicted childhood as an idyllic period of sheltered innocence, we once again, in the context of the removal of child labour, see the emergence of a life-cycle space that could be filled with education, love, play and investment.[8] On the other hand, there are numerous competing chronologies. Hannah Newton, for instance, reconstructs attitudes to the sick child in the early modern period, showing that parents and medical men were keenly aware of the

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[4] Katrina Honeyman, *Child Workers in England, 1780-1820: parish apprentices and the making of the early industrial labour force*, (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007).

[5] Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (eds.), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency, 1750-1914*, (Aldershot: Ashgate 2013).

[6] ibid p.7.

[7] Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010).

[8] Rousseau, *Émile*.

fact that children were not just mini-adults. Specific medical responses to children can be observed, as can a considerable emotional investment in the cure, suffering and wellbeing of the child patient.[9] This was quite the departure from orthodox historiography. The French medievalist Phillipe Ariès had argued that childhood was a modern construct, with medieval youngsters treated as proto-adults who were quickly integrated into the economic mechanisms of the household.[10] Further challenging this traditional view, Stuart Campbell has identified a material culture of toys and play-things in pre-modern Scotland that suggests there was a market place for childhood for well to-do families and those beneath them in the social strata.[11] In this sense, something that we might recognise as a 'modern' attitude towards children was already in place well before the eighteenth century, a contention that sits well with Linda Pollock's sense of attitudes towards the younger generation in this period.[12]

Whenever we locate the emergence of a definable childhood and however we define the age limits of a child (a not inconsiderable subject in it's own right[13]) the really important question, as modern soul searching on the mental health of young people suggests, is that of the socio-cultural and socio-medical experiences of those who people these childhoods. For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these experiences have been inextricably tied up with the emergence of normative 'standards' and wider narratives of (adult and child) perfectability. From the later nineteenth-century, for instance, the increasing possibility of elective, corrective and reconstructive surgery meant that physical impairment of the sort that might previously have been lived with

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[9] Hannah Newton, 'Children's Physic: Medical Perceptions and Treatment of Sick Children in Early Modern England, *c*. 1580-1720', *Social History of Medicine*, 23/3, (2010), pp.456-74; Hannah Newton, *The Sick Child in Early Modern England, 1580-1720*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012).

[10] Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, (London: Cape 1962).

[11] Stuart Campbell, 'Work and play: The Material Culture of Childhood in Early Modern Scotland', in Janay Nugent and Elizabeth Ewan (eds.), *Children and Youth in Premodern Scotland*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press 2015), pp.65-88.

[12] Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983); Pollock, *A Lasting Relationship: Parents and Children over Three Centuries*, (London: University of New England Press); for a wider summary of the field see M. L. King, 'Concepts of childhood: What we know and where we might go', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 60 (2007), pp.341.407.

[13] For a discussion of age definitions see Steven J. Taylor, *Child Insanity in England, 1845-1907*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

became increasingly and inexorably remediable. When the vicar of the Suffolk town of Wortham constructed narrative and pen portraits of his parishioners in 1830s, children with physical impairments had turned into adults with obvious disabilities. A century later he would not have framed the same characters.[14] In education, normative standards of attainment and (increasingly) behaviour crept in from the 1870s, even for the poorest children educated in workhouses. The rise of institutional provision meant individuals, including and especially children, with mental impairments or what we might broadly understand as behavioural problems could be swept out of sight, increasing the traction of normative standards for the wider population. Didactic literature on child rearing and the 'appropriate' behaviour of both adults and children had a long history by the later nineteenth-century but its reach and traction certainly increased over time. A wider body of literary productions also had a role to play in constructing the normal amongst a population for whom some people have seen a democratisation of literacy post-1860.[15] And of course the establishment and growth of a magazine culture both reflected and drove a wider interest in fashion, public figures and what constituted beauty. Certainly by the later nineteenth-century, when eugenic narratives emerged as the harsher end of the story, the issue of what made for perfect and imperfect bodies and perfect and imperfect people had strongly intruded onto a receptive public consciousness. Less than 60 years later this sort of narrative had extended to a discussion of the possibilities of bodily improvement through cosmetic surgery on the one hand, through to the improvability of the embryo on the other.

It is against this broad backdrop that the idea of 'Imperfect Children' was discussed at a conference held at the Centre for Medical Humanities, University of Leicester, in the summer 2013. The discussions from the conference confirmed our expectation that using an imperfection/perfect dichotomy as an analytical prism would be contentious. Debate developed over inter alia: whether

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[14] David Dymond (ed.), *Parson and People in a Suffolk Village: Richard Cobbold's Wortham 1824-77* (Ipswich: Wortham History Group, 2007).
[15] Martyn Lyons (ed.), *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives: Writing Practices in 19th and 20th Century Europe* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), and Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe c.1860-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

any child could be described as imperfect given that children were and are beings that are not yet fully formed, so that in some sense they are by definition imperfect; who 'owned' and set normative standards; the balance in different historical periods of ascribed, adopted and self-generated narratives and identities of imperfection; the relationship between narratives of perfection and imperfection in the past and present; the quantitative dimensions of physical impairment; and the particular intersection of mental and physical 'imperfection' and wider socio-cultural and socio-medical constructions of disability. For many of those who attended the conference, a career spent fighting against such labels made a conference on childhood imperfection in particular a problematic event.

All of the contributors to this special issue address to some degree the labelling of the physical, mental or behavioural issues they deal with. For the historians in our original audience the concept of 'imperfection' and with it the notion of normative standards, should not have been surprising. The emergence and understanding of childhood illness and disability is an expanding sub-field in both the history of medicine and the history of childhood. Various mental health issues faced by children during the nineteenth century are examined by Joe Melling, Bill Forsythe and Richard Adair, Steven Taylor, and David Wright.[16] These studies have suggested that children with mental illness or disabilities were observed and treated in a multitude of ways in both the community and predominately adult environments of mental health institutions. Taylor particularly presents the stigma attached to learning disabilities through the community response to two children in the late-nineteenth-century and the broad and varied economies of care that developed in urban areas in comparison to the experience of those in rural localities were left to fester in asylums and

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[16] Joseph Melling, Richard Adair and Bill Forsythe, '"A Proper Lunatic for Two Years": Pauper Lunatic Children in Victorian and Edwardian England. Child Admissions to the Devon County Asylum, 1845-1914', *Journal of Social History*, 31/2, (1997), pp.371-405; Steven J. Taylor, '"All his ways are those of an idiot": The admission, treatment of and social reaction to two "idiot" children of the Northampton Pauper Lunatic Asylum, 1877-1883', *Family and Community History*, 15/1, (2012), pp.34-43; Taylor, *Child Insanity in England*; David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum, 1847-1901*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001).

workhouses.[17] The history of mental disability has been further developed by Wright's work on Down's syndrome, something the author describes as the most visible manifestation of mental retardation. Wright goes on to suggest that the society's manufacture of the imperfect 'other' was a consequence of 'the rise and cult of education, individualism, and intelligence that has dominated Western society for the last hundred years'..[18] Responses to 'mental deficiency' were complex in nature and, while the Mental Deficiency Act, 1913, legitimised segregation of 'afflicted' individuals from society, Mathew Thomson investigates numerous other responses to mental imperfection that included family members, civil servants, medical staff, and social workers who were in the process of professionalising. [19]. Finally, Matt Smith's research on the emergence of hyperactivity suggests such a disorder is a modern phenomenon, influenced by cultural forces as well as medical ones.[20]

We could go on, but the sense that the elision of mental and physical impairment in children with wider notions of perfection and imperfection is a mainstay of the socio-medical construction of childhood in historical populations is clear, even if, as Anne Borsay and Pamela Dale argue, the disability rights movement has been focused on the experience of adults and the lives of disabled children have been largely marginalised.[21] The perfect/imperfect dichotomy also has wider traction: In 1974 Lloyd deMause suggested that the history of childhood was a 'nightmare' from which we had not fully awakened. His argument was that scholars had overlooked the negative experiences of childhood in the past to concentrate on 'fantastic castles and magnificent battles'. [22] More recently 'historians such as Alysa Levene, Pamela Cox, Pamela Dale and Anne Borsay, Steven Taylor, and Louise Jackson amongst others have banished the 'nightmare' and made it abundantly evident that children experienced poverty, abuse, physical or mental disability, and delinquency; all factors that

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[17] Taylor, 'All his ways are those of an idiot and *Child Insanity in England*
[18] David Wright, *Downs: The History of a Disability*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), p.113.
[19] Mathew Thompson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy in Britain c. 1870-1959*, (Oxford: Clarendon 1998).
[20] Matt Smith, *Hyperactive: The Controversial History of ADHD*, (London: Reaktion Books 2012), p.155; 'Hyperactivity and American History, 1957-Present: Challenges to and Opportunities for Understanding', in Borsay and Dale (eds.), *Disabled Children*, pp.173-182.
[21] Anne Borsay and Pamela Dale (eds.), *Disabled Children: Contested Caring, 1850-1979*, (London: Pickering & Chatto 2012).
[22] Lloyd deMause, *The History of Childhood*, (New York 1974), Chap.1.

shaped and defined imperfection.[23]. Histories of education, educational discipline and the ordering

of sites of learning have been freighted with similar complexity.[24] Using a Foucauldian lens schools

have been conceptualised as disciplinary arenas acting upon the bodies of pupils, teachers, and

administrators alike.[25] The ritualistic practices that schools imbued in their pupils from a young age,

such as lining up, walking (some might say marching) and working in silence, sitting in rows, and

raising a hand to speak, all were designed to create order but they encouraged an environment

where the child who could not conform stood out from the crowd. If we think back to our own

school experience it does not take long for the name of the child who was 'othered' by these

processes to pop into mind and thus we become more aware of the way that imperfection has

become a category for classification that has permeated our own lived experience . Social policy has

also been used as a prism. Harry Hendrick has argued, for instance, that there was an attitudinal

shift in the late nineteenth century, when the concern of child welfare reformers moved from

children in institutional care to a more general interest in the welfare of the child in the family.[26]

Hendrick has argued that policies towards children were influenced by the concerns of a middle-

class that was becoming acutely aware of the threats posed by working class, especially male,

children.[27] To contemporary observers a dichotomy emerged where children were either treated as

depraved or deprived, as demons or as innocents, as imperfect or perfect.[28]

In short, the concept of imperfection and its construction has been an ever-present

historical narrative in the broadly defined modern period. Understanding this makes contemporary

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[23] Alysa Levene, *Childcare, Health and Mortality at the London Foundling Hospital, 1741-1800*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2007); P. Cox, *Bad Girls in Britain: Gender, Justice and Welfare, 1900-1950*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2002); A. Borsay and P. Dale (eds.), *Disabled Children: Contested Caring, 1850-1979*, (London: Pickering & Chatto 2012); S.J. Taylor, *Child Insanity in England*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2016); L. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*, (London: Routledge 2001).
[24] Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling and the Family in Postwar Canada,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
[25] M. Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal.*
[26] Harry Hendrick, *Child Welfare: England 1872-1989*, (London: Routledge 1994); Hendrick, *Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate*, (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2003).
[27] Hendrick, *Images of Youth: Age, Class, and the Male Youth Problem 1880-1920*, (Oxford@ Clarendon University Press 1990).
[28] Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English society, 1880-1990*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997).

concerns about childhood mental health, declining standards of parenting, feral children, obesity and physical inactivity and above all childhood mental health and adult worries about an epidemic of eating disorders and child suicide, rather more intelligible. They are not new, but rather part of a deeply rooted long-term narrative in which adults and children contest, adopt and impose normative standards and thus define some people – some children and then their adult selves – as 'other'. As the possibilities for 'correcting' abnormal behaviour, bodies, genitalia, birth defects, inherited conditions and the like have expanded and deepened, so the resulting narrative of imperfection has taken hold much more firmly in the popular and social media consciousness. When the vicar of Wortham (see above) recorded his stories of the parishioners he depicted a place in which physical impairment, mental illness and mental breakdown were so very common that everyone was touched by them. The imperfect in glorious colour and multitude were in full view or (in the case of those carted off to institutions or having recently died) in full memory. Precisely because impairment was so ubiquitous, normative dichotomies could not have functioned. Almost two hundred years later, exactly the opposite is true and a narrative of perfectablity, curability and improvability has taken a powerful and damaging hold in the public imagination.

Collectively, the articles for this special issue are about this process, about the about the way that our thinking in relation to childhood has evolved and in particular about the emergence of notions of perfect and imperfect children's bodies and minds over the last 250 years. We seek to explore the experiences and representations of young people who existed on the edges of what might be described as 'normalcy' or 'perfection'. In doing so, we seek to explore the lives and experiences of children that were excluded from or were peripheral to mainstream society and introduce 'imperfect children' as a valuable prism through which to explore historical themes related to medicalisation, disability, utility, labour, welfare, and modernity. Thus this issue applies an analytical lens that very much differs from traditional work on childhood and more specifically the health of the young, and attempts to identify and capture the historical value and experiences of our 'imperfect' subjects. Imperfection thus works as a tool to uncouple the child from ideas of

innocence, and a means for more objectively focusing on children who might be described as transgressive or living at the margins of what can be considered a 'normal' or 'perfect' childhood. It is important that imperfection is not treated as a value judgement, the children discussed are not being discarded as worthless or undeserving of historical attention, but in fact the opposite. The goal is to focus on the liminal child and place them centre stage.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that our five articles are closely linked to contemporaneous ideas of what it meant to be modern. At times discussions manifest themselves in explorations of growth and development, most obviously in relation to the child, but also of medical practice, institutions, and society. For instance Christopher Goodey's contribution ambitiously intertwines literary history and scientific development to trace the evolution of scientific labels for intellectual disability from the eighteenth century through to the present. Likewise, Matthew Smith explores how ADHD diagnoses have developed in different global contexts to suit particular cultural attitudes. Thus we begin to see how 'modern' expectations of 'perfect' behaviour result in the medicalisation of the child considered to be imperfect. Medicalisation of childhood, like modernity, is a thread that runs through all of the contributions. While historians have focused on medicalisation in a broad sense throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries very little work has focused on children. Such a lacuna is unsurprising considering attitudes towards childhood health in the past. Until relatively recently infant mortality has been staggeringly high and those that did survive those first few years of life often succumbed to disease before reaching adulthood. Subsequently, the young, as carriers of infection, were excluded from medical intervention and hospitalisation. In fact specialist medical care for the young in forms of children's hospitals arrived late to Britain with the first ones not founded until 1852. In the absence of targeted medical care, David Turner explores how eighteenth-century charity and medical men sought to restore impaired children to utility and in doing so prepare them to take up their expected role in society regardless of social or class distinctions. . Moreover, Steven Taylor traces how parents and families collaborated with and influenced asylum doctors in the nineteenth century in order to secure diagnoses of mental

imperfection. Moving further afield from medical institutions Michael Mantin demonstrates how deaf children developed their own culture and identity in resistance to imposed education. Even in this environment, acceptance of sensory impairment and the subsequent development of deaf culture was challenged and contested by those occupying spaces of normativity.

From discussions at our initial academic conference and through the scholarship that features here it quickly became apparent that children outside of accepted expectations were 'othered' by a range of observers. Steven Taylor's chapter provides a window to how families of mentally impaired children could be complicit in this process. The conceptualisation appears to have been linked to notions of utility and Taylor and Turner discuss how assimilation, conformity to acceptable norms, and future productivity were paramount considerations of those dealing with the physically and mentally disabled. The 'imperfect' child might be described in this way not because of their own mental or physical restrictions, but because society has developed to fear what is different and fails to meet its own expectations. In the modern world abnormalities stand out, it is a depressing truism. What this volume seeks to achieve is a better understanding of how children that have developed outside of social expectations were treated, cared for, and dealt with in the past. Were children tossed aside, the sad truth is that in some instances they were (Taylor), but in other circumstances we witness attempts to try and integrate the imperfect into perfect society. Again, this is not to say that these attempts were morally correct or justified but that they existed and we need to acknowledge this.

Our authors focus largely on England and Wales. This was a deliberate approach by the editors of the special issue. Our conference on imperfect children established, and perhaps not unexpectedly, that the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-medical construction of normative standards, languages and labels of perfection and imperfection, and the transmission and universalisation of these narratives via social, medical and media channels, was highly situational by country. A much wider pan-European and comparative project will be needed to trace these

processes and to draw out their particular versus general characteristics. While our articles use a rich variety of sources, some of them well outside the 'mainstream' when writing about histories of childhood, this is largely a special issue founded on adult views of children that might be considered different and the development of normative standards by adults that were imposed upon or adopted by children themselves. This approach is consistent with wider narratives of medicalisation of childhood. The challenge for the future will be to construct ideas of imperfection from the child's perspectives, where possible using their own words in the form of letters, diaries, and interviews. This would reflect the current vogue of locating the 'child's voice' although it might provide a cultural rather than social history of medicine. Such an approach would also lead us into the complex but compelling question of how children themselves formulate, understand, transmit and enforce in their peer groups normative standards of body shape and size, mental health, beauty, or physical ability and inability. In a contemporary sense, it is this question which is compelling and in its answer the voices of historians of medicine and childhood must once more be heard because these issues are in many ways path-dependent. Finally, our authors do not take an overtly class perspective. This is not a special issue about the poor and nor does it reflect a literature on histories of childhood which has been undeniably dominated by perspectives drawn from sources kept by middling and upper sort families. The editors made a conscious choice when selecting articles for the special issue to think about narratives and labels of perfection and imperfection as essentially classless, much as they have become today. This was and is in keeping with our sense that historical work on childhood imperfection can contribute something to modern understandings of issues which are anything but uniquely twenty-first century.

THIS NEEDS TO GO IN SOMEWHERE: [29] - I can intersperse these in various spaces, I think we should

cut the section above. Agreed.

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[29] For example see Steven Thompson, 'The mixed Economy of Welfare and the Care of Sick and disabled Children in the South Wales Coalfield, *c*. 1850-1950', Chap. 3; Mike Mantin, 'The Question of Oralism and the experiences of Deaf Children, 1880-1914', Chap. 4; Anne Borsay, 'From Representation to experience: disability in the British Advice Literature for Parents, 1890-1980', Chap. 6; Josè Martínez-Pèrez, Mariá Isabel Porras, Mariá Josè Báguena and Rosa Ballester, 'Spanish Health Services and Polio Epidemics in the Twentieth Century: The "Discovery" of a New Group of Disabled People, 1930-70', Chap.9; all in Borsay and Dale (eds), *Disabled Children*.