Youth Individualisation and Family Relations: Three Studies of Family and Youth Life

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This paper presents three different studies on youth and family relations and the role of family influence in youth individualisation. They show the growing importance of individualisation in late modern youth life development and the process of youth life change from family dependence to peer relations. This change is seen as part of a greater change in family life, which change social agency from adults and family to the individual and its personal choices. The first study compares Siberian and Danish young people and their family and peer relations and points to the challenges of developing an independent youth life as a changing force in individualisation. The second study looks at Danish young people and their use of family and peer support in everyday life. This study tells how a recognised independent youth life creates new form of social relations between young people and the family. The third study looks for knowledge of ethnic minority youth individualisation in their acculturation or social integration process in late modern Europe. This study illustrates some practical aspects of the two first analyses. Ethnic minority youth often seem to be caught between family and late modern peer youth life. The study tells that changing family practice becomes important for the young persons. Families are in a change from a “reproductive” family to a “modern” or even “supportive” family and this change influences the individualisation process of ethnic minority youth.

Keywords: individualization, youth, family, ethnicity

Individualisation has become an important issue in late modern societies. But the construction of individual agency also has become a global challenge. Therefore, youth development and youth life, as a special time for learning and individualisation, influences traditional patterns of upbringing all over the world (Mørch, 2007a; Beck, 1992).

As we know, historically, youth and education developed as the fundamental social constructs of modern individualisation (Mørch, 1985; Gillis, 1981; Musgrove, 1964; Stafseng, 1996). When family life and productive life became separated, education and youth life became the bridge between them and responsible for making young people competent for adult life. Also today youth life and education are the fundamental constructors of individualisation (Mørch, 2003).

So wherever family life and productive life become separated, youth life becomes important, in daily life, in policy and planning, and in education. Youth has become a both global and local construction.

Modern life differentiation, however, makes it obvious that individualisation should not be seen as the

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same everywhere. The differentiated paths of individualisation and the resulting individual personalities are results of the organisation or forming of people's social contexts. Without being promoting a functionalist perspective, it might be said that individual and psychological development always should be seen as a societal and contextual individualisation. This does not mean that many different forms of individual development should not be possible, but they are part of a broad structuration process. They form society and are formed by it, simultaneously (Giddens, 1987, 1991; Mørch, 2007b).

Especially in late modern Western societies, in which public social systems become the security base of the citizens, the individual is made the societal agent and in this way changes important aspects of family or kin family responsibility. Family members are under pressure to accept and function within a new and much more individualised society in which the individual has become the subject of both decisions and change. This process at the same time underlines both the importance of expedient individual developments and the negative consequences of a "relative deindividualisation" which points to a situation in which the individual does not succeed in developing sufficient competences to be able to manage societal demands (Mørch & Andersen, 2006; 2012).

Siberian and Danish Youth Life

To illustrate the different forms and consequences of the relation between family life and youth development, we would like to present a few results from a comparative exchange program study of Danish and Siberian youth, which was made at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The exchange program was planned to make both Siberian and Danish youth aware of the existence of different forms of youth life and reflexive of themselves as both objects and subjects of youth life. By taking part in new forms of youth life and by making narratives about their own life, their motives, interests, plans, and perspectives they might, in terms of Giddens activity theory, become discursively conscious of youth life. Only by overcoming or expanding practical consciousness, youth become able to reflect and accordingly change their own youth life and activities within it.

The study of the Danish and Siberian youth, then, had two perspectives. On the one hand, the intention was to describe youth life as it was seen, understood, and lived by the two different groups, and on the other hand, to find out if the exchange program influenced youth self-understanding and actual youth life in the two groups. Therefore, the groups were investigated before and after the exchange program. Because of the language difficulties, only questionnaires were used for both groups, but besides this, some of the Danish youth were asked to write diaries.

The population of the study (39 Danes and 39 Siberians) came from three Danish and three Novo Siberian youth-clubs. As the number of the studied population is small and also because the population should not be considered representative in any statistical sense, only broad distribution differences in the answers are pointed out, and conclusions are only drawn from very general "trends" in the material (Mørch, 1993).

Differences of Youth Life

The first apparent trend in the material is that youth life in the two groups seems different in a central respect. Although conditions of youth life, so as living conditions, daily activities, school, and club-life, do not seem to differ much, the way youth life is lived is different. Danish youth seem to be more oriented toward their peer group as part of youth life than Siberian youth. Seen in relation to the overall youth theory

perspectives, this trend tells that Danish youth seem to exist within a broad and visible youth life, whereas Siberian youth life does not seem to have such distinct contours. Siberian young people seem mostly engaged in family life and in “escaping” family and adults.

If we look at family relations, the material tells that Siberian young people has a closer family life. On the one hand, they have greater expectations to their family. They expect the family to help and support young people. On the other hand, they maybe also feel more pressure from the family. Being dependent on the family also creates more opposition against it. Danish youth do not seem to have such clear pictures of family function. Danish youth seems more independent of family and adults. Families just exist; they are there, maybe mostly as an emotional relation. Danish youth do not have authoritative confrontations with their family. The family may be engaged in the youth life or it may not.

If we combine this picture with the picture of youth peer group relations, an overall difference seems to develop.

On the one hand, Danish youth seem to be peer-youth in the sense that they look for friends to be together. Siberian youth especially want to ask peers for advice. They want independence and to have a recognised life of their own. Danish youth seem more individualised in the sense that they are freer to engage in and look for advice and opinions from both friends and families. They are not looking for independence, but for influence.

Accessed or Experienced Youth Life

An important aspect of youth life is how the youngsters experience acknowledgement from others. Tables 1 and 2 show some interesting results.

Table 1

Experienced Respect (pct)

Where do you experience the most respect?	Danes	Siberians
In school	0	0
In family	47	8
On job	3	18
In the youth club	50	74
Total	100	100
Number	38	39

Table 2

Where Do You Feel, That Youth Should Have the Greatest Influence?(pct)

Youth should have influence in	Danes	Siberians
Family	8	17
School	38	60
Politics	54	23
Total	100	100
Number	38	35

Tables 1 and 2 about youngster’s experiences and wishes of respect show that Danish youth experiences a broad respect in family and club. Interestingly, both groups agree that the school is not the place for most respect.

Table 2 shows the areas where youth feel they should have most influence. Both groups stress the school

as a place where youth should be respected. In this way, they demonstrate school life as a central context of youth life. However, it is interesting that, besides school influence, Danish youth want more influence especially in political life and Siberian youth especially in family life. Seen together, Tables 1 and 2 tell about support or barriers to youth life development.

Global or Local Youth Life

The research also shows that youngsters are aware that differences exist between Danish and Siberian youth life, and also that they look at youth life from their own position. They have a realistic picture of youth life as being global and local at the same time.

Some interesting differences are seen in the material. The Siberians have recognition of a youth life, which they themselves do not have. The Danes, however, only understand youth life from their own position. They feel that the Siberian youth lack a real youth life, and for this reason, they look at the Siberians as more child-like than themselves.

The main conclusion from this study seems to be that youth life differs in a specific way. Siberian young people experience a more authoritarian life for young people. Youth life has not developed as a special separate and autonomous entity of life in the same degree as Danish youth life. Danish youth life, in contrast, has developed as a world of its own, a world of many opportunities, but in some respects also as a sanctuary. Young people find themselves living within a comfortable youth life, but at the same time, they experience youth life as both a condition of transformation and a hindrance of development.

Danish youth have many friends, they have good relations to parents, but they feel insecure about adult life and the transition into it. They have a problem of developing themselves as responsible actors or subjects in their own youth life. Siberian youth exist somewhere in-between being children and adults. Youth life is still in its constitution. They have a foot in each camp. For this reason, they have to overcome family and dependency to gain independence, and they use their peers to help them in this process.

Youth and Family in Europe

The next study we present was part of a broad European study which investigated and compared youth and family life in nine different regions of Europe (FATE: Families in transition). The studies both collected quantitative and qualitative data. In this paper, we will look especially on qualitative interviews of the Danish youngsters (Stölan & Mørch, 2004; FATE (Family and transition in Europe), 2005).

In the Danish interview studies (40 parents and 40 young people), both parents and youngsters were interviewed about the same issues, such as current situation, youth transitions, state and family support, family conflicts, and life plans.

The results of the studies are both confirming everyday knowledge and at the same time also surprising. Mostly, young people and parents have a very good relationship. They have good contact and good relations, and the parents support their youngsters both emotionally, socially, and economically. The good contacts and relations seem to be based on the young people's experience of independence and acknowledgement in relation to their families. Their life and reference seem to be their peers, but this is acknowledged and even supported by the parents. Danish youth are supported to make their own decisions and to choose their own life. In many ways, this seems to be a rather new type of relationship which follows naturally from the highly accepted youth life and the recognition of children and young people. The relations between family and the young people

especially seem to be made by social and economical support and young people may ask parent for help in many situations.

One interesting development which we found was that all young people had economical support for their youth life from both family and the state and mentioned that it was important for their everyday life and independence from the family. But, when asked about their independency, they hardly mentioned state or family support. They saw themselves as independent and not depending at family or educational grants. Their individual existence and rights seem to be seen as natural.

The study of course showed great differences all over Europe. But the interesting perspectives from the Danish research on the relation between family and youth seem to be that the development of late modern youth life is a social construction as well as a family supported construction. The families are eager to support their children and youngsters to develop independence and individual social responsibility.

This at the same time underlined the importance of understanding family influence. The family background is important for young people in the social integration process of becoming adult individuals in the late modern society. In our sample, it seemed that respondents with the largest educational “jump” according to social class and educational level often had changed direction and educational course, and many of them have needed more time than stipulated to complete their final educational choice.

The Family Challenge: Different Families and Youth

The third research project about youth development and the role of the family is the Up2Youth project (Mørch, Bechmann, Hansen, & Stokholm, 2008b).

In this project, we tried to gain more knowledge about ethnic minority youth in their process of social integration into European life. The project, therefore, also looked at young people and family background. This of course pointed to a specific challenge of combining questions of ethnicity and youth understanding. We should bear in mind that, for all young people, individualisation is a process of becoming cultural agents, and that ethnic minority youth is part of the same process of becoming “late modern youth” (Mørch, Bechmann, Pohl, Hansen, & Stokholm, 2008a). While many ethnic minority young people are able to manage these challenges, others react by dropping out from training schemes and develop subcultures which can be stuck in disintegrated arenas. In this situation they are not only experiencing discrimination or racism but also frustrations in their ambitions for becoming recognised in everyday life and in the integrative arenas of school and work. They may be seen as “relatively deindividualised” in a late modern world.

In this paper, however, we will only discuss family relations and youth individualisation.

Though families today vary all over Europe, the late modern development and its challenge of individualisation influences all family development. We may observe that the “fragmented contextualization” of everyday life (Mørch, 2007b; Baumann, 1995) or the “biographical subjectivisation” (Leccardi, 2006) of late modern individualisation processes leads to network constructions, which include family life. Families are under pressure to become contexts like other contexts. This means that all aspects of life are influenced by the late modern challenge of individualisation. At the same time, we can see that the institutional biography is changing. Youth life has become the centre of individualisation and tends to be seen as a primary road to adult jobs.

The role of the family seems not only to prepare for adult individualisation, but also to be an active partner in the construction of individualisation. Therefore, families are in the midst of a comprehensive change. They

are changing according to socialisation goals, personal relations, and authority structure. Though families are important actors in individualisation, they may have difficulties in both understanding and acting within these new developments and the new challenges of individualisation in the family.

A Broader Family Perspective

The first two studies point to a change in the relation between family life, youth life, and youth individualisation. Western late modern youth life supports an individualised youth development. The role of families in supporting young people points back to a complex mixture of socio economical, cultural, and traditional forms of family life. In addition, the inclusion in a late modern youth life with growing influence from peers also changes the role of the family socialisation perspective. Peers are gaining influence in individual development, which support youth individualisation as a making of family independence.

At the same time, as the family seems to loose its influence to peers, we experience, however, that family background still seems most crucial for young people's development. Family life influences children's and young people's educational opportunities (Stölan & Mørch, 2004). The Danish Social Research Institute has in more research reports shown the importance of family life (Olsen, 2005). This research operates with three variables or risk factors: (1) parents on social welfare; (2) parents not having a vocational education; and (3) children or young people not living with both father and mother. From their research, they are able to show that even that the single factors influences the children's educational success, especially if two or more risks are present simultaneously, the risk for failure in education increases seriously.

So, the challenging situation for young people may be helped if children and young people can have family support. And in this respect, especially late modern individualisation demands a supportive family. Not only should the family be an integrated social family but also its individualisation support is important.

One specific focus of the UP2Youth study was to understand how family influence works, and especially how it works in a situation of globalisation where ethnic minority groups become part of a Western late modern society.

From a family historical perspective, we find that three basic structures of family exist, both as they have developed in history and as they function today (Andersen & Mørch, 2005).

The first is the traditional, kin-orientated family, which we may call the reproductive family, both because it reproduces family forms from farming societies and makes the family in the sense of "kin" the agent of history, but also because it "reproduces" children. Children are brought up towards being as the adults were before. In this type of family, the family comes before the individual. The family is the subject of society. Family "honour" is more important than individual-developmental-freedom and responsibility. Children from this family may have problems keeping up with many demands of late-modern life and education and, at the same time, engaging in their more traditional family life patterns. Not surprisingly, these types of problems may be most characteristic during youth, and especially among young immigrants whose families come from rural areas.

The second type is the productive family. It still has a traditional perspective, and the perspectives come from the bourgeois family. Today it is understood as the middle-class family or housewife family (Frønes, 1994; Frønes & Brusdal, 2000). This family is no longer a "kin"-family, but more as a nuclear family based on the parents and children relations. As such, it socialises children or produces children and teach children the adults and parent's norms and rules. In this way, individualisation may be seen as a product of parental and

educational upbringing. It creates children and youth and gives them prerequisites for a later individualisation into different occupations. It is “the modern family”.

This upbringing and youth construction is maybe illustrated in the Siberian youth development, but is also very present in many ethnic minority families in Europe. This family form can support young people on their road to a late modern world, but it may also produce personal problems for children and young people. The challenge of being “good enough” and fulfilling parents’ expectations may create psychological distress or disturbances for the young people, but also antiauthoritarian attitudes and critics.

The third type of family is the supportive family in which the parents try to support the children’s individual wishes and development. This family has overcome traditional family patterns in its orientation towards late modern individual challenges. It is a transition from the modern family to a modernistic family, in which all family members are individuals in their own right (Beck, 1992; Andersen & Mørch, 2005). It is a new late modern family and is often seen as the ideal of the Danish family. This family may become a form of network or association that competes for influence with other networks that the family members engage in. In this way, the supportive family also becomes a support in the construction of youth and a youth life. The late modern family is both a result of a changing world and also a partner in this societal change towards late modernisation. One of the central objectives of the late-modern family is its emotional support of its members and its support for children to exert themselves in society. A central objective is to further the development of the children’s individuality as an inherent quality. The concept of “children as a project” is an example of this orientation (Ziehe & Stubenrauch, 1982). Obviously, the concern of the adults is not that children should be brought up to be strictly like their parents, or that the children are just adults to be. The children are seen as unique persons from the very beginning, strangers so to speak, whom the parents have to get to know and who have a claim on receiving support from parents and other adults for engaging in their future life. This situation of course also often creates problems. Children may be misguided or—maybe more often—they may not be guided or supported at all. They may not be given conditions for developing “ontological security” (Giddens, 1991), or they may be unable to participate competently in different institutional developmental practices. Some of these individualisation problems may be most visible during youth.

In any way, the supportive family may become an active player in developing late modern individualisation. Not only in the sense that it “produces children”, but because it becomes able to support young people and a autonomous youth, and also because it adapts to shifting conditions of individualisation in modernity. It creates new forms of social and organisational “answers”. The modern developments of youth individualisation and youth life also influence the life of the modernistic family. The family becomes a supportive network like other sorts of networks.

In this family, parents may see themselves as friends or comrades to their children. Therefore, the supportive or friendly family in many respects seems able to support the late modern youth life development.

This does not mean that the supportive family is without problems. Although it supports an antiauthoritarian development it does not automatically mean, that it is the better family in supporting young people’s individualisation. The supporting of young people’s own decisions and youth life autonomy demands the engagement in making young people competent to make their own decisions and to develop their social responsibility.

This implies that families should be in accordance with late modern development, but at the same time, able to support their children emotionally, socially, and practically in the individualisation process.

The Construction of Youth Differentiation and Ethnic Differences

Both the socialisation process and the family form and function influence youth development. And especially the ways the different aspects of upbringing and family life cooperate seem to be most important.

If we focus on the ethnic minority youth situation, many factors of cause are of importance. However, ethnic minority youth is on the way to late modern individualisation as other young people. But they may meet more obstacles to becoming successful. One of those is the family support to manage educational life, late modern individualisation challenges, and the process of individual individualisation. It seems obvious, that even though many ethnic minority youth comes from well functioning families, more ethnic minority youth—compared to ethnic majority youth—come from families which are “risk families” with social economical conditions being the most visible reason for ethnic minority young people’s problems.

This picture, therefore, shows that the problem with and for “ethnic minority youth” have both cultural and not cultural grounds. The ethnic issue is primarily a social and only partly a cultural issue. Many ethnic minority young people are not supported from their family according to late modern individualisation and youth life conditions and they are not successful in educational competition. Especially, young people from reproductive family background, where family and family life may be seen as more important than individual life and individualisation, are caught in a social and cultural conflict, which they may only escape by giving up family and take part in different forms of peer activities.

However, many ethnic minority youths are well functioning in Western late modern European societies. They may have non-risk family background and come from “productive families”. They may be supported in the individualisation process especially according to participation in education. For girls from productive families, this situation seems very successful. By taking part in education, they emancipate themselves into late modern Western society. Girls from more reproductive or risk families, however, are in more troubles. They have difficulties in breaking family influence and finding ways into late modern individualisation. For them, difficulties exist in becoming subjects in their own life.

By looking at ethnic minority young people as cultural agents of late modernity, it becomes clear that they are cultural agents of modernity as all other youth (Mørch, 2001). Therefore, they are trapped in the same challenges as other young people in a differentiating and marginalising society. However, their cultural practices as cultural agents may give them a personal support for coping late modern challenges, but also cause discrimination and challenges. Especially, they seem vulnerable if they need network and family support to find ways of developing late modern individualisation.

Agents of Change and Individualisation

Family life is not the only important background for young people and individualisation. Youth life in all its challenges is caused by many factors, especially education, social relations, media, and public life.

Family life is however of particular importance by influencing both individual agency, and developmental options and hindrances.

One central aspect of family development is its relation to a changing society and a changing youth life. Late modern youth life creates individualisation and makes family life important in new and changing ways. In this paper, we have illustrated the changing relation between family and individualisation. We have pointed to Siberian youth as caught in the process of developing a late modern youth life. We have demonstrated how the

Danish youth are having a privileged youth life which open for the importance of both family and peer relations. And we have looked at the challenging situation of ethnic minority young people in their change to late modern youth and individualisation.

The youth individualisation process especially challenges the traditional family life with its understanding of the family as the authoritarian agent of social processes. In the late modern individualisation process, family members or parents are losing their influence in youth life.

Today, young people are becoming individualised in quite new ways in education and public life. They are recognised as autonomous individuals. But they may be supported by their family to become individual agents. This situation also has become important in a late modern world, where young people with different cultural backgrounds are becoming agents in a late modern youth life.

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