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Replacing purpose with pastiche? On childhood and shifting identity patterns

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Identifying 'childhood' necessarily distinguishes it from 'adulthood'. Making such a distinction is like any other form of social categorisation (between male and female, or black and white): the communicative codes of a society determine where the dividing lines are drawn. Such labels are culturally constructed, as are their specific functions, the distinctions they typically mark and the meanings that they each convey. Identity is always an unstable entity. The notions that people have of 'children' and 'childhood' are only to a very limited degree based on universally shared experience.

Dominance of the vertical plane of life-history

The topic of this paper is the changing patterns of childhood. If we refer to any kind of changes we must relate them to some kind of reference point. To begin with, a few remarks on the image of childhood in modernity. One reason for this being an appropriate starting point is that it continues to exert a major influence on how we relate to children.

Modernity's image of childhood is associated first and foremost with a life phase, specifically a phase with a preparatory function. Identity in childhood is an identity that is under development, and is to that extent at root a non-identity. A common feature ascribed to all those going through childhood is that they are not (yet) adults, and that they are adults in the making. The aspect that distinguishes children from each other (and by which childhood is internally differentiated) is the varying gap between childhood and adulthood. Modernity's concept of childhood defines this gap in terms of (biological) age.

The model in which modern childhood is conceived and located is the vertical life history plane. In the phases of childhood and youth, movement is along this vertical axis in an upwards direction. It has a *telos* (purpose) - it is supposed to make a child into an adult, to prepare a child for adult identity, an identity which is without qualifying adjectives such as a natural, bodily-related or role-related identity. Childhood researchers in the period of modernity, especially development psychologists and those researching socialisation, describe the childhood itinerary in terms of life plans and stations. For example, they use concepts to show how far, at each age, children are physically, cognitively, emotionally or socially removed from adult identity (which is identity per se). These researchers pass on these concepts to the practitioners who are the designers of childhood contexts.

The changes in the patterns of childhood that have happened over the last few decades are largely determined by the extent that they shift the focus of viewing childhood from the vertical dimension of life history to the horizontal dimension of lifeworlds. To support this thesis, I shall first outline some new focal points in the academic, legal, political and economic discourses on childhood. I shall then illustrate some new accents in the patterns of childhood and the collective identity of children.

Tenacious concentration on the present

Recent studies in social childhood have deconstructed modernity's image of childhood and made a number of adjustments that fit the thesis outlined above. They have assigned children a rank as societal subjects. Recent studies indicate that children operate autonomously in very different areas of their lifeworlds and that they demand to be treated accordingly. These studies aim at overcoming the way that children have been marginalised by traditional research and by society. A key concept that symbolises this breach with the traditional concept is that of the 'conceptual autonomy' of children and childhood (Thorne 1987) - conceptual autonomy in theory, empirical research and in politics. Placed in the context of life course, conceptual autonomy replaces the future as the central focus of traditional developmental research by a new focus on the present in which children actually live, on their lifeworlds, on the lifeworlds and cultural fields that are important to and for them, on their actions and interactions, and on their ascriptions of meaning and their interpretations of the world and their (social) environment. Conceptual autonomy also implies a more cautious approach to age as a category.

The image of passive, dependent and incompetent children passing through a life phase, the sense and purpose of which is located in a different life phase, has been replaced in recent social childhood studies by that of active subjects who are capable of their own ascriptions of meaning and interpretation, and whose actions make sense here and now. This new image of childhood is centred on the present and is de-teleologised. However, this change of perspective is not unique to childhood research. There have also been parallel developments and identifications in other fields. It obviously makes sense to view the paradigm shift in social-scientific childhood research as expressing a very broad trend, that it recognises, confirms and accentuates. This specific development in society is caused by a range of factors. Civilisation theorists like Norbert Elias argue that there is a centennial trend which involves shifting the balance of power in favour of those who were formerly the weaker, in this case children. (Elias 1989) This trend has been boosted in recent decades by changing values, including a liberalisation in the way children are brought up, and by changes in the ways that decisions are taken within families. (cf. inter alia Büchner 1983).

In this connection reference should be made to the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly because of the three type of rights (the three 'P's': provision, protection, participation) that it reclaims for children. In addition to the traditional rights (to provision and protection), there is a new, participative right. In advanced Scandinavian countries there are efforts to achieve 'conceptual autonomy' for children in the political sphere. Paternalist and adultist notions have also come under attack in the discourse over children's wage labour.

The image of children as propagated by markets and media

How can one characterise the sociocultural conditions under which children in the Northern Hemisphere are now growing up? There is no lack of labels from which to choose: the social sciences provide many concepts for this. Some identify elements of the framework that play the greatest role in shaping childhood today: these include the individualised society, the risk society, late modernity, reflexive modernity, post-modernity, and (somehow or other) the multi-option society. In connection with new identities - in the sense of a changing gap between childhood and adulthood - it seems to

me that there is another aspect that deserves special attention. There is still too little acknowledgement of the fact that the society in which children grow up today, from babies onwards, is an expanding, complex and highly mediatised *consumer* society.

This world is omnipresent in the everyday life of children today. Unlike the family and the school (the classical institutions of childhood in modernity), the consumer society does not have an exclusive physical location, yet penetrates into every corner of everyday life, occupying above all the orientations and activities of children within their peer groups. It changes the balance of formal and informal learning in favour of the latter. This is very important for the experience of being a child. Many experiences that children have when acting in and grappling with this world tend to be 'out of sequence'.

Such a tendency has always been present, in essence. The temporal notions that children and young people have of the way they will develop in the future never purely originate from the models and advice of parents or of other people who have taken this path, but always also from other cultural sources, and these notions are constituted amongst one's peers. Therefore a certain degree of antagonism between the generations can always be expected. Children usually insist - as a kind of anthropological constant - that short-cuts are possible, and demand that they are granted rights at an earlier stage. Conversely, these demands for accelerated progression are generally resisted by those who are responsible for the programmatic aspects of the 'passage' and for the continued validity of conventional sequences - namely parents, teachers and the relevant institutions of guidance and control. In recent decades there have been growing indications that the tensions that can be expected from this have intensified, because young people, through their desire to quicken the pace of their own development, have discovered allies in the consumption and media industries.

Children of today can obtain access to virtually all cultural domains independently of parents and teachers. Media and commercialised culture have revolutionised the pathways for knowledge acquisition, and the manner in which children create images of themselves, of others and of the world in general.

Children in the television era are being confronted en masse, day in and day out, beyond class, religious and national boundaries, with symbols, interpretations and lifestyles that are often beyond anything that parents and teachers are able to convey. What is lost in this process is the self-evidence of the family-, neighbourhood- and regionally-based traditions, the world-views, the notions of masculinity and femininity, of childhood, of leisure, taste and lifestyle that children are exposed to and witness in their families, kindergartens and schools. Parents and other adult references can no longer influence the acquisition of knowledge in a traditional way, with recourse to clearly defined age-related norms and concepts (cf. Hengst 1987), from the ubiquitous flood of information.

The autonomisation generated by this media- and consumption-based culture is rooted partly in the wider scope for control and access that it has granted children. Reference can be made here to features of both hardware and software: firstly to the new symbolic worlds (the trend away from the dominance of the discursive to the dominance of presentational symbols) and secondly the new technologies and channels of transport. These free their users from the dictates of programmes, from fixed times and places, and frequently lead to the collapse of parents' monopoly of control.

The research community has only recently begun to investigate in a serious way the roots and implications of this trend. Yet the key foundations were already laid in the first decades of the 20th century. Regarding the formation of identity, Peter N. Stearns, the American consumer researcher, pointed out in 1997 that, because of the intensified relations between parents and children, greater attention has been focused on the affective response patterns of children - and of very small children in particular - since the beginning of the 20th century. 'People started to get interested in ways and means of occupying and entertaining children in order to prevent unwanted eruptions of feelings and crises. (...) One option that seemed particularly attractive was to divert children's passions away from family members to things. Even though this was never expressed in such clear terms, the core issue was ultimately the extent to which objects could facilitate the care and upbringing of small children' (1997, p. 165).

Rising prosperity and, after 1945, the growing number of upwardly mobile families joining the ranks of the middle class, prepared the ground for entering a new dimension of psychological attachment to consumer goods in a culturally relevant and identity-forming manner, and to the acquisition of such goods. However, this new stage was more than just another segment in a globally conceived trajectory, more than greater prosperity and growing production rates, more than aggressive marketing strategies, though all these factors counted as well. Rather, the decisive innovation was the formation of unspoken (yet no less real) consumer habits in the world of children and infants, and in the stronger psychological identification with consumer goods and the process of acquiring them that was generated among individuals by these habits. Shopping, and social distinction through the medium of consumer goods, played a greater role than ever before. (ibid., p. 165f).

Beyond this aspect of stronger identification with consumer goods on the part of children, it is interesting that the market has also been toying for a very long time with the idea of children acting autonomously in the here and now, making their own buying and consumption decisions.

Influential sections of the market no longer follow concepts of childhood based on developmental psychology or on socialisation theory or educational theory, in either a narrow or a broad sense. Unlike in the 1950s and 1960s they have set aside traditional childhood research and sought direct access to children, granting them what one might call conceptual autonomy. The board rooms of the multinational corporations that push the consumption of popular culture are no longer interested in the cognitive and social development of children, or in psychological concepts of developmental stages. If age grouping is still used, this is only for purposes of market segmentation. What are important to the makers and sellers of children's products are the current preferences of children, their emotional bonds to heroes, toys, etc., and knowledge about children's (play-related) fantasies. Also of importance is information about children's decision-making role within the family. Major parts of the market have abandoned developmental psychology and socialisation theory models of deficits in childhood, of not yet being adult, and replaced the future-orientated middle-class childhood project with a focus on the present. Children constitute a present-day market. Of course, the market bases its approach on this focus on the here and now as also being the right project for the future as well, due to its profitability (cf., inter alia, Hengst 1996; 2000). For this market the future is a lifetime of consumption. There is no interest here in any qualitative, upward movement. The one and only interest is to move consumers through time.

Focus on the present and identity work

It is certainly time that greater value was attached to the life of children in the present. As my brief outline has shown, this process is occurring in very different discourses and with very different interests at work. The problematic aspect of revaluing the present is that it establishes an image of children as being history- and future-less. It is no coincidence that such an image should arise now: it reflects current society in which identities must be formed without predefined scripts, and without the help of adult directors, who possess knowledge about relevance for the future and with a lead in experience. Processes of detraditionalisation and marginalisation (current buzzwords being the 'risk society' and 'post-modernity') have brought all age groups into this situation.

There is no possibility of returning to traditional concepts of life course and identity. On the contrary, there is a need for intensified research into the future. As far as the formation of identity is concerned, there are anthropological constants in the ubiquitous striving for autonomy, and in a sense of belonging and social recognition.

This striving does not operate in a small number of phases or crises, which can be externally defined as being especially relevant for identity formation. The repertoire of significant others and objects of identification has been greatly expanded. The teleological concept of development has also had to be abandoned. It originated from a normative tradition of developmental psychology. In the developmental approach there is a risk that the subjective meaning that children or young people attach to a specific type of behaviour is confused with the 'meaning' that scientists ascribe to the same behaviour. Sociologically it would make more sense to speak of 'action tasks' for which solutions are found and in which the capacity for action must be tested and repeatedly proved, rather than of 'development tasks'. Action tasks are demands that link lifeworld and biography.

What is necessary, as I see it, is a fundamental revision of the way that lifeworld(s) and biography are linked. The primary focus is no longer on the crises and responsibilities of relevance for identity formation, but on the everyday formation of identity. This means that greater importance must be attached to everyday action and the everyday conduct of one's life than identity theories have tended to do in the past. Identity is structured - especially among children - not merely through discourse, but also through the contexts of action, the chaotic mixture of experience and impressions that is structured or pre-structured through everyday action. This generation of coherence and continuity is a form of structuration that is achieved on the one hand through discourse, and on the other through everyday action. In this sense, actions are the methodological bridge between the conduct of one's life and one's identity, and at the same time represent the practical aspect of identity.

Identity and leading one's life are two sides of the same coin; in leading one's life, the practical and everyday level of life is emphasised, whereas identity focuses on the level at which meaning is given to life, the level at which everyday life and one's lifetime are integrated. Leading one's life is not just the framework for discovering identity, but also a strategy for shaping identity. (cf. Behringer 1998).

Obviously the notion of identity as the progressive formation of (inner) 'capital', which is capable of being completed in adolescence (i.e. as an identity platform for subsequent adult life, essential for mastering life), is indissolubly linked to the modernity project. Today identity is a 'draft project for one's own life' (Fend 1991), a sequence of projects –

and probably the simultaneous pursuit of different and partly contradictory projects that, by virtue of their multiplicity, raise in a rather novel way issues of the coherence and permanence of key orientations in one's life.

Identity or biography is thus dissociated from predefined notions, and openly made a task for which individuals are responsible through their decisions and actions; the proportion of biography that is now open to individual decision-making and self-design is increasing. 'Construction kits' providing optional combinations for the construction of biography, as well as 'do-it-yourself biographies' come into existence.

People and identity patterns are both de-composed by increasing differentiation, and must be reconstructed in complex and changing combinations and sequences of experience and action.

Identity formation is a life-long process, which takes place in respective lifeworlds. A group of social psychologists noted in a study that 'we understand identity to involve a continuous process of shaping one's life, a process that is (newly) constructed in every everyday act. In other words, identity is not formed by the subject "now and again", for example when it asks "Who am I?" or joins in a dialogue with others and is asked "Who are you?" Subjects work permanently on their identity (through their actions)'. (Keupp et al, p215).

The concept of pluralisation is repeatedly applied in order to characterise contemporary people's lifeworlds. It is also asserted that there is no connection between them. Kenneth Gergen has put forward the thesis that we are prepared to act in a world devoid of connectedness, a world in which anything is possible. 'As we move into the post-modern world, purpose is replaced with pastiche.' (Gergen 1991, p172).

However one reacts to such a statement, it remains that pluralised lifeworlds no longer interconnect, 'in order to permit some overall view of the meaning or purpose of life. Lifeworlds co-exist, but they are not coherent' (Cohen & Taylor 1977, p201). As a basic principle, children are in the same situation as that of people in other age groups. This has been impressively demonstrated by Lars Dencik (1989), who looked at the differing requirements of families and kindergartens, and by Ake Daun, who studied children's conversations about whether there is any such thing as God. Children act in the family, kindergarten or school, and in peer groups inside and outside institutions. Existing in many worlds means switching frequently from one to the other. When changing from one small world to another children are confronted, like everybody else, with expectations that are at least marginally different, and they encounter different types of people. 'The little lifeworlds of present-day human beings are governed by different "jurisdictions" and belong to different domains of meaning.' (Cohen and Taylor 1977, p202f.).

If lifeworlds merely co-exist without being coherent, the subject must establish links between them and integrate them, in order to shape their own identity. This process can be characterised as the horizontalisation of identity work, and should not be ignored by the research community. Of course, growing up with plural lifeworlds impacts on the actions taken by each individual. Individuals will form their own new interpretations.

Newcomers' new identity-constructions

An important feature of children is that they are always newcomers to a society. This immunises them against nostalgia and makes them more open to new developments, since

they do not have to abandon things they are familiar with. In the following, I would like to use two examples to illustrate how being a newcomer could be related to a kind of eclecticism and how this also produces a proximity to the future, and involves work on social and collective identity patterns relevant for the future.

Family models of present-day children

The first example illustrates elements of a pluralised, open family model in the minds of present-day children. The images that children have of typical families, and particularly of ideal families, are efforts to grapple with major changes in private relationship patterns.

An empirical study conducted in Germany in the early 1990s showed that for children of primary school age 'family' is no longer a natural entity that can be taken for granted. At this age, the institution of marriage begins to determine the child's 'family image'. When 'marriage' is used as a category for signifying family, the possibility of the parents breaking up becomes important. The children's answers express their awareness of the variability of family: one could say they understand family as a social and cultural construction.

Contrary to the assumptions of traditional development psychology, the wishes and fantasies of change among children are as much a component part of concept formation as formal, logical operations in the realisation of culturally specific concepts with ascribed values, such as 'family'. Most of the children interviewed wished for a family with many members - seven or more. Only 18% of the children wanted a family with three members or less.

> In the family images of the (...) children we interviewed, the many-children-family was the norm and the desirable size, contrary to the demographic trend towards the one-child family ... The ideal family is one with the most children, the most frequently named being families with three or more children. And the ideal family is the only type of family in which 'children' and siblings are named in first position. ... For 21% of the children, friends are also part of their ideal family, not just family members, and 66% of the children want to have their friends with them in their fairy-tale castle. (Ulich and Oberhuemer 1993: 125).

Are such family images typical among children? Are they under-developed? Some aspects are of course rather immature, but when compared with the modern concept of the nuclear family it can be seen that they are adequate to the times we are living in. They reflect the instability of the marital sub-system. The ideal families the children constructed betray the search for networks, which can be read as an alternative to more transitory or volatile relationships. Clearly children who produce such images are co-designers of their lifeworlds in the sense of recent childhood research, in that they are responding to new circumstances and challenges. It should also be clear that the specific element in their responses - the temporal core - is not to be interpreted as managing a 'development task' - at best in the sense that they are grappling with a development within society. Their answers do contain age-specific elements, yet these are based to a much greater degree on shared experience. The element of this experience that is particularly important is that the family image does not result from their own family situation, but arises from a sensitivity that one could certainly explain as coming from many different sources, including the diverse range of media offerings.

Portrait of a Children's International

I would like to provide a second example from my own empirical research, in which children today are asked to identify what childhood is. A few years ago, as part of a study on children and collective identity (cf. Hengst 1997), we asked children aged between 8 and 13 the following questions, among others:

> Who is more similar, a German and a French child, or a German child and a German adult?
> What about a German and a Turkish child? Are they more similar than a Turkish child and a Turkish adult, or a German child and a German adult?

The children's responses to these two questions expressed how they draw distinctions in their constructions of 'us' and 'them': one such distinction being between children and adults. I find it striking that so many children assume a kind of mental 'Children's International'. As far as the first question is concerned, there were only a handful of children who chose a national and thus intergenerational option. Like most German children, children of Turkish origin also took the view that there are more similarities between French and German children than between children and adults from the same nation.

It is different when reference is made to the North-South distinction. This does not mean that all children are certain that this is qualitatively different. Migrant children see it most clearly. Some children hesitate, or say that they find the question difficult. Some children say that children from the North differ from children from the South because of the different conditions in which the children live and are brought up. Other children do not accept this barrier and say that children are always more similar to each other, more so than native and foreign adults.

Although basically tending in this direction, some German girls take a more cautious view. They emphasise the gender-specific dimension and believe that similarities between girls is less when one leaves one's own cultural environment. In their opinion, there is a greater similarity between a Turkish girl and a Turkish woman than there is between European children of both genders and Turkish boys. Their criteria for assessment are obviously the different scope for individuality and freedom that they ascribe to the two groups. The symbol they cite as exemplifying the crucial difference is the headscarf worn by Turkish girls and women.

As far as the construction of the 'Children's International' is concerned, it is striking that, here more than anywhere else, language as an indicator is pushed into the background. The culture of children, as evidenced by their responses in this survey, is one that has many languages, including the non-verbal, and this contrasts with adult culture. Such an assessment is partly based on the children's own experience; many (German) children describe how, on holidays abroad, they had no problems understanding children from the particular country or from other countries. An aspect that may be even more important is that they generally assume that children have common interests and mentalities, in a way they do not perceive adults to have. They believe, as a fundamental principle, that children have more interests in common than adults, that they are more open, funny, less serious and less kill-joy than adults, and that they are much more prepared to ignore differences between people.

An interesting question is whether this construction of a Children's International, which the children seem to assume, is related to age-specific factors only (they use 'not yet' frequently when making comparisons with adults), or whether there are elements of a new, generationally specific, mentality. The latter assumption is supported by the fact that being a child nowadays means growing up with peers and focusing on peers, much more than was the case a few decades ago. Firstly, public childhood arises at a very early stage in children's biographies (kindergarten is now the rule rather than the exception). Secondly, there is the commercial system that engineers communities and common interests - peer groups on a global dimension.

In any case, the media preferences and leisure interests of children in the survey exhibited considerable similarities. Our survey corroborates what many empirical studies in this field have shown: that all children are fascinated by American TV series and formats, cartoon films, soaps, sitcoms, by MTV and its national adaptations. Asked about their favourite TV channels, German children mention commercial channels only, for example. All children are fascinated by the toys and games, the leisure and sports fashions that are distributed worldwide. In permanent interplay, the culture industries and peers (as virtual and real groups) put on the agenda what is 'in' at any one time. Many of the children interviewed say that it is important for them to follow trends, including the way that they dress. The media and consumer goods industries do everything they can to stage children's cultures as a peer-group culture that is independent from adults. A common, worldwide platform has been created here, in which the English language has become a lingua franca. In the sub-cultures of net kids, rollerbladers, streetballers and rappers, the secret codes traditionally created by children are being replaced by American insider jargon.

When the children in our survey were asked what fascinates them about their preferred, commercially produced, culture, the terms most used were exciting, amusing and funny. And there is no doubt that they consider such preferences to be particularly typical of children. There is an evident connection, it seems to me, with the demarcations children make from the (imagined) habits and mentalities of adults.
But there is another level to what they say. They clearly reveal children's preference for what can be called a western lifestyle. The pattern of childhood is blended into the concept of a Western lifestyle. The West is not just a geographical fact in this concept: on the basis of technological and leisure criteria, the West also includes Japan. Through entertainment products, such as computers, computer games and martial arts, the Japanese have made a name for themselves.

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