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Lifestyle Space for Children in Scandinavia

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Scandinavian welfare societies are often presented as the best place in the world for children to grow up. In this paper, I will argue that it is important to go beyond this ideal image and critically explore the cost lifestyle spaces and Nordic welfare societies may have on children and young people. Daycare centers—or Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE)—represent an important space for childhood and young children’s everyday lives. Notions of “the competent autonomous child” interplay with increasingly powerful discourses on children as consumers, connecting “traditional” notions of “Nordic authentic, natural childhood” to market orientation and globalization. Contemporary neoliberal discourses on flexibility, individual choice, and user orientation in daycare are closely intertwined with rights discourses, conceptualizing young children as customers and social actors with rights to participation. At the same time, discourses on children as human capital and ECCE as a space for social investment and learning have become increasingly powerful.

The high emphasis on participation rights, seen as individual freedom of choice from an early age, also implies a danger of putting high pressure on children and young people for being responsible for their happiness and self-realization. Following from this is a tendency to individualize different kinds of social, mental, and emotional problems, rather than seeing them as rooted in society.

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1. Introduction

All societies in the world are concerned about children and childhood. Children represent visions of the future as well as bridges to the past, to history, to the life of previous generations. In order to create a better future society and improve well-being and life quality for children, knowledge about the varieties of different childhoods that are lived and experienced around the world is important. As part of global change, there are many similarities between children's lives in different countries in the world today, including their lifestyles. However, as we know, there are also differences with regard to national and local variation in children's lives and social/cultural perceptions of childhood.

The term "lifestyle" is often used as a concept reflecting an individual's attitudes, preferences, and values. Lifestyle and identity are therefore closely intertwined. Individual lifestyle is socially (culturally) constructed, as described by the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, who stated that "culture" is the dimension of meaning in social life. This includes ideas, values, religious beliefs, aesthetics, moral assumptions, and modes of thought as these are expressed and communicated through social practices in everyday life (Gullestad 1992).

What is a "lifestyle space" then? Spaces are constituted by (social and political) discourses. By "discourses," I mean the dynamic and shifting ways in which we understand, think, and act regarding childhood and the "good life". It has been argued that the concept of discourse can thus be used more or less similarly to—and replacing—the complicated and recently contested concept of "culture" (Kaarhus 2001).

I will continue by quoting a Norwegian author of fiction Edward Hoem's notion of what childhood means, from his novels *The Homeland Childhood (Heimlandet Barndom)*:

Childhood is not a time, it's a landscape, it is the holy land within each and every human being, far beyond the first years of life, when society demands socialization and sets up curricula for us. (Hoem 1985: 5)

This reflects the view that childhood is a life phase "inside" us during the whole course of life, and therefore the experiences we had as children in a way still influence the way we live, our lifestyles, identities, emotions, and the way we think and act.

There is a dynamic interrelatedness between different and competing discourses, globally and locally, that constitute lifestyle space for children. In what follows, I will address contemporary (and sometimes competing) discourses on childhood and the "good life." I will also include a brief overview of main characteristics related to children and everyday life in Norway today that indicate values connected to lifestyle space.

In this paper¹, I will explore lifestyle spaces for children in Scandinavia. The results of my research are related to experiences and research in Norway and Denmark, both of which have similarities to other Scandinavian countries.

2. Norway as the Largest Local Community in the World?

The map of Norway gives an idea of the geographical place in which children live. The population, in total five million, live scattered around this long, stretched country. There are very few large towns in Norway. Only Oslo, the capital, has more than half a million inhabitants. Trondheim, the third largest town in Norway, situated in the middle part of the country where the Norwegian Centre for Child Research is located, has approximately 190,000 inhabitants.

22 percent of the total population in Norway today is children under 18 years, and less than 13 percent of the population are immigrants (including immigrants and children born in Norway with immigrant parents). The fertility rate has decreased a bit during recent years, and it is now 1.88 for each woman. The average life expectancy for Norwegian women as of 2010 is 83 years, and for men 79 years—very similar to the rest of the Scandinavian countries. (Statistics Norway 2012). However, we are still beaten by Japan, which has the highest life expectancy for women in the world at 86.4 years (men in Japan 83 years, Wikipedia 27. 09. 2013).

Lifestyle space for children in Scandinavian countries is influenced by a long social democratic tradition and welfare policy. Social equality is emphasized, and as part of the aim to reach gender equality and give both mothers and fathers the opportunity to participate in the labor market in addition to spending time with and caring for their small children, parental leave today implies paid leave for both mother and father, in total 47 weeks (with 100 percent salary) when a baby is born. 90 percent of all children aged 1–5 years are offered a place in daycare centers (called *barnehager* ‘kindergarten’). Approximately 45 percent of children in Norway experience their parents’ divorce, so there are many single mothers and fathers. The emphasis on gender equality implies that fathers today have a great influence on and responsibility for the upbringing and care of children.

Norway is a scarcely populated country, and from a historical perspective many people have lived in the countryside, in small towns and rural areas—on the coast, in the mountainous areas, or on farms and in houses inland. As part of the Scandinavian social democratic tradition, *egalitarian individualism*, there is (and has been) a strong emphasis on a so-called district-friendly policy, aimed at maintaining small local communities and settlements all over the country. However, in the last two decades in particular, the tendency to move into towns has been increasing. The population density per square kilometer in Norway is in mean 16.

Norway has been described by anthropologists as the “largest local community” in the world, and the rural areas are seen as peaceful and safe (Sørhaug 1984; Gullestad 1992). The notions of close-knit communities and belonging are valued, emphasizing the importance of family life, social networks, neighbors, and relatives. The rural ideal is connected to ideals for “the good life” and “good childhood” and the lifestyle space for children.

3. Family Life and Welfare Policy Related to Children's Lifestyle Space

This section provides further information about family life and welfare policy that is of relevance for children's lifestyle spaces. First, typical working hours are not very long. The hours per week are regulated at 37.5 hours. Of course, there is some variation due to the particular job one has, but in general, people normally start working at 8:00 a.m. and end at 4:00 p.m. Everyone has 5 weeks of vacation (with 100 percent salary) each year. This implies that there is a lot of leisure time and vacation that also impact children's everyday lives and ideals for their lifestyle.

From an early age, many children take part in organized leisure activities like sports and music. The varieties of different leisure-time activities also involve parents bringing their children to these activities, and participating in *dugnad*—a particularly valued joint practice in Norway. *Dugnad*, which is an old tradition, requires the involvement of people working voluntarily for the “best interest” of all toward a predefined aim defined by a group, often a neighborhood, community, or organization. In relation to leisure-time activities, *dugnad* functions as a kind of “sponsoring” activity that involves contributing funds to finance the pursuit.

4. Children as Citizens

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, or UNCRC (1989), can be seen as part of a globalization process, representing particular images of children as subjects that are claimed to be universal. During the last 20 years, we have witnessed an increasing emphasis on “children as participants” in Norway as well as in the other Scandinavian countries. Rights to active social participation, often interpreted as rights to citizenship, have been described as revolutionary compared to earlier international child rights declarations, and as a step toward increased recognition and justice for a group of human beings that are marginalized in society. However, the emphasis on children as claimers of rights, with rights to participation as constructed in the UN Convention, is different from the notion and forms of participation related to children as social actors in everyday life, as unfolded in families, kindergartens, schools, local communities, and society as a whole.

Since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Norway in 1991, and the inclusion of the Convention in the Human Rights Act in 2003, the status of children as citizens with participation rights has been prevalent. Historically, children's rights have been emphasized in all the Scandinavian countries. Individual rights for children and the status of citizenship signifies the emphasis on social equality between children and adults, and the aim of avoiding discrimination based on age.

Participation rights for children and young people are often implemented with particular reference to Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC. The main formulation of these articles are as follows:

Article 12: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her

own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” (UNCRC 1989, accessed by internet 2013/9/27)

Article 13: “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice”(UNCRC 1989, accessed on internet 2013/9/27)

In Norway, these rights are practiced in a variety of different ways, but to a high degree I would argue that lifestyle spaces for children and youth are influenced by the UNCRC and the emphasis on rights to be active participants. From an early age, children are seen as social actors who should have a say in everyday life, in kindergarten, in schools, in family life (such as the right to be heard with regard to decisions of where to live in divorce between their parents), and in the community.

This includes recognizing young people as political actors with a say in local and national policies (Bjerke 2012). Many municipalities have established children and youth councils, representing a space of democracy for them. Many of the participatory activities that have been initiated by policymakers aimed at giving children a voice are short-term-oriented and not anchored in law and legal arrangements (Kjørholt 2002).

However, laws and regulations have in fact also been adopted to ensure children’s rights to participation. One example of this is the Plan and Building Act, section 9–1, stating that all municipalities have to listen to children’s and young people’s voices and consider their interests in local planning (See for instance Ot prp. 32, 2007–2008, paragraph 1–6, Ministry of Environment). A particular children’s representative is appointed in each municipality in order to ensure that children are heard.

5. Early Childhood Education and Care as a Space for Participation

In Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries, children below school age are also seen as autonomous and competent in many ways, with their own rights to take part in decision-making processes and to make decisions for themselves from an early age. This is reflected both in the Kindergarten Act (regarding early childhood education and care services for children aged 1–5), revised in 2005, and in the national curriculum for kindergarten (*den nasjonale rammeplanen for barnehager*, revised in 2006), reflecting the influence of the global children’s rights discourses. § 3 in the Kindergarten Act is stated as follows: “Children have the right to express their views on every day life in ECCE. They have the right to participate in planning an evaluation of the content of ECCE” (The Kindergarten Act, Ministry of Knowledge, revised 2013)

The following quote from the UN Report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child clearly illuminates the power of contemporary global rights discourses, also with regard to children below school age:

There has been a shift away from traditional beliefs that regard early childhood mainly as a period for the socialization of the immature human being in a status towards mature human being. The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognized as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view. (United Nation's Children's Working Committee 2006: 53)

However, we may ask: What does it mean to recognize young children's rights to participate? How are they going to express their views, and with regard to what? These are fundamental questions that need to be addressed. There is no universal standard for what it means to participate. These rights have to be interpreted in a particular social (cultural) context. Research in Norwegian kindergartens (ECCE) indicates that children's participation is often interpreted as individual autonomy, freedom of choice, and self-determination (Kjørholt 2005; Seland 2009; Østrem 2012). The right to freedom of choice is often connected to responsibility for one's own choices (Seland 2009). In recent years, research has also focused on children's rights to participate in a relational perspective, challenging discourses on participation connected to values such as autonomy and freedom of choice for the individual (Bae 2010).

6. The "Tribal Child": Play and "Children's Culture"

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a dynamic interrelatedness between different and even competing discourses on children and ("good") childhood, such as these:

- Rights discourses and citizenship: the *equal* child
- Play and "children's culture": the *different* child

Discourses on "good" childhood are also connected to play and the notion of children's own culture, the "different child" in Scandinavian countries in particular, since the 1980s.

The notion of "children's own culture," also called "play-culture," in policy and research in Scandinavian countries, refers to children's own play and cultural activities understood as an independent space with its own folklore and rituals (Opie and Opie 1959; Mouritsen 1998). Children are constructed as competent, creative actors, and childhood is thought of as a domain where children's own authentic culture unfolds and can be understood relatively independently of adulthood.

The excerpt below, expressed by a representative from the Ministry for Family and Children to one of the largest newspapers in the early 1990s, illustrates how an ideal lifestyle space for children was seen:

We are organizing children in Norway to such a high degree that the authorities now feel a responsibility to help both small ones and grown-ups to get on the new track. The ministry for family and children has modern theories that will help children who want to guide

their own leisure time by themselves. We are organizing childhood the way children are no longer out in their local environments; they do not climb trees anymore and they do not construct huts in the treetops. We simply have to give the play back to children (Representative from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs in the national newspaper *Aftenposten*, October 1990).

As we can see, the lifestyle space for children is connected to “being freed” from adult control. Children are seen as authentic and “in nature,” also as natural beings, close to nature. The following two photos below, from the Norwegian newspaper, *Adresseavisen* in February 2010, is from a report advising parents to take their children out in the snow, to go skiing, and to eat in the snow (Photos 1 and 2).

Notions of a “good” childhood in Norway are connected to children’s ability to climb trees, build huts, and practice their own culture, in particular outdoors, such as in the forest or in the snow during the winter. There is high emphasis on children being “out in nature.” In kindergarten, children play outdoors every day, in every season. Even when it rains and snows, they are outdoors for at least a couple of hours a day from the time they are about one year old. In primary schools and kindergartens, one can often see a *Lavoo*, a type of tent traditionally used by the indigenous people in Scandinavian countries who live with their reindeer—the Sami nomads. These are now also used for children’s play and other outdoor activities in primary schools and kindergartens (Photo 3).



Photo 1 Photo from “Utetliv i vinterferien (Outdoor life during the winter vacation)”, *Adresseavisen*, February 2010 (Photo taken by Agnete Weisser).



Photo 2 Photo from “Uteliv i vinterferien (Outdoor life during the winter vacation)”, *Adresseavisen*, February 2010 (Photo taken by Agnete Weisser).



Photo 3 “The tribal child” playing in and out of a *Lavo*, a particular type of tent traditionally used by the indigenous people in Scandinavian countries (Photo taken by the author in a Norwegian kindergarten, January 2010).

7. Neo-liberalism, Learning, and Early Childhood as Social Investment

In recent years, we have witnessed a new trend emphasizing children as human capital. This is followed by an increasing *academization* of the curriculum and content of ECEC services. Similar findings are also documented in the report *Starting Strong* (OECD 2006), pointing to a tendency for public childcare to become oriented toward the preparation of preschool children for their later role as citizens and labor market participants. This implies moving toward a more structured and school-oriented curriculum, with formal instruction, and emphasizing subjects such as literacy, math, and so forth from an early age.

In Denmark, early childhood education and care today are forced to focus on outcomes, that is, skills relating to the educational system rather than regarding social processes among children as a result in themselves. Eva Gulløv states that the play-oriented and social pedagogical tradition, stressing values such as inclusion, tolerance, social behavior, and forms of communication rather than more subject-oriented learning has to some degree been replaced by a curriculum stressing learning (Gulløv 2012).

In Norway, a similar trend is also significant. The new national curriculum (*Rammeplan*) reflects a tendency toward a more school-oriented program, including learning and subjects such as math and literacy (Kjørholt and Qvortrup 2012). This trend is significant in many European countries. It reflects an increasing market orientation, connecting an investment in early childhood to the need for labor in a competitive market. In this perspective, learning and knowledge, along with the emphasis on children as a future labor force, are prevalent. The value of childhood “here and now” is suffering, then, by being of less importance.

In Norway and Denmark, as in other European countries, children and early childhood education and care are thus to a high degree seen as social investments, emphasizing young children as human resources and the need to start early in order to develop knowledge (Kjørholt and Qvortrup 2012).

8. Lifestyle Space for Children and National Identity

As I have pointed out, Norway and other Scandinavian countries have a tradition regarding democracy called “egalitarian individualism,” putting a high emphasis on equality and also on combining that with a strong focus on individual rights. This emphasis on equality sometimes makes it difficult to see the social inequality that exists in many different ways, for example, in relation to ethnicity and social class.

Children and childhood have a significant symbolic value in modern societies. In Norway, the high emphasis on children as social participants in society contributes to revitalizing the national identity of Norway as an inclusive and modern democracy, embracing different citizens (Kjørholt 2001, 2002). Photo 4 reflects this point. I selected this photo of the Norwegian Crown Prince because it clearly illustrates the interrelatedness between contemporary discourses on national identity and children as having claims to rights and the competence to participate. Children and the Crown Prince



Photo 4 Norwegianness: “We are all equal”. The Crown prince is visiting local communities in Norway, Report in the national newspaper *Aftenposten* April 2009 (Photo taken by unknown photographer).

are represented as equal, and the Crown Prince is sitting in order to talk with children on equal terms. Through this, as the photo reveals, the Norwegianness of the ideal “we are all equal” is reconstructed.

I would also like to point out that the Norwegian Crown Princess was previously a single mother, one of the “ordinary people.” That our Crown Prince married a single mother, giving him the identity of a stepfather like many other Norwegian men, also symbolizes the image of Norway as a modern social democracy with equal opportunities for all.

9. Conclusion

Scandinavian welfare societies are often presented as the best place in the world for children to grow up. In some ways, I would say that this is true. At the same time, I will argue that it is important to go beyond this ideal image and critically explore the cost lifestyle spaces and the Nordic welfare societies may have on children and young people. The high emphasis on participation rights, seen as individual freedom of choice from an early age, also implies putting high pressure on children and young people for being

responsible for their happiness and self-realization. The following points are worth our attention:

- There are an increasing number of children and young people in need of treatment from mental health care services. 47,000 children and young people less than 18 years old received treatment from mental health care services in 2006 (total 1.1 million).
- The number of children getting policlinic treatment more than tripled in the period from 1998 to 2006, and this growth has been strongest in the last three years.
- More than double the number of children today receive offers for assistance from specialist health services than in 1998.
- Suicide and self-injury are increasing among young people, in particular young boys. 30 percent of deaths among males aged 10–24 years are caused by suicide (Mehlum et al. 2000).

These problems are underscored by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in their response to Norway's periodic report to the UN about the implementation of UNCRC.

Swedish welfare researcher Bo Rothstein argues that there is a lack of critical investigation into how these problems might be rooted in society. According to Rothstein, there is a tendency to individualize different kinds of social, mental, and emotional problems, rather than seeing them as rooted in society (Rothstein 2009). Increased individualization and freedom of choice as an overarching moral value may have a cost. A child rights approach to well-being thus requires a holistic approach, implying a focus on the interrelatedness between different rights in the UNCRC. Moreover, investigation of how different groups of children and young people are experiencing the space of lifestyle in Scandinavian countries is needed.

Let's hope for the best for the future and to welcome more comparative research.

Note

- 1) This paper is based on my presentation at the international symposium "Future Society for Children: Scandinavian Thought and Practice" on March 6, 2010, and the succeeding cooperative research I have conducted as a collaborative international researcher for the core research project "The Anthropology of Care and Education for Life" for the National Museum of Ethnology (NME) for FY11–13. I feel this initiative of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka is welcomed as a step toward increased dialogue about how to conduct research on children and childhood in order to create a better future.

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