

Children of the Welfare State

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Civilising Practices in Schools,
Childcare and Families

Laura Gilliam and Eva Gulløv

With contributions from
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Introduction

Laura Gilliam and Eva Gulløv

Anthropologists have generally understood civilising missions as imperialistic practices, and thus associated these missions with a colonial logic of the past. In this book we argue that civilising missions are as much practices of the present, taking place in formal and informal children's institutions in a welfare state. Focusing on schools, day-care institutions and families in Danish society, we explore their civilising ideals, aims and practices. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews with children and young people aged 1 to 22, parents, pedagogues,¹ teachers and school principals, the book analyses the everyday practices and internal conflicts of these public and private institutions, and discusses how norms of civilised conduct are negotiated, standardised and disseminated. Moreover, by exploring children's experiences of and reactions to their institutional upbringing, the book also points to ambiguous outcomes of these civilising projects for children who differ in age, gender, ethnicity and social class. On the one hand, children are treated with considerable regard for their personality and sensitivities, and taught about equality and inclusive behaviour towards others. Yet on the other hand, though characterised by a strong egalitarian ideal, the institutional upbringing creates subtle distinctions between social groups, teaching children about moral hierarchies in society and prompting them to regard themselves as more or less civilised citizens. Illuminating these dynamics, the aim of the book is to shed light on the ideals and practices of children's upbringing in a welfare state and to discuss their social and cultural embeddedness and consequences.

Civilising Institutions in the Danish Welfare State

By focusing on children's institutions in the Danish welfare state, the book addresses the general issue of society's interest in the upbringing of new generations, while also presenting a specific case. All societies engage in some kind of shaping and socialisation of the new generation (Durkheim 1975 [1922]; Levinson and Holland 1996), but one distinguishing characteristic of the Danish welfare state is the amount of time the majority of

Danish children spend in public institutions from an early age, the extraordinary amount of attention and effort put into this process by the state, as well as the widespread cooperation in this endeavour by parents of different social backgrounds. In 2015 89.7 per cent of all children aged 6 months to 2 years in Denmark attended out-of-family care in public-funded nurseries or small at-home day-care facilities, while 97.5 per cent of all 3–5-year-olds were enrolled in public kindergartens. Whereas day-care institutions for younger children are optional, school is compulsory from the age of 6. In 2015 81 per cent of all Danish schoolchildren attended state comprehensive schools catering for 6–15-year-olds,² and 81.6 per cent of all 6–9-year-old children frequented after-school clubs in the afternoons (Statistics Denmark 2015).

Though recent developments in global relations and contemporary political priorities have altered many premises of the classic welfare state, the focus on children's institutions and educational efforts has not declined. In fact, investments in this area are greater than ever before. Children have moved into the centre of political concern, with the consequence that the educational system is expected to prevent or even contribute to solving the main challenges of Danish society (declining market shares, competition with other countries, unemployment and social exclusion, immigration and social segregation). Thus, rather than leaving the upbringing of children to families or private agents, the Danish state has intensified its civilising efforts by striving to get all children into public care from their first year of life in order to ensure a proper and effective socialisation process and educational development. The result is an integrated and finely tuned system of public children's institutions which cater to the working parents' need for care and education for their offspring, but also, not least to society's need for new generations of citizens of the right mould. So this massive effort is not merely a practical arrangement demonstrating concern for the nation's future workforce. The extensive focus on children and the investment of time and money that is made in their care and upbringing bear witness to the fact that the Danish welfare state does not leave the practice of childrearing to parents alone, but plays an active role in the proper upbringing of the next generation of citizens.

An Eliasian Approach to Childrearing

The institutional priorities and practices in relation to childrearing will be examined using the concept of 'civilising', inspired by the work of

sociologist Norbert Elias (1994 [1939]). In Elias's work, the concept refers to culturally specific norms of proper and cultivated behaviour, which evolve through changing power relations and processes of integration between social groups, yet contribute to cultural distinctions and social hierarchies. Unlike related concepts such as socialisation, upbringing and disciplining, 'civilising' applies to both formative efforts and the social processes of integration, distinction and psychological change which make people strive for certain forms of behaviour which they regard as appropriate and distinguished, while discarding others which they regard as inappropriate and degrading (see further discussion in chapter 1).

We are aware that the concept of 'civilising' – and especially 'civilisation' – is controversial due to its historical baggage and evolutionist ring. We will, however, argue that it is precisely its focus on social distinctions and human hierarchies that gives the concept its analytical potential, as long as it is not used to make normative judgements about people's behaviour but is employed to understand their behavioural norms.³ Hence, it is important to stress that the term 'civilising' does not stand for specific universal values, or for a set of universally applicable norms of conduct. Societies and their populations differ in terms of which forms of conduct are considered civilised, and even within individual societies there will be different and changing understandings of what this entails. It is a subject under constant negotiation between different social groups. However, it is a central point in the work of Elias that some groups have greater opportunity to impose their understanding of what is respectable. When this influence persists over longer periods it often appears as an almost natural perception. One of the aims of this book is to illuminate how civilised conduct is conceived of and negotiated in a welfare society which strives for equality, yet is based on norms reflecting historically produced power relationships between social groups. In our view, Elias's theory of civilising is analytically useful for this, due to its focus on the relationship between power, behaviour and moral judgement, and its ability to illuminate the relation between cultural values, social interdependencies and subtle processes of distinction. By applying this discussion to Danish institutions for children and young people, the book addresses how the encompassing institutionalisation of children relates to changing group relations and extensive processes of integration in wider society, necessitating children's transformation into civil persons capable of engaging in public spheres in ways considered non-offensive and socially acceptable. In a further perspective, we find that this approach contributes to more

general theoretical discussions of the relationship between educational institutions, cultural norms and processes of distinction.

The Role of Institutions

Part of the negotiation as to what is civilised takes place between parents and childcare professionals. What should be prioritised in childrearing? Who has the right and the authority to decide how the child should be brought up and what it should learn? Danish society is interesting in this regard because the extensive institutionalisation demonstrates that public institutions for care and education are, to a great extent, given the right to raise children from a very early age. By analysing everyday situations and practices in families, day-care institutions and schools, we will examine the negotiation of roles, authority and priorities in relation to children's upbringing which takes place in and between the private and public spheres, but also examine recurring features of the formative work with children across the different types of institutions.

A main tenet in the following analyses is that day-care institutions and schools are central civilising and integrating organs in the welfare state. They are constructed to ensure that new generations are cared for and civilised, yet at the same time they also contribute to the very ideas of what civilised behaviour and a civilised society entail. We will thus argue that behavioural norms are both 'institutionalised' through children's institutions – in the sense of being routinised and disseminated – yet also become 'institutional' that is moulded by the conditions and social relations of the institutions. The analysis of everyday life in such institutions can therefore provide insights into the values and norms that are prioritised to such an extent as to be part of the institutional arrangement, while at the same time revealing how these values are interpreted, negotiated and moulded by the institutional structures and personal interactions. With this approach it is also possible to look into why some groups of children and some types of behaviour fail to meet the relevant standards and are therefore perceived as wrong and not measuring up, in moral terms, within a social hierarchy.

The Ethnographic Approach

As mentioned, the book is based on ethnographic research. This entails that, over an extended period, we have conducted participant observation

and gathered material regarding everyday life in the institutions that were included in our study.⁴ We have observed both daily routines and unusual incidents, paying attention to what children and adults do and talk about, and we have interviewed children about their experiences and understandings, as well as interviewing pedagogues, teachers and parents about their practices and notions of children, upbringing and institutional tasks and settings.

Studies of this type probe into everyday life, but, of course, our material is not representative of all families, day-care institutions and schools in Denmark, nor does it reveal all aspects of institutional life or touch upon all issues relevant to the discussion of civilising. Nevertheless, we find such studies well suited to produce a more general form of knowledge. Although the ethnographic approach is local and situated, our research interest is general and directed towards society's underlying values and multiplicity of rationales. As a result, we have attempted to understand why people act as they do in concrete situations and contexts, but, at a more general level, we have also tried to shed light on the cultural understandings and values and social dynamics behind the childrearing practices and institutional priorities we have observed. We aim to understand both local practices and a national case, but also to explore the relationship between welfare institutions, parents and children on a more general and theoretical level. Our ambition is to provide insight both into underlying cultural values of Danish society, and into the social processes which continuously either challenge or corroborate such values, and which provide a basis for self-perception, social cohesion and hierarchy.

In this endeavour, we not only draw on the sociology of Norbert Elias but also on insights gained within the fields of anthropology of children and sociology of childhood, the anthropology of education, Bourdieu's praxeology, the sociology of institutions and ethnographic studies of Scandinavia. In these different academic traditions, we find overlapping and parallel interests in exploring the relationship between childrearing practices, processes of enculturation, notions of what it means to be educated and the impact of institutions on social stratification. Inspired by these studies and analyses concerning children, educational institutions and upbringing practices in various cultural settings, we aim not only to present a study of a specific national setting, but also to contribute to a more general theorising on the cultural foundation and social implications of civilising institutions.

The Book's Structure

The book is an anthology in the sense that the chapters are written by different authors and are based on several studies carried out in various institutions. As such, each chapter can be read in its own right. Nevertheless, the studies were conducted as part of the same project, and it is our ambition that the book can be read in its full length as an aggregate analysis. In this sense, we regard it as a monograph. The four authors are all anthropologists, and ethnographic methods and descriptions are at the core of the book's analyses. This also means that, particularly in the book's six empirical chapters, we have given priority to the empirical material and made frequent use of situational descriptions, transcripts of conversations and direct quotes.⁵

The first two chapters by Gilliam and Gulløv frame the following empirical analyses. Chapter 1 introduces and discusses Norbert Elias's notion and theory of 'civilising' and the book's theoretical perspective on institutional childrearing. In chapter 2 the historical background to and development of the institutionalisation of childhood that has taken place in Danish society over the last century is described and analysed, as well as the different conceptualisations and practices of childrearing, civilised conduct and societal forms that these convey. After this introduction, the book's six empirically based chapters present studies of different institutional settings and groups of children. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the efforts to civilise children in the first public institutions they encounter as autonomous agents – that is the day-care institutions of nurseries, kindergartens and integrated institutions for 1–6-year-olds. In chapter 3, Gulløv analyses the prevailing ideal of the young child as a flexible and socially balanced person able to adapt to shifting situational requirements. This ideal allows for many interpretations giving children a certain leeway, which, however, not all children are able to handle in acceptable ways. In the following chapter, Olwig examines the kindergarten as a site where young children experience early forms of sociality and how their position as 'not-yet-civilised' within the institution influences the way they interact with others, form groups and assert themselves.

After these chapters on early childhood institutions, the next three chapters address society's primary civilising institution: the *folkeskole*, that is the comprehensive Danish state-funded school. In these chapters, Gilliam examines children of different ages and of various social and ethnic backgrounds. Based on fieldwork conducted in grade 0 classes at

two *folkeskoler*, chapter 5 illustrates the work involved in teaching the youngest schoolchildren – aged 5–6 – to be ‘social’ and in moulding good, civilised communities. It explores the institutional logics of this, and the consequences that the school’s ideal for civilised conduct has for different children’s identities and practices in school. In chapter 6, the focus is on 10–12-year-old children in an ethnically diverse school in a former working-class urban district and the extensive civilising work directed towards especially immigrant boys, who are considered problematic and uncivilised. The analysis demonstrates how these efforts, and the social dynamics of countercultural forms to which civilising projects may contribute, teach children about the social categories of gender, class, ethnicity and religion. This theme is continued in chapter 7, which analyses the final grade 9 in a financially and educationally privileged suburban environment. This chapter analyses how affluent young people – aged 15–16 – come to see their own position as morally superior by the way teachers describe them and the surrounding world through categories and narratives loaded with moral evaluations.

In chapter 8 the focus turns towards families and their upbringing practices. Based on fieldwork carried out in a number of homes in an affluent residential area, Bach shows how parents – particularly mothers – are engaged in close regulation of children in order for them to interact in appropriate ways with others and to build up their social capital. She further explores children’s role in parents’ social networking and in their demonstration of their own civilised capacity and position. The book ends with more general and theoretical reflections on the relation between children’s institutions, the welfare society and contemporary understandings of civilised conduct. In chapter 9, the concluding chapter, Gilliam and Gulløv examine the civilising projects across the various institutions and discuss how they relate to and reflect dominant cultural norms and social hierarchies in Danish society, as well as their implications for children of different social and ethnic backgrounds.

1

On Civilising

A perspective on childrearing, conduct and distinctions

Laura Gilliam and Eva Gulløv

In this chapter, we present the theoretical framework of the book; that is, the way we have adapted Norbert Elias's theory and concept of 'civilising' to the study of upbringing ideals and practices in the institutions of the Danish welfare state. In Elias's work the concept of 'civilising' is used to denote both visions and ideals of cultivated conduct and ambitions, as well as the process that over time creates changes in the way people feel, think and behave. These visions and ideals reflect relations of interdependence and social domination, and give way to processes of distinction. Applying this notion of civilising to the way Danish families, day-care institutions and schools bring up children, and exploring how civilising projects unfold in the everyday lives of these institutions, grants us a better view of the social and cultural embeddedness of formative work and its implications for children and childrearing. As we will argue, the approach also opens up insights into how children's institutions contribute to the social and moral hierarchies of welfare society, not only in Denmark but also in contemporary welfare states in a more general sense.

The Civilising Process

Norbert Elias elucidated his theory of 'the civilising process' in a complex and comprehensive work containing an in-depth examination of the relation between the formation of Western European states and what he describes as a 'civilising' of behaviour and personality since the Middle Ages (Elias 1994 [1939]).¹ According to Elias, civilising processes take place in all societies, but the civilising process of European societies has a

particular character, due to the central role of the state (1994 [1939]:379; Mennell 1990:208). Using France and Germany as his empirical cases, he describes a lengthy historical development from the establishment of courts in the Middle Ages, towards an increasingly integrated state society in which the state gradually gains a monopoly over taxation and the use of violence.² This consolidation of the state reflects a process of greater population density and a division of labour and functions, leading to a high degree of internal dependence between members of society, or what Elias calls ‘chains of interdependence’ that become longer and more differentiated over the centuries (1994 [1939]:289).

Elias argues that the combination of state monopolisation and increased social integration has led to greater physical security for the members of a society and, over time, a general aversion to and heightened ‘threshold of sensitivity’ towards violence (Elias 1998a:182–93). In order to live in mutual interdependence, members must develop a high level of self-control, avoid aggression and other behaviour that may offend others, and seek to adapt their behaviour to other people’s expectations (Elias 1994 [1939]:366–9, 429). This necessitates a certain standardisation of conduct and coordination of interactions – not least through increased temporal regulation (Elias 1992:118–19). In a societal organisation based on members’ mutual dependence, control of drives and predictability becomes central. Over time such adaptations are integrated into well-established patterns for interpersonal interaction. A central point here is that through this process, what were previously external requirements are gradually internalised as ‘self-restraints’ associated with feelings of shame or disgust over the uncivilised behaviour of yourself or others (Elias 1994 [1939]:365). The genuine fear of other people’s use of violence and reprisals is transformed into a fear of other people’s judgements: a fear of being excluded or losing face. Thus, self-control and shame become psychological mechanisms that replace the fear of aggression from others. In this way, behaviour becomes the basis for assessing status and respectability.

Elias illustrates this via a historical review of rules for etiquette and manuals for childrearing aimed at raising young boys in the German and French court societies. He describes how norms slowly spread from these court circles to the rest of society and became integrated in social interactions. Using examples from these manuals, he shows how physical restraint and the restricted expression of emotions in particular became markers of social distinction gradually changing the make-up of the

individual psyche. Whereas, for example, in the fifteenth century, spitting on the table when eating was described as being merely bad manners, over time spitting has become something which is generally repellent. However, this is not simply a change in practice, but also a need that is eliminated or at least suppressed via a gradual transformation of feelings (Elias 1994 [1939]:131–6). Using several body-related examples (e.g. table manners, bed sharing, sexual relations, toilet habits, and fights), Elias illustrates how, over the centuries, an increasing suppression of drives and a detailed division of public, private and intimate behaviour has developed (1994 [1939]:160). He argues that a person's social reputation and interactions with others necessitate an intensified awareness about which forms of expression and ways of behaving are appropriate in different social contexts. Corporal punishment of children in Denmark may serve as an example. From being a normal and widespread practice, adults' right to hit children was first problematised, then forbidden for authority figures in children's institutions, and finally in 1997 – after substantial controversy – made illegal also for parents in private homes and, in addition, fraught with shame. In this way, behaviours that were previously widespread in the public sphere have gradually become socially degrading, even within the boundaries of the home.

Figurations and the Relationship Between Sociogenesis and Psychogenesis

As this shows, the norms of conduct that people must observe to be accepted as civilised persons change over time. Elias's point is that they change in relation to alterations in social power balances between social groups, and via complex processes of social mobility, social struggles, integration and distinction. He describes, for example, how the growing bourgeoisie of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Germany and France, in their striving for social elevation, adopted part of the court's etiquette and symbols of distinction while dismissing other aristocratic manners as decadent in an attempt to establish their own code of conduct as morally superior (1994 [1939]:387, 433). Such social dynamics and changes in power balances are decisive not only for which norms become dominant, but also for the individual's personal conduct and perception of social relations. They influence what Elias terms 'human figurations'; that is social networks of interdependent actors which form the outset for individual reasoning, self-awareness and orientation (Elias 1970:127–