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The presentation of children in the Faeroese public debate

In this paper I will describe how the children of the Faeroe Islands are presented in the public debate today and how ethical, political, and scientific questions influence the composition of the images. The relation between societal processes and interpretation of children is also discussed with emphasis on the Faeroese context as a small-scale society with deep roots in pre-modern times.

Children in anthropology

The anthropological interest in children, personality and culture usually is traced back to the influential work of Margaret Mead on Samoa (1979). Her book on Samoan children (a comparison with American childhood) became a bestseller around the world, but has been seriously criticised in academia – primarily because of its strong ideological implications (Keesing 1981; Barnard & Spencer 2002). Mead's work changed the view on children in USA, but did not describe children as active subjects. In contemporary anthropology, children are understood to be agents “actively engaged in constituting the ideas and practices that will inform [their] adult life (Barnard & Spencer 2002: 92). Mead's success was related to the contemporary cultural and political interest in exotic and “liberal” child rearing practices in non-western countries. It is an illustrating example of how research results – also nowadays – are taken up by the media to feed the current political debate with some legitimating explanations. It must be realized, says Mead

by any student of civilization that we pay heavily for our heterogeneous, rapidly changing civilization; we pay in high proportions of crime and delinquency, we pay in the conflicts of youth, we pay in an ever-increasing number of neuroses, we pay in the lack of a coherent tradition without which the development of art is sadly handicapped (1979: 195-196)

In small-scale societies like the Faeroe Islands public presentations of children are often intermingled with undocumented representations of contemporary Faeroese society in general, and thereby relatively unreliable as research data, hence also vulnerable to different kinds of subjective political interpretations (Andreassen 1992). In her book on Ethiopian children, Eva Poluha (2004) shows why the Ethiopian society is not changing in the direction that the country's authorities believe it to do, by studying society "through the eyes of its children". She unveils "the power of continuity" by means of a fieldwork at an Addis Ababa school and offers a radically different picture of Ethiopian children than adult Ethiopians themselves are used to. Samoa, says Mead (1979: 197), "knows but one way of life and teaches it to her children. Will we, who have the knowledge of many ways, leave our children free to choose among them?" Mead has a mission to change attitudes in USA, while Poluha tries to bring new "native" (emic) perspectives into the Ethiopian political discourse on the future of children and their society.

Media debate

Only two decades ago, Faeroese children and young people were seldom mentioned in the local media. It was during the 1990s and especially after year 2000 that children started to get noteworthy attention in newspapers, radio, television, and, not to forget, cyberspace in the Faeroe Islands. The deep economic crisis in the Faeroes of the early 1990s symbolizes a societal shift, from early modern to late modern society, from relative isolation to international orientation, and has widened the public discourse, previously very narrow and static in nature, introducing children, youth and other relatively weak groups to the stage (Gaini 2003a & 2003b). In the late 1970s and early 1980s children and children's culture were the main topic of an emotional political and cultural debate on the future of Faeroese culture – if or when television was going to be introduced to the islands (Andreassen 1992; Forchhammer 1998; Poulsen 1980). Political leaders and intellectuals on the islands warned against an uncontrollable foreign influence through modern media – television, radio and video – and foretold, in threatening terms, the end of Faeroese children's culture and leisure. In 1984, as the last place in Western Europe, Sjóntvív Føroya (the national Faeroese television company) was established. Children's culture was during the 1980s still quite local and traditional, not reflecting the new styles and trends transmitted through foreign media. The children's cultural identities were strongly anchored in the local

community, social and family networks, and the Faeroese landscape (Forchhammer 1998). The authoritative voices in the public media debate propagated a strong protection of Faeroese children's culture unspoiled by alien influence and culturally "authentic" in its shape. Hence, when television finally entered Faeroese homes in the mid-1980s there were almost no programs for children and young people – and the lively media debate died soon after. Later, in the late 1990s, came the computers and Internet, opening the gates to the public sphere to Faeroese children and young people. A new dynamic interactive discourse on children emerged.

Media and children's culture

During the last years, as children and young people increasingly have become the subject of vital debates regarding social, cultural, educational and political issues, old stereotypes linked to children have got new fuel, but are indeed also contested by critical voices, especially from young people themselves, but also from youth researchers and social workers. Children exist as a social category and constitute part of the public debate, but they are at the same time the target of journalists' attention in the hunt for one-sided colourful headlines. The growing focus on children is an integral part of the processes of (late) modernisation in the Faeroese society, the so-called reflexive individualised society emerging, which "democratises" societal discourses and openly questions early modern customs and traditions. The cultural emancipation, conceptualised by Thomas Ziehe (Ziehe & Stubenrauch 1983), that children and young people take part in nowadays, at least in theory, makes the freedom of choice a dogma that influences children's identity and lifestyle formation. The modern media and public debate have become essential contexts regarding children's cultural identity formation and development. The presentation of children in media is therefore a crucial venture involving ethical and political considerations: how are children presented relating to the adult population? Or in relation to children in other countries? Or in relation to the family entity? The public discourse becomes even more fragile when 'science' is used in the description and analysis of Faeroese children: how are research results presented? What is mentioned and what is not? Why? How are the results used to support specific political actions? This general problem is of course not restricted to the Faeroese context, but may appear to be deeper on the islands than in the Nordic neighbouring societies, due to the very short span of time in which public attention has been diverted towards the children population. Children are not the only

mute and stereotyped group in the debate, but they are especially vulnerable to abuse and misunderstanding because of their defenceless status as minors. In relation to this asymmetric relation of power, it is necessary to reflect on how the researcher can protect his informants and data against biased and unethical misuse of scientific data in public media.

Faeroese childhood

Faeroese children are, it is often argued, extremely free due to a laissez-faire attitude to upbringing and socialisation in most families. Children's limitations are few and they take part in most of the activities that their parents are involved in. Children are not hidden or kept separated from grown-ups. They play everywhere and are seldom interrupted in their ventures. "But they are only children", people say to defend kids against authoritarian corrections and sanctions. "It's just child's play", it is also said when gangs of kids behave like small criminals or hooligans disturbing innocent people in their neighbourhood. Children are to a high degree left alone in this way – neither condemned as misbehaving thugs nor spoiled as kings and queens of the family (the so-called curling children effect). Kids are just kids, is the slogan. Children's nature is to play without supervision and discipline and learn by doing. Or is it not? The representation of children changes when modern media become one of the main sources of information and learning in Faeroese homes. Childhood and youth "are defined as if dictated by nature, the development from infant to adult is seen as a more or less automatic and natural process, but the ideals are of a cultural nature" (Heggli & Hauan 2002: 10). The interpretation of what belongs to children's culture reflects general cultural models and values and is therefore related to a specific time era and context. "Kids are not only kids, they are also confronted with images that tell them how they should behave and appear as kids" (op cit.: 15). The presentation of children in the media and public debate also influences children's own interpretation of children's culture, and they are thereby cogitating, even if children at the same time appear to be "authentic through their lack of reflexivity" (op cit.: 20). The tendency in research has been to harmonise children's culture, "making it idyllic" (op cit.), and somehow natural. What is considered natural for children, the ideal model, is mediated through modern media that influence children's self-identity in special directions, according to commercial and political priorities. Children are therefore, as minors and victims, easy to misuse in public debates on different contemporary issues.

“Forgotten” kids

During the last years, many individuals and organisations have put considerable efforts into the health, well-being and interests of children, for example through strong participation in the public debate.

Children’s rights (especially the production and distribution of educational information on the UN convention on the rights of the children) is the subject and framework of a new project aiming at informing people about the legal situation of children in the Faeroe Islands, as well as trying to influence Faeroese political decision-makers to put the kids on the political agenda. The project aims to unveil the problems of children’s rights in a society that has never, explicitly, discussed children’s rights, because any problems regarding the issue were always considered non-existing. It is important, says the young and ambitious project leader Annlis Bjarkhamar, to be conscious about Faeroese children’s problems in contemporary (late) modern society and to discuss them openly – adult to adult, adult to children, as well as within children’s own communication.

A new Faeroese organisation (from 2004) called “Children without rights” has as goal to introduce joint custody (which is accepted in other Nordic countries) in Faeroese law, but has to fight against many weighty opponents, especially from religious and conservative political circles who dislike the idea of updating the family laws from the beginning of the 20th century that are still in function in the Faeroe Islands. A long time ago, these family laws of Danish origin in Denmark have been substituted by a new code fitting to the modern family and values. Our aim is, the organisation’s leader says, to give the children custody; children should have the right to (as far as possible) keep close bonds to both their parents – even if the parents divorce and move in different directions. The parents should have parent duties in relation to their kids.

The problems in parent-children relations in fragmented families receive much attention in Faeroese media, the most famous case being the “Lítli Petur case” in which a boy, aged five, was sent to an institution in Denmark after the tragic death of his young mother. Petur’s parents did not live together and the mother had the custody over their three children. Because the Faeroe Islands did not have an institution capable of taking care of children with special (psychological) needs, Petur had to move away from his sisters and grandparents. People felt ashamed and frustrated over

the situation. Everybody wanted to help the lost boy, but there was no simple solution to the problem. He had to move to Denmark where his father lived. Petur became a symbol of the lost Faeroese children, caught between the outdated jurisprudence of the Faeroe Islands and the social realities of contemporary society. Children do not live anymore in romantic authentic Faeroese family entities, idealized in political rhetoric, at least not all of them, and one of society's main challenges is to adjust and adapt the outdated laws and social values to the life of Faeroe Islanders anno 2005. Other debates in the media influencing the romantic images of traditional family life and harmonious parent-children relations are linked to the dark stories of sexual abuse of children in the Faeroe Islands. It is indeed not a new phenomenon, but it is a novelty to discuss the problem openly in media, even if it is a very sensitive and still very secret field, not finding its way to the public sphere very often.

Children's physical health has also been in focus lately, nationwide campaigns being lanced – physical training, nutritional priorities, and anti-smoking attitudes, in order to improve the general health of the younger generation. The urgent need of psychological and psychiatric institutions for young people has been strongly emphasized by professionals in media, but unfortunately ignored by the political leadership with powers to upgrade the priority of children and young people by establishing new institutions and special services. The way we treat the children gives the observer insight in contemporary culture. There are, says Daun (1982: 51) about Sweden, “numerous ideas and notions about children in our society that can serve as paths towards enhanced insight into our culture, in other words, into concepts which guide people in their reflections about themselves and the world around them”. Anthropological research can therefore, he says (op cit.: 52), be used to understand Swedish (or indeed Faeroese) culture on a more general level.

Children's own perspectives

The questions researchers have to ask are: how much do we know about our children? And what do we think that we know about them? What image is transmitted through the public debate? How reliable is our information? Children's points of view are fortunately gaining recognition nowadays, they are taken seriously in many contexts, and being voiced in several new radio and television programmes, Internet sites and journals, making children's identity and values less veiled in the form of stereotyped and stigmatising notions than before.

The radio youth programme ZIP is extremely popular among teenagers, because the young host, Elin Hentze í Stórustovu, every week has a panel of 6-8 young people to discuss various youth issues in unusually boundary-breaking and explicit fashion. Violence, sex, drugs, prevention, music, religion, love, and other subjects are on the agenda, making the media debate of the early 1980s seem rather archaic and naïve.

Today everybody wants to define the children, to direct their path of life (future), and affect their lifestyles. The Faeroese religious communities have never been as engaged in the organisation of attractive, trendy leisure activities for children and young people as now. They fight for the souls of the youth, for the future of the religious communities, and acknowledge that even the religious youth wants to have dancing and clubbing, concerts and cafés in their everyday life. Youth cultures in the Faeroe Islands are today closely connected to the currents on the global youth scene. Consumption patterns have a strong influence on contemporary youth identities and lifestyles, as the presentation of children and young people in media highlights modern consumerism. Today, say Wyn and Whyte (in Miles 2000: 106), “youth itself is a consumable item, in that the superficial trappings of youth are now part of the consumer market”. Participation in markets “thus becomes a ‘need’, so that young people feel they need to be conspicuously sporting the latest styles and show their awareness of the latest trends” (Miles 2000). The presentation of children in media is very much a question of propagating special consumer styles, describing selected parts of the global entertainment industry, and selling new consumer goods and ideas. Many children and youth programmes in media are sponsored by telecom companies, soft drink producers, and the international music business. Children and children’s culture, as presented in media, reflect only the lives and styles of a limited part of the children population: those participating in the global trends and styles.

Fieldwork in a school

The advantage of doing research at home can easily turn out to be a hidden problem, a pitfall, because the anthropologist as an observer becomes blind, not managing to separate the essence from the rest, not being sufficiently focused, and not catching interesting cultural manifestations that deserve sensitive attention and comparative analysing (Gaini 2005). The anthropologist, no matter where he is placed on the globe, at home or abroad, always needs to be conscious of his position and role in the field, not taking the obvious and “natural” for granted, as exotic and scientifically

sensational findings may be just around the corner. “It was a great mistake”, says Jackson (1987: 8), “to think that the distant ‘savage’ had more to give to anthropologists than one’s local ‘compatriot’: they simply have different types of information to impart”.

Social scientists in the Faeroe Islands have to be creative and use all their imagination to secure the anonymity of their informants in published books and articles, a problem not often discussed as only a few fieldworks and surveys are carried out each year. People who really want to disclose the identity of my informants do not have to make any strenuous efforts to unveil the secret, because many people already know when and where my fieldwork took place. Fortunately, my project is not focusing on particularly sensitive personal issues, and it mostly refers to the whole group rather than specifically to some of the 24 individuals in the class. Anyway I emphasised immediately to the pupils that no names were going to be published and that my project was completely independent of any school authorities.

The general transparency and relaxed atmosphere of Faeroese society makes it impossible to hide that you are a researcher, as the broad public captures every movement in society, including ongoing projects at the national university (Gaini 2005). In small scale societies like the Faeroes, ordinary people are engaged in all kinds of debates, everybody having comments to give even in narrow academic debates, a situation often frustrating and hampering research institution staff. Local and family interests can in some cases threaten the validity and reliability of projects, if the researcher is not managing to keep a satisfactory scientific independency in his work, a pitfall that may be easier to fall into in small scale societies.

The ethical considerations related to research among underage youth are important, because the project involves children, who from a legal point of view, lack powers to take essential decisions without parental authorisation. Not only from a legal perspective are the informants the weak part; young people are indeed in a vulnerable position in interaction with a researcher, an adult with potential powers to influence them in unacceptable and unethical directions. Anthropologists work with a set of strict ethical and scientific prescriptions, not accepting short cuts to impressive results at the expense of the informants’ human liberties. Violations of such principles may damage the reputation of scientific work seriously, giving, at a local level, the next generation of researchers serious difficulties in their fieldwork project pursuits (Lalander & Johansson 2002: 198). A pitfall to avoid is to make use of accumulated

data from emotional political discussions, because this may naturally give outsiders the impression that the project was never independent scientific work. The knowledge of the school class should not, in my point of view, be used in the media without the same level of ethical standards as in other contexts, to avoid any tempting exploitation of the informants involved in the project.

Children in the Faeroe Islands have entered the public discourse and their everyday life and culture is being used to illustrate Faeroese society in the broadest sense, making them representatives of the real Faeroese values or society's fundament, but at the same time the political abuse of reliable knowledge about children and youth is common, making them the victims of future strategies and policy. The ambiguous presentation of children in the Faeroese public discourse demonstrates the deep social shift, the societal transition that characterises contemporary Faeroese society – between tradition and modernity, between local and global society.

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