

European Childhood – Childhoods in Europe

International Conference and Annual Meeting of the “Sociology of Childhood”

Section of the German Sociological Association

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Munich, German Youth Institute

CALL FOR PAPERS

The pattern of modern childhood, being thoroughly structured by familiarization, scholarization, exemption from wage work and protection, is not limited to national boundaries. Rather it is one of the fundamental conditions of any modern social structure and of modern economies, as well as being a cornerstone of cultures valorising childhood highly. This pattern may be empirically found in a number of nation states, although to varying extents, not only in Europe but throughout the world. The pattern of modern childhood even serves, in a broad sense, as a normative frame of reference for all societies, national and international policies and programmes. Nevertheless, a general similarity in worldwide childhoods is not assumed. Manfred Liebel (2005) traced out the big difference in childhoods in Western Europe and Latin America exemplarily regarding the phenomenon of child labour. But, while Latin American childhood is constituted differently, this does not mean an absence of Western European concepts of childhood. While the passing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child 20 years ago intensified a norm-oriented concern with enhancing children's qualities of life as well as educational and learning outcomes through a range of multiple international conventions, supportive programs and comparative studies (e.g. OECD, UNICEF, WHO, international social reports on children), such concern had existed already. National policies are by no means allowed to ignore this western driven international development. Such comparisons seem to especially meet the concerns of the European Union as a supranational institution. This leads to an inquiry about the unitizing of the normative frame of reference which normalizes, regulates and structures childhood and to inquire about a worldwide enforcement of certain semantics of childhood.

Childhoods in the EU were, neither in the singular states, nor in inter-state comparisons, homogenous, even though the pattern of modern childhood as a figure of difference and as a factual frame of action (compulsory school education, ban of child labour, majority) has been achieved everywhere. For example, the ban of child labour may be seen as established in the whole EU, and, if occurring, does not have the function of ensuring survival as in the states of Latin America.

Firstly, differences existed and still exist in the forming of familiarization: while all states in the European Union define families as the final place of legal and moral responsibility, and of privacy and intimacy, concrete arrangements of child care of kindergarten and primary school age differ eminently, as do the concepts of child-adult relations, legitimacy of public interventions in the parental rights and concepts of good childhood.

Secondly, similar statements can be made with regard to the scholarization of childhood: the implementation of compulsory school education, organization of knowledge acquisition and mediation. Those differences are highly interwoven with national patterns of familiarization.

The coalescing and especially the enlargement of the European Union, the opening of labour markets and its differences in wages, economic crisis and the concurrent crisis of traditional welfare state models, have all established the European childhood and its differences on the national and EU level as a topic of discussion and comparative observation and, in the end, made childhood itself a phenomenon in crisis: too many poor children, raised health risks, too few well trained young people, too risky transitions into working life, too many unemployed mothers, striving for too narrow or incorrect education for their children. Raised attention is directed at the observation and analysis of differing conditions and forms of institutional and familial care, education, health and security. In recent years, money and research commitment have been invested in the development of empirical comparative instruments and in the execution of a multitude of comparative studies, resulting in a sensibility to differences and sometimes a sharper definition of phenomena of difference as a problem. Such programs as "Starting strong", part of a series of "child centred social investment strategies", carried out by the European Parliament and several member states, as well as the Bologna process and the Lisbon treaty relating to the perception of difference as a problem are answers to such processes of definition.

Historical studies (Göran Therborn) show how in the territory of the present EU, national programs and developments of law for descending generations never processed via a total exclusion of international European discourses and developments. The legally binding rules made on the level of the European Union (e.g. raising the minimal age for labour work) and the approximation of the start-offs for national decisions (e.g. Bologna process, self obligatory national expansions of early child care institutions, etc.), are still a novelty.

Backed by these observations, the meeting will focus on the question as to how far European policies – legal regulations and programs as well as European discourses and comparative studies serving as important references of policies – contribute to the alignment of national childhoods. How strongly will such processes of alignment influence national childhood, if biographical transitions become internationally homogenized, if institutional arrangements of care and education become similarly conceptualized, and if educational differences are no longer individual but advance as a national problem? Or do the specifics of cultural patterns of childhood stay valid as the national implementations of political programs generate significant differences themselves? Are national peculiarities of national patterns of childhood perpetuated though the common will, programs, orders and obligations to de-differentiate? The meeting will not focus too much on the all too often discussed topics of early child education or school education, but wishes to discuss the broad range of child related policies, programs and discourses (child security, child and adolescent social work, material supplies and conditions of life, rights and participation).

Contributions to the following topics are extremely welcome:

1. *Childhoods in Europe – European childhoods:* what impact do European Union decisions have on the conditions of children's lives in the member states? What changes in national patterns of childhood are observable, tending to align conditions of children's lives and life worlds in Europe? Can such changes be tracked back to regulations of the European unification process (e.g. with re-

gard to children's participation in different social spheres such as organized education, art, economy/consumption, media, political participation, etc.)?

2. *Child policies in Europe - European child policies*: which mandatory regulations for all member states have emerged in recent years? What relative importance and scope do children's and adolescents' politics gain in the general frame of European politics? In what manner and with what consequences did single states implement child related regulations and decisions of the European Union? Or, how did national politics influence European decisions?
3. *Semantics and discourses of childhood in Europe – European childhood semantics*: what discourses and semantics of a “good childhood” have emerged on the national and European level recently? How are they conceptualised normatively? How are differences in education, strata, participation, child rights, health and family discussed and assessed? How are cultural differences in childhood and family life interpreted?

Papers on each topic may deal with historical perspectives, systematic comparisons or analyses of present policies and politics.

*If you are interested in actively taking part in this conference, please send your **abstract** to:*

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Deadline: 13 March, 2009

Please note that all abstracts must be submitted in pdf-format.

To institutions receiving this Email, we would highly appreciate that this call for papers be forwarded to individuals, departments and networks that may have an interest in the conference.

Our apologies for any cross sending. We look forward to welcoming you to Munich in early October, 2009!

Further details, including registration information and a draft conference programme will be available soon on our website: <http://www.kindheitssoziologie.org/>

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