

BOOK REVIEW

# Problembarnets århundrande (The century of the problem child)

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The anthology *Problembarnets århundrade* (*The century of the problem child*) is the first volume in a series on disability research published by Studentlitteratur as a presentation of social science research into disability and society. This first volume is a collection of papers concerning the basic idea of the child as problematic, as mirrored in the processes whereby researchers, professionals and the state join forces in identifying, analysing, counting and taking measures to handle the problematic child. The context is the school.

The main aim of this book is to use historical analysis to promote our critical understanding of the present. Is there really a change? Is it for the better? The work of Michel Foucault is a common theoretical inspiration for the group. The six authors each take as their starting point the present-day intense debate about problems among children at school, and the tendencies related to these, such as increased segregation, individualization and participation. They question the idea of constant progress away from moralizing child-rearing practices towards a scientifically developed understanding making us able to explain and scientifically base the treatment of deviance among children. Is there a change from authoritarian policies towards democratic forms of help or are there only new ways of disciplining? Their historical analysis of school policy and social policy in the developing welfare state aims at making us able critically to scrutinize what is taken for granted, and hence made invisible, in the present-day discussions. Looking back furthers our understanding of both the changes that have taken place and the long continuity in ideas about deviance among children at school and the way in which the institutions function as part of this development.

The problematic child is seen as socially constructed from cultural preferences and institutional demands. The authors highlight the moral dimension and meaning-making embedded in the understanding of the problematic child. Their analysis addresses the tension between the right to support versus the right not to be labelled as deviant. A diagnosis of deviance, and thus belonging to a deviant category, entitles the child to resources from the welfare state. Experts are the gatekeepers in control of this

distribution, including or excluding and counting. They have as a basis for their understanding of the problematic child ideas about what a child and childhood is, i.e. ideas of deviance are related to ideas about the normal child, a normal development and a good childhood. The distribution of deviance in various parts of the population, which is a matter of concern, is described.

The social meanings are expressed in language. The relationship between vernacular, scientific and professional understandings and terminology is discussed as well as eventual conflicts or agreements between categories of experts. Of special interest is the relationship between the professionals, the children and their parents. Parents may be seen as the source of children's problems but also as a hindrance when professionals want to take measures to handle or prevent problems.

The introductory chapter presents the overall approach of the authors and raises their main questions. The following articles take on historical analyses of various conceptualizations of the problematic child. The editors' article focuses on behavioural problems at school, starting in the present-day contested neuro-psychiatric diagnoses and the institutional context of the school. They then turn to a historical analysis of professional and institutional discourses – the diagnostic culture – targeting these children, individualizing the problems and aiming at diagnoses based on medical science and struggling with the social-cultural dimensions. Karin Zetterqvist Nelson takes her starting point in non-governmental organizations arguing for the rights and needs of persons with dyslexia, and follows the references they and others give to medical doctors exploring congenital word blindness at the end of the 19th century. Zetterqvist Nelson critically analyses this research and how it is established, concluding that the bio-medical understanding is still dominating and that there still is a gap between this understanding and the pedagogical measures taken to handle the problems. Judith Areschough starts in the present-day Swedish discussion about abolishing separate schools for intellectually disabled children (*särskola*), a debate that followed the increase in enrolment of children during the recession in the 1990s. Areschough turns to the older concept for “mentally retarded” “*sinnesslö*” and follows the debate about education for this and related categories of children. She sees clear parallels between her historical data and present-day discussions, for instance concerning definitions, entitlement to schooling of various kinds and the issue of the parents' right to decide. Thomas Wahl analyses the view about the child's body, posture and movements, a stable focus in descriptions of the problematic child over various diagnostic periods. His historical analysis shows both how the posture is constructed as problematic and how the problematic child is constructed via the “bad” posture. Technology of measurement, pictures, tests and verbal descriptions demonstrate the construction of the deviant posture and the relationship to scientific discussions of functionality and causal chains. Again we see the tension between medial science and cultural norms – here even aesthetic judgement. The last article addresses the health policy at school. Eva Palmblad and Kenneth Petersson start in the present-day shift of perspective concerning the relationship between state, experts and

citizens, where the focus today is on the individual's own responsibility, self-determination and power. This includes children at school, where participation is a key word. Is this a democratization of society or a new way to discipline the citizens? The historical analysis starts with the discussions of hygiene during the first part of the 20th century and follows the development to pedagogical tools combining a good message with the idea of the pupils' self-determination. The authors then turn further back in history, tracing similarities to the salvation project of Martin Luther. With Foucault they talk about a new pastoral power. The authors link this to the way power is used in the modern liberal democracy.

The five cases may thus be related to discussions about problems phrased in the terminology of today. The authors analyse the historical foundation and development, with the critical aim of disclosing hidden meanings. The articles give illustrative and convincing examples of the social constructions of the child as problematic. The cases are well chosen and complement each other in giving a strong empirical support for the general conclusions drawn. The historical dimensions brought forward inspire to critical reflection about the present-day issues concerning children's problems at school. In this way the book fulfils its aims well. The book is also well written and informative, which means that it will have a broad audience, especially in educational settings. I will now summarize what I see as the book's main contributions before I conclude with some critical reflections.

There are, according to the authors, many aspects of continuity, which give rise to critical reflection about the present-day understanding of progress in our understanding of problematic children. These are, and have been, defined as such according to moral values, norms and institutional demands, at the same time as there is a continuous optimism concerning the possibility of making scientific progress in understanding these problems. The tendency over time is towards an increase in diagnosing. There is a tendency to adopt a scientific discourse. Biologically founded medical science gives arguments used to legitimize what are rather culturally and institutionally constructed norms for deviance. There is fluidity between normative and scientific judgement. An important point is that the non-biological character of deviance at school makes medical science as well as professionals dependant on the experiences parents and teachers have of these children, i.e. a dependency on the structure of control in everyday life. The authors raise this as a hidden methodological problem in medical science, which lacks critical reflection about these sources as social and historical products.

The diagnoses do not lead to medical but to pedagogical measures. Presumed medical problems are met with socialization. Segregation as a measure and the reasons for segregation of the children is a continuous theme over time even though the reasons today more purely refer to the interests of the child. Diagnosis and the ensuing selection processes are today, as earlier, part of the state apparatus to distribute public resources. The parents of the problematic children are and have been seen as both a cause of the problems and a hindrance to the measures deemed by professionals as required. The authors also see changes in the relationship expert–client, which they call

informalization, but they do not see it as democratization. Rather than a change in the distribution of power, it is seen as an expression of a new form for discipline and governing. This is related to the other change they stress: the spreading of a pedagogical perspective. There is, more than before, a pressure on the individual to develop competence to take responsibility for her/his own life, i.e. to fulfil the demands of society. Basically the process is about governing and disciplining the citizens towards productivity and competent citizenship.

### **Critical Comments**

Though new in the sense of taking present-day discussions as the starting point for genealogical analysis in new areas, I still get a flash-back to critical approaches from the 1960s–70s, where for instance the concept of vagrancy was analysed within critical criminology, demonstrating its stepwise changing application due to the varying interests of the developing industrial society, i.e. showing its constant meaning as a tool to control the uneducated workforce. The questioning of the meaning of the various presumably scientific labels for deviance and the strategy to draw on historical data in this critical endeavour was common in those days and, in this sense, the approach of this book is not new.

Transcending the aims of the authors, I would like, from their perspective, to raise a question about their research. Just as the disciplines they scrutinize they are to a large extent part of state-funded research, but their research takes on the task of critical observation of others. This relates to a well-known ethical problem in historical research, i.e. the risk of arrogance from the researcher's own scientific and historical point of view. An awareness of this problem is seen in Zetterqvist Nelson's article, where she draws the reader's attention to the fact that the historical research that she scrutinized was conducted according to the methodological standards of that time. This may be understood as a remark of precaution not to judge the past according to the norms of the present. On the other hand, there are examples in the same article that seem to illustrate just that. She describes, for instance, the medical doctor who is focused in the analyses, as "more or less obsessed" by brain research (p. 61, my translation). This kind of clearly pejorative attribution of an attitude is not empirically grounded in the article and seems to serve no purpose other than to forward an image of the "mad scientist". Her further remark, that he does not comment upon that the image of the brain he constructed at the end of the 19th century, risks being too simple (p. 70), and her critique that he did not consider the problems of analysing adults and children together, with a reference to a present-day source referring to this problem (p. 88), both show signs of arrogance from a present-day perspective. If the point here is to problematize present-day references to this historical research, rather than to discuss the researcher himself, this could have been clarified. This tendency also seems to be present in the wording of other articles. To describe that an expert diligently ("*flitigt*") does something insinuates that it is not always professionally motivated to do so.

The authors might have taken a step back and made the reader aware of how in their analysis they contribute a new construction of the past and present. Their contribution to a historically based critical analysis of present-day society is important, and may have an impact on future developments. If we look back at how earlier critical approaches were brought into education and research in, for instance, social work, we may conjecture that these six authors may contribute to further reflexive work within the professional categories and institutions they address and eventually bring about changes in the conceptualization of children as problematic in terms of behaviour, posture, achievement and development. Even though these authors do not raise a question which may be phrased as the well-known “*Hvis skolen ikke fantes*” (Christie 1971) (*If there was no school*) or “*Deschooling society*” (Illich 1971), their research may inspire to such thoughts.

A final comment is that there is no discussion of the fact that the focus is on children. The authors state that an understanding of what a child and childhood is forms the basis for the understanding of the child as problematic and one of the continuous questions is said to be the child’s compliance and understanding of its own problems. The increasing importance of the parent’s and children’s participation is also mentioned. However, the child as an agent is rarely mentioned in the articles in the way that the parents are. The authors do not comment on this difference, which means that they reproduce the different social positions child–adult. To the issues of power they discuss, they could have added the age order of society, i.e. age as a structuring principle in the life course institution. To which extent could an understanding of children and childhood as a life phase, enrich the analysis of the norms and morals as well as the institutional contexts, which form the basis for identification, explanation and action against problematic children? How important may it be at present and over time that this is about adults’ problematizing children and not problematic adults? What does the positioning of the child and the adult, respectively, mean for the discussion about the relationships expert–client–relative, when it comes to understanding the tension between arguing for confirmation and the right to support versus arguing for the right not to be defined as deviant and exposed to coercion? These questions could be dealt with in future research.

## References

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