Incorporating children's perspectives into family sociology: dilemmas and potentialities[1]

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, the American sociologist and feminist Barrie Thorne (1987) wrote a classic article entitled: 'Re-visioning Women and Social Change: Where are the Children?'

In this article, Thorne argues that, even if feminist scholars have 're-visioned women as active subjects in knowledge by granting them agency and diversity and by challenging diversions like public versus private' (Thorne 1987: 85), both feminist and traditional knowledge remain deeply and unreflectively centered around the experiences of adults. Her point was that, in addition to the re-visioning of women, we need a similar re-visioning of children – children's lives, agency and their experiences. Simply put, she was arguing that more studies should focus on children's perspectives.

Thorne's article was on my reading list when I took my first class in family sociology many years ago, and it is one of those articles that have followed me even since. It is therefore also of personal interest that I have chosen to quote it here. To me this contribution was valuable because it

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clearly highlighted theoretical parallels between women and children's situation – in addition to pointing out the importance of bringing children's perspectives into sociology.

Applying children's perspectives suggests studying children and children's everyday lives from their own points of view, listening to children's voices, and trying to understand how the world appears to them. This can be done with reference to various methodological tools, though qualitative methods are those most frequently applied. Those who approach children's perspectives often find that, in many contexts, children and young people provide contradictory answers and views which might challenge our adult norms and traditional ideas.

When I interviewed children and young people for my doctoral projects, I asked one of the boys what he thought about his future, and whether, for example, he thought he would like to marry? His answer greatly surprised me, as he said straightaway, 'Of course, several times!' I repeated the phrase 'several times' slowly, in order to be sure that I had got it right. He responded:

> Yes, several times ... I think it's impossible to live together with only one person during the whole life span – over twenty years – that's a terribly long time to spend together with only one person. I mean, it's unlikely you'll meet someone you can manage to live with for such a long time.

As adults, we readily think that our norms and thought models can be transferred to children and young people. The way this boy answered me contradicted my expectations – and in many senses it corresponded perfectly with Giddens' definition of 'the pure relationship', which, according to him (1992: 58) is a situation in which:

> a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.

I shall not draw further on Giddens' ideas here, but I find the example a convenient illustration of the fact that children and adults often have different preferences in their lives, just as feminist thinkers have pointed out

how women often view and value the world differently from men. Thorne's point, however, was that, by focusing on children's perspectives, researchers might discover leads for rethinking children – both by examining the parallels between the situations of children and women respectively, but also by achieving clarity about the ideological and actual connections between women and children (Thorne 1987: 86).

Thorne argued that knowledge about children is deeply adult-centered, and she pointed further to three images with which adult interests and perspectives have viewed children: children as threats, children as victims and children as learners (or the 'socialization' approach). Thorne's main point was that, in all three images, children's perspectives were absent.

Today, twenty years later, several scholars within different disciplines have met Thorne's – and others' – request and highlighted children's perspectives on social life in both empirical and theoretical studies. Most of these contributions can be categorized within the interdisciplinary field of 'childhood studies' or 'the sociology of childhood' (see, for example, Alanen 1992, Clark et al. 2005, Corsaro 1997, James et al. 1998, Prout 2005, Qvortrup et al. 1994, for international studies; and for example Andenæs 1996, Kjørholt 2004, Solberg 1994, among others, for Norwegian contributions). The three images of children that Thorne described have been analysed and reworked and a vast body of literature both regarding empirical and theoretical issues have been produced. Described very simply, childhood studies shifted the focus from viewing children as dependent, incompetent and passive objects towards an emphasis on children as independent, competent, active subjects (see Kjørholt 2004 for a broader discussion). But how are children focused within family sociology?

The place of children in family sociology

Childhood sociology and family sociology are in many ways overlapping with each other. Most children grow up in families. The historian John Gillis (2003) has suggested that 'Only children can make a family' (Gillis 2003: 149), and we don't really talk about family without having children in mind. There are however differences between these two fields – childhood and family sociology, and it is reasonable to suggest that as *children's* life has been the main focus in childhood sociology, *family* life has been the main focus in family sociology.

Even if mainstream family sociology addresses issues about children and their lives – this is, to a large extent with references to issues like decline in fertility rates, number of children in the family, adoptions, adults' rights to become parents or not to become parents and discussions over various child care arrangements and gender equality regarding unpaid care work. Globalization, transnational family systems and changing citizenship are also issues that involve children as well as changing family forms, divorce and post-divorce family relationships. Yet, as claimed by Amanda Wade and Carol Smart:

> mainstream family sociology has still not recognized the place of children in the family – except in so far as they appear as appendages of their parents (Wade & Smart 2003: 170).

A quick review of recent textbooks to a large extent confirms this claim. This means that, generally speaking, the question Barrie Thorne asked twenty years ago – where are the children – is still valid to ask with regards to mainstream family sociology.

In the following I will draw on some of the ideas Thorne raises in order to discuss how the incorporation of children's perspectives into family sociology may address both dilemmas and potentialities. There are of course many ways to discuss both dilemmas and potentialities regarding this question. In the following I have chosen to focus more broadly children and adults' different positions in society in relation to age and the dependent-independent dichotomy. Further on, I seek to concretize dilemmas and potentialities with references to three empirical cases.

Children and adults' different positions

Childhood studies have provided valuable criticism of the socialization model and promoted the idea of the competent child. However, there is an inevitability about the fact that children are – in a variety of ways – subordinated to adults. They are, for example, legally subject to their parents until they reach the age of majority, which is 18 in Norway. This means that age is one of the most important dimensions in defining what a child is. Even with a clear definition – up to 18 years, say – using age as a category is problematic in several ways.

Yet, although children are subject to adults in terms of age, they have legal rights of their own. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 asserts that all children are independent individuals with many of the same rights as adults, in addition to a number of special rights linked to their very status as children. Article 12 on participation, for example, provides for children (in Norway from the age of 7) the right to a say in decision-making regarding, for example, divorce and custody arrangements. Article 3 on the best interests of the child is frequently discussed in relation to divorce and family change.

The process from having a convention on the rights of the child to a changed local practice is, of course, long and cumbersome, and carried out almost *solely by adults*. Recent research shows how such processes often fail to make the best interests of the child and children's participation sufficiently concrete (Ottesen 2004, Haugen & Rantalaiho 2006). Also, concretizing children's rights gives rise to certain dilemmas regarding adults' power over children. Studies focusing on the role of children in family mediation, for example, have shown that, even if children may be seen as active agents in everyday contexts, what has been neglected is *how* their agency and their interests comes into being. Even if children legally have a right to be heard most family counselling services for example, do not include children directly: rather, their voices are represented through their parents (Haugen & Rantalaiho 2006). This means that the parents are still defining and voicing the children's interests and needs. Further on, if children are involved, it is the parents who define to what extent children can contribute, this often regardless of for example the children's legal right of seven years.

This illustrates some of the dilemmas involved in the incorporation of children's perspective and demonstrates that age and legal rights are both contested concepts open to definition and negotiations that again are related to cultural and historical contexts. Further on, in cases of family change where children have been given a say, their voices often contradict the understandings of one or both of their parents. Interestingly, in some cases children's voice actually make important contributions to family practice (Haugen 2007, Rantalaiho & Haugen 2006), thus further illustrating the mutual influence between adults and children.

Thorne herself suggested that adult-child relations may involve considerable mutual influence (Thorne 1987: 95). One way to highlight this was to turn the conventional socialization framework on its head and ask how children influence adults, rather than asking how adults shape chil-

dren. She argues that we should extend our field of study and focus not only on different constructions of childhood, but also on different constructions of adulthood. For example, people who are 'grown up' according to age, but who, for different reasons, are not independent or able to help themselves, are often treated as children. Elderly or handicapped people are often viewed as a-sexual and dependent. Thorne argues the need to acknowledge varieties of adulthood which illuminate dimensions of ambiguity and negotiations of age.

The ambiguity of age categories is clearly illustrated in work conducted by several scholars, as for example, Anne Solberg (1994). She studied children who worked in a fishing community and showed how age was ignored, or, as she put it: 'I noticed the disappearance of age' (Solberg 1994: 175). In the work context, it was rather the work activity that mattered. Thus she showed age to be a socially constructed dimension structured by specific historical and cultural contexts. The reworking of age has parallels to the discussions of the dependent-independent dichotomy. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994: 309) pointed out the dissimilarity between adults and children by claiming that: 'Dependency is an incomplete state in life: normal in the child, abnormal in the adult.'

Adults and children's dependency and independence

Julia Brannen (1995) has argued that relationships between parents and children are far too complex to be viewed as polar opposites in terms of dependence and independence. Children's relationships with family members should therefore be conceptualized rather in terms of *interdependence*.

I find this argument reasonable. In my thesis (Haugen 2007), for example, I have shown that many parents rely on their older children after divorce in order to get help with both domestic work and emotional support. Children and young people help their parents in household work and look after their siblings, but they also do what Hochschild (2003) would define as 'emotional work', for example, controlling and filtering the information they pass from one parent to the other. Alternatively they may shield their parents by withholding information that they know will upset them, for example, about mummy or daddy falling in love again.

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Kari Moxnes (2003) and Julia Brannen et al. (2000) have both pointed out in recent studies that overall children in families showed great concern for their parents. This is also what I found in my study. One twelve-year-old boy, for example, had problems sleeping when he was at his father's. He was concerned about his mother because her new partner did not treat her very well. Therefore the boy would make several telephone calls to his mother in order to check that everything was all right whenever he was staying at his father's. Also some children preferred to spend time with the parent they felt most sorry for, or the parent they thought needed them the most, even if this often interfered with the child's need to be in touch with friends and school mates. One other example might nuance the dependent-independent dichotomy further:

In this example a teenaged girl stayed home almost every evening instead of going out with friends. The reason for this was that she wanted to keep her mother company, since the mother had not met with a new man after the divorce, and spent most evenings at home. The mother on the other hand told that she would have liked to go out and meet with new people, but because her daughter rarely went out she felt she had to stay at home. She didn't want to leave her young teenage daughter alone at home. In this example, one felt that the other one was dependent on her, and vice versa. However, it shows how important it is to bring in the understanding of children and younger people in order to rework these kinds of dichotomies.

Examples points to the different dimensions of interdependence between children and parents. Most parents in these examples are dependent on their children's ability to do caring activities regarding both household and emotional work. At the same time, children are themselves dependent on their parents for both economic and emotional support, for example.

However, the term 'interdependence' may also be problematic because it indicates that parents and children are equally dependent on each other and thus suggests a symmetric relationship. The relationship between parents and children may be symmetric in some situations, but as stated by Virgina Morrow (2005: 59) children's lives are conducted in a context of hierarchal structures.

According to Thorne (1987) one of the main challenges, which also points to some of the dilemmas in incorporating children's perspectives into family sociology, is to move beyond the limitations of adult-centered frameworks or what she defines as 'adult power over children' (ibid.: 93). And further, that the understanding of both children and women are linked

to subordination: women's subordination to men, and children's subordination to adults. Also, she argues that

> women are closely and unreflectively tied with children; womanhood has been equated with motherhood in a mixing of identities that simply does not occur for men and fatherhood (Thorne 1987: 96).

The examples I have been discussing so far have illustrated how a focus on children's perspectives illuminates: dilemmas over children's legal rights and negotiations of age, as well as dilemmas over the dependent – independent dichotomy. These dilemmas will, of course, take different forms, as conceptions of adulthood and childhood vary cross-culturally and change historically. Nevertheless, it is important to pay attention to what Thorne highlighted: 'But whatever the conception of children, adults do the defining' (Thorne 1987: 93). Adults' power over children is probably the most challenging dilemma to overcome in order to incorporate children's perspective into family sociology.

Dilemmas and potentialities – empirical examples

In the following I would like to present three cases that raise issues that are pivotal to family sociology and theory. Here I seek to concretize and illustrate both dilemmas and potentialities, which are often two sides of the same coin. I will draw on some empirical examples regarding children's care work, the commercialization of childhood and reproductive technologies.

Children's care work

Howard Becker and his colleagues have focused on children who take on significant, substantial or regular caring tasks and responsibilities which have a negative impact or outcome for their own well being. In Britain, this group of children are referred to as '*Young carers*' (Becker et al. 1998, 2001). One of the interesting findings of Becker and his colleagues is that many children perform exactly the same kinds of care work as is required

of community care assistants. The difference is that *young carers* most often do this work because they have little choice or alternative, similar to some of the children I have given a voice to in my thesis. Their work and commitments are rarely recognised by professionals. They are left unsupervised and have no opportunities for training or personal development, nor do they have specified hours or terms of employment – and they are unpaid.

Care and unpaid domestic work are issues of considerable debate in contemporary family sociology, since we now know that the amount of informal care work carried out in households is often substantial. Nancy Folbre for example has pointed to both the extension and the importance of non-marked work (Folbre 1994: 89). As already pointed out, children also do non-market work, and Deborah Levison (2000) has argued that economists have not considered children as economic agents because of their lack of power relative to adults.

> Children's responsibility for providing care for other children, for ill, disabled, or alcohol/drug-abusing adults, and for elderly adults must be among the least visible of all work measured by economists (Levison 2000: 130).

Levison uses the example of children's work activities to demonstrate how a consideration of children's agency can affect economic analyses. She states that most countries follow the recommendations of the International Labour Organization in allowing children to participate in unpaid housework while banning or severely limiting their working in the paid labour force. She argues that work that children would often like to do is forbidden to them – and the work that they least want to do is allowed them – and often even expected of them.

> Researchers who systematically listen to and observe them find that children in diverse countries and situations prefer paid work over unpaid work, work outside the home over work inside the home, and work for non-family employers over work for family employers (Levison 2000: 127).

One of the most important contributions of family sociology and its feminist stream in particular, in recent decades has been to visualise and acknowledge women's unpaid domestic work in general and care work in

particular. Family sociology has great potential in also acknowledging and theorizing children's unpaid work. Children's perspectives might challenge adult definitions of childhood and constructions of children's relations to work, if we give children a voice and manage to incorporate children's perspectives more extensively. The next two examples I want to draw on are cases that have been debated in the popular media recently. The first one pointing to commercialization and children's television.

Commercialization – the Teletubbies case

This is the Teletubbies – a popular children's television series aimed in particular at the very young children (between the ages of one and four). Purchased by over sixty countries and translated into over forty different languages it is one of the most successful children's program ever (Buckingham 2002).

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teletubbies

Last month[2] the Teletubbies again became an object of media debate when the Polish Children's Ombudsman (Ewa Sowinska) claimed that the program promoted homosexuality because Tinky Winky (the largest of the Teletubbies) has a woman's handbag (the 'magic bag') which is said to be a hidden homosexual symbol. Similar claims were put forward by the

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[2] Prøveforelesningen ble skrevet i juni 2007.

American pastor Jerry Falwellsome years ago. He warned parents that Tinky Winky was a hidden homosexual symbol because he is purple (the gay pride colour) and his antenna is shaped like a triangle (the gay pride symbol).

The Teletubbies case highlights some of the issues debated in recent family sociology about family ideology and normative thinking. The claim, that the Teletubbies promotes homosexual propaganda is, of course, an adult construction. Those who make these claims are also in effect saying that they know both how this is perceived by the children themselves, and the effects that the alleged hidden propaganda has on them. To understand how this is perceived and explored by the children and how it actually affects them however, we have to study children's own perspectives more extensively. If not, and as pointed out by Buckingham (2002: 58) we are in danger of 'simply imposing adult categories, and thereby making unwarranted assumptions about viewers'.

On the other hand – we do know that commercial actors produce ideas and convey information towards children that are often gender specific. Ideas about gender that for example are communicated through the toy industry are adopted a long time ago and are run in a large scale by the very same commercial actors – the toy industry. One example is the concept of My Little Pony, which according to Ellen Seiter (1995) was produced in order to make a gender specific product, or a 'girls toy' for small girls (between the ages of two and eight). Seiter shows how commercial actors did research on small girls in order to produce not only a toy, but also an idea of a toy or a story concept, that would be adapted by small girls. Children are said to be the most important target group for advertising today (Blindheim et al. 2004, Buckingham 2000). It is therefore important to explore further and understand more precisely how these processes of commercializing ideas and often gender-specific propaganda occur.

Even if we talk about the commercialization of children in a global context, at the same time raising ethical issues of both legal and public responsibility, we also know that the most important phase of the process, when children consume the product, are related to *family practice*. David Morgan (1996) has pointed out the importance of studying 'family practices', with the stress on 'practices', and on 'doing families'. This focus on everyday life practices places the emphasis on the taken for granted – for example issues about gender – as well as it makes it possible to incorporate children's perspectives.

Most children are dependent on their parents to obtain a product, while parents, on the other hand, are often dependent on the child in order to obtain information about the correct preferences. This kind of family practice between children and parents illuminates processes linking families and the market, as well as how gender-specific patterns and habits are produced and reproduced.

In family sociology, gender is a well-established theoretical and analytical concept. So far, however, its focus on children and gender has mainly treated children as becomings. One of the potential benefits in incorporating children's perspectives into family sociology is that gendering activities can be explored not only from the perspective of the adults, but also as perceived and experienced by children in families.

One important issue in family sociology – another issue I discuss in my thesis – is how families are defined and understood. The last example illuminates this question further.

Reproductive technology – the donor case

'Hello, I'm Your Sister: Our Father Is Donor 150.' This headline was published in the *New York Times* on 20 November 2005. The story was about how two of the genetic daughters of the so-called Donor 150, who were born to different mothers and were living in different states, had been connected through the Donor Sibling Registry. This Registry is a website that opens for parents and their offspring to enter their contact information by sperm bank and donor number. The web page has helped many people, including many teenagers, to find 'the missing piece' in their family puzzle. One 16-year-old girl who was connected with her 15-year-old half-sister is given a voice in the article. She says:

> I hate it when people that use D.I. [donor insemination] say that biology doesn't matter. Because if it really didn't matter to them, why would they use D.I. at all? They could just adopt or something and help out kids in need (*New York Times*, 20 November 2005).

The donor phenomenon addresses several important questions dealing with ethics, technology and family relations. However, there is no doubt that the focus so far has been mainly on adults' interests and needs, clearly

illustrating the subordination of children to adults. What about children's experiences and understandings of reproductive technology? What does it mean growing up knowing that your father is donor 150? The quotations above should, however, be understood in a western context in which images of the nuclear family and biological roots are strong. In other, for example African cultures, various forms of extended family networks exist that are based on both class, gender, title, ethnicity, and geographical proximity. In these cultures 'fictive kinship' – people who have no blood relationship with each other but have deliberately created social ties are frequent (Abebe & Aase 2007). Thus it is of huge importance to acknowledge the cultural and historical context when discussing issues of family definitions.

Research has pointed to how reproductive technologies have made the term 'mother' more complex, and how new terms, both popular and medical, have arisen to describe the new hybrid mothers (Prout 2005: 128). Recent Norwegian research has pointed to the situation of the fathers in this context (Spilker 2006). The debates over reproductive technology that have occurred in recent decades have focused on the implications of changes for women in particular, including gendered relations, as well as parental responsibility, but to a large extent children's perspectives are ignored: 'Children, childhood and generational relations more generally appear as an adjunct to that gender-based discussion' (Prout 2005: 128). The donor case also draws attention to the ethical and moral dilemmas that have been debated in both research and the political sphere. I suggest that a more extensive incorporation of children and young people's perspective through family sociology would be valuable to these discussions.

Current issues about unpaid domestic care work by children, the commercialization of childhood and reproductive technologies are moving up the political agenda in several countries. These issues all have great influence over children's lives, but children themselves are almost never heard or invited to bring their own voices into the policy-making process. Jens Qvortrup (2005: 10) has argued that historically children are the 'last remaining group which has not yet been recognised as having a claim on current political and societal resources'. He further argues:

> despite much progress made for example represented by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children formally remain by and large subsumed within the household – or perhaps more precisely, the family (Qvortrup 2005: 10).

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Thus it is of huge importance that research producing evidence to decision-makers does include children's perspectives, so that children within different cultural and historical contexts are represented. In this respect, I suggest, that incorporating children's perspectives into family sociology has considerable potential,

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