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Tracing childhood – towards the history of an invisible child

In this paper I will consider the theme of the "Gender and Knowledge - Gendered Knowledge" conference and the history of Finnish childhood, on the basis of the first research plan for my doctoral thesis- *Tracing Reason - Recognition of Childhood and Its Political Space in Finnish Society 1809-1863*. At first I will consider some ontological and epistemological starting points for the research process. I will then look at the methods, or ways, towards my sources: the Swedish law of 1734, the Church Law of 1686, official decrees of the Russian emperors between 1809-1863, a selection of Finnish newspapers, periodicals and children's literature, and the administrative court records of the city of Tampere. After that I will describe the idea of exploring whether one can trace the "child's voice" from the nineteenth century in various contemporary social questions.

In relation to the source material, it is noticeable that the texts generally seem to be written by men. It is therefore necessary to take into account how they used the child's voice: firstly, in the family and secondly as possessors of civil, political and cultural power in a traditional agrarian community and state. However, in this context the most challenging task is to ask about the children's invisibility in these kind of historical discourses. When discussing this question, the need will arise for more in-depth consideration regarding who actually took part in the public discussion on the child's legal position in society and what type of individuals were ignored? Where, in reality, were the children, in nurseries and play-yards, on streets and in schools, or in factories, poorhouses and spinning houses? And finally, how and where in general did the traditional concepts about childhood, or the "children's best", encounter modern ideas, or has notion of a so-called "enlightened childhood" been a "dormant reason" or even a "nightmare", as L. DeMause has stated?

The child and childhood – some thoughts on ontology and epistemology

I examined the history of Finnish pedagogy in my Master's thesis, entitled *Reason and Children's Education - J. V. Snellman's Conception of Childhood in His Lecture on Pedagogy 1861* (2004)¹. The starting point in this study was early childhood education and I approached the subject matter according to the Hegelian philosophy of the Finn, Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806-1881). Snellman approved of Descartes' notion of "I think, therefore I am", as outlined in "*Discours de la Méthode*"². My own research process began in the "spirit" of this assumption, which lasted from the late seventeenth century up until the early nineteenth century. This is why I will also distinguish between the concepts of the child as a natural phenomenon and childhood as an open discursive concept. Both of these concepts found different forms of expression in Finnish legal and scholarly texts during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The philosophical method Snellman adopted to cross the gap between body and soul was the idea of *Reason*. For Snellman, the essential nature of the human being meant the process of thought, whereby subjects become the objects of their own thinking. For the subject, thinking is the manner by which s/he is not simply aware of the content of knowing. Snellman placed a third element of the human being - *the Spirit* - between the body and the soul, which expresses itself as Reason and *Tradition* in society.³ According to this doctrine, a child comes into the world without Reason. Snellman stated that life-long self-education has its origin in child-rearing and will gradually lead to ever deeper self-assertion. It enables a child to have better knowledge of itself as a perceiving and sensual entity, as well as a right-willed and acting human being.

According to Snellman's logic, language was the expression of thought and *Word*. Through early childhood education and teaching at home, a child is able to absorb the tradition of the word, which includes the whole human system of thinking and acting - *the Right*. First and foremost, this meant for Snellman that an individual had the ethical responsibility to act in a free and rational, but also in a traditional way - according to gender roles in society. Snellman gave parents the responsibility of child-rearing in the family, and thereby the task of leading children to the Tradition, the moral concept (*sedlighet, Sittlichkeit*) and to their recognized position in civil society.

Furthermore, in general the problem of historical knowledge or truth is complex. This relates especially to language, which preserves meanings over time. However, in Snellman's opinion, language also had an ontological as well as a lexical function. Thus, if as a researcher I take a textual starting point for the history of childhood and conceptions about it, it implies the account of different cultural histories, the experiences of generations and the languages. The primary sources in my research are written in old-fashioned Swedish and Finnish, with the theoretical frame being in modern German or in English. The conceptual correspondence between my thinking and the past will undoubtedly meet many difficulties. One of the problems here concerns the manifold conceptual incommensurability between the conceptual system in the nineteenth century and our current century. Furthermore, what in practice seems to be **in** the child-rearing problematic to us was not necessarily the same in the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁴

It has also been common in our own time to argue for the close connection between language and gender: how men's knowledge is somehow more technical or rational and women's thinking progresses through more bodily-intuitive processes. In addition, there will certainly be the specific knowledge of the different generations, and this also relates to the children's life and position in society. As boys or girls, have they somehow different ways of thinking? During historical research, how can we take these kinds of question into consideration?

From invisible to audible?

Psycho-historians generally tend to approach childhood through the mental structures in a society. New points for research are raised when one considers childhood in general to be a special phase of human life. The question about the interest of knowing in science will also be addressed. This concerns whether its focus will be on our adult descriptions of a specific single historical case, or will it continue the prevailing narrative of white western middle-class childhood. Perhaps something quite new will be found, which will maybe tell our children something about their past?⁵ Here one methodological problem to be decided centres on the conception of the researcher's role. Shall I, for example, use the hermeneutic interpretation as a method to understand my own conceptions, or analyse the various historical social or

cultural structures that we can see to be connected with different conceptual constructions of childhood?

The task of tracing a child's own unique knowledge in early childhood history is demanding and perhaps impossible. The pre-textual essence and unwritten culture of a little child's world is problematic and forms a very special kind of object in historical inquiry.⁶ Children's minds and lives have always opened up as non-linear processes in many directions, including both conceptual and pre-conceptual or masculine and feminine elements. Furthermore, if a small child's own authentic texts were at hand, all interpretations would always be based on our adult gendered conceptions. Therefore, I think a child's own conceptions of the world have been, are, and maybe will always remain somehow invisible to our final understanding.⁷

Perhaps the only possibility is to try to open up the different kinds of constructions related to the myths of nineteenth century Finnish childhood, and then to seek the relevant methods to analyse them. Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire after the war between Sweden and Russia in 1808-1809. However, many social institutions remained unchanged, as was also the case with the every day conditions of population. A gradual process did occur, however, towards a new and open national identity. At this point I would like to assume that childhood was one narrative of the Finnish nationalistic movement, which later gave childhood a relatively prominent place in our society.

Sometimes terms such as "third-degree questioning" of sources or "silent sources" have been used as metaphors in (my) historical research. Here I will pose the question: how I can make my historical sources "speak", or is it even possible to give "a voice to the child"? Or maybe we have to rephrase the question: how we can make the past visible to the children? In this sense, what things will we call "historically important" and "why" - or are we just offering "princesses for the girls and knights for the boys"?⁸

The concept of "invisibility" in my research is in some ways a preceding step to the "child's voice"⁹. Invisibility points in manifold directions. At first I would like, as mentioned, to use this "child's voice" to make visible the ideas of those writers who made the child and childhood visible in their own time. That is why it is also important to connect the concepts of childhood, or, for example, the "best interest of a child" to the wider historical, social,

cultural or even political context. What kinds of thing were genuine and which was new? This also means taking into consideration the history of German idealism and its reception and influence on the Finnish world of ideas, jurisprudence and political concepts in the beginning of the nineteenth century. What is(‘) more, what kind of influence have they had on pedagogical thinking and a child’s legal position in the family and different kinds of social institutions?¹⁰

In relation to such theoretical and contextual backgrounds, I would also like to approach the history of Finnish early childhood education by following the theory of recognition advanced by the German social philosopher Axel Honneth in his ongoing studies at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt am Main. In *Invisibility: on the Epistemology of “Recognition”*, Honneth highlights social submission and exclusion in western society - the absence of an “inner eye”, that prevents us from seeing the true human person instead of mere numbers and columns in statistics.¹¹

It is possible in historiography to draw wide lines or to concentrate on smaller matters, but it is still important to realise the connections and development processes. I have my own developmental way of looking at the past, with the conceptions and historical framework I now have at my disposal. Is it a common supposition that as a woman I will use them somehow differently from men?¹² I do not argue that the male way to describe the position of women or children in society or history has been consciously negative. Perhaps it is simply a the question of a “different starting point”? Whatever the case, the male point of view in nineteenth century Finnish agrarian society was quite different from my own or even that of men in the current post-industrialized century. I am therefore also considering the real possibility of moving between the different positions of children, men and women in the past because they, for their own part, were located through conceptual networks in definite institutions, languages and space: in governmental power, the Church, the judicial system, schools or the poor relief system.

All the above-mentioned texts will form the discursive area for a new public childhood at the beginning of nineteenth century in Finnish society. It is interesting to observe how multi-faceted this society was and to note the different categories or social positions - or gendered voices - writers have used to construct it. What were the specific social, cultural and political

positions that male - or female in some cases - authors created for the different estates, genders and generations? Where did the writers obtain the most important impulses for their conceptions and where were these realized? Lastly, did they simply see children as objects for adults or somehow as active participants in society?

Traces – Connections between past and present reasons?

In this paper I have asked how we can reach the "child's voice" in history research. I began by stating that it would maybe be better to speak about a phenomenon called "childhood", which has been connected to society by different institutions and textual discourses. As such it is possible to consider them as traces left by children in human culture. Over the centuries it has been a common practice that children shared their daily lives and worked together with adults, but we can also see how upper and middle-class families placed them in nurseries and schools - waiting rooms for adulthood. In every genuine human culture, where there are human beings, there are also children. We can also say that they produce multiple meanings: where there are children, there is action... Everybody knows how a small child leaves traces all around him or her - drawings, untidy clothing, etc. Yet, they also leave some kind of "new order" in family lives and roles. It often seems that an adult's only task is to find the proper method to control this "movement". Is it any wonder that for centuries there was considerable need for so many didactical books on child-rearing? In *The Great Didactics* of J. A. Comenius, for example, and in other historical accounts we can find the vital conceptions of adults - or perhaps more correctly doctrines - about the more imaginary child and its essence as a "spiritual plant", rather than a real child.¹³

In the 1840es, when the German Friedrich Froebel (1782- 1852) founded his kindergarten as a "spiritual garden" for children, many boys and girls in my home city of Tampere worked with their parents in the cotton weaving mill. However, as social historians have stated, after modern western society discovered the unique character of childhood, it was soon separated in order to protect children from the adult world.¹⁴ I think here is one possibility to find a cause for the difficulty in tracing the cultural history of children, which we have somehow cut off from past culture, when different age groups traditionally lived together.

In undertaking research in human history, we actually draw near to the political arenas - the goals and means, the struggle for power and the right to justify one's own actions. Modern public society and private family life have established a certain space for the politics of childhood. The border zone between these private and public spaces and the study of the movements of the various actors' between them is a challenging task: who crossed the lines, and why? What kinds of encounter have there been?

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an inner development towards civil society emerged in Finland. Later, this afforded everyone the opportunity as a citizen to participate in a democratic national society. One important element of this large national project was the child and childhood: firstly as a metaphor for the future of the country and nation, and secondly as future active citizens in national society. From this point of view, for example, it is useful to study the first children's periodical in Finland, entitled "Eos" (*the Autumn*), which was published from 1854. Many of the stories, drawings, songs and poems were written by famous national writers, such as Zacharias Topelius (1818-1898), and constructed an ideal picture of upper or middle-class childhood and have given it a definite position in Finnish children's literature.¹⁵

We have stated that language was one of the most distinguishing features in the evolution of the concept of a Finnish national childhood. Competence in a specific language also produced privileges and a certain position in society. However, in this sense we can also draw attention to a child's lack of empowerment in society. In his writings, Snellman generally indicated the competence of Swedish, as the written cultural heritage was more open to Swedish -speakers. Snellman's age marks the onset of, the Finnish national movement, which sought to cultivate the nation, to create a completely new written Finnish national culture and to bring literacy to the common people. For Snellman, a patriotic education, where boys and girls had their own natural social positions in society, was the highest and most important part of the educational system.

One more question...

Back to the beginning: to think is to be a human being. To be a human being is to think - in a certain time and context. My thinking is bound to my gender and our post-modern time and context. From there I can try to reach paths towards the past: books and texts, paintings and pictures etc. Furthermore, what I would like to do in my research, in a certain sense, is to locate the past and present in an intertextual relationship and discussion: somehow to make them ask each other questions.

Who had the right to speak for the child? In child research we have for a while now spoken about giving a voice to the child. In my research, I would like to make Finnish children and childhood more visible in the broader historical context. One of my goals is to find some of these places in the textual material where adults exercised their right to speak for a child. I will try to consider how their conceptions of childhood have been constructed in different texts, or how as writers they have tried to express children's emotions, their relationships to knowledge or their experience of the world - to use "the child's voice".

Every time we choose something from the past and make it an object of our historical thinking, we are at the same time illuminating new approaches to the subject. In the research of childhood, I see one option being to make some form of map - also for children of our own time - of the thoughts to be found in the various texts. It could make them more approachable in the wider context of the whole cultural system of knowledge. Furthermore, by focusing our research on the child or childhood of the past we can find something that lies very deep in our human nature and way of thinking. By giving it a name we bring those thoughts to our prevalent system of meanings - we make it part of our own existence. This is also the point where historical thinking begins - as an empowering movement between different historical conceptions and meanings. However, it is always the most opportune moment, when in historical research children themselves can read the traces of human life and take part in historical discourse.

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Notes

¹ Tunturi 2004.

² Descartes 1899, p. 55.

³ See e.g. Snellman 1992 (1836), pp. 555-572.

⁴ Also compare the different histories of childhood written by Ariès 2003, deMause 1974, Aronsson et al. 1989 or Cunningham 1995.

⁵ In *EOS*, the first periodical for children in Finland, many historical stories were published for 19th century upper-class family children, e.g. here the story about Alexander the Great in *Eos* Vol 1 No 19-21 (1854), pp. 142-160.

⁶ I am thinking here of the "living cultural history" in Finnish kindergartens in regard to the common children's song and play of the "Sleeping Beauty". For contemporary research about "listening to the child's voice" see http://www.edu.helsinki.fi/lapsetkertovat/lapset/In_English/frontpage/index.htm

⁷ In Finland Marjatta Bardy, for example, has researched J.-J. Rousseau's conceptions of the nature of childhood. In Finnish see Bardy 1998, pp. 15-20.

⁸ The project to make children participate in scientific knowledge is interesting. At the University of Tübingen the "Kinder Universität" was implemented, where professors gave lectures to children. See <http://www.die-kinder-uni.de/index.html> and <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/uni/qvo/kinderuni-2005/kinderuni.html>.

⁹ In our Master's Thesis (Tunturi & Åkerberg 2000) we examined children's contemporary stories about their "good and bad days". In this research we stated that the so-called "Century of childhood" had gone, but that "the child's voice" has remained unheard in educational research. Adults conduct studies - for adults - but the child has been left in an adulthood "waiting-room". While interpreting child's world from an adult's point of view, the child's own active role has been overshadowed.

¹⁰ On Hegelian legal thinking see Hegel 1994 or 2002. On the history of German Idealism in Finnish Pedagogy see Väyrynen 1992. On the discussion of "Children's Best" see e.g. Grossberg 1999.

¹¹ Originally in German Honneth 2003.

¹² Ellsworth 1992, pp. 90-119.

¹³ Comenius 1928 (1628 and 1632). For more on the contemporary research see The International Comeniological Workshop, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, June 2nd-3rd 2005. <http://www.jyu.fi/tdk/kastdk/kasv/comenius/abstracts.htm>.

¹⁴ On women's and children's roles as factory workers, see the English review of the Finnish study by Haapala 1986 or 1988.

¹⁵ *EOS tidskrift för barn och barnens vänner* 1854-1866. Also see, for example, the fairy tales published in 1847 by Topelius, the Finnish national history writer.

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