

## Conference and expert meeting

### ON TIME: Doing research with children on time

Basel, March 18-19, 2005

The conference ON TIME was prepared as far back as early as fall 2002 when experts of international reputation were first asked for their participation. The invited speakers and experts came from Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, United Kingdom, Finland, and Italy. Workshop participants were from Switzerland, Germany, Luxemburg, and Canada. The NRF's recommendation to keep a fair proportion of women was finally overfulfilled. Apart from the session chairs all speakers and experts present were women.

The high competence and international provenience of the invited speakers, experts and public was the basis for dense and focused discussions. The interaction and temporal format of plenary speeches and workshops proved to be adequate. The workshops were guided by working papers that fulfilled their function to focus the discussions which shifted systematically from questions of empirical approaches to theory-building. The sessions were attended by a public numbering steadily 40 people of mainly international provenience. This number proved ideal for a thematically focussed, immediate and engaged discussion.

The conference and expert meeting fulfilled its two main aims: It shed light on qualitative empirical procedures and was able to give directions to the ongoing research activity; it outlined the theoretical frames that will guarantee successful analyses and syntheses.

#### First day (Friday March 18)

In her opening speech *Dr. Helga Zeiher* (Berlin) outlined two strands of the topic: first how urban childhood has been empirically and qualitatively followed, categorised and theorised; secondly which are the changes and tendencies these "childhoods" have undergone during the last three decennia. Her focus was concrete, stressing the everyday life perspective and dealing with the decisions made by children in order to handle different situations.

One of the key informations handed over by Helga Zeiher to the second plenary speaker *Laura Wehr M.A.* (Basel) was that the concepts of time and space allow for structure and agency to be set in concrete relations with each other. In her input she highlighted the guiding dimensions of time practices, time perception and time limits and conflicts. This led to the issues of perception, competence, negotiation and empowerment, which were accompanying the conference until its end.

Workshop 1 initiated the four step common work of the experts with the question "Time is everywhere, children are in many places. Where do we stand?", thus continuing the issues of the introductory speeches.

*Dr. Ingrid Westlund* (Linköping) has unfortunately fallen sick, so her input to the opening workshop was read. She hinted at opportunities for the field researcher to use unconventional and creative methods in order to grasp children's multiple times and handling of time, in particular "critical incidents" that need often to be elucidated by other media than speech. She also questioned the presence or influence of authorities like parents and teachers in the interview situations. As a theoretical opening she recommended to take into consideration Ricoeur's "third and human time" notions in the analysis of the collected narratives.

In her response *Dr. Beatrice Hungerland* (Berlin) pointed to the double reference of children to age-time and everyday-time, both bringing with them specific rules and notions of discipline. In a dialectical manner the upriver generations (parents, teachers) are bound to respect and make work the same system of reference. In her research Hungerland has dealt with the discourse of children's lifetime, the notions of childhood as preparation stage, family childhood as opposed to "real" (work) life. Parents' advising manuals published between 1950 and 2000 in Germany allowed her to identify a changing variety of time practices in early child care.

Workshop 2 addressed the notions of "Double distances. Field work with children", asking for the child-subject to be addressed in research about the temporal functions in the life of the 10 to 14 year old.

In her input *Dr. Gabriela Muri* (Zurich) presented two theses that characterised the field research setting. She stated that by seeking to include a special children's perspective as much as possible the roles become asymmetrical and the adult an outsider. The provocative counter thesis was that then children themselves participate in standardizing childhood. As a conclusion she recommended not to reflect solely on one's own role in the field but also on the children's status. In a second step she demanded that this positioning question has to be supplemented by asking how children produce synthesis ascriptions between various contexts – school, home, activities – and differing adult roles as researcher, teacher, parent. This would do justice to the thesis that time is a socially construed phenomenon among children and consequently can only be interpreted and analysed in complex, interdependent contexts.

In her response *Dipl. Soz. Svenja Pfahl* (Berlin) checked the field work setting presented by Laura Wehr by her own field work with children of age 6 to 12. She agreed that the empirical research on childhood is strongly influenced by the intergenerational gap between the adult researcher and the studied child. She was of the opinion that this intergenerational gap can be bridged by choosing an appropriate research setting, although without the need to be completely abolished. A certain distance between child and grown-up researcher has to be maintained. She diagnosed an inconsistency and potential conflict between the ascription to the child as an "expert" and at the same time as a "child".

Keynote plenary speech: In her evening public plenary speech *Prof. Dr. Allison James* (Sheffield) opened the theoretical part of the meeting with her speech on "Everyday

notions of childhood and youth: Theorising their relevance for the social organisation of time". With rich empirical material at hand she entered the discussion of the terms "childhood" and "youth" at the basis of the entire NRP, commonplace notions that invite to widely varying definitions in different contexts. She analysed the corresponding ideas of the temporal space of the life course and the temporal patterning of everyday life in their dialectical relationship. James explored what this means for children themselves who are situated at one end of this temporal sequence. She contended that the emphasis placed on children's future works to not only devalue their experiences of the present but also to problematise their pasts.

Such contradictory images and imaginings have considerable effects on the intergenerational relations that take place at home, school, and neighbourhood: Precisely because the importance of "childhood" and "youth" is held to be in the future, rather than in the present, children and young people's relationships with adults are structured around inequalities of power in relation to decision-making.

### **Second day (Saturday March 19)**

Plenary speeches: In the opening speech of the second conference day's programme, *Prof. Dr. Leena Alanen* (Jyväskylä) took up the last argument of James by highlighting, on the one hand, children's rights and children's welfare in the generational context and, on the other hand, the place of the topic within sociological research and theory. She explained three sociological concepts relevant for the present discussion – sociology of children, deconstructive sociology of children and childhoods, structural sociology of childhood – and the categorical and relational approaches with respect to the notions of time and thus generation and "generationing". Against the current "absolute" notion of time and of space she puts the meaningful social practices that are always embedded in time and space and therefore inseparable from them. She concludes that a step towards thinking children's welfare could in fact be taken by building on the idea that welfare is based on the right to meaningful time. This would open up for one or another time policy (Zeitpolitik) for promoting children's welfare.

*Dr. Dympna Devine* (Dublin) presented in her plenary speech a wealth of ethnographic evidence of children's school-experience in the context of Irish primary education. She questions children's compulsory time-ordering by school and the discourses connected with this fact. Power and identity are established in rigid as well temporal as spatial settings lacking all opportunities of consultation. It became evident that the children used a discourse of work for their presence in school and complained about an imbalance between work time and play time. Also, and contrarily to many adults' opinion, children are well aware of the nature of times and power relations which induce them to negotiate pockets of resistance. Yet localised solutions by children or teachers would be overpowered by unchanged predominant patterns.

Workshop 3 checked the transition from the collection of qualitative data to their analysis: "Lots of materials. Finding directions".

In the input by *Prof. Dr. Helga Kelle* (Frankfurt) answered to methodological issues raised in the workshop paper for this session. She agreed to the procedures of developing analytical categories from the material itself but proposed reflexivity in the sensitizing step. In qualitative research one needs not think of "individual cases" and "the general" as opposed categories.

With respect to the coding process she was of the opinion that in ethnographic research there is no sense in thinking of analytical categories in terms of singular, clear-cut, or isolated items. It is more a matter of interrelations and coherence. With respect to data sources and media she stressed the point that each method of research or each data source is constructing a research subject of its own, thus analytical procedures should not be mixed or summed up.

The discussion in this workshop was then focussing on an interview and mind map excerpts presented by *Laura Wehr M.A.* to the comment by the experts and participants.

Workshop 4 turned to the perspective of application, asking "Cui bono? Towards a social and political application of the results".

*Dr. Martina Heitkötter* (Munich) presented a film about a concrete project of time policy in Bremen and an input as a reply to the workshop papers by *Laura Wehr* and *Justin Winkler*. She asked for the actor who is potentially interested in strengthening the perspective of children on existing temporal structures and who would be capable to instigate the political processes of re-arranging social time patterns.

Referring to the question of localised vs. global strategies and solutions, she stressed that the defective co-ordination of social times has first to be dealt with. This can free the individual and the group from temporal stress caused by desynchronisation and it lowers the conflict potential by offering cultural communicational procedures. That way application concerns both the "private", family realm and the "public" functions.

The final plenary speech was given by *Prof. Dr. Carmen Leccardi* (Milan) who had agreed to take over the demanding task of giving a resumé of two days' discussions. She stressed that the topic of time has the capacity of binding together structure and agency, institutions and subjectivities - and scientific disciplines. She reviewed the issues on three levels of duration (*durée*) relevant for everyday life of children and adults: repetition, non-reversibility, and institutional times. All discussions of time practise, time perception, time limits and time conflicts should be assessed with respect to the intersection between these categories. She also reminded the distinction between expressive and instrumental levels, between open and goal-oriented time orientation in children's temporal activities which was not explicitly addressed in the conference but implicitly assumed. It invites to reflection on children's time expertise, capacity to negotiate, and coping with the rules set by collective *zeitgebers*. In six points she concludes about the character of time as a context-related issue, which leaves chronological time as only one of several dimensions of

life. The study of children's time shows poignantly how time relates to power, how it expresses social complexity. However, temporality of duration is replaced by notions of economic time and time shortage, in way that calls social scientists to reflect on political and ethical answers, and consequently to propose conceptual frameworks.

### **Follow-up**

The conference and its results have led to an active participation in the efforts of the newly founded working group "Zeitpolitik und Bildung" of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Zeitpolitik, directed by board members Helga Zeiher and Karlheinz Geissler. The participation of ON TIME in this very early stage gives us the opportunity to contribute to its agenda in an essential way.

The ON TIME publicity has also brought about an invitation for doctorate student and field researcher Laura Wehr to present material and methodological findings at the conference organised by the Society for the History of Children and Youth "Children's Worlds - Children in the World" at the Third Biennial Meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 4 to 7, 2005.

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