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# Conduct of Everyday life - Participation in Social Conflicts

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## Double Symposium: Elaborating the study of persons in their conduct of everyday life, Ole Dreier & Charlotte Højholt

1. Introduction

I want to enter the discussions about conduct of life with a focus on *conflicts* of everyday life – and their (structural) relatedness to broader social conflicts.

In other words I want to understand the inner connection between personal life problems and social conflicts.

I have been asked whether I point to societal conflicts between societal groups or to relational conflicts between persons – and I want to point to both or rather to the inner connections between these.

My field is children’s everyday life and conflicts about, with, between, and for children conducting their life across contexts and with different conditions for taking part here

- In this paper I want to understand difficulties related to children’s school life in a situated way – analysing personal engagement as well as social conditions for taking part…

In relation to analysing connections between human life conditions and subjective ‘agency’ we confront the theoretical problem that these conditions are typically *conceptualized in abstract* ways – for instance related to different kinds of deficiencies in social background and to an unambiguous question of categorization and reproduction of social order in school.

One of the theoretical problems in relation to this is how to conceptualize social conditions in *a concrete way* – to pave the way for situated analysis of *unequal conditions* in the structure of school instead of displacing problems into social backgrounds of the children…

The points I want to reach are:

The social conflicts *about* children lead to personal problems *for* children

Personal conduct of life is entangled in social coordination and conflicts

The boy in the example you will hear about is not acting to ‘live up to a category’ or ‘to reproduce a culture’ – or other abstract reasons - he is struggling to conduct a contradictory life. His personal ‘agency’ is interwoven with the ways social conflicts in his life develop.

I discuss these theoretical problems on the background of different empirical research projects observing and interviewing children in their different developmental settings as well as their adults (parents, pedagogues, teachers, psychologists).

#### 2. Personal conduct of life and social conflicts

Concerning children’s ‘problematic’ conditions the tradition is to conceptualize specific, deviant and isolated variables or backgrounds – and from this follows a kind of displacement of problems – *from* social dilemmas and into abstract and individual deficiencies.

These abstractions are quite well criticized in psychology – but still dominating in practice.

Especially the professional practices aimed at supporting children in difficulties have a tradition for focusing on how professionals must compensate for lack of family resources or break with social heritage.

But no matter how the professionals arrange their support for children in different places the children themselves have to act in relation to this – to lead their daily life, to take part in different contexts, move between them and select things to do here.

It is a paradox that much theorizing disregards an active subject in relation to social problems.

The concept of ‘conduct of life’ is developed as a way to unite social structures and personal meanings and to be used in concrete empirical analysis of person’s efforts of integrating, planning and prioritizing everyday life.

The recent developments in our research group emphasize that persons’ lives and engagements are *distributed* between several contexts

and that the conduct of everyday life is a fundamental collective process *- s*ubjects conduct their life in collaboration with other subjects.

This movement points to *social coordination and conflicts* as central problems of the personal conduct of life.

When conduct of everyday life is interwoven in social coordination, negotiations and possibilities for creating something together with someone – the personal conduct implies investigating social possibilities. And such possibilities are *structurally and unequally arranged*.

The persons we study are in a process of conducting their life in relation to their specific conditions, demands and preferences - and at the same time developing *their ways* of taking part different places, organising daily life and influencing significant contexts in their life.

The question of conducting one’s life cannot be limited to a question of repeating what others have done before or adjusting to some kinds of given conditions. To live implies to *arrange* conditions – together with others to look for possibilities, to revise plans and pursue ideas- to make life ‘the life I want to live’.

Therefore, the possibilities for developing conduct of life are connected to possibilities for participation *and influence* different places.

In relation to children the tradition is to focus on what they have to learn to adapt to *given conditions* – and to confuse a child position characterized by quite limited conditions for influence with a determined child subject.

In our general upbringing of children as well as in our professional support for children I think we have overlooked the importance of giving the children experiences of being influential.

Well, developing conduct of life is a conflictual process interweaved with *different* social conditions.

- and in continuation of this I want to study the concrete meanings of *structural* inequalities and social problems in the concrete *interplay* between participants in daily situations and *from* the perspectives of concrete persons – or you could say from the perspective of everyday life.

**3. Conflicts about, with, between and *for* children**

In relation to children their developmental challenges are interwoven in social coordination, communities and conflicts, and the *responsibility* in relation to children is politically distributed among adults in a privatized, individualized and conflictual way.

Especially when problems are pointed out the dispute is: Who has the responsibility?

In continuation of this social *structure* children are in one and the same time gathered in institutional communities (as for instance a school class) and continuously differentiated into different kinds of categories (as for instance the good pupils, the ones who receive special help, the ones who do not know how to behave etc.).

These *differentiations are conflictual* - adults – mothers and fathers, teachers, pedagogues’ and psychologists – have different perspectives on these differentiations and on the children.

For instance they disagree about whether a child can stay in regular school or should be sent to special institutions and about how the school should prioritize in relation to working with social problems or working more isolated to obtain good marks in relation to national tests.

Also the differentiations *become ‘at stake’ in the interplay between the children* themselves and influence their communities - and the other way around: The interplay between the children makes up conditions for educational strategies that often get other significations to the children than they were meant to have.

‘Behind’ the practice of pointing out individual children we find a complex landscape of conflicts between different groups of professionals, parents as well as among the children.

These conflicts are connected to the question about how to influence the development of the common practice. In more general terms you could analyse the conflicts as conflicts about directions and influence in relation to the change of social practice.

In this way the different perspectives can be seen as connected as well as conflictual. They are not coincidentally different but structurally different and structurally connected.

Hence the *personal agency* is – not determined to - but entangled in *the multiplicity of perspectives* on the practice.

To conduct their everyday life children have to orientate in this social complexity and to negotiate their participation and influence on what is going on – these processes are not easy but involve common efforts, coordination and flexibility.

Still, it seems to be *challenges in children’s life that we as adults overlook* – as long as it is going on in a quite unnoticed way it is ‘just children playing’

and when the movements among the children become stuck we notice it as *specific problems* often related to a specific child and a specific background or diagnostic category.

When we overlook the social complexity of children’s daily life and the *ordinary difficulties* in relation to conducting a child life we overlook the general basis for the conflicts

– and how the children are positioned differently in relation to managing the general challenges.

#### 4. An example: The boy who couldn’t get the ball – and didn’t have any roller skates

In school the children are in a situation of competition – in relation to the academic tasks as well as in relation to positioning and influence among each other. In this way school life is characterized by a plurality of agendas – related to learning as well as to social life.

Due to the differentiations the children participate from different positions and with different conditions in relation to managing the double agendas of school life.

The classroom has quite different meanings to the children and what the adults do and say – as well as their rules (often meant to set the children equal) become involved in the strategies of the children and may have unforeseen meanings her.

This is illustrated when I observe school life from the position of Martin. He seems to be working hard to get a position in the group of boys but he also has to handle the conflicts between his parents and the teachers

 – conflicts about him, whether he is able to behave in school or not, whether he is lying or not, who are responsible for the noise and trouble in the classroom etc.

The teachers think he is badly brought up at home and the parents think the teachers are inflexible and traditional in their teaching style.

These quarrels relate to *political conflicts* about what ought to happen in school and about the distribution of responsibility between the adults.

In the end of some lessons in the class I observe a repeated conflict – a conflict to get the football first - which seems to be of great importance for the positioning in the football game of the break.

This moment accentuates the structural divisions in school between children’s self-organized play and adult regulated teaching. To be allowed to leave their chairs the children have to finish their school tasks, pack their school bags and be quiet.

A boy, William, is acting outstanding in combining the double agendas – organizing his close friends in a way that will satisfy the teacher.

Martin also tries with this strategy, but he is placed alone and is in increasing conflicts with the other boys as well as the teacher.

Martin is too quickly at the ball and William and some other boys argue that Martin must not touch the ball, "it is not allowed", "you are not allowed to do so are you?" The teacher becomes involved and yes, they are right, this is not allowed and Martin must put the ball back.

As usual William is the one who gets the football first, and he is organizing the football match in the break while Martin must try to take part.

The situation repeats itself in the end of the next lesson; but now Martin is so stressed to get the ball that it becomes a problem in relation to putting the sheet correctly in the folder, as he has been told. William is immediately on guard: "Martin, you must not take the ball."

It seems that Martin in this way is in trouble in relation to assert himself in lessons as well as during the breaks.

His attention is split in a kind of *personal conflict of priorities*. The abstract divisions and structural conflicts around him – among the adults as well as among the boys – become personal conflicts for him.

All children are dealing with conflictual agendas related to taking part in the lessons as good pupils, having fun with each other, developing friendships and communities, influencing the same etc.

The problem to Martin is the way the conflict is *displaced into his person* – and to his social background – and how this displacement moves back and forth between his adults as an abstract question of guilt.

In this process he becomes more and more exposed to the premises of the conflicts and he loses influence on the common conditions.

Still Martin tries to change his situations – for instance in relation to a period in the spring where all the children want to roll on roller skates. The pedagogues in the institution for children’s leisure time tell that Martin has taken a couple of the institution’s skates and lied about them being his own.

Some confusion occurs, partly because of the problematic communication with Martins parents and partly because Martin explains (during a long interrogation) that a pedagogue who is not at work that day has given him the roller skates.

The episode of the roller skates illustrates several points. When you follow Martins strategies, they do not seem well theorized as a subjectivation to a category as such interplay is sometimes analysed.

Such notions seem to stay in *the social meanings of his strategies* and for a psychology that wants to understand persons, it must be important *to see personal reasons* and social meanings as different aspects of the same problem

Where ‘personal reasons’ point to his engagement *in relation* to his conditions ‘social meanings’ point to how other persons act in relation to his actions.

The meanings of the children's strategies are social, and therefore they are also interpreted differently.

Among the professionals the episode on roller skates thus appears as a matter of Martins lies and deception, and precisely ‘lie’ is a theme for the conflicts among the adults in relation to Martin. Martin mediates between teachers and parents, and they do not agree about when to believe him. Discussions thereof appear to take up the attention at the expense of the dilemmas in the everyday life of Martin.

What Martin does becomes interpreted in the conflicts and in relation to the categorizations of him.

Lots of conflicts among the children are represented by the teachers as a question of the problems with Martin.

In this way the process of displacement becomes a kind of ‘generalization of the special’: It's everywhere he is "special", the special appears everywhere and therefore it doesn’t have much to do with what is going on in these contexts. In such a generalization the problem has not to do with the general conditions.

This very detached way to understand problems is part of the problem. It is *hiding the conflicts* and presenting the situations as mysterious.

With this I want to illuminate how *personal ‘agency’ is interwoven with the ways social conflicts develop* – how different perspectives are connected and the conflicts are ‘generalized’ and understood through different positions in relation to the ‘same concern’

- OR how *several parties* are giving up on the substance of conflicts.

Giving up constitutes difficult conditions for interaction and various parties seem to lose disposal. In these processes the children are giving up strategies for taking part in lessons as well.

Returning to the main problems:

We need theoretical developments to conceptualize the inner connection between societal and political conflicts and contradictions in the everyday life. To analyse how social conflicts also become conflict *for* persons when they conduct their everyday life.

With the example I want to point to the *situated inequality* in the classroom instead of displacing the conflicts in and about the school to abstract concepts about social background, bad functioning families, psychological deficiencies, lack of cultural capital, social heritage etc.

Even critical analyses sometimes seem to accept social differences and point to different kinds of lack of personal resources others places instead of analysing the contradictions of the school.

Nor do these marginalizing processes seem completely conceptualized as an unambiguous question of symbolic violence, hegemonic power in the school, reproduction of social order, etc.

The question of power and influence in school seems at stake as political *conflicts* about priority and distribution of responsibility in relation to the education of children.

We need to analyse the contradictory conditions in relation to these conflicts – and the possibilities for cooperation that these conflicts reveal.

In this way analyses of people’s conduct of everyday life may be used to criticize structural inequalities in a more concrete way and point to the political conflicts personal problems are entwined in.

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