Beasts, victims or competent agents

The positioning of children in research literature on manipulation

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Abstract:	Drawing on positioning theory, the authors explore how discourses of manipulation in everyday debates and research literature contribute to what Cook (2017) has termed "the moral project of childhood". The analysis shows that children are positioned in these discourses either as incompetent, powerless victims or as powerful, egoistic or psychopathological agents, and moreover that these discourses unreflexively build upon and reinstate pre-sociological Dionysian and Apollonian views on childhood, and a taken-for-granted generational order in which adults hold power over children.

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This article explores how discourses about manipulation contribute to what Cook termed, in a recent issue of this journal, "the moral project of childhood", which he defines as the "varied efforts over time by various parties to determine, arrange, or otherwise deem appropriate (or inappropriate) the boundaries and dimensions that make up the childhoods at hand, and thus of childhood generally" (Cook, 2017: 5). Historically, a central axis of this moral project has been the Western understanding of children as dependent 'becomings', belonging to their parents (as opposed to adults as independent 'beings'), and disputes between the former Dionysian and - for the past few centuries - prevailing Apollonian views on childhood (Jenks, 1996; Ansell, 2016). James, Jenks and Prout address these views as pre-sociological constructions of "the evil child", who needs discipline in order to become more human, contra "the innocent child", who is vulnerable and needs protection (James et al., 1998). Scholars within childhood studies argue that rather than reflecting children's (and adults') natures, these binary constructions simplify a more complex reality in which all human beings are both becomings and beings, and human life is characterized by interdependency and relational agency (Esser et al., 2016). Moreover, these simplifications risk 'othering' children who are located in unprivileged positions in the generational dimension of the social order (Alanen, 2009; Wihstutz, 2017). In continuation, scholars have also identified how Dionysian and especially Apollonian views on childhood, despite growing recognition of children as competent agents and efforts to encourage their participation in various arenas (Woodhead, 2010; Birnbaum and Saini, 2010), are still powerful in today's moral project of childhood (Gram, 2004; Turmel, 2008; Esser, 2015; Knezevic, 2017). However, research on, how research literature on manipulation contributes to this moral project, is still scarce. A systematic review, which we carried out in 2015-16, documented this very clearly. The review was motivated by the observation that children, across different practice contexts and in the media, seem to be constructed either as 'evil' or 'innocent', which goes against the grain of the 'global movement' to engage and listen to children in research, policy and practice (Birnbaum and Saini, 2010: 260). We wanted to explore whether this was also the case in research literature on manipulation.

After a brief introduction to our analytical approach (positioning theory), the article begins with an introduction in the form of three examples of debates about manipulation, and how these contribute to the moral project of childhood. These examples serve to elaborate upon, and illustrate, our motivation for conducting this literature review. Hereafter we move to the literature review, which - although carried out as a systematic review – does not aim to provide clear, evidence-based answers to well-defined problems as in a Cochrane (2018) systematic literature review. Rather, we regard the literature as an empirical foundation for our analysis of the moral construction of childhood in discourses on manipulation in the scientific literature. We begin this section with a brief introduction to our search strategy and sample of articles. This is followed by an analysis of different conceptualizations of manipulation, and of which actors are identified as manipulating and manipulated, respectively. We then analyse the epistemological approaches and fields of research represented in the literature, and hereafter turn to a discussion of the discursive construction of (different) child and adult positions and their ascribed rights and duties, and moral implications of the positions. The article ends with a concluding discussion.

Positioning Theory

Rom Harré (2004) defines positioning theory as addressing how "the nature, formation, influence and ways of change of local systems of rights and duties as shared assumptions about them influence small scale interactions". The concept of 'positioning' addresses how people locate themselves and others through storylines, i.e. they ascribe to them certain rights, duties and characteristics (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010: 2). A storyline is a "set of sequences of actions and positions saturated with cultural meaning and therefore offering potential interpretations linked to characters and practices" (Søndergaard, 2002: 191). Thus, while discourses can involve ambiguity, a storyline is defined by coherence. Regarding manipulation, discourses about children may include a Dionysius and Apollonian as well as a 'becoming' and 'being' view on children simultaneously, through multiple storylines. Moghaddam and Harré (2010: 2) empasises that, "positioning has direct moral implications, such as some persons or groups being located as 'trusted' or 'distrusted', 'with us' or 'against us', 'to be saved' or 'to be wiped out'", and in continuation also emotional implications such as shame and pride, fear and security, or love and hate (Kleres, 2011; Davies and Harré, 1990).

The presentation of the examples below, and the following analysis of research literature on manipulation, is guided by the broad question: which storylines can be identified about children in relation to manipulation? To answer this, we first examine which acts are identified as manipulation, and what is understood by manipulation. Further, we examine which actors are positioned as manipulating and which as manipulated, and how this positioning locates children, parents and professionals morally in regard to rights, duties, trustworthiness, competence, etc.

Children as weapons in conflicts between parents

Our first example relates to a heated Danish debate over the consultation of children in divorce cases, in which children are purportedly used as weapons in battles between their parents, in which one parent manipulates the child into disliking the other and not wanting to stay with or visit him/her (e.g. Stubkjær, 2009; Berg, 2014; TV2, 2014). This debate manifests in newspapers, on Facebook, in TV reality shows etc., and in political debates about legislation. Our attention was drawn to this debate during an ongoing research project in which one of the authors took part, which led to her being invited to participate as an 'expert' in the debate.

Danish law on custody, in conjunction with Article 12, paragraph 2 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), defines children's right to their own viewpoint and stipulates that the latter should be heard, with a weighting depending on their age and maturity. However, the next sentence makes the following exception: "The obligation to involve the child directly in the case does not apply if it is deemed to be detrimental to the child, or if it is considered unnecessary under the circumstances" (Forældreansvarsloven, § 34. paragraph 2, our translation). In the above-mentioned debate, one side argues that this exception paragraph should be used more often, as parents manipulate their children's viewpoints, and the authorities allow these manipulated viewpoints to have too much impact on decisions, implying that they do not really take children's age and (lacking) maturity into account (Bækgaard, 2014). Others argue that the authorities themselves manipulate children to say the opposite, i.e. that both their parents are 'good parents', since the authorities regard any negative views that children may have about a parent as the result of manipulation –this is called 'the manipulation myth' (Bækgaard, 2014). Despite different storylines, children

are, in both cases, positioned as the manipulated party, implying that they are not trustworthy and not really capable of expressing their wishes, experiences and feelings.

Thus, though children here are positioned as active agents with rights, it is in the form of puppets that can be used as weapons, and not as competent actors who should have a say - rather, the idea is that they should be protected from this. This storyline reflects an Apollonian view on children. Conversely, adults are represented as powerful agents who are capable of controlling their children's emotions and perspectives. Parents are portrayed as manipulating for egoistic purposes, while professional child experts are seen either as 'knowing better' than the child about his/her authentic feelings and best interests, or as acting incompetently due to the 'manipulation myth'. Thus, the child is positioned as manipulated and as unable to exercise any influence over his/her own life. Whereas the general moral approach to childhood in divorce cases in Denmark, in line with what Birnbaum and Saini (2010: 260) identified as a global movement, emphasises the need to engage and listen to the children, this is turned upside down in storylines in which the word 'manipulation' occurs.

Children as mini princes and princesses

Our second example concerns parents' upbringing of their children and the power relations between children and adults. In newspapers, TV programmes and books as well as in Family Schools and other educational programmes on parenting, children are sometimes - to different degrees – Dionysian portrayed as imperious little beasts who force their parents to wait on them, as though they were mini princes and princesses and their parents their humble servants (Hansen, 2001; Mikkelsen, 2014; Winterhoff, 2014). Thus, it is argued that this unfortunate situation is due to the parents' lacking disciplining of the child: i.e. they have let the child get his/her own way too often, and are afraid of conflicts with the child and of losing its affection (Carlsen et al., 2018). The argument is that these children manipulate their parents, thereby inverting the natural and desirable power relationship (Mikkelsen, 2014; Winterhoff, 2014). Parents are therefore advised to impose stricter rules, and some are enrolled in Family Schools[1] or other parental educational programmes. In these programmes, parents are trained to tell their child very clearly what they want him/her (not) to do. They are also advised to avoid negotiating with their child and being soft-hearted if it disobeys - even

[1] Orignally founded in the eighties by the British psychotherapists Brenda McHugh and Neil Dawson.

if they empathise with it and find its disobedience meaningful (Carlsen et al., 2018; Galløe, 2016).

In this example, we find a clear Dionysian storyline. The positioning of the child can at a first glance seem a bit blurred: on the surface, parents are positioned as victims of children's manipulation. However, this is explained with reference to parents' poor upbringing of the children. Thus, parents are positioned both as active – albeit incompetent - agents, and as victims of children's manipulation. Nevertheless, it is the parents who are blamed, because they are positioned as responsible for their children's personality development, and as having both the right and the duty to discipline them. Empathy and negotiation with children are deemed inappropriate; whereas a strict, authoritarian upbringing is seen as appropriate. Children are positioned as competent actors capable of manipulating their parents, but their competence is inappropriate. Thus, the effect mirrors the former case: it is deemed inappropriate to let children have a say: their feelings and thoughts don't count. Thus, an unequal child – adult power relationship in which adults govern and control children emerges as the desirable relationship.

Children as wolves in sheep's clothing

Our third example relates to the field of social work with so-called maladjusted children. In this field, with regard to discussions about the appropriateness of engaging children in research and evaluation, we find a storyline which portrays children as wolves in sheep's clothing: i.e. as creatures who appear very innocent and friendly, but are actually crafty and dangerous manipulators. We have observed this discourse been articulated in cases where researchers or children's rights organizations want to consult the children or involve them in participatory research, or when the results from such projects are dismissed (especially if they point to problematic professional practice). This discourse questions the researchers' or children's rights workers' expertise about this type of child and their ability to figure out, and interpret, what children (who are supposedly experts in manipulation) tell them. Based on the claim that interviewing and interacting with such children requires special skills, namely being able to see through, and resist, manipulation by the children, the criticism of the professional practice is rendered harmless. This happened, for instance, when the Danish National Council for Children carried out and published a study of the perspectives of children in care (Børnerådet 2012).

Here we have three positions. First, the young manipulators, i.e. the children, are positioned as strategic and untrustworthy. The 'evil child' position, however, is not necessarily a Dionysian view pertaining to all children, but may be specific to children with pathologies. Second, the researchers and children's rights workers are positioned as well-meaning, but naive and incompetent, and their attempts to listen to the children's perspectives are considered inappropriate. Third, the social worker is positioned as competent and capable of seeing through and resisting manipulation by the beastly children.

The moral project of childhood in the three examples

In the above cases, manipulation is exclusively associated with underhand methods of control, unfairness or even evil intentions, and this has consequences for the discursive construction of the morality of childhood. Thus, using the word 'manipulation' in this sense suggests oppositional identity positions in which the subject can be located either as a competent, but unsympathetic, manipulator, or as a passive object and victim of the manipulator. Being positioned as a manipulator is morally stigmatizing since it implies being ascribed egoistic or even evil intentions and the use of underhand methods to achieve one's goals at other people's expense. Likewise, being positioned as the manipulated party is stigmatizing due to being seen as a passive, less competent object or victim whose actions and perspectives are deemed inappropriate. Thus, both types of positioning may evoke emotions such as shame and anger.

All these storylines within discourses about manipulation, despite their variations, tend to reproduce (and 'naturalize') a generational order in which adults hold power over children, with negative consequences for the recognition of children's agency, perspectives and participation. Thus, these storylines (re)produce a representation and positioning of children as less trustworthy and not entitled to a say. Children's challenges of adult control are deemed inappropriate, and so are adults' attempts to empathise and negotiate with children. We now turn to the research literature on manipulation to examine the extent to which this picture is repeated or challenged.

Sample method

Whereas above, we identified a negatively loaded meaning of the word 'manipulation', the etymological meaning carries a positively loaded meaning, namely 'to handle skilfully by hand'; or simply a neutral meaning, namely 'mental influence' (Online Etymological

Dictionary, 2018). In our literature search, we used the definition 'mental influence'. We thereby included literature that did not use the word manipulation, enabling us to examine types of mental influence that were *not* defined as manipulation. We also included studies on all age groups, permitting an intergenerational perspective. We used a funnel-shaped search strategy, starting out exploratively with systematic Scopus search restricted to the social sciences and humanities and to the period from 2004 – 2015. We used the following key search words (in Danish and English): manipulation, splitting, managing behaviour and behaviour modification which co-occurred with child, youth, young, adolescence, social work, pedagogical work, pedagogic, divorce, placement, parents, foster parents, foster care, borderline, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, therapy and treatment. After excluding duplicates, this resulted in 1.680 hits. Based on the abstracts, we further reduced the number of relevant articles to 95 by stipulating that they had to address manipulation in the sense of 'mental influence'. We then read these 95 articles in their entirety, which led to another reduction of the number of relevant articles to 41. Of those, 20 focus on children and young people.

Meaning of manipulation: Positioning the manipulator and the manipulated

A first step was to examine whether the literature defined and used the word manipulation in the same way as it was used in the above examples. We found that this was typically the case. Thus, most of the literature defines manipulation as an intentional, underhand strategy used by the manipulator for egoistic purposes. For example, manipulation is defined as "*deliberately influencing or controlling the behaviour of others to one's own advantage by using charm, persuasion, seduction, deceit, guilt induction, provocation or coercion*" (Hamilton et al. in Mandal and Kocur, 2013: 45), or "*exercising a conscious influence over the interaction partner such as for the partner not to be aware that he/she is a subject of manipulation*" (Pilch, 2008: 232). Although the articles differ in their accounts of the motivation for engaging in manipulative actions, for example anxiety or revenge, they share the view that manipulation is enacted in order to gain something or to promote oneself (Barlow et al., 2010; Cillessen and Rose, 2005; Grieve and Panebianco, 2013; Hawley, 2003; Isen et al., 2010; Mandal and Kocur, 2013; Pilch, 2008; Rose and Swenson, 2009; Swit and McMaugh, 2012). Thus, the storylines in these texts depict the manipulator as strategic and egoistic, and the manipulated person as the victim of the egocentric intentions of the manipulator.

In articles on children and young people as manipulators, the concept often refers to popular children and young people trying to maintain their social status among peers and is associated with aggression and bullying (Barlow et al., 2010; Cillessen and Rose, 2005; Hawley, 2003; Isen et al., 2010; Rose and Swenson, 2009; Swit and McMaugh, 2012). Drawing on the same negative coding of manipulation as a way to promote egoistic goals, Mandal and Kocur (2013) investigate borderline patients' use of manipulation techniques such as simulating symptoms, acting out and being aggressive. One article which address parents as manipulators of their children stands out as extreme, ascribing the manipulator not only with egoistic but also evil intentions of revenge (Summers and Summers, 2006). The article portrays manipulation as parents' use of 'bad control' in order to harm the other parent by controlling the child in subtle ways, and is thereby in line with the media debate in our example.

Constructions of mental influence as non-manipulation

Another stream in the literature uses the concept of behaviour modification to address intentional mental influence, and operates with a much more positive interpretation of manipulative acts, namely as the intention and ability to help other people (Labrador, 2004; Schiff and BarGil, 2004; Scholte and van der Ploeg, 2006; Busari and Ojo, 2011). Combining behaviour modification with positive intervention, these articles describe crucial strategies executed by professionals in order to change unwanted behaviour through mental influence. Being positioned as an agent of behaviour modification has positive moral implications compared to cases where intentional mental influence is labelled manipulation.

This echoes the general picture from the literature review: when acts of moderating other people's ways of acting, thinking or feeling through intentional mental influence were negatively associated with, for instance, egoistic motivated control, intentions of harming other people, exploitation and psychopathy, the word manipulation was used (e.g. in Beeble et al., 2007; Cillessen and Rose, 2005; Finkenauer et al., 2005; Gagné and Bouchard, 2004; Overbeek et al., 2006; Summers and Summers, 2006; Swit and McMaugh, 2012; Walling et al., 2007). Conversely, if these acts were positively associated or regarded as neutral, other words were used, e.g. behaviour modification, therapy, treatment, training, education etc. (Braet et al., 2009; Busari and Ojo, 2011; Labrador, 2004; Schiff and BarGil, 2004; Scholte and van der Ploeg, 2006).

Some literature explains the individual development of a manipulative attitude based on socio-pathological conditions or psycho-pathology, for example as the result of problematic family dynamics (Beeble et al., 2007; Walling et al., 2007), traumatic emotions (Goldblatt, 2013), psychological or psychiatric disorders (Jimenez, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2007; Sieswerda et al., 2013), or neurological conditions (Boes et al., 2012). Unable to act differently, the manipulator is located as a product and victim of her/his conditions or circumstances. In the following, we will delve deeper into this by exploring the questions: who is identified as the manipulator, and in relation to whom?

Children's manipulative acts: Positioning and its moral implications

When children are described as exerting intentional mental influence, these acts are conceptualised either as manipulation or Machiavellianism with negative moral implications (Beeble et al., 2007; Cillessen and Rose, 2005; Finkenauer et al., 2005; Gagné and Bouchard, 2004; Hawley, 2003; Overbeek et al., 2006; Summers and Summers, 2006; Swit and McMaugh, 2012; Walling et al., 2007). None of the articles conceptualize such acts by children in terms of behaviour modification or skilful negotiation, with the exception of Hawley's (2003) article on Machiavellianism, and even less so in terms of treatment, therapy and education as do some articles dealing with adults' attempts to exert intentional mental influence (e.g. Braet et al., 2009). Pilch's (2008) article on Machiavellianism deems children's ability to manipulate other children as complicating successful adult intervention in the children's (from an adult perspective) inexpedient actions and interactions, e.g. bullying, exploitation and crime. Without denying that some acts, such as bullying and exploitation, may be problematic and call for adult intervention, the purely problematizing connotations attached to children's ability to mentally influence others is a striking finding. This reflects a (re)construction of the generational order, notably the oppositional positioning of children and adults, just as occurs in our examples on manipulation in regard to the upbringing of, and consultation with, children labelled as 'maladjusted'. Here, adults' power over children is seen as desirable, whereas children's power over other children or adults is deemed inappropriate and pathological – and something that should not be permitted. Only one article deviates from this picture, treating children's mental influence over others in a more nuanced manner, namely Rose and Swenson (2009) who discuss it in terms of social intelligence and organizational abilities, high performance management etc.

Adults' manipulative acts

Regarding parents, the literature either problematizes their intentional influence over others as manipulation with negative connotations (Finkenauer et al., 2005; Gagné and Bouchard, 2004; Walling et al., 2007), or describes it as skilfully modifying children's behaviour, however the latter only in cases informed by supervision from professionals or training programmes (Braet et al., 2009). Conversely, professionals' intentional mental influence over children is exclusively positively connoted in terms of empowerment and the reclaiming of children's feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Busari and Ojo, 2011; Labrador, 2004; Schiff and BarGil, 2004; Scholte and van der Ploeg, 2006). In these articles, children are positioned as objects of adults' agency, irrespective of whether this is bad or good, harmful or empowering. Parents are positioned as manipulators - in two cases failing to take the child's wellbeing into consideration, with negative moral connotations (Beeble et al., 2007; Summers and Summers, 2006); and in other cases with positive moral connotations (e.g. Braet et al., 2009). Conversely, the professionals are positioned as agents of behaviour modification (Schiff and BarGil, 2004; Scholte and van der Ploeg, 2006; Braet et al., 2009; Busari and Ojo, 2011), training (Braet et al., 2009), education (Busari and Ojo, 2011), intervention (Braet et al., 2009), treatment (Scholte and van der Ploeg, 2006), and therapy (Jimenez, 2013), and are thereby positioned as skilful and competent, with positive moral connotations, i.e. altruism and empowerment.

Methodological approaches

The majority of the articles are based on empirical studies with a positivistic design which claims objectivity and robust evidence. Thus, their goal is either to measure the effect of intervention programs through a pre-post experimental design (e.g. Braet et al., 2009; Busari and Ojo, 2011; Schiff and BarGil, 2004; Scholte and van der Ploeg, 2006) or to identify causalities between skin conductance response and psychopathic traits in boys and girls (Isen et al., 2010); between Machiavellianism, emotional intelligence and theory of mind among school children (Barlow et al., 2010); between parents' use of psychological control and the child's temperament and gender (Walling et al., 2007); between school children's popularity and internalization of symptoms (Rose and Swenson, 2009); between school children's emotional intelligence, social skills, psychopathy, aggression, empathy, cognitive distortions and emotional manipulation (Grieve and Panebianco, 2013); between parenting style and young people's social-psychological problems (Finkenauer et al., 2005); and between school children's strategic agency and popularity (Hawley, 2003).

Fourteen articles are based on quantitative approaches (e.g. Barlow et al., 2010; Walling et al., 2007) whereas only seven use qualitative methodologies (e.g. Veysey, 2014). Thus, the field is dominated by statistical and medical epistemology, whereas other methodological approaches, for instance the global movement promoting participatory approaches and the inclusion of children's perspectives (Birnbaum and Saini, 2010; Woodhead 2010), are strikingly lacking. Some articles include children as informants (Barlow et al., 2010; Braet et al., 2009; Busari and Ojo, 2011; Finkenauer et al., 2005; Hawley, 2003; Overbeek et al., 2006; Rose and Swenson, 2009). However, these do not aspire to give voice to children's perspectives. In other articles, children are even not included as informants, but are reduced to objects of parents', teachers' and social workers' assessments. Thus, what is striking from a childhood studies perspective is the total lack of research on the role of manipulation in children's lives viewed from a generational order(ing) approach (Alanen, 2009), and the omission of children's perspectives.

A few review articles summarizing other articles were likewise based on empirical studies with a positivistic design (e.g. Pilch, 2008). However, as we have shown, these studies are not objective in the sense of value free either in their premises or implications. Rather, they must be regarded as highly normative, as we found similar Dionysian storylines about a desirable power relationship between children and adults across the different texts, which positioned children and adults in opposite roles and distrusted and disregarded children's views and experiences. Moreover, we also identified an oppositional positioning of parents and professionals, with negative moral connotations for parents (if not guided by professionals) and positive connotations for professionals. In the following, we elaborate on the biases in these studies, focusing on the predominance of medical approaches at the expense of social, cultural and historical dynamics and more participatory approaches which take into account children's perspectives.

Dominance of traditional (Western) psychological and psychiatric approaches

Individualistic approaches that view manipulation as a personal trait characterise the majority of texts using the word 'manipulation'. In these texts, the subjects' behaviour is seen as determined by some kind of inner core self; a pathological self that manifests regardless of context, opposite the relational self and agency, put forward by scholars within childhood studies (e.g. Esser et al. 2016, Rimmer 2017). Thus, manipulation is understood as a

consequence or symptom of mental illness or imbalance, e.g. as in personality disorders (Schwartz et al., 2007: 383), neurological deformities (Boes et al., 2012); narcissistic pathology (Summers and Summers, 2006), hyper-developed emotional intelligence (Grieve and Panebianco, 2013), biological markers (Isen et al., 2010), or lack of cognitive abilities (Walling et al., 2007).

Other articles which deal with treatment or social work and conceptualise mental influence in terms of behaviour modification regard manipulative acts as effective social interventions towards children, young people and adults in need of guidance (e.g. Braet et al., 2009; Busari and Ojo, 2011; Labrador, 2004; Schiff and BarGil, 2004; Scholte and van der Ploeg, 2006). These texts identify particular groups of children as being in need of guidance – the children being the problem - and the approach is once again individualistic; however because the children are also constructed as becomings, i.e. as developing subjects, these personality traits are regarded as modifiable. These texts reproduce a Western traditional developmental psychological construction of children as more or less passive, incompetent objects of adult agency; 'the developing child' (James et al., 1998).

Overall, the research literature concerned with manipulation in the broad sense of intentional mental influence turned out to be predominantly from the fields of psychology and psychiatry. It is dominated by medical discourses that regard acts of manipulation from the point of view of a positivistic ontology as a cause-effect phenomenon predetermined by biological or developmental psychological factors. Conversely, social constructivist and new materialist sociological approaches, which are promoted within childhood studies (Ansell, 2016; see also Esser et al., 2016) were absent, and historical, cultural and social dynamics more or less ignored, with few exceptions. Thus, drawing on a sociological-relational perspective, Overbeek et al. (2006) make the point that manipulation and social problems are tied together in a way which makes it impossible to separate cause from effect. One article, in particular, stands out, showing how borderline patients are stigmatised as manipulative (Veysey, 2014), but we did not find such a critical stance to the stigmatisation of children as manipulative.

Summary

In our investigation of the research literature on discourses about manipulation, defined as 'mental influence', we noticed three striking tendencies. First, we found that manipulation is

considered a personal trait, caused either by egoism or unlucky individual circumstances. This portrays the individual either as responsible for his/her own actions or as a victim. Only two articles deviate from the view that manipulation emerges in certain situations. Thus, Fairfax and Gilles (2012) and Veysey (2014) focus on how treatment and therapy services promote manipulation. Unlike the literature on children who exercise mental influence over others, these two articles introduce an interactionist perspective, arguing for a connection between manipulating acts and how these are interpreted by people in the surroundings. Second, the review illustrates that the concepts 'manipulation' and 'behaviour modification' have different connotations and are not associated with the same types of power relations. While manipulation is negatively associated and primarily linked to the actions of children, mentally ill persons, and in some case parents, behaviour modification is positively or neutrally associated with professionals' actions. Finally, the literature reveals a narrow range of research methods drawing mainly on positivist approaches, whereas phenomenological and hermeneutical, as well as interactionist, social constructivist and new materialist methodological approaches, which characterise the first and second wave of the new social childhood studies (Esser et al., 2016), are lacking. It appears that the global movement promoting participatory approaches within childhood studies has had no effect on research on mental influence on or by children.

Concluding discussion: Discourses on manipulation and the morality of childhood

Our review was motivated by the observation that children, across different practice contexts and in the media, are constructed either as 'evil' or 'innocent', which goes against the grain of the 'global movement' to engage and listen to children in research, policy and practice (Birnbaum and Saini, 2010: 260) and precludes more nuanced perspectives on manipulation. At first glance, this is not all that surprising, as other scholars, e.g. Gram (2004), Turmel (2008) and Esser (2015) have also found pre-sociological views on childhood to be powerful in today's moral project of childhood (Gram, 2004; Turmel, 2008; Esser, 2015; Ansell, 2016). However, these scholars point to the Apollonian view, in particular, as dominant. The findings from our review suggest a completely different picture when it comes to discourses about manipulation. We only found the Apollonian view in literature on parents' mental influence over their children, whereas in literature on children's mental influence over other people, as well as in other areas of the literature on parents' (professionally guided) mental influence over children, the Dionysian view of children dominated.

The research literature analysed regards itself as objective and neutral, but the analysis revealed how it is imbued with normativity that builds on – and reinforces - a particular moral project of childhood. Thus, across the literature, we found children positioned either as incompetent, powerless victims of the manipulative acts of peers and parents; or as powerful egoistic or psychopathological agents, dominating and exploiting their peers or parents. Both positions carry negative moral implications in the form of stigmatization and identification as less morally sane and trustworthy than other people. The literature further suggests that the behaviour of children identified as manipulative must be modified through adult intervention, and not least that the participation and influence of children identified either as manipulating or manipulated should be restricted. Thus, in the literature, discrimination, disciplining and lack of recognition of these children are constructed as appropriate attitudes, whatever a Dionysian or Apollonian view, advocating a generational order, in which adults (should) hold power over children. In line with Knezevic's findings about the Swedish child welfare system, the "undoubtedly moral child" was largely missing in the literature, "and children's agency diminished, deviant or rendered ambiguous" (Knezevic, 2017: 470). Therefore, our findings offer an explanation for why children in various contexts – despite a participatory climate – experience not having a say, e.g. regarding where to live after their parents' separation (Birnbaum and Saini, 2010: 277), or concerning residential care arrangements (Leeson, 2007; Gaskell, 2010), or in schools (Sørensen et al., 2012; Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012).

Our point is not to judge, or to argue that such stances on the morality of childhood are good or bad, or right or wrong – although of course we have views on this matter. Rather, our aim has been to illuminate how the more contingent field of childhood as a moral project tends to narrow and homogenize when certain words or concepts, as well as theoretical/methodological approaches, are at play – and does so in a way that counters, what might be regarded as the 'zeitgeist' of a participatory climate (Woodhead, 2010) and ambivalence between protection and participation (Jans, 2004), based on Dionysian discursive constructions of children.

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