The Representations of Childhood and the Self-Image of Adults in Modernity: The Image of the Child as "Other" or as Part of the Narrative of Life

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Abstract

In this article, the meaningful relationships between the social construct of childhood and the self-image of adults in modernity are explored. The image of the child is approached as a discourse that reflects and exercises both exclusive and inclusive powers. First of all, the relationship between the discourse on immaturity and maturity is explored as a mutually "othering" binary opposition. In this discourse, the child is defined as both "not yet" mature, as well as representing what adults have "left behind". It therefore forms a depository image for both negative characteristics— reinforcing a positive image of maturity and mature traits—as well as positive characteristics projected on childhood, in this way idealizing childhood in opposition to adulthood and supporting a positive image of "human nature". Modern developments are taken into account in considering whether this dichotomous image is applicable to the image of the child in modernity. The second relationship that will be explored is the image of the child as part of the modern narrative of life (Giddens, 1991). The image of the child is defined in terms of both its opposition and similarity to the image of the adult. Hence, in modernity, it can be constructed so as to ensure a narrated line of continuity throughout the life span.

Keywords: Image of the child, adults, discourse, modernity, childhood, classification

Introduction

Recently, modern social science has recognized that childhood is not merely biologically determined, but that its meaning is culturally defined. It has been stressed that this construct affects both how we see our children and act towards them in, for instance, educational or legal practices (King, 2007, Noort, this issue). Hence, the idea and importance of childhood as a cultural construct has become more widely recognized. However, although the discourse on childhood is often understood in terms of how it is practiced in everyday life or institutions, it is hardly ever related to other prevalent discourses and images, such as the discourse on maturity. In this article, however, I will argue that the image of the child must be understood in relation to the classification process of adults. A poststructuralist approach will be utilized

To begin with, I will set up a theoretical framework for understanding the image of the child. A social constructivist approach (King, 2007, p. 4) will be employed in which the image of the child will be posited as a discourse. Within this Foucaultian framework, the multiplicity of images and interpretations will be addressed. In addition, taking into account both hegemonic and agentic considerations, I will discuss the problem of the

in order to understand the several structural, meaningful relationships between the constructed image of the child and the self-image of adults. The main question that will be investigated concerns the effect of the image of the child on the construction of adult identity in modernity. It is not the purpose of this article to define what exactly this image constitutes. After all, it must be recognized that there are many childhood images (see for instance Sorin, 2005). Instead, the present article will focus on the meaningful relationship between the image of the child and the self-image of adults. It will be argued that the meanings attached to "the child" and childhood reflect and reinforce how both children and adults are classified, even though this relationship is not always recognized. These meanings partially reflect the interests and desires of adults.

definer and the defined in the relationship between childhood and adulthood.

I will then explore several functional relationships between the discourse of childhood and mature identity, proposing the two main classifying functions of the image of the child for the identity of the adult. First, the image of the child will be posited as partially constituting and defining "what one is not": it will be argued that the discourse on childhood comprises ideas on the "otherness" (Said, 1978) of

children as compared to adults. In this way, what the adult is *not* is defined in both a negative and positive sense: on the one hand, the child is defined negatively because of his or her immaturity and, hence, as incomplete: instead, he or she is conceptualized as a "becoming" (James e.g. 1997, Prout 2005, see also Kanters and ten Brinke, this issue). Hence, in relation to maturity, the child is defined as "not yet", lacking the characteristics that define maturity and adulthood. On the other hand, the image of the child can be seen as idealistic and, as such, embodying those positive traits of "human nature" that adults have "left behind". Moreover, modern developments will be taken into account in order to investigate phenomena such as the effects of the scientification of childhood (Prout, 2005) on these identity relations.

Secondly, while the child can be classified as the "Other" defined by both "not yet" and the "left behind" qualities in relation to adults, the child identity is at the same time always intrinsically part of us, for our identity as adults is partly shaped by our own childhood experiences. How we define childhood and, hence, categorize and organize these experiences within our "narrative of life" (Giddens, 1991, Taylor, 1989) influences how we see ourselves. To put it simply, childhood comprises part of the life story of adults. I will argue that the modern image of the child reflects the need for continuity in life stories. The "image of the child" which adults have and, therefore, the classification of their own childhood experiences and memories, will reflect the desired "narrative" qualities in the modern life story.

It is concluded that the relationship between the image of the child and the self-image of the adult in modernity is partially determined by their intrinsic "otherness", which consists of both the "not yet" of the child, and the "left behind" of the adult. The complementary qualities of these constructs can be an important source of meaning. However, because the distinction between adults and children has recently become blurred (Prout, 2005, p. 7), the defining power of this former dichotomy has declined. However, in modernity, new values are placed on the image of the child. It will be concluded that the growing modern concern for the bookkeeping of a modern narrative of life, combined with the popular and scientifically supported discourse on

childhood as source of selfhood and personal identity, have proposed that childhood is an important period within the narrative of life.

Problems with the image of the child: discourse, meaning and definers

Before the importance of the image of childhood and its relationship to the image of maturity can be properly analyzed, both constructs have to be clarified, and so do the extent of their generality and their influence on individual constructs such as identity. First of all, there is the problem of defining childhood. An image or meaning is of course anchored in the biological immaturity of the child. However, selfhood always presumes enculturation: a sense of self arises only within the context of social processes. "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity" (Mead, 1934, p. 135). Hence, the "natural" self, is always by definition already a "cultural" self.

Moreover, regardless of natural or cultural "facts", the "meaning" of a construct always presupposes an interpretation of the reality being studied. Meaning is essentially relational: it can only be constructed in relation to other things. "Meaning is produced, not through a one-to-one relation to things in the world, but by establishing difference" (Saussure qt. by Storey, 2006, p. 87). After all, it is only in relation to other things that objects and ideas acquire their meaning: the idea of what is it to be a child is only meaningful in relation to what it is to not be a child: to be an adult—and vice versa. Moreover, the interrelatedness that underlies categorization is derived from other social constructs. Meanings are constructed in relation to other meanings and not in relation to such concepts as "natural adulthood" or "true human nature". After all, people act towards things and others on the basis of "the meanings that things have for them" (Blumer, 1969). What is behind this meaning is thus not only truly meaningless for us. In addition, it does not matter in our daily interactions: the image of the child only makes sense in relation to other images and, while defined within the framework of an interconnected web of meanings, partly defines that totality. Consequently, paradoxically, it is our expectations and not empirical reality that truly constitute our

reality. "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (Thomas qt. by Ritzer 2008). The image of childhood is thus a reality in itself with real consequences,.

Thirdly, there is the fundamental problem of the source of the constructed image. Karl Marx believed that the material conditions underlying the superstructure of societies is what determines ideas. One can argue that the image of the child evolved naturally, as modes of production and, concomitantly, of family composition and the expectations of children, changed. However, this again raises the question of both the interpretation of material conditions and the agency of those involved. A more suitable approach would be that of "structuration" (Giddens, 1986) whereby free actors actively form meaningful structures which simultaneously and constantly both form and constrain these agents. All agents, including children, are actively involved in defining, whilst being shaped in the process by their interpretation, acceptance of, and resistance against previously existing definitions. Hence, one cannot draw a clear distinction between definers and defined: the definer is in part the defined and vice versa: children are not merely passive receivers of meaning but are actively involved themselves in the process of constructing meaning. This can occur, for example, through children themselves resisting strict definitions of childhood and, in this process, contributing to the process of defining themselves, their peers and the role of their parents. However, it must be noted that the power relation between adults and children, in terms of knowledge and all other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1990), and in terms of fostering dependency, is extremely unequal. The discourse on childhood will therefore strongly be influenced by the desires and interests of the hegemonic adults (see: Gramsci, 2006: Said, 1978).

Moreover, this discourse or powerful image is directly linked to self-classification. In other words, the role of self-defining —the reflexive character of the image of ourselves—must be considered. In a network of meanings, we also attach a certain meaning to ourselves. This meaning is what comprises our identity, which can be defined as "our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others." (Jenkins, cited in

Macionis et al., 2004, p. 175). Hence, identity is essentially exclusive: by attaching certain meanings to ourselves, we are not only defining who we are, but who others unlike us are. In other words, being something involves *not* being something else. Moreover, the quote above explicitly refers to the identification processes of others as well: identities, such as individual meanings, are not merely the result of individual classifications. Meaning is continuously constructed in the dynamics of interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969). The inherent reflexivity of identity therefore allows for an even more dynamic construction of meaning. Self-classification is an essential part of identity. The image of the child is thus an important source of self-classification and can be considered as part of the "generalized other" (Mead, 1934) in opposition to which a personal identity can be contrasted. Moreover, reciprocal reflexivity can be considered as an important source of this image, highlighting the personal interests of those involved.

Finally, the idea of "the image of the child" and "the self-image of the adult" as being "essentialist" constructs must be questioned: the interpretation and involvement of self-definition of these images will vary individually. Moreover, the meanings of "childhood" and "self" intersect with other constructs that vary to an even greater degree, such as gender, race, individual habitus, and culture. There are more and more sources of social diversity in modernity (Prout, 2005, p. 28). Although modernity allows for a greater diversity of child images, one can at the same time observe the institutionalization of child socialization (Nasman 1994 qt. by Prout, 2005, p. 33). This development carries the implication that the raising of children is no longer exclusively confined to the private sphere, but that children from a young age become partially socialized through abstract "expert systems" (Giddens, 1991, p. 33)—for example in daycare or kindergarten. Hence, modernity entails, in addition to growing particularity, a number of homogenizing forces. This reinforces a uniform discourse of the image of the child. It is also important to note here the increased scientification of childhood and selfhood in general (Chamboredon and Prévot, p. 3, 1975). For example, psychology has developed extensive life phase models and developmental

theories, thereby creating a strong "normalizing discourse" regarding what a childhood should encompass and what normal development looks like. This gives rise to a discourse that enjoys strong scientific backing, and as such powerfully influences children and educators, juxtaposing images of "ordinary childhood" and "the normal child". Moreover, the practice of this discourse is institutionalized in entities such as educational organizations. Thus, although both the individuality of interpretation and the intersectionality of childhood images must be taken into account, one can still speak of "the image of the child" in modernity, taking the dominant institutionalized discourses as generally informing our image of the child.

The Image of the Child as Opposite to the Self: Binary Oppositions or Multiplicities
Now that the constitution and meaning of the image of the child is clarified, specific relationships between the image of the child and the self-image of the adult will be explored. In the discussion that follows, the dominant discourses on childhood will be taken as constituting the general image of the child whilst, for the image of the adult, the self-reflexivity of a "mature" identity informed by the modern discourses on adulthood will be taken as a starting point. Hence, the relationship between the image of the child as seen by the adult and the self-image of the adult will be explored here. In this section, I will argue that this relationship can be seen as one of binary entities. In modernity, children are to some extent posited as the "cultural other" in reference to adulthood (Christensen, 1994, qt. by Prout, 2004, p. 10). In this dichotomy, the definition of the child as what one is not helps constitute the self-image of the adult as mature in both positively negative and positive sense.

First of all, the image of the child defines the child as "not yet". Thus, the immaturity of the child is what is emphasized. The child is not yet mature, hence lacking some essential characteristics that adults have attained. One could see this specific link between the image of the child and the image of the adult as a relationship of binary opposites. These are not only dependent on each other for their meaning. In addition, they also stand in a relation of power

towards each other (Lévi-Strauss, 1972). There is an inherent feature of dominance and subordination, whereby the definition of the subordinated is negative or lacking (Said, 1978). In the Western tradition of altering child-adult dichotomies, when we purely look at negative features of the image of the child, the child has generally been portrayed as irrational, uncultivated, incompetent and dependent (see also Kanters and ten Brinke, this issue). These ideas are of course not by definition negative, but are often seen as such. In the history of Western thought, agency, cultivation and independence have generally been positively valued (Lloyd, 1984, Prout, 2005, p. 10). Having a stable idea of what maturity entails made it easy to define the otherness of the child. It was through defining the "otherness" of the child that the identity of the adult could be affirmed. The adult is defined exactly in terms of the acquisition of qualities that children are presumably lacking. Children were defined as "becomings", in opposition to the "being" of adults (James et al., 2000, Prout, 2005, see also Kanters and ten Brinke, this issue).

Secondly, the image of the child projects those positive traits onto childhood that are seen to comprise "human nature". Hence, the child is defined in the sense of what adults have "left behind". One might call this the nostalgic image of childhood (Woodrow, 1999, Sorin, 2005) and it involves mainly a romanticized image of human nature. This image is still predominant in early childhood education (Sorin, 2005, p. 1). Again, the binary qualities of the relationship between the image of child and the image of the adult are central to this definition: "[Childhood,] as well as being different from adulthood, is its obverse, a depository of many precious qualities adulthood needs but cannot tolerate as part of itself" (Holland, 1992 qt. by Prout, 2005, p. 14). Childhood is idealized as a period free of responsibilities, a time of innocence and creativity (Sorin, 2005, p. 2, Prout, 2005 p. 14). It reflects Rousseau's image of human nature: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains". Rousseau posits the child as a *tabula rasa*, innocent and unspoiled by culture. The period of childhood thus is conceived as a utopia, and children themselves are seen as in need of protection from the negative influences of the adult world. The "left behind" image of the child reflects the longing of adults: defining the child in

this way engenders an idealized image of human nature in which adults can vicariously partake while, at the same time, it reinforces the "no longer" aspect of their self-conception as "mature adults" who have "put away childish things."

However, it can be argued that, although the defining power of this double dichotomy of children as "not yet" and "left behind" remains strong, it has come to be challenged in recent times. Whilst the identity of the adult has become more and more contingent and malleable, the identity of its former opposite, the child, has become subject to the very same vicissitudes. Thus, the distinction between adults and children has become blurred (Prout, 2005, p. 9). In pre-modern Western cultures, children were predominantly conceptualized as "becoming" in contrast to the adult as "being". Hence, in the process of becoming, positive characteristics of childhood were lost and new positive traits of adulthood were gained. However, adulthood is no longer seen as a completed project, but rather as a "becoming" as well (Prout, 2005, p. 67, Kanters and ten Brinke, this issue). In this way, the defining binary differences between children and adults have disappeared. Children can no longer be seen as "not yet", since adulthood is no clear achievement. In addition, the aspect of "left behind" becomes manifold. The former binary category is replaced by a multiplicity of becomings (Prout, 2005, p. 67). The child is no longer a discrete category, to be placed in opposition to the identity of the adult: the ambiguity of the identity of the adult and the child are recognized. This paradigm shift is linked to the scientification of childhood, and results in conceptualization of a greater number of life phases: childhood and adulthood are subdivided into smaller categories, with the additional category of adolescence in between.

Nowadays, it is argued that the boundary between childhood and adulthood has become blurred. In the contemporary media, for example, children are often portrayed as diverse, active, aware, judgmental and complex (Prout, 2005, p. 12). This new image of the child can also be called "the agentic child" (Sorin, 2005, p. 7). Hence, children and adults sometimes temporarily switch roles. Moreover, it is recognized that the strict dichotomy between adulthood and childhood cannot be maintained:

children can no longer be sheltered from the world. As noted above, the institutionalization of child care brings them into direct contact with "modern expert systems" (Giddens, 1991). Moreover, consumer society and mass media now recognize children as a new target group. Migration and diversification within the globalizing world are both processes that also include children, who often find themselves living in new places or thrown together with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Hence, children are also affected by the plurality of modern societies, and come into contact with "competing, complementary and divergent values and perspectives from parents, school, media, consumer societies, [and] peers" (Prout, 2005, p. 30). Consequently, the power of the image of the child as binary opposite to the selfhood of the adult has eroded.

The Image of the Child as Part of the Self: Modernity and the Narrative of Life

Selfhood is no longer defined within the context of the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood. Thus, becoming mature is not seen as essential to the attainment of selfhood and identity. Rather, modern life has become a constant process of "becoming", of "sustaining and creating a self" (Giddens, 1991), and this includes the period of childhood. For this reason, our general conception of childhood is no longer strongly related to us in its otherness. Instead, childhood tends to be conceived as an essential constituent of ourselves in a positive sense, constructed in such a way as to fit into our "narrative of life" (Giddens, 1991, Taylor, 1989). It is horizontal continuity, rather than a vertical chasm, that is stressed in the affirmation our own identity.

In modern science, the period of childhood has become appreciated for its importance as a period of socialization and identity formation. For example, the Freudian discourse has become part of modern self-awareness and identity formation: identities are often justified by referring to childhood experiences or upbringing. Moreover, modern psychology has stressed the importance of childhood for personality formation, as well as for skills acquisition and intellectual development (Chamboredon and Prévot, 1975, p. 1). Hence, childhood is no longer viewed as a pre-self period essentially different from mature

identity. Instead, identity is conceived as formed in a process of continuous interaction and experiences, including those in the childhood period. The experiences in the childhood period are even classified as especially important for forming one's personality and sense of self. On the one hand, the binary power of the childhood period in terms of its role in defining our maturity has weakened. On the other hand, the importance of the image of the child to the construction of our own identity has increased. After all, part of our identities is formed by our memories of our childhood. By classifying childhood in general, we are classifying the content of our childhood memories, and affirming the importance of these memories for our own selfhood.

Central to this classification process is the so-called modern conception of self. The sociologist Anthony Giddens has theorized that the purpose of the modern conception of self is "to keep a certain narrative going" (1991, p. 54). Nowadays, the self is no longer traditionally defined by specific prescribed roles. Instead, it has become a personal reflexive project: "the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives" (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). Central to this project is the self-awareness of its construction and its reflexivity: the "being" of an individual is no longer a given state, but is defined in terms of both what "has been" and in terms of its becoming. In the words of Charles Taylor: "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going" (cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 54). Hence, the childhood period has gained importance for the self-definition of adults in the reflexive project of self. The image of the child is directly linked to the classification of this childhood period, for it is this image that determines its place in the narrative.

Conclusion

The socially constructed image of the child has direct implications for not only institutional practices and the self-image of the child, but also for its referential opposite: the self-image of the adult. This defining power is both oppositional to and constituting of "mature identity". The image of the child defined adulthood in its otherness, both positively and negatively. It was argued that a child image can both define children as "not yet", thereby positing

adulthood as a desired status to attain, or can reflect the idea of what the adult has "left behind", in which childhood is conceived as a kind of golden age of individual development, characterized by freedom, exploration and innocence. However, it was recognized that, in modernity, the binary qualities of this distinction have been weakened. Adulthood is no longer seen as "being" but instead as a "becoming" that extends over the entire life span. Hence, the idea of childhood as "other" has lost its power too. Moreover, since children and the image of the child alike have also been subject to the pluralizing tendencies of modernity, the defining power of childhood as binary opposite has declined. Therefore, I have explored the relationship between the image of the child and the modern narrated self. The modern relationship between these constructs can be seen as signifying a line of continuity in life: selfhood as a lifelong project of becoming.

It can therefore be concluded that the image of the child constitutes an interesting point of departure in exploring modern constructions of meanings and identities. It can be posited as a powerful discourse, enabling and restricting both immature and mature self-definitions. Whilst I have attempted here to outline this discourse as a social construct that is strongly related to the discourse on adulthood and modern selfhood, other authors in this issue will mainly focus on its implications, as well as on questions related to the enactments of the image of the child. After all, it is through the daily practice of the discourse on childhood that the image of the child is created and recreated.

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