CHILDHOOD NARRATED AND NEGOTIATED: CHILDREN'S, PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' VIEWS ON CHILDHOOD

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In this paper I shall demonstrate how different approaches to childhood interact with the childhood narratives of children, parents, and school teachers. Childhood is narrated and constructed by different agents. In Pierre Bourdieu-terms we have a field of agents, discussing the definition of the Child. In this discussion, professionals have striven to achieve orthodoxy, i.e. the privilege of being experts whose utterances have more power than those of others.

THE DANISH CONTEXT

In the Nordic countries and especially in Denmark, childhood has become extremely institutionalized and professionalized during the last thirty years. Today we have a large labor market related to children, and childraising has become a matter for professionals as well as parents.

Most Danish children attend daycare within their first year of living as 90% of all mothers are in the labor market. So the concept of the Child is a very important category which functions as an archimedic point in the process of defining specific professional groups as well as parenthood in general. The public debate has frequently returned to the question of who should influence and leave their mark on children. In the seventies, there was a moral panic about indoctrination of school-children, which created a taboo in relation to the role of professional upbringers. They were expected to be teaching "facts" and useful competences like reading, writing, calculating, etc. But it was also expected that teachers would train children's independence and improve their abilities to participate in a democratic society; at least this is an implicit formulation in the text of the school legislation. *So*, as a teacher, one must both teach "facts" and "attitudes."

The questions of what are "facts" and what are "attitudes" has been rather obscure in the public debate, and the demand for neutrality has forced teachers to emphasize and make visible their teaching, and play down their personal opinions and values, even though the latter is an important part of teaching democracy.

METHODS

In this context I have studied how children, parents and teachers *tell* childhood. I have done so partly by means of interviews and partly by fieldwork. The former I rather prefer to call conversations or dialogues with people. The latter I would call folkloristic fieldwork, i.e. on the basis of my cultural competence I get into dialogues and interactions with adults and children. Being a part of the Danish culture myself, I have striven for no kind of neutrality. Rather, I have sought to expose the context-bound dynamics of communication in relation to children and their upbringing.

I have been faced with the well-known dilemma of not being able to ask the informants about what I wanted to know because I wanted to obtain materials which would provide more than just examples of what I could think of in advance. So, instead of making questionnaires, I spoke with the informants about themes in relation to my interests. We spoke about children and adults, about play and school, about toys and joys, about the past, present, and future. I also spoke with the children and interacted with them in different ways, and I spent time with them, just observing. And those observations included adults interacting with children. I see this fieldwork partly as a way of producing social reality by means of my person and partly as a way of observing (this) social reality.

THE TEACHERS

On the basis of Sandra Dolby Stahl's study of personal narratives, I have interpreted the dialogues between me and the informants (Kjær 1997) in relation to communication strategies

and the use of style and narrative sequences of different kinds.

In short, teachers tell in generalized terms, they express themselves as having official capacities as experts with authority deriving from their training. They tell no personal narratives, but many "scientific truths" about children's nature. But they do not just hide behind authority. They also express very deep personal involvement in their work. In this personal involvement they make use of their childhood memories in two ways: 1) They tell pupils about their own childhood experiences in order to establish a close relationship with them, and 2) They refer to their own childhoods to aid in evaluating contemporary children's competences, needs, and possibilities. I shall give an example to illustrate the type of dilemma that teachers have to deal with. This teacher tells about the teacher-pupil relationship.

> Per: "There has to be a fundamental joint trust, namely, that both of us are basically fond of each other. And I don't say 'respect' one another. I say: are fond of each other."
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> Bjørg: "What then if you're not fond of somebody? Did you ever experience that?"
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> Per: "No. There's no reason not to be fond of them. What reason would that be?"
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> Bjørg: "Maybe you are just not fond of some people."
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> Per: "Yes, but I feel differently. And I know that I do. Otherwise I couldn't be a teacher. My task. . . is to see that there is a person who needs knowledge. And I must give knowledge to that human being. Because if I don't do that, I've let him or her down."

This teacher expresses deep devotion and personal involvement in order to explain his obligations towards the children. It is a contemporary version of a classic nineteenth-century con

cept of devotion. This concept is closely connected with the very shaping of the professional teacher, who emerged as a skilled person in this historical period. This devotion is about morality, affection, and openness in relation to any human being that walks through the door of the classroom. This very sentence I just quoted, "Because if I don't do that, then I've let him or her down," is a strong statement of human commitment. But it ends in a totally different style, like this:

> Per: "And by the way, I get paid for it."

This illustrates the tension between, on the one hand, the teacher's self-image based on devotion, and, on the other hand, external demands for professional capacity to act in standardized and predictable ways in order to be fair to all children and trustworthy to the surroundings. This tension demands devotion and personal commitment from the teacher-but at the same time it taboos the limits of such a deep personal involvement. So the teacher has to say that his disliking a pupil is not a possibility.

We have two lines of argumentation: 1) the personally committed and emotionally expressed way of telling, and 2) the professionally distanced and intellectually expressed way of telling. And these two lines of argumentation never meet. The teachers jump abruptly from one to the other. In this movement between the discourses, the image of childhood functions as a legitimizer and explanation. As a teacher, one is supposed to love all children because they are assumed to be alike-i.e. childish. On the other had, because children are alike, one can generalize in scientific ways about them.

THE PARENTS

Parents tell childhood in very personal ways. This is in complete accord with their culturally-defined roles as intimately related to and attached to their children. They would be bad parents if they spoke otherwise. They tell many personal narratives and identify strongly with their sons and daughters as they recollect their own childhood experiences. But the picture is

quite ambiguous because the parents also use scientific concepts and knowledge when narrating their children. All of the parents use developmental psychology to explain and describe children in general and their own children in particular. When the offspring are discussed, parents mention, for instance, the importance of play and sport activities for children's mental and intellectual development, implicitly drawing on psychological research showing a connection between the two.

The Swedish ethnologist Karl-Olov Arnstberg (1987) describes how psychology as a scholarly discipline has led to the growth of a popular psychology living side by side with authorized psychology. According to Arnstberg, psychology offers personally based causal explanations which appear to be universal and place the individual in a larger context without de-individualizing him or her. This is why scientific psychology is used in everyday life. The conceptualization of childhood gives the personal interpretations a touch of science. Especially in this field of childhood and child raising, the question of right and wrong is attached to scientific results.

So these parents' interpretations of children are marked by the scientifically legitimated discourse of public professional childcare. Today, most parents are in contact with daycare institutions very early in their parental career, as part of child raising is moved from a private to a public space when the child is about one year old. Ideals, norms, dreams, and hopes, which can differ a lot, are narrated and negotiated in an arena where the intimacy of the family must communicate with professional competence. The reference to developmental psychology makes the parents' argumentation appear scientific in a way that signifies their mastery of the prestigious codes concerning children and their development. This style of well-informedness aims at mastering the professional code in order to make it possible for the parents to express their own opinions. The parents do not necessarily take over scientific frames of reference uncritically. Rather, they create a tradition of parenthood and childhood on the basis of a scientific discourse. They use this scientific discourse in refiguring their own wishes, norms, and morals in much the same way as they use their childhood memories.

THE CHILDREN

I am going to introduce you to three boys in a kindergarten. They are best friends, sometimes referred to as "The Three Musketeers"—just to give you some idea of the character of their friendship. For about two years, these boys have been busy telling and playing endless Spiderman stories. They go on for hours, days, and weeks. Conscientiously they have been doing their "homework" as they have watched the Spiderman TV Show every Friday afternoon. They have made their parents videotape the shows, they have invited each other home to watch the tapes, and they have rehearsed and discussed conflicts and characters in the show.

The teachers do not think Spiderman is in good taste. They consider it to be of poor quality and violent, primitively repeating a stereotyped dichotomy between good and evil. The boys use Spiderman in at least three ways:

1. It keeps the adults at a distance, whereby the boys gain complete control. Here it is of great help that teachers loathe Spiderman!

2. It serves as a good source for the creativity of the boys, as the characters are used, transformed, discussed, and elaborated in narratives and play.

3. It forms a critique of cultural notions in the adult world. The boys use Spiderman to insist on the existence of good and evil—and they insist on the importance of their own judgments, which are far from stereotyped.

Let me elaborate a bit on the last point. In contemporary Denmark, the dichotomy of good and evil is, in a way, non-existent. To be more precise: it has been transformed into a dichotomy of good and sick (or good and pathological) (d. Frykman 1993). This dichotomy of good and sick is a contemporary way of conceptualizing human suffering by relating to evil not as an explanation, as in premodern or religious contexts, but as some-

thing that has to be explained.

In this process of explaining evil, professional caregivers, teachers, social workers, etc. play an important role. A child cannot be just evil, bad, unpleasant or disagreeable. The badness of the child has to be explained in terms of external influences such as events, which have made a healthy, normal child turn into a pathological one. This process of making evil dissolve into social, psychological, and societal circumstances is practiced by professional upbringers of all kinds and has become part of Danish common sense, a "truth" taken for granted.

But by using Spiderman characters in playing and telling, these boys insist on the existence of evil. The pedagogues cannot accept such a standpoint since their professional identity is closely linked to the explanation of evil in order to make it disappear and make the malfunctioning child normal again.

In these three different ways of narrating and defining childhood we can see that all of them implicitly or explicitly relate to the private-professional dichotomy, and negotiate the appropriate frame of reference. To my mind the different, distinct adult modes of telling the child must be understood together as a whole. The messages of private and professional utterances are important to understand some basic cultural notions in contemporary Denmark.

I consider this tension between modes of utterances to be a reflection of an ideology of social life. It is an ideology which connects professional competence to both authority and morality. The greater the professional competence, the greater the authority and moral habitus. That which is formed as rational, scientific, neutral truths are as a matter of fact utterances about morals, attitudes, and values.

Actually, the study of children's expressions is an eye-opener in pointing to these truths for what they are: cultural notions about the nature of children.

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