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Where to and why? Children on meaning and value from a new materiality perspective

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present article is to discuss what children regard as important in life and how they view the purpose of life. We proceed from a new materiality perspective. The results are based on a study conducted in Sweden among 40 6- to 9-year-old children in two different classes in two elementary schools. A qualitative data-collection method was used involving text reading and movie viewing. In the present article, we begin with a theoretical discussion of the new materiality perspective before presenting our results. The findings show that children perceive togetherness, kindness, fairness and freedom as basic values for their own part and that they consider wealth and family to be basic societal values. There is a value differentiation going on in children's thinking, a result of which is that some values step out as basic values for children. A map of values is construed that aims to explicate children's value orientation.

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New materiality; child-specific values; value differentiation

Introduction

In recent research on children's understanding of death, death has been seen as part of life. Thus, life and death are taken as correlate concepts (Kenyon 2001). In a previous article (Ahmadi et al. 2019) we¹ looked at children's (40 6- to 9-year-old) perception of death, and in the present article we discuss what they think is important in life and how they view the purpose of life. What do they say about the purpose and meaning of life? What do their value orientations look like? We understand purpose and meaning as orientation towards life goals and outcomes, where this orientation is guided by values. We believe that values and goals are integrated, in that one cannot exist without the other.

Values in the materiality of things

During the 1980s, Finnish neurophysiologist Matti Bergström observed that values are spontaneously produced by the human brain and its physiological/biological processes; in this connection, he referred to what he called the 'value generator' of

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the human brain or mind (1984, 1993). More recently, Antonio Damasio spoke about 'the physiological state of a living organism's tissue' as 'the deepest origin of biological values and valuations' (2012, 48). Damasio suggested that the 'biological value is the root' of values like 'relative worth' (in economics), 'merit', 'quality of a thing' and 'utility' (49). Given this, values are in and through the materiality of things. The new materiality position states that we are material beings in a material world, and values are a part of that world. Paul Tillich, while construing a monistic view of spirit-matter interaction during the 1950s, spoke about the potentiality of a material thing as the foundation of value. If we considered a thing 'from the point of view of its potentialities', we would reach 'an objective value (of a thing) in this realm' (1959, 6). A consequence follows: If we are to create a sustainable world, we must acknowledge the value of things independent of the human evaluation of them.

We make a distinction between 'old' materialism and new materiality. The first we understand as a reductionist position that reduces things to mechanical matter, while the second is a holistic position that accepts the potentiality or the value of the thing independent of the human evaluation of them. As an epistemological position materialism presupposes that the researcher takes an observing position in relation to the object of study and builds representations or corresponding ideas of material things out there; as an ontological position, it presupposes that there are 'real' things in the outer world (Taylor 1992). During the 1950s Werner Heisenberg acknowledged the difficulties of the materialist position as a base of natural scientific truth-claims (Morrison 1994, 254). Subjective value theory, saying that values are human evaluations, is usually congruent with the materialist position. Given the new materiality position, we like to emphasise that it does not necessarily lead into a reductionist position. All things have their own value; this value or potentiality exists independent of the human evaluation of the thing. New materiality speaks for the plurality of values. Without going into discussions about different forms of realism and relativism we note that in our view representations say something true about the world out there (and in there): 'Events in the body are represented as ideas in the mind. There are representational "correspondences", and they go in one direction—from body to mind' (Damasio 2003, 212).

The change in value orientation we are witnessing today claiming that it is not only human beings who have rights, but also nature and natural things were being prepared already during the 1950s. Saying that things per se have value means that the nature exploitation (the use of forests, animals, and plants for human prosperity only) we have witnessed during the previous industrial/economic era is no longer possible. We could build a common world in cooperation, collaboration, and interdependence with all things (McFague 2001; Keller 2018). Not a single thing exists in the universe without interdependence and interaction with other things; all is related. In the materialist value orientation, the human subject found him- or herself outside the materiality of things, having an autonomous and independent

position in relation to them (Giddens 2003). In the new materiality perspective human beings are a part of the evolving evolutionary world and society.

New materiality

The theoretical basis of our previous article was the notion that children are relational, relating beings whose consciousness is relational. We discussed two facets of relationality: child-specific ideas and time- and society-specific ideas. Our thesis was that there are both child-specific and time- and society-specific ideas in children's understanding of death. We maintain this grouping here as well, but integrate it more explicitly with the position of new materiality. Given the new materiality perspective, we are in the company of other people consciously and unconsciously, affected in many known and unknown ways by our societal/cultural environment and, not least, by unconscious thinking processes going on outside the 'search light' of the conscious mind (Jung 2001, xii; Damasio 2012, 276). Because we are in the world and trying to orientate in it we can speak of coordinates and centres of gravity—maps that open up horizons on and in the world depending on which perspective we take. Value orientation could be approached by asking questions like: Where do children put their value claims? What is important to them and where do they find this importance? A new materialist might ask: What is the world like that children are heading into? We differentiate between the child and the adult perspective on children, and to get a fair understanding of what is happening, we also integrate the two perspectives—an integration that does not imply they are fused together in a non-differentiated manner. In general, new materiality emphasises difference, plurality and differentiation (Deleuze 1994). In analysing our empirical material we find a kind of a value differentiation in children's understanding of what is important in life.

In new materiality, we find the distinction between expressive modes of knowledge and representational general abstracted ideas (plurality in epistemology; there are different knowledges). In natural scientific approach, there is 'the effort to construct a unified field theory among the sciences (which) ultimately rests on the validity of the reduction of "life itself" and its forms to physical categories. The effort has remained a cultural ideal' (Aronowitz 1988, 301). In our view, such an effort is done on the representational level of knowledge, whereas new materiality finds life and values in the expressive modes of knowledge. In new materiality, life expresses itself (Tillich 1957; Deleuze 2002; Agamben 1998; Agamben 2015). Measuring and controlling life with the means offered by the materialistic natural scientific paradigm is still a cultural ideal and a power mechanism in modern state philosophy. In opposition to this abstract approach, the knowledge of values, Tillich wrote, 'combines an ideating and empirical element', where the ideating element is 'the intuition of the essence (or potentiality) within some existing exemplars' (1957, 6). In the previous

article, we suggested that child-specific ideas belong to expressions and that general ideas belong to time- and society-specific ideas. Time- and society-specific ideas are produced in societal and cultural context, we think that they are more or less free-floating ideas in that context, familiar to most of the members of the society. Barbara Rogoff speaks about 'the sociocultural approach' as 'an integrate approach to human development. Cognitive, social, perceptual, motivational, physical, emotional, and other processes are regarded as aspects of sociocultural activity rather than as separate, free-standing capabilities or "faculties"' (2003, 237). Our results show that children have time- and society-specific ideas and surplus to them they have also child-specific ideas. In our attempt to understand children's meaning and value orientations, we forespeak an integrative relationship between the two.

Emmanuel Levinas, who inspired Gilles Deleuze, emphasised expression: 'truth is inseparable from its historical expression and, without its expression, thought thinks nothing' (2006, 18). We believe that even general ideas say something about the world and reality out there, but we also acknowledge that child-specific expressions say something true about life. Thinking concerns that which is original and primary; abstractions or general ideas are not primary things. When it comes to life, one main point is that life is always a life (Kierkegaard 1991; Deleuze 2002), whereas our conceptions of life, in philosophy and science, especially in biosciences, are representations or abstractions above life. Representations are general abstract ideas marked by dualism between the representation and the represented. Instead of orienting ourselves within dualism, we could look for 'forms of life' (Agamben 2015, 263) in which thinking and life experience are brought together; we could look for 'the unity of life and thought' (Deleuze 2002, 66). We could look for 'the unity of life in its diverse manifestations', a unity which 'cannot be restricted to human kind' (Tillich 1958, 1).

Brendan Hyde, interpreting Scott Webster's view, wrote:

There is a particular type of space that is created between the various frameworks of meaning that are offered by a culture or society, and the individually created meanings that offer personal significance for the individual. Such a space can create a tension between meanings acquired from one's personal life experience, and ... (those) as received and authoritative wisdom of the culture, society, or presented worldview. (...) A person's spirituality emerges in this space as the result of the encounter between personal meaning and the frameworks offered by society (2008, 117).

Hyde continues that 'there exists a freedom that one can exercise in relation to meanings that are received from (the individual's) particular culture' (ibid.). We also think that spirituality emerges in the space between general ideas and individually created meanings, combining and integrating time- and society-specific and child-specific ideas. We believe that child-specific ideas and child-specific values are expressions of children's spontaneous meaning-production;

freedom is not only freedom from established ideas and frames but freedom to own production. It seems to be the case that there is not only the value-generator in the human mind or brain, but also the idea-generator: children's child-specific ideas speak for that. We found child-specific ideas while children were talking about death and soul, we do not repeat those findings here but try to lift up children's value orientations and their understanding of meaning of life. When it comes to value orientation children seem to make own value orientations, resulting in differentiation between primary and secondary values. To say what children's value orientations are is also to say something how that orientation happens.

Recent research

When speaking about meaning, a distinction is made between *meaning with* and *meaning in*. Meaning with the universe has usually been linked to great narratives of religion and ideology. Such narratives have less power today (Taylor 1992; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). It is hard to speak about the meaning with life in general terms or about the meaning with individual human lives given the historical events of the 20th century. It was Victor Frankl who turned our attention to meaning in life, and he did so in light of his personal experience of the Holocaust. In his view, meaning in life is found in the events of everyday life (Frankl 2006). Meaning in life is congruent with expressions of life.

Meaning is created through self-transcendence: a human being goes beyond her-/himself and relates to something bigger. David Hay combines 'value-sensing' with 'meaning', stating that meaning is a dimension of value-sensing (Hay and Nye 2006, 74–76). He also considers that 'Feeling is a measure of what we value' (74). New materiality differentiates between feelings, giving affection a special place. Deleuze finds in Spinoza's philosophy 'affects' both as 'feelings that are themselves passive' and as 'adequate, active feelings' (2005, 220 f.). Value orientation is to go from victimising passive state of affects to that of active feelings, active feeling being those that we 'produce' (221). Feelings in this sense are relational modes created either in interpretation, when we interpret our relation to ourselves, others and the society or in actual relationality when the relational object gives birth to affection. With 'relation' we mean the relation to something bigger than the individual self. There is 'a deeper "sensed" meaning' which Hay takes as the content of spirituality (76). Hay, in association with Rebecca Ney, speaks about 'a geography of the spirit', and presents 'a notion of spirituality as something biological built into the human species, an holistic awareness of reality which is potentially to be found in every human being' (2006, 63). We have found the position in Damasio as well. We agree with the following: 'In the end, the only way an accurate map can be drawn is to listen to what children have to say and, from what we hear, to create an empirical account of the contexts of childhood spirituality' (64). An accurate map, when it comes to value orientation, makes a difference between that what is of primary and

of secondary importance. Donald Ratcliff and Scottie May point that 'the possibility of spiritual realm is more resonant with some aspects of postmodern thought' than with 'Enlightenment era and its intellectual offspring, modernism' (Ratcliff 2004, 9). They also link value-sensing and 'a quest for meaning' with each other (149). In tune with Hyde, Hay and May they also speak about 'a core category of *relational consciousness*,' pointing to 'God, other people, things', as relational objects. It is usual to count new materiality as a form of postmodern thought.

Recent research in children's meaning-making has emphasised the importance of animals for children (Waldau 2011; Russell 2016/2017). Enderburg's and van Lith's research (2010) showed that companion animals have a beneficial therapeutic influence on children with 'impaired development'. In environmental research, a distinction is made between 'the human world' and 'the more-than-human world' (Abram 1997). The human world centres around human beings, the more-than-human world means that there exists a holistic universe with minerals, plants and animals, including human beings. In the human world, the human being is interpreted as having a special place above nature and animals, thanks to his/her awareness and language. In the more-than-human world, there is no such place; human beings share the environment with other living and non-living things. The new materiality position emphasises this second position. It seems that children also move in that direction in their value orientation; our results show that animals are important to children.

Children have a sense for justice. Conceptions of justice vary from John Rawl's and Martha C. Nussbaum's (2007) *a priori* approaches, in which pre-empirical theory of justice is construed and used as a normative pattern, through Amartya Sen (2009), in which we find an integration between theoretical and empirical 'way of living' emphasising approach, to new materiality perspective, in which justice is inherent to life as 'creative justice' (Tillich 1959, 8) or as a 'state of the world' (Agamben, with reference to Walter Benjamin, 2015, 81). There is a growing interest in what children think about justice, for example, considering environmental issues. Ann Sanson and Sussie Burke write that 'the majority of children and youth have at least some concern about climate change' (2020, 353). They list possible coping strategies while working with children, like 'problem-focused coping' and 'meaning-focused coping' (354). Our empirical material shows that justice is important to children, they think that there should be justice in human interactions and in the world.

With regard to value orientation, we speak about coordination of values: some values are more important than others. Paul Tillich talked about how primary and secondary concerns express human value orientation. Value orientation is a constant on-going re-valuation of values, of that which is important in life, irrespective whether or not one is religious. In the empirical material, we have tried to list which of the values are of primary concerns for children and which might be considered periphery concerns.

Methodology

Sampling strategies

We chose the schools through a convenience sample, making use of the network of schools cooperating with the University of Gävle, Sweden. A request including the project description was given to the principals at the two schools. Subsequently, the principals contacted suitable teachers. We had a planning with the teachers how interventions could be done.

Data collection

We have used following qualitative data collection methods: a) movie viewing 'Pojken med guldbyxorna' (The Boy with the Golden Pants 1975 by Leif Krantz), b) text reading Bröderna Lejonhjärta (The Brothers Lionheart, 1973/2009 by Astrid Lindgren) and c) dialogues both in small groups with 6–8 persons in each group and in the whole class. We visited two schools with one class in each, the first and second grade primary school classes with 20 pupils, boys and girls (6 to 9 years) in each class. Movie viewing and text reading happened on different occasions, we met the classes twice. We could not show the whole movie but showed some central aspects of it, the movie is 3 hours long, our stay lasted each time about an hour. We explained the general structure of both the book and the film to the children before we began reading and viewing, respectively. Subsequently, we had discussions with the children where we asked them about the themes in the book and the film. The dialogues followed the book narrative and the film sequences. All dialogues with the children were audiotaped. The teachers were present and explained difficult words in both sources, otherwise remaining neutral during the meetings.

Procedure

The research group had discussed and planned which parts of the movie and the book should be taken into consideration, the guideline being the fair introduction of the movie and the book as a whole: what is happening in them when it comes to their central narratives. We liked to hear children's view of the book and the film and started dialogues with open questions. We had a certain pre-understanding and had construed few semi-structural questions which target the central aspects. The motive why we chose these two is that the movie shows the interaction between the main character, his father and society, it emphasises some values in the local/global society (the boy visits Africa with his father; money is important; there is injustice in the world). The book in its turn tells a story of two brothers and their journey into the afterlife, it deals with existential concerns in a narrative/mythical form. Both of these works can be considered Swedish classics.

We began the text reading with a brief summary of the book's content, after that we read specific sections from the book. The dialogues followed the book narrative; we were interested in children's thoughts about the themes in question. During the second session, selected episodes from the movie were shown. In connection with the film, we followed the above procedure: we began the discussions based on the film sequence and asked the children to comment on it. The main strategy was to let the children express their own views, then to ask them to explain what they meant. Some dialogues about a variety of subjects were brought up in smaller groups of children.

Examples of questions we asked initially are: 'So, what did you like about the book?' and 'What kind of film is this?' Considering the book and the brothers' relation with their father, who in our opinion is an ambiguous figure, we asked: 'Is he mean, this father?' The children responded that he is both sad and angry. While reading the book, we asked why one of the brothers died; one child answered: 'He jumped out of the window!' We continued asking why he jumped and got an answer: 'In order to save his brother'. We continued: 'What more happened in what we read (...) what was the book about?' The brother who jumps out of the window dies, and we asked: 'But if things like this happen, like the house is burning and someone jumps out and dies, what happens afterwards? What happens when people die?'

Method of analysis

The transcription protocol was read through, coded and analysed individually by all of the researchers involved. Each researcher lifted up the main theme s/he found in the empirical material. To prevent other influences on the coding process, a need to maintain objectivity, the themes were discussed within the research team only after all of the authors had individually done the coding. By themes we mean the central ideas, in this case, value orientation and purpose of life, expressed in the transcribed material. Naturally, we were familiar with the content of both the book and the film. We had a kind of a pre-understanding of their central themes, and this might have affected which part of the book/film was considered central, thus directing the pupils towards what we thought was important. However, we believe that the individual analysis of the material counteracts this bias. After the individual and the group analysis, the group met to compare and discuss different main themes, listing the themes and the sub-themes. Main themes and sub-themes were selected jointly. In this way, we believe we were able to meet the condition of having 'a coding scheme (procedure!) that is relevant and exhaustive for the material' (Green and Hartman 1992, 22). After the coding and out-crystallisation of the central themes, we read them in the light of the map of analysis: children express value, they speak about that what is important in life, expressing their meaning-orientation. In the due

course, after a working period, some values step out of the material as central to children, we also saw that some values could be characterised as societal values (when children speak about their relation to significant others) and some as their own central values. We saw that the child-specific ideas are not as outspoken as in relation to themes like death, soul and afterlife, but there were some central values important to children as such. It seems that a kind of differentiation of values is going on in children's thinking, a differentiation that we find as one the most interesting results of the inquiry.

Ethical considerations

The study proposal was approved by the Ethics Committee in Uppsala, Sweden (Reg. no. 2016/099). The Ethics Committee's approval states that the proposal meets the main ethical requirements of research like consent, disclosure, confidentiality and utilisation. Prior to the intervention, the study was presented to the school principals, who gave their approval. It was then presented to the teachers, with whom we discussed the design and how to conduct the study. The teachers involved were the contact persons in the two schools. An information letter was sent to the children's caregivers. They gave their written consent before the child could partake in the study. We also asked for the children's consent before starting the intervention, informing them that they were free to leave if something became uncomfortable. The materials: audiotapes, transcription protocols and working material – were accessible only to the researchers; no one outside the research groups has had access to them.

Results

In the following, we will discuss: 1) How children understand adults' world, 2) What children believe is important in life and 3) What children say about goals in life. Child 1, Child 2, etc., refer to children in the actual conversation. There were conversations in half and full classes. The result presented is based on the themes we found in the taped conversations.

How children understand adults' world

Several issues or themes in the empirical material show how children understand adults' world. We concentrate on two of the themes: Wealth and Family. In relation to wealth, we have found sub-themes like: Spending money, Money and power, Money and happiness, Money and helping others, Greed.

Figure 1 shows the themes and sub-themes concerning this question:

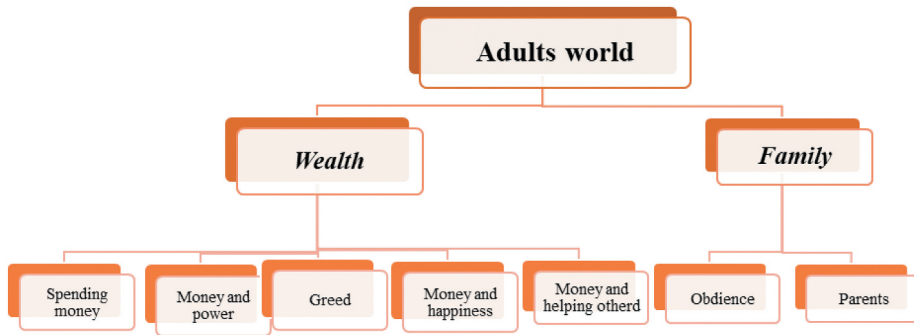


Figure 1. How children understand adults' world.

Wealth

Spending money

Some children had the following conversation in relation to the film. They were asked if they would still go to school if they had golden pants with pockets full of money

Several children: 'Of course not.' (laugh).

Instead they would do things like:

Child 1: 'Buy a hotel.'

Child 2: 'Buy a car.'

Child 3: 'Travel to many countries.'

Child 4: 'You also have to pay the tax, then you also have to have money.'

The conversation shows time- and society-specific ideas in relation to what could be done with money; most adults might agree.

Money and power

Money and power were linked together. The conversation led to the question: Can you buy everything with money?

Child 1: 'No, not something someone has and doesn't want to sell.'

Child 2: 'You can't buy a person with money.'

Child 3: 'Maybe in other countries. I have heard that in some countries you can, not in our country, you can't, but there are other countries where you can sell your children.'

There are limits to what money can do. It is not possible to buy a person, perhaps a reflection of discussions on trafficking that have been in the media

lately. In some other countries you can buy people, but not in Sweden. Perhaps the high-morality self-esteem popular in Sweden shines through here.

Money and happiness

The question – Does money make you happy? – was considered.

Child 1: 'Yes!'

Child 2: 'No!'

Child 3: 'He (the main character in the film) is not so happy because he knows that it's someone's money, which he got from those pants; he is stealing!'

It is interesting that the children respond both Yes and No to the question of whether money gives you happiness. The time- and society-specific idea that money gives happiness is widely spread in Sweden today.

Money and helping others

Can money be used to help others?

Child 1: 'He should buy lots of land.'

Child 2: 'They would send money, to poor people in other countries.'

Some of the children lived in the urban area and some in rural areas. The notion that money could be used to buy land is central to people in rural areas. Sending money to poor people is also a time- and society-specific idea, given the Swedish tradition of international aid.

Greed

The issue of greed followed the discussion on helping others. The question put forward concerned why some people tend to have more and more money.

Child 1: 'When you are so rich why do you want more money then?'

Child 2: 'Maybe you want to be richer? Or maybe you need something that you don't have that much money for? Kind of, if you were rich maybe you don't have that much because you have wasted your money and then you can't afford it? Then maybe you just take the money and do things, or you just want to be rich?'

In another discussion, the children thought that having plenty of money creates problems:

Child 1: There are 'problems that might appear when you have that much money' (like the boy in the film, whose source of money is endless).

Child 2: 'But if you act that way, perhaps you stop caring about other people, when you think too much about money.'

Child 3: 'When you're that rich, why do you want more money then?'

Child 4: 'It's because I feel it will create trouble'. (...) I think you'll face very many problems if you don't know where the money comes from and what you could do with them.

We asked: Do you think rich people have problems with their money?

Several children: 'Yes!'

Child 1: 'You might lose friends.'

Child 2: 'You might not care about somebody when you only want to buy things.'

Child 3: 'This kind of rich people, of course there are some who are kind, are mostly mean. There are many rich people who say so (that they care about others) but who still only want more money.'

Asked if rich people could be recognised, one child replied:

'They have much finer clothes than everyone else.'

Child 4: 'But I believe rich people are like the one (in the film) who's kind, and who are really, yes, kind, but there are also those who don't share with others.'

It seems that the children believe ordinary people are poor:

Child 5: He (a boy who opens the gate in Afrika) is 'an ordinary poor person.'

While in another school, when we asked whether money is important, several children answered: 'Yes!' When we continued by asking whether money is the most important thing, the children answered 'No'. 'Family' is the most important thing. This is one of the examples of value differentiation that we find in children.

Child 1: 'No, you go crazy because of it (money)! (...) It happens that you buy things you don't want (...), then chaos might break loose in the house'.

Child 2: 'Banks have a lot of money, because they steal money!'

It is obvious that money is important, as it allows you to buy things you need, but an excess of money is not a good thing. Family is more important than money:

Family

Family relations were discussed by the children. They reflected on how family relations were construed in the adult world. Here we found two sub-themes: Obedience and Parents.

Obedience

One child took up the issue of obedience while talking about the film: What it is to be obedient?

Child 1: 'One who is enslaved.'

Child 2: 'Yes, it's just a slave, ... he (brother) treats me like a slave, then it is like he decides everything I have to do.'

Being obedient is like being a slave; a brother is in command. Perhaps children associate the commando strategy with slavery?

Parents

Children paid attention to parents; the boy in the film had grown up without his mother and had been raised by his father in societal/economic turmoil.

Child 1: 'I wonder where the mother was?'

Child 2: 'He may not have a mother, but he said at the beginning that he had a mother. ... I think it was because she had left.'

Child 3: 'Father didn't care.'

Child 4: 'Dad was not nice. ... He doesn't buy new pants for the child. He had very nice clothes on, so he cared more about what he would wear than his child.'

Child 5: 'So, I think this is how the dad is a little bit like this, ... he is still in bed while the child makes food for him like, it doesn't feel special ... he leaves his job too soon, he may not do as you should at work, he may not listen to workmates and such'.

Child 6: 'It felt about him (the father) that he didn't care about his son, he didn't buy new stuff for him or something!'

The children's comments show that the tricky figure is common in their societal/cultural context. Wealth and family are central to the children's understanding of the adult world. What children say here clearly reflects time- and society-specific ideas. In understanding the adult world, they do not seem to leave much space for child-specific ideas. When it comes to the important things in life, the children's own ideas or expressions seem to be given more space: it is possible, given the empirical material, to speak about child-specific values.

What children believe is important in life; child-specific values

Values children think are important in life belong to the sphere of relationships. The sub-themes or central values in direction to which their value differentiation

gravitates to are: Togetherness, kindness, fairness and freedom. It seems that these are the most central issues in the children's value orientation. They are not separate values; they overlap each other. Without fairness and kindness, there is no togetherness. Freedom is something people sense; it is the opposite of being a slave. The themes we found in this connection were relationship and rights. In [Figure 2](#) you can see the themes and sub-themes regarding what children believe is important in life.

Relationship

Togetherness

When asked what the most important thing was for the brothers of Lionheart, the children said the following:

Child 1: 'That they were able to be together in the Cherry Tree Garden.'

In another context a child expressed the following:

Child 1: 'The most important thing in life is that you feel you're a part of them, that you feel like a buddy.'

Asked whether they preferred to read together or alone, children answered 'Together!' Asked why, they said it is 'Cozy' and that people are 'Close to each other'.

Kindness

Kindness operates with empathy in relation to other people, and in relation to the opposite of being kind:

Child 1: 'You ask why that person is kind of stupid, and you can try to make that person understand that it's better to be kind and help the person make friends and be kind!'

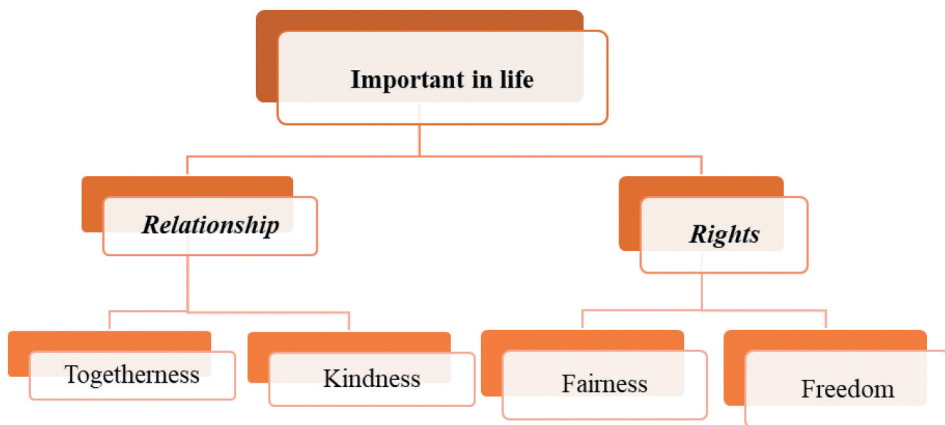


Figure 2. What children believe is important in life.

In relation to crime and traitors, the following comments are illuminating:

Child 1: 'I think that all people should live, even if you are a mean, mean, mean person, so!'

Child 2: 'You could, in a way, ask what has happened. I used to ask: Could I help you or could you just tell me, I won't tell the others. We could just take a walk and talk about it.'

Child 3: 'They are kind and help each other.'

Child 4: 'You still hurt the other person; it's not good to hurt that person. It's not good to hurt the person.' The child believes it is better to put the criminal in a car and let the person get away than to put the person in a prison. 'Until the person has understood how to be kind, then the person can come back'.

Child 5: Better 'to shoot in the leg' than to kill.

Asked why Tengil the traitor has become so evil, the following comments were made:

Child 1: 'Maybe someone threatened him?'

Child 2: 'He doesn't have any friends.'

Child 3: 'His parents were mean to him and perhaps he had an older sibling who took all his things and he was left empty handed.'

Child 4: 'Somebody has been mean to him. (...) So he wanted to show that he is no coward and he became so hard and cool and so he turned mean too, and after that he found out that it seemed good and so he continued.'

One child showed empathy for the people s/he had lost:

Child 1: 'I think you have to learn to lose your closest loved ones.'

In another connection, a child said that 'The family is important but it is also important to learn that you might lose people and so, so I think that's important in life'. Kindness is not only togetherness, it is also having insight into the conditions of life: that loved ones are not for us to keep, but we might lose them and we have to learn to live with that. There is a strong sense of empathy in kindness. Continuing the discussion, children said:

Child 2: 'We have to respect each other.'

Child 3: 'Not to say bad things to each other.'

Child 4: 'You must be kind.'

Child 5: 'You should not fight, then no one will want to be your friend.'

Child 6: 'Everyone should participate.'

Together-ness goes with kindness and empathy; the value differentiating correlate is the bad opposite. The opposite (meanness and other bad things) functions as a springboard that is to be avoided so that the value orientation might gravitate in the direction of what is important in life. Given the process of value differentiation that children find out what are the central and important values and they do so in relation to their opposites allows us to speak about together-ness and kindness as child-specific ideas or values.

Asked whether it was possible to see kindness in someone, the following statements from the children are illuminating:

Child 1: 'You can't always see that.'

Child 2: 'Maybe sometimes. Yes, like, you can only see it in the face. You can see it if they make some face, like, if they've done something and the movements also'.

Child 3: 'I think, like, that I can feel it, and I'm right mostly that it doesn't feel right if I'm supposed to do that or something else. It's just a feeling you get when it doesn't feel right.'

It is interesting to note that Emmanuel Levinas considered the face to be a central part of his post-phenomenology: 'This is what we describe with the words: the face speaks. The manifestation of the face is the first discourse' (2006, 31). In Levinas' view, phenomenology was still trying to bring the content-substance and categories of perception to the level of general knowledge, but a face that speaks belongs to the expressive modes of knowledge: 'expression is a relation with the one to whom I express the expression and whose presence is already required so that my cultural gesture of expression can be produced' (30). Children understand that some 'make a face', displaying a false picture of themselves. There is not only value differentiation there is also awareness of what is going on.

Rights

Fairness

Amartya Sen equated fairness with justice. In his understanding, justice is not dependent on a transcendental normative judgement, but is inherent in people's life (2009). Children are not beyond good and evil, but they coordinate and differentiate between them: the one cannot be understood without the other. We might try to improve the tyrannical Tengil; we should try to do that a couple of times, but without any obvious result, there is one outcome left:

Child 1: 'If that person tries to kill people, it is unnecessary to have him around!'

Fairness came through in discussing the role of money in human interactions:

Child 1: 'I think he (the boy opening the gate) thought, like, well, I would like to be rich too, that it's a bit unfair.'

Child 2: 'A kind of jealousy'

In another connection, one child said:

Child 1: 'All people are equal.'

Being fair and being kind go together, and so do their opposites: being mean and being jealous, which seem to be things children do not wish to be identified with. They are aware of the presence of 'bad things' (injustice, murder, lies and jealousy) in life, but they also know that a good life is fair, kind and free – lived together with other people.

Freedom

Commenting on what the most important thing is, one child said the following:

Child 1: 'Freedom and joy, the most important thing is that you feel free.'

In connection with equality between people, other children said the following:

Child 2: 'The most important thing is to be attentive and happy with what you do.'

Child 3: 'The most important thing in life is that you are alive.'

Children seem to believe that freedom is a necessary condition for being happy with that one does and feeling alive. A slave is not happy because other people (like a brother) control his/her life.

To summarise: The adult world is affected by material values like money; there is greed and injustice, selfish rich people, but also some kind rich people. The world abroad looks a bit different than one's homeland: there is more injustice abroad and plenty of poor people. We need to work to help those countries and hopefully create a more just world. This interpretation reflects time- and society-specific ideas; in our view, these ideas are widely spread in Sweden. The most important things in life are togetherness, kindness, fairness, and freedom, which are to be preferred to money and wealth. It seems to be the case that children's value differentiation moves in that direction and the values become central child-specific values. These child-specific values seem to go with meaning in life or that which makes life worth living. It is not money that makes life worth living, but relational values (values in relationships). One question in this connection is: Given the state of the adult world – with its economic orientation – does the future world have any place for the values of togetherness, kindness, fairness, and freedom as driving and motivating forces in the individual/collective interaction? What happens when child-specific values that children think are important collide with adult's more materialistic understanding of values?



Figure 3. What children say about goals of life.

What the children say about goals of life

Considering goals of life, children talked about heaven and hell (See [figure 3](#)).

Heaven and hell

The children believe that some go to heaven and some go to hell; good people to heaven and bad people, possibly, to hell.

Child 2: 'You go up to heaven. (...) Some believe you go to hell.'

Asked where that is, the child answers that 'it's way far down in the earth, maybe'. 'Down in the earth?' we asked, and the child answered: 'But it's only if you've been really bad, then they say you will go to the devil when you die, if you've committed suicide'. 'Is that true?' we asked, and the child answered: 'I don't know'. After a while, a child answers that s/he saw it in the movie, that people go either to heaven or to hell. We think that this dualistic understanding of the end of life is a time- and society-specific notion that children have taken over from their cultural context. There is also a naturalistic understanding of the end of life:

Child 1: 'You might die of sickness, you might die in a fire.'

Child 2: 'But when you get very old maybe you think it's really hard to live so that you, like, want to die.'

Child 3: 'I hope I never want that! (...) But why do we have to die?'

Child 2: 'Hearth stops pumping after so many years.'

Child 4: 'Body gets old and stops working.'

Child 5: 'What can you do then, you can't even think, just lie there and it all goes black, or do we come to another world?'

Child 6: 'That person is under the earth, that person will never live again, live life again.'

The naturalistic understanding of the end and goal of life is also a time- and society specific idea, which children have picked up from their societal/cultural context.

There was also the idea of reincarnation:

Child 1: 'Once my mother and I talked about what happens when you die, and we thought that, like, letting a person into a room, then the soul goes out of the body and becomes a new person.'

As the comment shows, the idea of reincarnation is something found in the child's social context.

The naturalistic understanding that death means the end of life is strong among children. In the previous article, we showed that there are some child-specific ideas considering the end of life, we do not repeat them here. Instead we comment the possibility of another world and the possibility of living one's life again. We find repetition in Kierkegaard and in Nietzsche: for Kierkegaard, repetition is congruent with spirituality; for Nietzsche, repetition or the eternal return is congruent with becoming of/in the physical world. Kierkegaard used the Danish word *gjentagelse*, which is used for theatre rehearsals: the play is repeated again and again to perfect the performance. Repetition for Kierkegaard is the spiritual state in which the existence that has been comes back in the present: 'The true serious individual is serious precisely through the originality with which s/he comes back in repetition. (...) In this sense, seriousness means the personality itself, and only a serious personality is a real personality' (1973, 132 f). To come back is to become aware of the existence that has been; through narrative repetition, past existence is now a living reality in individual's life. Repetition in this sense might be considered mature spirituality. Aware thinking implies that life is a mix of negative and positive elements; life consists of opposites, like in children's understanding of justice/injustice, freedom/slavery, good/bad. In Deleuze's interpretation of return in Nietzsche, we take repetition and return as congruent with each other, there is 'Time to expel the negative, to exorcise the reactive – the time of becoming-active. This time is

the cycle of the eternal return. The negative expires at the gates of being' (2006, 190). The positivity of being overcomes the negative. Here the negative is personal, social, cultural and existential, something that the total personality is immersed in, like death, lying, jealousy, hate, etc. Repetition/return entails overcoming the negative. It is being realistic about life: Child 1: 'If you get old you will have a lot of friends, but you will also lose a lot of friends'. Child 2: 'I think you have to learn to lose loved ones'. Child 3: 'You have to take care while you are living!' To take care of people around, especially the loved ones while living, is an expression of the positive; that we do not care, for example, for elderly people is an expression of the opposite. We cannot say what the goal of life is, but we can try to express it by pointing to the power of the positive in life experience. Also in this perspective, we have a freedom of choice, a choice which has political/spiritual implications. The power of the positive in life experience, even in children's life, seem to be the ground of inherent justice; in children's understanding, there is a difference between justice and injustice.

At the end of the sessions, we asked the children whether it was good to talk about difficult things. One child replied: 'Yes'. We asked why they thought this way. Another replied: 'It's because we learn something new'. We also asked whether it was nice to have book-readings together, and several children answered: 'Yes!' It is good to do it 'Together', not alone.

Conclusions

We began our theoretical orientation by stating that we consider death and life to be correlate concepts. We see in our empirical material that even good and evil seem to be correlate concepts in children's value orientation. There are evil things like war and cheating caused by traitors and criminals (negative things), but children do not want to be like those persons. Good things step out as such in relation to evil things, theoretically, we speak about value differentiation here. Perhaps this value differentiation, both in differentiating between primary and secondary values and in differentiating between good and bad, is driven by the value generator, leading to a situation in which 'suitable' values are preferred by children, that is, those that match their value generator. Children prefer togetherness, kindness, fairness and freedom as basic values, in addition to family and wealth which they seem to find in the adult world. Considering wealth, they seem to have different understandings of the benefits of wealth; excessive wealth creates problems. Ordinary everyday people do not have much money. The money issue is certainly relevant to children's families in one way or another; we might take this as a time- and society-specific idea.

Justice or fairness seems to be at the centre of children's value understanding. People and society should follow the dictates of justice, which for children means fairness in encounters between people. They say things such as: all people are

equal, people should be together, no one is to be left alone, the needs and integrity of the person are to be respected (if s/he does not want to speak with the teacher, the choice is his or hers), no one should have an excess of money, even a criminal deserves empathy (we could shoot him in the leg instead of pronouncing the death penalty). Things are rather good in their home country, but there are injustices like poverty and greedy people in other countries, also a difference between the values they have at home and values they think are in some other countries. The sense that fairness is the key to value orientation is important, something we adults could use when designing educational strategies.

Togetherness says two things: that children have good friends they like to keep company with and that children's value orientation is gravitating in the direction of togetherness. Promoting togetherness has been one of the main educational strategies in Sweden in the kindergartens and schools since 1968. The fact that children give it such weight is a good sign. This also shows how children construe what we call child-specific values. Child-specific values in this connection means that these are the values children prefer given their value orientation. On the other hand, togetherness also serves as an ideological buzzword in administration and politics. Research has also shown that children need spaces of their own, and our empirical material shows that freedom is central in this respect. To promote balanced development among children, when both togetherness and solitude prevail, could be a guideline when constructing kindergartens, schools, and other places for children.

What do children think about the goals of life? Where we find meaning, we find value, or rather, meaning orientation is guided by that what we think is valuable in life. If things lack value, they become meaningless; we do not consider them because they fall outside our value gravitational fields. Living together and taking care of each other seem to be central to children. Death is seen as the end of it all or as a transformation: going up to heaven or rearnation. There is also the notion of living one's life again – an impossible project, it would seem. In the present moment, children are collecting material for their life stories, living through their life experiences. The collected material seem to consist both of time- and society specific ideas and values and of child-specific ideas and values. These two, which we earlier have called the two facets of relationality, seem to be the poles within which children's value orientation comes to pass.

Note

1. The previous article was written by Fereshteh Ahmadi, Jari Ristiniemi, Inger Lindblad and Lina Schiller, the four making the research group that conducted the empirical part of the study.

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