Chapter 18

The Development of a Personal Conduct of Life in Childhood

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SUMMARY

Research on the conduct of everyday life has only addressed adult personhood. This chapter views child development as a matter of how children come to conduct their lives in structures of social practice. Children’s lives depend to a large degree on structural, institutional and personal arrangements of care. The development of a child’s conduct of everyday life unfolds in relation to these social arrangements with built-in age-graded changes both in the demands made on the child, and in the child’s scope of possibilities. This chapter highlights how a child’s becoming able and allowed to move around on their own in social practice, is central to the child’s development of their conduct of everyday life. A key feature of this involves the child relinquishing its dependence on adult/parental arrangements. These issues are addressed using material from case studies (Dreier, 2008).

INTRODUCTION

So far, research on the personal conduct of everyday life has always focused on adults (Dreier, 1999; Holzkamp, 1995, 1996; Osterkamp, 2000; Weber, 1952). Instead, this chapter addresses the psychology of child development by raising the two following questions: How do children come to conduct their lives in structures of social practice? And how does their development of a personal conduct of everyday life unfold in relation to the institutional and other social arrangements for children’s life trajectories? In a recent research project I studied the everyday lives of parents and children in families undergoing outpatient family therapy. They were interviewed about their everyday lives at regular intervals for nearly two years. These materials were analyzed together with therapy session transcripts. I published a book about one case where the conduct of everyday life of the two children, aged twelve and fifteen, were analyzed (Dreier, 2008). In this chapter I will use material from this study to address the issue of how children develop the conduct of their everyday lives. My background is in personality psychology and not in the psychology of child development. As such, my aim here is to sketch some dimensions and characteristics of the development of a conduct of everyday life throughout childhood, showing how we may gain a wider and deeper understanding of the personal nature of children’s development by recognizing the child’s need to develop a personal conduct of its everyday life. I hope thereby to convince child psychologists to pursue this topic systematically. The work of others who focus on the development of children in their everyday lives has inspired this chapter (Højholt, 1999, 2008; Hviid, in press; Ingholt, 2008; Kousholt, 2006, 2008; Valsiner, 2007). These authors highlight the institutional arrangements for children’s lives and development, drawing attention to how children move across social contexts which raise diverse demands on their participation. They also stress that the process and character of children’s development is affected by these arrangements and movements.
Yet, so far these developmental psychologists have not picked up the notion of a conduct of everyday life as something which children need to develop in order to come to terms with living their lives in such complex arrangements of social practice. By and large, developmental psychology is preoccupied with: the development of cognitive and emotional, that is, psychological processes and skills; with the role of adults in guiding this development; and sometimes with how one or several everyday contexts affects these developments. Occasionally, children’s developing their use of time and their perception of space and gradual expansion into wider contexts is taken up (Christensen & James, 2000; Spencer & Blades, 2006; White & Siegel, 1984). Researchers then focus on the organization of children’s time; on children’s control over their time in diverse contexts; and on children’s understandings and explorations of spaces and paths through spaces. But they do not explicitly address how children come to conduct their lives across times and places.

It goes without saying that a personal conduct of everyday life is not given at birth. During the course of their childhood, children must develop a conduct of their everyday lives in order to come to live as full adult participants in complex arrangements of social practice. Why has developmental psychology not seen this as a key feature of child development? We need to explore the personal and subjective dimensions and implications of the fact that children’s lives from an early age are stretched across diverse contexts with diverse demands and relations. Developmental psychology has not yet recognized that children therefore face a personal problematic of conducting their everyday lives by linking and balancing off their various concerns, relations, commitments, and activities across places This is particularly salient as children’s developmental trajectories are socially and institutionally arranged and regulated quite tightly, with many age-graded shifts and transitions which challenge children both to conduct their everyday lives in specific ways and to change their conduct.

The term ‘to conduct’ reverberates with unfortunate and misleading connotations relating to individual control and autonomous living. This is perhaps one reason why children’s conduct of their everyday lives has been overlooked. Especially young children live in ways which are deeply dependent on institutional and adult care arrangements. In their early years, these arrangements even take care of the basic ordering of children’s everyday lives. Hence, the issue of how children conduct their everyday lives may seem superfluous. Children are basically taken care of, and to the extent that this is the case, children need not attend to the conduct of their lives, and may instead conduct themselves in the carefree manner we generally associate with being childlike. Children are left to develop a conduct of life in relation to minor parts of their everyday lives within these arrangements of care. Be that as it may, as children develop, the arrangements of care for them generally leave increasing scopes for children to conduct their lives and call on them to do so. The arrangements of their everyday lives become looser and less all-embracing (Gauvain, 1999). Moreover, arrangements for development are meant to enable children to take over the conduct of their lives gradually in ways that are linked with how the persons with whom they share parts of their lives, conduct their everyday lives. Together, they shape a joint conduct of these overlapping parts.
CONDUCTING A LIFE IN DEPENDENCY

From an early age, a child’s development of its conduct of everyday life is affected by how its parents conduct their everyday lives and how they arrange the care of their child or children as parts of this conduct. This includes the times and procedures for children getting up in the morning and going to bed in the evening; for bringing and picking them up from kindergarten and other places; for naps and meals; for how children are included into family life in the morning and upon their return in the afternoon; and for the rhythms and divisions of family activities and chores at home. Adults may, for example, view their child’s play as an, in principle, unending activity that can be launched and interrupted at any time and, therefore, something that can be arranged to fill in suitable slots of time in the rhythms of family life throughout the day. Family arrangements and the conduct of a joint family life are defined and redefined by the parents, with an eye to it being appropriate for their children (Kousholt 2006, 2008). Children may then see family life as something their parents order and arrange. They may take its ordering and arrangements for granted, neither requiring their attention, nor requiring that they learn how to maintain and change arrangements. They may see all this as essentially their parents’ responsibility, and consequently the children do not take much responsibility for their family life. Perhaps they even come to see their family of origin more as their parents’ family than their own.

Interestingly, how a child conducts its everyday life depends on the arrangements and regulations of others because the course of a child’s everyday activities is basically ordered by others. But a child must still conduct its everyday life in relation to these arrangements and regulations. It must shape its conduct in relation to the ordinary sequences and rhythms of everyday activities and relations with various others in and across various places, including ordinary transitions and shifts, breaks and tensions, being with various others or alone, engaging or relaxing. Therefore, children must develop their understandings and preferences and their ways of seizing and ensuring opportunities for what matters most to them. They must find out how to live in relation to arrangements and rhythms. They must consider how arrangements suit them and what they can do to make the arrangements and rhythms suit them better. Conducting their lives in relation to existing arrangements involves developing a range of personal preferences; preferences for ways of doing things; for taking part in and affecting ordinary sequences, rhythms and shifts; for getting through tensions, transitions, and breaks; for responding to interruptions and to other concurrent activities and relations; and for unfolding their everyday lives in shifting constellations of being with various others and alone. Children must also develop abilities for accomplishing all this. That is, they must learn to do all this. In doing so, they mould their ways of doing things and taking care of their preferences, their rhythms of activities and their relations, while fitting all this into their everyday course of activities.

In conducting their everyday lives, children are dependent on adult arrangements and help. At the same time, children rely on adults for getting things done. Moreover, during the rapid process of development, children’s wishes often develop ahead of their abilities. Hence, children must learn ways to make adults do the things for them or help them with what they are doing. They must learn to fit their ways of accomplishing things with the help available, by redirecting, interrupting, and postponing their ongoing activities, persuading and pestering, and so forth.
This is part of the reason why children develop an ambiguous relation to the ordinary versus the variation in their everyday lives. On the one hand, the ordinary and the ensuing familiarity of everyday arrangements provide orientation for children in doing things. But their dependence on others introduces unpredictability into their everyday lives, that makes them learn to seize opportunities on the spur of the moment and redirect their activities and engagements accordingly. Combined with the attractiveness for children of reaching out and exploring as yet unknown activities and relations, learning to seize opportunities triggers their development toward as yet ill-defined ends. On the other hand, children treasure variation in their everyday activities, relations, and engagements. This comes across fairly strongly in the case materials in my study, as the children juxtapose what to them is ‘exciting’ in their everyday lives with what is ‘boring’ (cf. Gauvain, 1999, p. 187). The ordinary nature of their everyday lives is boring in contrast to variations, shifts, and changes which are exciting. The children are usually ready for variations and they therefore conduct their everyday lives in ways attuned to embracing variations. Generally speaking, arrangements are characterized by various degrees of regularity and fixedness or variability and openness. Adults responsible for a social practice often prefer arrangements with higher degrees of regularity and fixedness while children prefer more open arrangements with much room for variations. Children develop their preferences. They change their preferences. They may not yet have made up their minds about what they stand for. The stability of arrangements and relations therefore seems less important to them. Everyday conflicts between adults and children, and children’s development more generally, involve special dynamics due to these differences.

While developing the way it conducts its everyday life, the child develops and changes its self-understanding, which in turn helps it orientate and direct its conduct of everyday life. But a child’s self-understanding is not as clear and cohesive articulate as its conduct of everyday life. As in the relation between the development of wishes and abilities, a child’s self-understanding may in some respects lag behind what it does in its current practice, while in other respects the child may clearly be ahead of itself in terms of self-understanding. The vagueness in a child’s understanding of itself is maintained by not yet having articulated its preferences into definite personal stances and not settled in the particular life that it is presently living, nor committed itself to its present life as the life it wants to live.

The fact that children participate in different contexts, with different co-participants and different ways of doing things, is important to the promotion and development of their self-understanding. Human beings learn by having chances to compare similarities and differences. When children experience other things being done; things being done in other ways; other relationships where other things are possible or allowed, children gather these experiences and may reflect on the similarities and differences between them. They also compare the experiences with their usual or ordinary life. Furthermore, visits to similar places, such as to the homes of friends, or talks with friends about their respective lives at home, grant opportunities for learning by comparing.

**EXPANDING MOVEMENTS AND ENGAGEMENTS**

As children grow older, their participation and engagement in other contexts outside the home increase. This important transformation is afforded by their being allowed to and becoming able to move around on their own across diverse contexts. This changes the
balance and composition of children’s everyday lives. They may then more freely order their participation in other practices; vary the practices they participate in and the people with whom they participate, as they increasingly take the conduct of their everyday lives upon themselves. In doing so, children begin to move out from under parental and institutional arrangements of care taking charge of developing the conduct of their everyday lives in new ways. In ordinary Danish arrangements of care for children, this transformation begins around the age of school entry and expands through the early school years. The timing of these changes in various countries and localities depends on qualities of the socio-material environments such as distances and paths to relevant places, various kinds of safety and risks, traffic patterns and how children may move around/be transported, including the possibilities and attitudes of their parents toward bringing and fetching them (Cornell & Hill, 2006; Spencer & Blades, 2006; White & Siegel, 1984).

Children then begin to expand their worlds of activities and friendships outside home, and the significance of these activities and relations increases. In the process, they develop friendships with new qualities and meanings. These friendships often vary across time and must develop in order to persist or be revived. In these friendships children develop and experience new forms of confidentiality and intimacy, and this in turn affects their self-understandings.

These new activities and relations change and vary periodically. They are characterized by their variability and instability. Periodically, children may fall back again on their family life and spend more time at home. Because their everyday rhythms of activities are variable and unstable, children’s conduct of everyday life cannot be fixed. It remains variable and unstable. This is also due to the fact that children make rather loose appointments with each other, often at quite short notice or during ongoing activities (Gauvain, 1999). Children’s agendas for the day and their mode of conducting their everyday life are therefore also quite loose, variable, and unpredictable. This fits their emphasis on being able to explore new, exiting activities and relations. A fixed way of conducting their everyday life would get in the way of seizing occasions to explore exciting opportunities as they emerge. It is, hence, important for children to conduct their everyday lives in loose and open ways.

As the child expands its activities and relations in various other places, the relationship between differing parts of a child’s life changes, as does its conduct of everyday life. These changes are affected by children insisting, among each other, that most of these new activities and relations are to be separate from their relations with their respective parents. Among each other, children take this separation as a sign of growth. A child asking her parents permission for everything, telling them everything, or asking her parents for help in the affairs of friendship and extra familial activities may be ridiculed as the behavior of a small child who still needs the help and care of her parents while a big child can instead do without, or ask her friends for help and care. The new confidentialities and intimacies among children, thus, separate these parts of children’s everyday lives from their family life. In the conduct of their everyday lives children are, therefore, in new ways faced with separating or establishing various overlaps between their various relations. Added to this is the previously mentioned dynamic of children going by what is exciting rather than boring, where excitement is associated with new activities and relations and boredom with the all too familiar ones, such as family life. While being at home they juggle demands for attention with their need and entitlement for being absent, or at least absentminded, and for running out the
door whenever chances of exciting activities with friends turn up. Yet, the variability and instability of these activities and relations make children temporarily redefine their needs for and engagements in their family life. In other words, the meaning of their family life and of their presence at home varies. The exiting new activities and relations that now go on in their lives elsewhere may provide good stories that children can tell their parents. Such stories offer parents a chance to understand the person their child has turned into. This may invigorate the relation between parents and children.

As opposed to a child’s teachers, for example, parents want to take care of the whole life of their children. Parents also feel—and are often made—responsible for all of their children’s lives. Consequently, as their children’s activities and relations in other places expand, parents’ direct care for their children at home is increasingly supplemented by forms of indirect care for their lives in other places. By indirect care, I am referring to how parents, from the place where they primarily meet their children, that is - at home, care for those parts of their children’s lives that take place without their being present. The influence they may gain is then indirect and mediated primarily by what the child is willing and able to make of the care both later and elsewhere. Similarly, the guided participation emphasized by some developmental psychologists (e.g., Rogoff, 1990) encompasses various forms of indirect guidance. Cell-phones provide a technology for indirect care, as do the phone lines of companies with working mothers when school is out (Aldous, 1996, pp. 8f.). Because children do not tell their parents much about what goes on in these other places, parents care for their children while, in many respects, being uncertain about what goes on elsewhere and what may be done about something in these other places. The lack of knowledge and direct influence easily lends a quality of worrying to parents’ care for the lives of their growing children, and this in turn affects the relation between parents and children and the issues between them. Because children are often more engaged in their activities and relations outside home, the balance of care must also shift to indirect forms of care. In connection with their pursuit of indirect care, parents may opt to focus their attention on the development of their child’s self-confidence. Many take self-confidence to be a particular entity in children’s psychological makeup that may be in need of boosting or repair. But concern about self-confidence has an obvious practical basis. The employment of the term has particular meanings and dynamics. To parents, self-confidence means that their children are willing and able to deal with matters on their own. This seems to presuppose the instilment of certain abilities and understandings in their children. But of course, once elsewhere, children address matters as a part of particular activities that take place in particular relations with particular others. Thus in practice, self-confidence refers to children being able to take care of themselves in other relations outside home without the direct help and presence of their parents. The term presupposes both particular structural arrangements of care and of the trajectories for children’s development.

Due to their increasing engagement in exploring exciting activities and relations outside home, children shape an open conduct of their everyday life, ready to respond to upcoming options and interruptions. Tensions easily arise between such a conduct of everyday life and those family arrangements that are fixed. Through a sequence of struggles, these tensions are tempered by the parents loosening the family arrangements, and/or their children’s obligation in relation to these arrangements. The children’s belief that family arrangements are the parents’ arrangements and responsibility makes it easier for the children to hold on to their looser conduct of everyday life. For the same reason, children consider it ok to drop their commitments, responsibilities, and
engagements in family life for some time while other more exciting things occupy them. In other words, in the conduct of their everyday life they let their engagements in family life vary depending on their activities and relations elsewhere. The order of dependencies in the children’s conduct of their everyday life is in the process of being reversed.

In its early years of dependence on parental and other adult arrangements, a child’s scope for unfolding its conduct of everyday life is regulated by parents and other adults telling it what it may or must do or not do, and the child has to ask permission before doing many things. A child’s insistence on larger scopes for unfolding its everyday life, therefore, easily takes the shape of a rebellion against being told and having to ask permission. To children, having to ask permission signifies being a small child and that parents and other adults do not recognize that they have grown in relevant respects. Instead, a child may insist on being entitled to decide for itself, without asking permission first. For some time, the child may combine insisting on deciding for itself with still wanting its parents’ help in doing what it has decided. But gradually this individualist approach is replaced by insisting on having a right to be heard, that is, on having a say and an influence on joint matters.

A child’s loosening of its ties with parental arrangements of care is often viewed as a matter of its becoming autonomous (e.g., Gauvain, 1999). In the influential book on Habits of the Heart, Bellah and others state with regard to the USA, “In a culture that emphasizes the autonomy and self-reliance of the individual, . . . childhood is chiefly preparation for the all-important event of leaving home . . . in late adolescence” (Bellah et al., 1996, pp. 56f.). Bellah and others here articulate a very widespread notion according to which children are first members of a community at home while later they are on their own, away from home in society. Child development is directed toward becoming autonomous. This notion rests on a family-centered perspective and neglects the significance of social arrangements and social and personal relations outside home as a basis for people’s lives. In contrast, the analysis presented here rests on the understanding that the lives of persons are conducted across places and that various arrangements and social relations in diverse practices are significant for the forms of conduct that emerge. The personal conduct of everyday life depends on and is developed in relation to structural arrangements of social practice. Children are in the process of finding a new composition and balance with regard to their conduct of everyday life. They move into forms of adult conduct of everyday life that are shaped in relation to social and institutional arrangements of social practice. But children will not and can not yet reach a fully formed conduct of everyday life because their lives are still unsettled. They have not yet fully settled into living their particular life as committed to “specific others in rich, concrete social relationships, to specific places and senses of place, to specific activities and organizations of rhythms of life” (Calhoun, 1995, p. 183, in reference to Smith, 1987)

The emerging and as yet unsettled character of a child’s conduct of its everyday life affects its self-understanding. The exploratory nature of children’s pursuits that is so crucial, gradually leads to a clarification of their preferences but not yet necessarily of their stances. Moreover, the variability of a child’s activities, relations, and engagements and the loose and open conduct of its everyday life make its self-understanding vary and difficult to articulate distinctly. The child develops and changes its self-understanding in a way where it is both ahead of itself, in hopeful and wishful ways, while its self-understanding also lags behind its actual abilities and what it is
presently doing. This makes recognition by significant others particularly important for children’s self-understanding. But institutional arrangements for life trajectories also play an important role in affecting changes in children’s self-understanding. For example leaving public school and entering vocational school is an important indication of being a different and more grown-up person.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have shown that, in understanding child development, it is relevant to consider children’s development of a conduct of everyday life. In an exploratory analysis, I have sketched the emergence of a personal conduct of everyday life throughout childhood. I have shown that this development must be seen in relation to the existing arrangements of child care with built-in, age-graded differences in the demands on and scopes for children’s participation in social practice. I have highlighted the key role of children both being allowed to, and able to, move around in social practice on their own, for their development of a personal conduct of life. I have also shown how the distinctions between direct and indirect forms of care with their particular associated qualities and dilemmas become increasingly important. In the developmental process, children increasingly become concerned with the problems of separations and overlaps between the various relations and activities in the conduct of their everyday lives. In more general terms, the approach employed in the analysis is based on arguments for theorizing persons as participants in structures of social practice (Dreier, 2008), while suggesting that such a theory is relevant when grasping the personal nature of child development.

REFERENCES


