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Bringing environmentalism home. Children's influence on family consumption in the Nordic countries and beyond

Bengt Larsson, University of Gothenburg
Magnus Andersson, Malmö University
Christina Osbeck, Karlstad University

Abstract

This article discusses children as contributors to sustainable ecological development. The aim of the article is to develop a framework for researching two questions: What are the prerequisites for children to become responsible environmentalists? What actual and potential influence do children have on their family's consumption? Three theoretical perspectives are elaborated in relation to relevant empirical research: children as cosmopolitan actors and world citizens, children as 'subjects of responsibilization' in relation to the discourse on sustainable development and children as actors influencing family negotiations about consumption. The article concludes by suggesting methodological implications that follow from this framework.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, environmental education, governmentality, intergenerational infl uence, sustainable development

How do children contribute to a sustainable world? Do they mind what foodstuffs their family buys, or their usage of water, electricity and transportation? Can they learn to take responsibility not only for their own actions, but also for their family's consumption and for global sustainability? Such issues are raised by the increasing significance of ecological concerns in educational and consumer policies. A unifying discourse is articulated in the political goals of sustainable development, first in the Brundtland Report and subsequently in Agenda 21, the UN Millennium Declaration, Baltic 21E and the UN resolution Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–14). In these declarations and statements, great hopes are placed on the capacity of individuals to take responsibility and act locally with global awareness. This discourse is also reflected strongly in many national policy documents, not least in Sweden and the Nordic countries, which we take both as a point of departure and as an illustrative case in this article. The educational and consumer policies of these countries express a strong conviction that it is possible to stimulate such a sense of responsibility.

To judge the plausibility of expectations that children can learn to take responsibility for their own and their family's consumption in the light of global environmental problems – and to understand the prospects and implications of the policies and pedagogies designed to accomplish that goal – two crucial questions must be answered. First, what are the prerequisites for children and youths to become responsible environmentalists? Second, what actual and potential influence do young people have on their family's consumption? The purpose of this article is not to provide direct answers to these questions, but rather to indicate the direction in which such answers may be sought. Our aim is to elaborate a framework for empirical research on the issue. To do this, we review relevant empirical research, and present theoretical perspectives that we believe are crucial to addressing these questions.

The vast amount of empirical research on children's environmentalism may help to address the questions raised, but no study provides a complete answer. Research on the environmental attitudes of children/youth is well established, as is that on environmental education. Nevertheless, such studies appear to disregard important aspects of young people's environmentalism. These research traditions are generally more oriented towards attitudes and interpretations than actual practices of consumption and pro-environmental behaviour. They have little to say about the ways in which children and youths actively negotiate environmental issues at home, and the influence they have on domestic consumption – issues we believe to be central for understanding the potential effect of children's environmentalism.

There is, however, a third research tradition of relevance, focusing on children's consumption and influence on family consumption. Unfortunately, this tradition generally tends to leave environmental consumption aside – an area where we believe there has been a change in intergenerational influence over recent decades.

To confuse the picture further, there is a tendency, both in consumption theory and in research on ecological consumption, to neglect children (and parents/families), because of a strong emphasis on adults' individual attitudes and practices (Cook, 2008; Martens et al., 2004; Zelizer, 2002). A Swedish review of research on ecological consumption illustrates this tendency. This review reports 25 studies, a majority of which are concerned with adults. None focus on children's or youths' consumption, and the few researchers that study family consumption typically disregard children (Ekelund, 2003).

In this article, we view children as active parties in decisions on household consumption in relation to pro-environmental issues against a background of institutional change and advanced liberal forms of government in (Nordic and western) late modern societies. We regard children as active and effective, but also as governed subjects interpreting the discourse of sustainability in relation to their own and their family's consumption. We seek to elaborate a framework for empirical research on young people's influence on domestic consumption and sustainability in affluent societies, both by bringing distinct fields of research in contact, and by placing them in the context of three theoretical perspectives. First, we frame children's environmentalism in terms of children as cosmopolitan actors and world citizens. Thereafter, we introduce an analytics of governmentality to view children as 'subjects of responsibilization' in relation to the discourse on sustainable development. Finally, we discuss theories of family democracy and intergenerational influence and learning to understand children as actors influencing family consumption practices through negotiation.

The discussion of these theoretical approaches is also a way of problematizing three aspects of children's environmental activities that seem to be more or less taken for granted in the discourse on sustainable development. The first is that children are environmentally engaged and able to take responsibility for global issues; the second aspect is that education to strengthen such responsibilities affects attitudes and practices; and the third, that children are

able to influence their parents and family's consumption. We conclude the article by suggesting methodological implications that follow from our research framework.

Our approach is relevant to the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 1997; Jans, 2004; Qvortrup, 2001). This is because we discuss the consequences for childhood of some aspects of the structural transformations of modernity, which are becoming increasingly manifest in the Nordic countries, such as forced cosmopolitization, governed responsibilization and family democratization. It is also because our theoretical framework may clarify ways in which the politics and pedagogies of education for sustainable development change what it means to be young in late modern societies, in terms of responsibilities for a shared environment.

Children as environmental and cosmopolitical actors

Young people are often seen as seismographs of change in the western world, and this is also true of sustainability. This is obvious in political declarations on sustainable development, but also in social theory and pedagogical philosophies aiming to make children concerned and responsible world citizens. The concept of cosmopolitanism has become a trademark for theories that share the uncertain but strong hopes articulated in the politics of sustainable development – that individuals are able to raise their sights from local arenas and develop a cosmopolitical outlook, based on the experience of world citizenship (Beck, 2006). According to these theories, globalization is not only a question of economy or politics, but has emotional and ethical consequences too. The influx of global concerns urges people to act from the concept of a common destiny, shared with other continents and future generations.

Thus, we may talk about forced cosmopolitization, most evident in late modern societies. However, as shown by Furia (2008), one should not suppose a priori that cosmopolitanism is an ideal upheld only by an affluent, well-educated western elite. The concept of the 'cosmopolitical gaze' refers to the fact that human empathic capacities may extend globally, when local lifeworlds are being penetrated by global risks. Schools and the media are significant for the development of such a perspective, because both have the capacity to increase awareness of the relation between the local and the global (Kemp, 2005; Silverstone, 2007). Such sweeping theoretical statements need a reality check, though, so as not to be dismissed as merely theoretical versions of the politics of sustain able development. Let us

therefore provide a short review of children's environmentalism from empirical research, before returning to the issue of children's cosmopolitanism.

Children's environmentalism

Empirical research has shown that environmentalism is stronger among youths than among their parents in the Nordic countries (Autio and Heinonen, 2004; Carle, 2000). Like adults, children see the moral and ethical aspects of environmental issues. Swedish schoolchildren (age 7–16), for instance, are shown to be concerned not only for nature and animals, but also for future gen erations and people in the Third World (Alerby, 1998; see also Ojala, 2007). The majority of Swedish adolescents (aged 15–16) believe their own actions to be significant for creating sustainable development – by reducing car travel, buying locally produced foodstuffs and sorting household waste (Skolverket, 2004: 70).

There is evidence of a positive relationship between environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (Meinhold and Malkus, 2005). Many Swedish adolescents (age 14–15) engage in pro-environmental practices such as separating paper and glass waste, composting and economizing on detergent (Cullbrand and Petersson, 2004). However, there is also a large gap between environmental attitudes and behaviour among young people. Swedish youths are, for instance, generally not willing to make environmentally friendly purchases if there is an added cost involved (Ojala, 2007; SOU, 2004:104: 85–9). Consequently, the proportion of political consumers is somewhat lower among youths (age 15–19) than among adults (Micheletti and Stolle, 2005: 150). Teenagers are also known to be heavy users of water and electricity, and in Denmark, adolescents have been shown to be less committed to proenvironmental practices than their parents (Grønhøj and Thøgersen, 2007).

Even though environmental attitudes differ among cultures, nations, classes and between genders (Phillips, 2000; Szerszynski and Urry, 2006), there may also be similarities. Kahn and Lourenco (2002) claim, based on empirical studies in Portugal, the US and Brazil, that the environmental moral reasoning of young people (aged 10–19) is comparable across cultures. However, it is important not to consider cosmopolitization as being uniform, affecting everyone in the same manner (Beck, 2006; Tomlinson, 1999). Environmental issues, for instance, are generally more important to women than to men, and this is also the case for

young people in the Nordic and other European countries (Carle, 2000; Lindén, 2004: 58ff.; Skogen, 1999; see also Holden, 2006). Girls worry and stress altruistic values more than boys, and have a stronger tendency to see themselves as responsible (Grønhøj, 2007; Ojala, 2007; Skolverket, 2004; SOU, 2004:104: 85–9). A Norwegian survey of adolescents (aged 13–22) confirms this gender difference, but shows that it intersects with class and 'cultural profiles'. There are more negative attitudes towards environmentalism in the working-class/rural 'redneck profile' (Skogen, 1999; see also Rickinson, 2001).

Here, however, one must keep in mind the gap between knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (Lindén, 2004). Even if educated or young people report environmental attitudes, and perform pro-environmental activities, factors related to income are often most significant when measuring households' negative effects on the environment in affluent societies. These include owning private houses and cars and travelling abroad, as compared with living in an apartment, relying on public transport and holidaying at home.

Children's cosmopolitanism

Empirical research shows that national media and American fiction dominate young people's (age 6–16) mediatized lifeworlds in the West (Drotner, 2005; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001). Nevertheless, we argue that theories of cosmopolitanism could contribute substantially to research on children and sustainable development. We base this assertion on studies of globalization of young people's lifeworlds, indicating the existence of transnational identifications and moral concerns – even if these studies focus on geographical and cultural rather than environmental issues (Hengst, 1997; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Valentine and Holloway, 2001). From surveys in Nordic and other countries, the media are known to be a significant source of young people's attitudes and behaviour regarding environmental issues (Carle, 2000: 141; Grønhøj, 2007; see also Easterling et al., 1995), as may be associations for those who are particularly committed – such as Fair Trade, or in Sweden the youth organization Fältbiologerna (Biologist in the Field) (Johansson, 2004).

However, many young people in affluent societies are also strongly group-oriented, and influenced by commercial advertising and consumerism (Autio and Heinonen, 2004; Ekström and Tufte, 2007; Moinian, 2007). Such influences may stand in sharp contrast to the assertion

that young people are mediators of environmentalism and a global ethical stance, but cosmopolitical factors should not be mistaken for a set of specific individuals, nor an epoch. Rather, they should be seen as a condition that people may enter and leave during the course of daily life (Silverstone, 2007: 12).

A related problem is that ethical reasoning concerning consumption, at least among Swedish children (aged 8–12), is concerned primarily with their own family's health and well-being. Global concerns are secondary (Johansson, 2005: 208–13). This is understandable, since many young people are rooted in national and local identities (Stald, 2002). Even so, tendencies exist among children (age 8–13) in both Europe and New Zealand to imagine a community stretching beyond the nation – a community that at least includes other affluent and consumer-oriented nations (Drotner, 2005; Hengst, 1997, 2005; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Valentine and Holloway, 2001). Most Swedish adolescents (aged 15–16) are not only knowledgeable about globalization, but combine a strong national or local identity with a sense of being world citizens (Skolverket, 2004: 70–88). On this basis, one could argue that an environmental interest paves the way for a cosmopolitan perspective.

Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, there is a discrepancy between attitudes and action. The number of political consumers is lower among young people than among their parents (Micheletti and Stolle, 2005: 150). There is a strong relationship between the cosmopolitization of children's everyday life, on the one hand, and the concept of children as citizens, on the other. The inclusion of children in institutional democratic processes, as stated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), has not been smooth, even in countries at the vanguard (Jans, 2004). Empirical studies show that the discourse on child protection regarding children as vulnerable is an obstacle to their inclusion and participation (Cockburn, 2007; Hill et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2004). However, the politicization of children's everyday lives stretches beyond institutional, political and educational settings, because the boundaries between learning and play are blurred (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003; Hengst, 2001). It is important to consider contexts beyond school, since children's political agency may be more salient in leisure activities and the family setting (Du Bois-Reymond et al., 2001: 6ff.). One explicit example of this is the politicization of consumption, which makes purchase a political act. Such a discourse not only empowers children as consumers, but also provides a source of political identification for the young (Bostrøm et al., 2005; Johansson,

2005; Trentmann, 2007). With this in mind, we closely examine in this article political attempts at increasing children's active pro-environmental consumer practices.

Children as 'responsible subjects' – a political and pedagogical project?

A central aspect of the political expectations that children (and adults) will take responsibility for global environmental issues concerns educational policies. To understand the prerequisites for children to become responsible environmentalists, the prospects and implications of the policies and pedagogies designed to teach children to accept responsibility for their own and their family's consumption must be considered. In order to address this issue, we find it productive to change theoretical perspective to the analytics of governmentality, which is specifically designed to analyse 'advanced liberal' modes of governing in which liberalization is combined with an emphasis on actors' capacity to govern themselves (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1991). This perspective is evident primarily in critical analyses of neoliberal policies in contemporary western societies, aimed at shaping economically rational actors through a 'conduct of conduct' – a process of 'responsibilization' in which individuals are given not only freedom to act individually, but also the knowledge, techniques and responsibility to be rational (Miller and Rose, 1993; Rose, 1999: 85ff.).

Such a responsibilization may of course include children. Ailwood illustrates this through her critique of preschool education in Australia. According to her, new ways of educating children are ways of shaping the rational market actors needed in knowledge-based economies. The aim is to create 'childhoods that will produce lifelong learners, self-maximizers – the rational worker/citizens required in neo-liberal and advanced liberal societies' (Ailwood, 2004: 29). Nevertheless, the analytics of governmentality can also be used for broader transformations of educational policies, such as the 'societalization of childhood' in Denmark over the past two decades that Kampmann (2004) describes. Children are given new degrees of respect and freedom, but at the same time, they are more indirectly controlled by being given the responsibility of contributing to their own socialization. This is illustrated by changes in day care/kindergarten pedagogies, which leave more latitude than previously for children to help define their own needs by expressing their wishes, interests and emotions. According to Kryger (2004), this is also a reason why the concept of 'the competent child' has become a mainstream idea in education in the Nordic countries.

When combined with environmentalism, such policies of responsibilization are manifested in pedagogical projects making children into the conscious consumers and world citizens needed in our times – a policy to create self-disciplined and caring, ethical 'ecological selves' (Bonnett, 2006; Kemp, 2005; Sandell et al., 2003: 213ff.; Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De-Bie, 2006). We may illustrate again with the Swedish case. In 2004, the former government declared an ambition to be an international pioneer in educating for sustainability (SOU, 2004:104: 141ff.). This is also a vision pursued by the incumbent government (Government Offices of Sweden, 2007:2). In the UN Economic Commission for Europe's (UNECE) Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development, the conference 'Learning to Change Our World' in Gothenburg in 2004 is mentioned as being particularly important, in addition to the Government Inquiry Commission of the same title. These centred on the idea that children (and adults) can learn responsibility for the environment and work for sustainability (ECE/CEP/AC13/2008/11: 18ff.; SOU, 2004:104: 72ff.). Thereby, the Swedish government statements echoed an ambition formulated in the Swedish national curriculum of 1994 for the 9-year period of compulsory schooling:

> Through the environmental perspective, they [i.e. the pupils] are given the opportunity both to take responsibility for the environment that they may affect directly, and to acquire a personal attitude towards comprehensive and global environmental issues. Teaching shall illuminate how societal functions and our way of life and work can be adjusted to create sustainable development. (Lpo 94 (2009): 6; our translation)

The inquiry report emphasized not only the role of formal education, but also the need for joint efforts from the media, associations and the general public. There are some trends indicating that such efforts have occurred. Let us give two examples. The first is that environmental themes frequently occur in children's books, and not only in fiction. Four handbooks on how to make a difference and save the world, aimed at children 8–12 years old, were published in Sweden early in 2008. Two specifically addressed how children might contribute to environmental sustainability. The second example concerns Swedish Public Television (SVT), which has traditionally produced high quality and often educational children's television. During 2008, SVT conducted a drive concerning environmental issues aimed at children aged 8–12, with particular focus on rubbish and separating household waste (Larsson, 2009).

These are just some illustrations of the responsibilization of children operating through, and beyond, the educational policies of sustainable development. The approach suggested by the analytics of governmentality is important in studying these tendencies, not only by raising the issue of what kind of 'subjects' are produced – and what kind of childhoods – but also questions whether such projects are productive and effective. We may glimpse the answer by examining a more specific area of research: environmental education.

The significance of environmental education

Turning to the issue of environmental education, we find some important Swedish research. First, we may observe that there are diverging views on the state of education for sustainable development. Öhman (2006) describes how the strong resonance of environmental issues in the 1980s subsequently abated, both in the extent of teaching and in children's engagement. In contradiction to his conclusion that education for sustainable development has not really entered Swedish schools, however, Björneloo (2007) shows a deep insight into the discourse on sustainability among teachers since the introduction of environmental education in the national curriculum in 1992. They generally share the vision of encouraging knowledgeable responsibilization and ethical cosmopolitanism. In addition, Axelsson's (1997) research in a 1991–4 project based on the OECD's Environment and School Initiatives (ENSI) indicates that attempts to empower pupils to take responsibility for both their own environmental learning and the environment were quite successful. From other studies, it is evident that many children develop a complex understanding of environmental problems and responsibilities from environmental education (Alerby, 1998; Carlsson, 1999).

These studies have less to say about eventual changes or effects in practices or influences on family consumption, however. Fortunately, there are some international studies more concerned with the effects of children's learning in terms of intergenerational influence that may provide answers. Ballantyne et al. (2001a, 2001b) show that children's (9–18 years) learning in Australian schools has triggered discussions at home. Almost a third of the students discussed what measures could be taken at home and in their local communities. Some children changed their own behaviour. Others explicitly tried to influence their family's use of electricity, water and chemicals, as well as their mode of transportation to school.

Grodzinska-Jurczak et al. (2003) show similar results from a school waste education programme in Poland. Their study shows that a majority of the children (aged 11–13) shared their learning at home, and that a third attempted to improve their family's waste practices.

Studies from the US (Leeming and Porter, 1997), the UK (Evans and Gill, 1996), Hawaii (Volk and Cheak, 2003) and Costa Rica (Vaughan et al., 2003) also show some effects of intergenerational learning and behavioural influence from children to parents and local communities. However, these studies focus upon educational effects on children, and their attempts to influence their parents. They have little to say about family negotiations and the actual effect on family consumption – an issue we have to approach with the help of a third theoretical perspective.

Children as economic actors – family democracy and learning

A third assumption underlying the expectation on children to learn to take responsibility for their own and their family's consumption is that they are able to influence their parents and family. From a research point of view, such suppositions must be transformed into questions concerning the actual and potential influence of children on their own and their family's consumption, and the specific prerequisites for an increase in children's influence in late modern societies.

Theories and research on family life in late modernity describe a development in which negotiations have become a permanent feature of child–parent relations. This space of negotiation is formally created through the political development of children's rights, and substantially through the institutional change of the family in the western world: its depatriarchalization, deinstitutionalization and democratization, as well as its decline in size and growth in diversity (Beck, 1995; Corsaro, 1997: 69ff.; du Bois- Reymond, 2001: 69; Giddens, 1992; Therborn, 2004: 102–6). These changes are of course intertwined with the expansion of the welfare state, and with its tendency to 'defamilialize' individuals; that is, to lessen dependency on family and kin. This tendency has been particularly strong in the Scandinavian countries, which were also in the vanguard of depatriarchalization, family law change and children's rights (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 45ff., Therborn, 2004: 79–81, 295ff.).

The loosening of traditional gender roles and family norms, manifested in the diversity of family forms – nuclear, binuclear, extended and singleparent families, cohabitation and homosexual partnerships – is said to make way for a democratization of the family. New post-traditional roles and relations must be shaped and reshaped through identity work and negotiations (Beck, 1995; Giddens, 1992). In addition, there are empirical studies from the Nordic and northern European context that support these theories. The right to individual freedom and to negotiate, even for children, is today being taken for granted in family life (Bäck-Wiklund and Johansson, 2003; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Björnberg and Kollind, 2005; du Bois-Reymond, 2001; Sellerberg and Thorsted, 2007).

This increasing emphasis on negotiations and learning in the family is also accentuated in research focusing on informal learning through the media and the Internet (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003; Drotner, 2005; du Bois- Reymond et al., 2001). As a general starting point, learning is viewed as an unavoidable, constantly ongoing process: it is what individuals collectively appropriate from social situations (Säljö, 2000). The point is that the boundaries between play, learning and expertise have become blurred. Therefore, research must more comprehensively appreciate children's and families' everyday life (Hengst, 2001).

Additionally, in the sociology of consumption, attempts have been made to conceptualize children as active and responsible economic actors, rather than as passive receivers of information from the media, advertising, school and their families (Martens et al., 2004; Zelizer, 2002; see also Corsaro, 1997; Drotner, 2005). A kindred perspective claims that the individualistic view of consumption should be replaced with more family-oriented approaches (du Bois-Reymond et al., 2001). An illustration of this is 'family process research', which seeks to study who initiates negotiations, to what extent discussion, negotiations or conflict follow and what the outcome of this process is (Grønhøj, 2006; Pettersson et al., 2004). These are empirical questions, however, and they lead us to examine research on children's influence on their family's consumption.

Children's influence on domestic consumption

There is considerable empirical research on children as consumers, with a traditional focus on strong socialization agents: parents, school and media (e.g. Brembeck et al., 2001; Gunter and

Furnham, 1998). From such research, it is known that parents and families are crucial for children's socialization as consumers. However, there is also research focusing upon children's influence on family decisions. Not surprisingly, such studies show that children and youth have influence – particularly on goods and services that children use, such as toys, clothing, food, snacks, holidays, restaurant choices and entertainment (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; Howard and Madrigal, 1990; Roberts et al., 2003; Wilson and Wood, 2004).

According to Williams and Burns (2000: 69), there are at least seven dimensions of influence effort among children (age 8–11): 'ask nicely, bargain, show affection, just ask, beg and plead, show anger, and con'. There exists, however, research stating that children tend to overestimate their influence, as well as studies showing that parents tend to underestimate children's influence, and that they have their way more often as they get older. Researchers on family decision processes explain that the influence of young people is stronger on the initiation of purchase, and choice of retail outlet, than on final decisions (Gunter and Furnham, 1998: 18ff., 53ff.; Wilson and Wood, 2004).

It is understandable that children have more to say about their own consumption as they grow older. Furthermore, a Swedish study showed that children are given greater influence over family decisions as they reach their teens; for instance, by being allowed to choose goods in the grocery store, or in discussions of consumption strategies (Pettersson et al., 2004). Other research provides evidence of broader patterns of influence than in the research reviewed above. Ekström (1995) show that the children's (age 13–30 [*sic*]) influence was strongest regarding shopping goods (clothes, books, music, cosmetics, etc.). They also had considerable influence on the purchase of durable goods such as home electronics, furniture and vehicles, but they were less influential over choice of leisure activities and services.

Not only age and class, but also family structure and parental style are decisive in children's influence on family negotiations. It has been shown that their influence on family consumption is greater in affluent families than in less affluent ones, yet they are more influential in egalitarian family types or families with a permissive parental style, and in one-parent families, than in families with stereotypical gender roles or an authoritarian parental style (Ekström, 1995; Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

Unfortunately, there is a lack of research focusing on informal learning and children's influence on family consumption from the viewpoint of pro-environmental behaviour and sustainability (Ballantyne et al., 1998; Easterling et al., 1995). There are, nevertheless, a few exceptions that provide valuable information. Grønhøj (2006) shows that Danish children (aged 6–16) participate in family discussions about water and energy consumption, and about ecologically produced food. A general conclusion was that time, taste, comfort, health and economy were more important than the environment in family decisions on energy consumption, and even on ecologically produced food. Significantly, the study provides no support for the thesis that children influence their families to buy ecological foodstuffs, or to decrease usage of hot water – rather, the reverse. Parents have a strong influence on family decisions, particularly mothers.

These conclusions are strengthened by subsequent studies by Grønhøj (2007) and Grønhøj and Thøgersen (2007), showing a significant 'intergenerational transmission' of pro-environmental behaviour from parents to their teenage children (age 16–22). Even so, they do not altogether dismiss the possibility of a 'reverse socialization process'. Grønhøj (2007) finds that children and parents, in at least a few of the families studied, remind each other particularly about the usage of water and electricity. Ekström (1995: 275) also offers evidence of some influence of children on environmental issues – on recycling and on purchases of unbleached paper and green laundry detergent. In a few cases, this influence can be traced back to the children's education at school. With the exception of this research, the area is not well covered, because little research on family decision processes focuses on environmental aspects.

A framework for empirical analysis

If we seriously consider the theoretical approaches elaborated and the remaining unanswered questions after reviewing relevant empirical research, there are some theoretically informed methodological conclusions to be drawn. Let us start in the reverse order from above, with the theories of intergenerational influence, family negotiations and democracy. First, intergenerational learning and family negotiations should be taken as a point of departure for the analysis. Research ought not to only start with the influence of school/parents and study the effects on children's attitudes, or only study the effects of children's attitudes on their own

or family consumption. Children should not be reduced to direct 'intermediaries', only transporting meaning without transformation. They are, rather, 'mediators', who interpret and negotiate environmental discourses and practices in complex intergenerational learning processes. With this in mind, it seems reasonable to begin with the issue of family negotiations and decisions concerning different areas of consumption, such as food and household articles, transportation, travel and vacations, housing and durables. From these focal points, research may pursue the following related practices of significance. (1) From what sources do children develop their concepts and evaluation of environmental issues and consumption? What is the role of information and discourses mediated through school, the media, peers and parents? (2) How may the processes of family decision-making be described, and what negotiations and influences characterize such processes? (3) What strategies do the individuals use in their negotiations, and how do they elaborate knowledge and values?

Second, research on children's influence must be studied in context to depict the factors that determine their negotiation strategies and influence on family decisions. Evidently, age, family structure and socioeconomic status/class are important, but so are variations in families' lifestyles in a wider sense, such as differences between urban and rural environments, within the frame work of national and ethnic cultural variations. Similarly, focus on differences related to schools, grades and educational programmes should be widened to include other contextual factors, such as informal learning through media, peers and youth associations. This point is reinforced by the theories of cosmopolitization and children as world citizens. Due to the 'liquidation of childhood' that is characterized by informal learning processes and blurred boundaries between learning and play, there is a need to embrace all aspects of children's everyday life (Hengst, 2001).

Third, since the media play a significant role in young people's lives, studies of socialization in interaction with education and the family must be supplemented by studies on learning in interplay with media and leisure. It is important that the media studies are conducted with a focus on active usage. Media texts are never transmitted; they are selected, modified, appropriated and applied. This requires studies of their reception, focusing on discussion of content among friends and family, its relation to learning from other contexts such as school and its transformation into (environmental) arguments and actions. The approach would then fit the methodological conclusions in relation to theories of family democracy.

Fourth, the explorative emphasis of this approach supports the use of qualitative methods. Only by a combination of methods would it be possible to study the practices and situations that trigger a cosmopolitan perspective. Political agency – in the wide sense of processes of interpretation, mediation and action – is central for an understanding of cosmopolitanism. A focus upon the whole process is often missing in research on children's relation to the adult world and 'the other'. As in the traditional approach to socialization, acquired knowledge is often viewed as passive, and oriented primarily towards territorial and cultural knowledge.

Finally, analytics of governmentality implies that children's influence and family negotiations about environmentally friendly consumption cannot only be conceptualized in terms of democratization and cosmopolitization. Research must observe underlying policies, and the kinds of 'subjects' that are produced. Important issues are: (1) How are productive and effective discourses on environmentalism, children and families spread and translated into practices of self-government? (2) In what ways do these discourses problematize routine everyday conceptions and practices, and what techniques for discipline and self-government do they imply? (3) What kinds of 'subjects' are produced? By raising these questions, we may problematize the starting point and objective of research on children's influence on pro-environmental consumption.

Conclusions

A recurrent and criticized feature of research on children, consumption and the media is that of the child as a victim of commercial culture and as a passive subject of socialization. The theoretical perspectives outlined in this article, however, point in the direction of children as conscious and active, if also as governed, subjects. Both theoretically and empirically, there are strong arguments indicating an increased influence of children on domestic consumption in our part of the world, not least in issues of environmentalism and sustainable development. This tendency has many causes. The perspectives we advance in this article emphasize the following causes as effective – at least in the Nordic context, but very likely also in other affluent societies: (1) the cosmopolitization of childhood, which is shaped by the media-driven globalization of lifeworlds, in combination with policies empowering and encouraging participation; (2) the responsibilization of children spread through discourses and techniques

of self-government, grounded in 'advanced liberal' policies emphasizing individual choices and the responsibility to consume sustainably; and (3) the democratization of family negotiations and of reciprocal learning that is advanced through cultural processes of detraditionalization, and the institutionalization of children's rights.

If these institutional characteristics and forms of government of late modern societies are important prerequisites for children to become responsible environmentalists, and to actually influence their own and their family's consumption, the lack of integrated research makes it difficult to provide reliable accounts of the specific processes through which this is done. Today, too little is known about the ways in which children and youths elaborate on environmentalist representations from education, the media and youth associations in relation to domestic consumption. What is more, we do not have adequate knowledge of the strategies and lines of argument employed by young people in negotiations with their parents – or the parents' reactions over issues of ecologically oriented consumption. When approached from the theoretical perspectives we advocate, the existing empirical research reviewed in this article only provides some of the answers, and helps us indicate the direction in which we might look in order to elaborate them further.

However, there are still some black boxes that must be opened to understand children's actual and potential influence on pro-environmental consumption and behaviour. Methodologically, we conclude that research on children's influence on household consumption and sustainability ought not only to integrate studies of children's environmentalism, family influences and environmental education, but it must also extend these fields of research in new directions.

First, theories of family democracy and intergenerational influence imply that a sound starting point is family negotiations about different areas of consumption. From this point, research should attempt to trace different practices of significance for family decision-making processes and children's conceptions of environmental issues. In addition, young people's influence should be studied in relation to age, class, family structure, school and cultural environment, as well as interactions with media, peers and youth associations. Second, theories of cosmopolitanism imply that we need to focus on children's everyday life in the wider sense – leisure and media uses, as well as school and family life – to understand how their views of risks, possibilities and responsibilities are shaped by their increasingly

globalized lifeworlds. Third, the analytics of governmentality encourages researchers to reflect upon underlying policies. They should observe the kinds of 'subjects' that are produced through the advanced liberal policies and the responsibilization of children in relation to the environment.

Obviously, it is not possible for a single researcher to consider all these things simultaneously, but they are important to remember when planning research on these issues. Our conviction is that many of these things could be accomplished, but this would require research that is mainly qualitative and explorative, integrating different perspectives and methodologies through interdisciplinary cooperation.

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