Jacqueline Knörr (ed.)

Childhood and Migration

From Experience to Agency

This volume puts an emphasis on the question how children themselves experience and manage migration and by means of which they construct an identity for themselves which takes into account their experiences from both their places of origin and their host societies. What role does the cultural background of the society of origin on the one hand and the strategies of integration found in the host society on the other play in the creation of identity and of a concept of home, origin and belonging? How do children express processes of cultural orientation and integration (music, media, fashion, style) and what role do peer groups and social milieus play in this regard? How do migrant children experience xenophobia and a lack of acceptance on the side of the host society and how do they counter-balance such experiences?

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[transcript]

jects of cultural adaptation and as active subjects, who change the culture they were born into while adapting to it (at the same time).[9]

Recent research on childhood among Brazilian indigenous peoples takes the path suggested by Toren, Hirschfeld and other authors here mentioned, thus aiming at a notion of socialization which is part of an historical and dynamic process of culture.[10] Children are considered as complete beings, as social agents able to create a socio-cultural universe with its own particularities and as social agents able to critically reflect upon the adults' world.

That childhood is socially constructed is now generally accepted, but its variation in different cultural contexts still needs investigation which takes into consideration children's voices and children's actions. Studying age sets and classes socially well defined, as well as life cycles and social learning processes may very well be useful devices when trying to understand the category "child" and its social place and meaning in specific cultural contexts. However, one should keep in mind that children have something original to say and therefore their experiences, representations, feelings, and expressions should be considered a valid object of social research. According to James & James (2004) children's experiences of social life and their impact on their own childhood, future childhood generations and on adult's life is still rather unclear. In other words, childhood agency is not yet fully recognized. Children may have been discovered as actors playing roles which help them enter adulthood, but not as agents who shape those roles and imbue them with specific meanings. Children also create new roles for themselves, both as individuals and as members of wider social groups. They do so in ways which induces change in the social life of the group as a whole and in the successive generation of children (like their parents did before them). Recognizing children's agency means recognizing their experience as a potential for change. Children's agency makes a real difference for society at large.

Now what does all this imply for studying and understanding children's experiences and their agency with regard to processes of migration?

While it has been acknowledged to some extent that children's own concepts of their social world, and their thoughts and feelings should be considered when studying childhood in general and specific aspects of childhood in particular, this has had little effect on migration studies dealing with children. Little is known about children's particular understanding of (migrant) life, their concepts of their place of origin and their host society, their ways of building identity for themselves. This is true despite the fact that children

makes up a large proportion of migrants and despite the fact that children take on important roles in mediating between their world of origin and the host society.

Children play this role for many reasons, one being that they acquire new cultural knowledge so "exceptionally well."[11] Children are also usually more involved in the social life of their host societies than their parents through school and other child-specific institutions and contact zones (playing grounds, football fields, kindergarten, backyards etc.). Children's ways of socialising with other children and with the world around is also less constrained by prejudice and bias than those of adults. Children want to be among other children; the "others'" cultural, social or political background is far less important to them than they often are for their – or the "others'" – parents.

We want to contribute to the understanding of how children themselves experience, view and manage migration and we want to show by means of which they construct an identity for themselves which takes into account their experiences from both their places of origin and their host societies.

The question that arises first when dealing with children constructing identity in the context of migration is whether they perceive and define cultural identity for themselves at all. In the context of sociological and anthropological research on migration and multiculturality concepts have been developed which try to terminologically classify and differentiate varieties of "mixed" culture and cultural identity (hybrid, creole, transnational, global, glocal etc.). Do such concepts also fit the reality of migrating children or is their perception of culture more dynamic and flexible than that of the researchers on the one hand and of the adults they usually research on the other?

One of the key issues raised in the context of identity as created by migrant children is the view children have of both their respective culture of origin and their host society. How children construct an identity for themselves, a sense of home and belonging and a sense of origin and descent which takes into account both contexts in which they find themselves is critically important. Another question is to what extent and by which means a relationship is maintained to the place of origin and whether and how it changes in the course of migration. How is this relationship represented in social interaction among children, between children and their parents, and between children and their social environment? It is important to get insight into children's observation concerning the social and cultural changes taking place that affect themselves and their families in the process of migration. What changes do they perceive, what do they think of those changes and how do they deal with them? What do they relate their observations to? Who do they perceive as initiating these changes and do they perceive themselves as agents of change within their families and their new social environment?

Another important issue is the process of social and cultural integration in society as a whole. How is it influenced by the dynamics of interaction of a

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9 See Egli (2003) who describes such a process with regard to hereditary rules in Eastern Nepal, which to a considerable extent predestine children's perspectives but which are also changed substantially by children in the process of adaptation and "enculturation."

10 See Lopes da Silva & Nunes 2002.

11 Hirschfeld 2002: 615, 624.

particular cultural background of the society of origin on the one hand and the integration strategies and practices of a particular host society on the other?

The role of social milieus and peer groups is an important issue when dealing with children experiencing and managing migration. How do peer group environments, socialization at home and school interact or contradict each other? And how do children deal with these different social milieus and the demands they put on them?

One experience almost all migrants of all ages have is xenophobia. How do migrant children cope with a lack of acceptance, with hostility and exclusion? How do children make use of existing institutions to overcome frustrations resulting from such experiences and how do they create new social niches where they can feel at home? How do they express processes of cultural orientation, integration, disintegration via music, writing, media, and forms of creative discourse? Are there gender specific differences concerning the construction of identity in the course of migration? How do different motivations and reasons for migration influence the course that migration and integration take?

We cannot deal with all these issues with the same degree of thoroughness in this volume, nor can we answer all the questions raised here. What we can do, however, is shed light on some of the major issues related to children's experience of migration. There can be no doubt that cultural identity and social practices learned and generated in childhood have an important impact on the course of social and cultural integration in youth and adulthood. Therefore, the investigation of these processes is not only of scientific interest but can also give important impetus to the development of strategies and modes of integration that appeal to children and serve their needs.

The approach we take is both comparative and interdisciplinary, the contributors having different theoretical and methodological backgrounds, and dealing with different social and cultural settings with regard to both place of origin and host society.

Sabine Mannitz' contribution presents the results of ten months of ethnographic fieldwork and subsequent interviews over a period of four years with adolescents from immigrant families in former West-Berlin. She points out that migration research has often stressed the adverse circumstances of immigrants in Germany. The so-called second and third generations in particular are seen as having the problem of living betwixt and between two cultures. This perception situates immigrants and their children in a structural conflict and creates the impression that they must choose between two competing cultures. But contrary to this model, Mannitz finds that her informants in Berlin face no such gap. While conforming in many instances to the idea of bounded groups and their unequivocal social identities – the idea that foreigners differ from Germans in their culture – children generally manage to act in both of these settings, applying practices of mediation and eventually creating a new transnational space for the management of identifications. However, despite

their competency in double agency, they have to cope with the fact that neither their migrant parents nor the wider German society is willing to legitimize their melange of identifications as a viable strategy. This is significant beyond the individual level, since creating an intersecting space for imagining collectivity may be a first step towards developing new codes of coexistence for the society as a whole. According to Mannitz, with transnationalization challenging the nation-state's previous *raison d'être*, the ways in which migrants construct their multiple affiliations might thus become centrally instructive.

Jacqueline Knörr deals with a group of (re-)migrant children and youths hardly mentioned in migration studies, namely children of Western background brought up in a non-Western environment before "returning" to a "home," which in many cases has never been or is no longer home to them. She deals with German children coming to live in Germany after having spent most of their childhood in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these children spent most of their social lives in German and/or international expatriate environments. In the context of dealing with some of their typical features she critically examines the notion of "TCK" – "Third Culture Kid" – a notion which has been used for some time now to denote children brought up as (children of) expatriates. Knörr looks at what it means to be brought up as a white child in Africa and how this experience affects (re-)migration to Germany. Upon "return" these children often find themselves in a dilemma: they are expected to be the same – speaking the same language and looking the same as everyone else – while their experiences, views, and ways of life are usually quite different from those of children and youths who have spent all their lives "at home" in Germany. Their difference is often neither recognized nor appreciated by teachers, peers, or their own families. What makes it even harder for them to find some comfort in their situation is the fact that compared to other groups of "real" migrants, it is usually more difficult for them to find others around them who share their experiences and problems. Knörr looks at the ideas and attitudes these children and youths develop in the course of (re-)integration and at some of their ways "in to" and "out of" German society – which include social isolation, self-exotization, multiple identifications, and idealization of one's former "real" home back in Africa.

Jana Pohl analyses the image of the *shtetl* in American children's literature. The *shtetl* was a predominantly Jewish community which corresponded to the size of a village or small town. The *shtetl* image has a long and rich tradition in American children's literature. It accommodates the manifold recollections of Jewish-American writers, whose autobiographical experiences are often related to their subject. To many Eastern European Jews who left their home and migrated to North America around the turn of the last century, the *shtetl* stands for their culture, their place of origin. In contemporary children's literature the image of the *shtetl* is linked to migration, the two concepts both being central in the collective identity of American Jews of Eastern European descent. By connecting the – memorized – *shtetl* image with migration, those