This paper was presented at the First International Conference on Sustainable Development Alternatives, June 5-7, 2012, Ecuador

Citation for the published paper:
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"Young Consumers in Sweden"
In this paper the question of how economic resources influence children’s peer relations will be addressed, with focus on the Scandinavian setting. This question is of particularly importance in times of changing discourses surrounding children’s role in the consumer society. In 2009, the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet wrote about a summer camp focused on consumption for young girls in a wealthy district of Stockholm. Some readers became upset and said that “children should be children and nothing else”. However, several readers meant that “this is something that the girls want, other camps are seen as uninteresting, moral panic is the word”. As these statements exemplify, the ways Scandinavian children are portrayed as consumers have gradually changed, from vulnerable beings towards competent actors in their own lives (Tufte, 2010). The shift influence debates about regulation and deregulation on consumption and media directed to children (Skirstad, 2006; Plogell & Sundström, 2004). Children have, to a high degree, been strongly protected by the welfare systems in Scandinavia. However, in the Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, societal transformations that changes the frames for modern childhood are taking place. Today, two overall changing processes are noticeable (Bonke, 2005). Firstly, a withdrawal of the state’s responsibility: the market has taken over the distribution of a number of services. Secondly, the public area of responsibility has been influenced by principles of the market and more responsibility has been placed on the individual. Consequently, the Scandinavian countries have become more liberalized, with higher economic differences between households as a result. This, in combination with the increasing impact of consumption in children’s lives, and the shift in how to portray children as consumers makes knowledge of young consumers highly important.

Scandinavian research on consumption and economics has mainly been addressed from different perspectives than in the USA and Great Britain (Bonke, 2005). To a great extent, the focus has been on public solutions in relation to economically vulnerable groups. However, through liberalization, the prerequisites for protecting children have gradually changed. In line with this, Scandinavian consumer research has expanded and become wider. Today, focus is often on ‘tweens’, a category crafted in the 1980s by North American marketers (Cook & Kaiser, 2004). The concept of tweens refers to a transition, mainly between 7-12 years of age which can be considered as a tense stage between childhood and youth, where power struggles and identity crises are common and where children begin to understand the value of possessions based on social meaning and significance (Kalmus & Keller, 2009; Roedder John, 1999). Children develop from being highly dependent on parents, to becoming more influenced by friends (Kratzer et al., 2009; Molenmaker et al., 2008). For tweens, consumption and economic resources are often important to attract friends and to avoid bullying (Chan, 2004; Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Lundby, 2011; Lundby, 2010; Ridge, 2011; Olsson, 2011; Weinger, 2000). Children may achieve popularity and a sense of community in the peer group by the use of ‘appropriate’ possessions (Downie & Glazebrook, 2007; Pugh, 2009; Roper & La Niece, 2009; Wærdahl, 2003). At the same time, these possessions may position the child as a unique individual in the group (Kalmus & Keller, 2009). There seems to be a peer culture in which material goods are central, particularly in children’s relationships with their peers (Dittmar, 2011).
The characteristic connected to the transformation during the tween period, from being a small child to becoming almost a teenager with more economic recourses, more pressure to consume and more power over their own consumption, makes tweens an attractive group on the market and an important focus for research (Johansson, 2005; Lundby, 2008). A number of researchers have sought to examine the role of consumption and economic resources in peer relationships (for example, Allison, 2006; Belk, Mayer & Driscoll, 1984; Buckingham, 2000; Brusdal, 2001; Cook, 2005; Cook, 2008; Damay, 2008; Kline, 1993; Kochuyt, 2004; Schor, 2004; Seiter, 1993). However, how children actually use possessions and economic resources to attract friends have not been extensively studied (Pugh, 2009). This paper attempts to explore the functions of material possessions and economic resources in peer relationships among children. Two questions are posed. How do children perceive the functions of possessions in order to attract friends? And how do children perceive the functions of economic resources in order to attract friends? In Sweden, economic inequality between households is increasing (Salonen, 2011). Thus, while everyday life for children is strongly influenced by consumption, the economic preconditions for children vary. In order for future research to understand the social consequences of not being able to consume to the same extent as peers, knowledge about how material possessions and economic resources function in peer relationships is vital. This question is of particularly importance in times of changing discourses surrounding children’s role in the consumer society.

In total, 48 Swedish children aged 9 were interviewed in focus groups, using a projective vignette technique and pictures. The children were asked if and how children in general could gain new friends through material possessions and money. The findings indicate that children perceive possessions as multi-functional tools in peer relationships. The ability to fit into the peer group, by the use of different possessions, was perceived as especially important. Additionally, the children perceived money as an altruistic tool to demonstrate kindness.

As the Scandinavian countries become more liberalized, with higher economic differences between households as a result, we need to address the question of the consequences. We should consider the significant effects of increased consumption on children’s social relationships as well as the extended evidence of children’s materialistic thinking. The consequences of a social system in which economic inequalities increase, seems to be related to extended segregation and exclusion of children’s relationships because they may internalize the importance of consumption. If children perceive peer pressure of having "cool" things, and if they believe that they can use material goods to become more popular and accepted, they may be highly vulnerable to the internalization of materialistic values (Dittmar, 2011).

Keywords: Children, economy, consumption