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Under the Radar: Children and Childhoods Missing from Nordic Childhood Studies

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This year, 2023, our journal *Barn – forskning om barn og barndom i Norden* celebrates its 40th anniversary! On August 16–17, the Anniversary Conference *At Critical Crossroads in Nordic Childhood Studies* will be held in Trondheim, Norway to celebrate our birthday. Looking back, we are proud to see the wide variety of research that has been published in *Barn*, embracing a range of disciplines, geographic locations, topics, children and childhoods. Throughout the years, we see that some topics have received more attention than others, such as institutionalized childhoods or, more specifically, childhoods in educational institutions. Children in school settings, in after-school programs, and in kindergartens have been given a lot of attention in recent research (cf. ongoing review study of all published articles in *Barn* since 1983 by Lorgen, Ursin & Lyså). Regarding leisure and family time, many Nordic scholars have paid attention to the playing child, some have focused on the reading child, and we have come to know much about the child as a peer and the child as a family member. Children and childhoods have also been studied in relation to the Nordic welfare state. In recent years, some have focused on the child in child welfare services, the migrating child, and, in a few instances, the adopted child. When it comes to

children's rights, there has been an extensive focus on both the participating child and on the child who cannot, or may not, participate. However, while we have put some children and childhoods under the microscope, others have remained hidden in Nordic Childhood Studies. In our 40th anniversary issue, we draw attention to those childhoods that have remained "under the radar". In this special issue, we take notice of the overlooked and explore the future of Childhood Studies in Nordic contexts by exploring the margins of our field, embracing the ignored.

Going wide and focusing on the understudied enables us to reflect in novel ways on what Nordic childhood may mean in contemporary societies. Looking for commonality in diversity, or exploring the familiar in innovative ways, can remind us of what we may take for granted. The Nordic countries are known for the Nordic welfare state model, which is often associated with an idealized child-friendly and child-centered approach to children's everyday lives. However, as the articles of this special issue show, there is not one, but many Nordic childhoods, and the idealized images remain out-of-reach for many children. Our societies have changed rapidly over the last decades. Perhaps they have always been more heterogenous than we might think. The articles in this special issue contribute with explorations of everyday lives and practices that speak to such differences, inspiring us to open up and expand on what we conceive of as Nordic childhoods. The nine articles contribute to expanding our field in a range of ways – thematically, theoretically, and politically – reflecting the heterogeneity of childhood experiences in our Nordic societies, both historically and in contemporary times.

Childhood Studies is a sensitive area of research, as childhood holds a special position in our societies. Our societies also provide specific contexts for the understanding and interpretation of childhood. In the following, we approach the idea of Nordic childhood in ways that aim to explore connections and assumptions about this period of life, namely: 1) the sacred position of childhood in our secular societies; 2) the relationality of our individualistic societies; and 3) the need to expand the idea of Nordic childhood through embracing "other" childhoods.

Sacred childhoods in secular nations

The Nordic societies have gone through processes of secularization, and religion and tradition can be said to have a weaker position in our contemporary societies, at least at the state level. We live in heterogenous societies with different religious denominations and affiliations, but the strong connection between church and state has diminished. Childhood, however, can be said to have risen as a particularly valued and sacred space in the midst of such secularizing processes, and is perhaps the most sacred aspect in contemporary society. The sacralization of childhood as a cultural process was emphasized by Viviana Zelizer in her exploration of the changing social value of childhood in the US at the turn of the 20th century (Zelizer, 1994). Through an emphasis on developments in the field of medicine, a rising concern for children's safety and protection, and the transition from children's work to children's schooling, Zelizer explored the changing social (and monetary) value of

children in society, from being economically useful through their contribution to work and income, to becoming emotionally priceless in the family (Zelizer, 1994). The emotionally priceless position of children in Nordic families can be said to constitute a norm in contemporary times, and the sacral position of children and childhood is visible in dominant perceptions of children's vulnerabilities and need for protection. In this special issue, some of our authors touch on such themes, such as the place of children in families (Norburg), as well as ideas about what children should be exposed to and protected from in society, for example, with regards to gender norms (Mjelstad & Solbakken), and physical touch in institutional care for children (Fylkesnes).

In contemporary secular Nordic societies, the nuclear family is often self-evidently considered to be the best place for children to grow up, as emphasized, for example, in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and national policies. However, the concept of childhood, expectations concerning parental relations, and ideas about care and education have changed over time, also in our Nordic settings. At the beginning of the 20th century, the close, everyday contact between children and their parents was under discussion, as Ulrika Norburg demonstrates in her article **“To Look After and Care for These Little Ones’. The Missionary Association’s Ideas About Childhood During the 1930s and 1940s”**. Norburg shows how ideas about childhood are always contextually negotiated by discussing an interesting change that took place within the Swedish missionary movement. At the beginning of the century, religious calling and missionary duties were seen as the priority of missionaries, and it was considered best for the children of missionaries who were leaving the country to carry out their calling to stay in Sweden, where they were brought up and educated by the Church in children's homes, even though this meant separation from their parents. Over the years, however, this practice was considered less favorable, and new practices were suggested to allow missionary families to stay closer together. The article reminds us how changes in emotional practices are a result of multiple developments taking place in different sectors of society, illustrating that the social meaning of childhood is also subject to contextual and historical change.

Discussions around gender are also connected to the sacred position of childhoods and the discourse of childhood innocence in the Nordic context, especially in relation to norms about sexualities and normalized heteronormativity. Public debate about transgender children, legislation, and regulations on children's possibility to confirm another gender than they were born with physically continues to take place in the Nordic context. The gender-normative character of our societies is visible in how research expanding or challenging such notions is absent in child research. In their article **“Det handler om å alltid ha vært’: Transidentitet og aktørskap i bildeboka *Ollianna*”** (“It is About Always Having Been’: Transgender Identity and Agency in the Picture Book *Ollianna*”), Kaja Mjelstad and Hedvig Solbakken analyze the portrayal of transgender themes in a Norwegian picture book for children. The authors investigate to what extent the portrayal of trans and cis people in the book is normative, how such portrayals connect with the notion of children's agency and supportive surroundings, and also connect their discussion to ideas about children and childhood in a Norwegian context.

Children's vulnerabilities with regard to corporality and privacy are another sensitive area in our societies, which have been less in focus in our journal. In the article **“Berøring og intimitet – kroppen i skjæringspunktet mellom offentlig og privat. Omsorg for utviklingshemma barn og unge i barnebustad”** (“Touch and Intimacy – The Body at the Intersection Between Public and Private. Care in Small Institutions for Intellectually Disabled Children”), Ingunn Fylkesnes explores children's multiscalar vulnerabilities in such institutions, where children live without parents. With few verbal communication abilities, the children instead depend on communicating through single words, sounds, gestures and body movements. The children depend on help from staff for everyday care, involving negotiations of corporal and emotional boundaries. Based on observations over three months in three institutions, Fylkesnes explores the interaction in care activities between children and staff in such institutions, through theorizations of differences between *body work*, *intimate labor* and *emotional labor*. Children's bodies, conceptualized as both public and private, and the notions of intimacy and touch are also used as analytical entry points. In this article, we can see how children's bodies exist in a relational space, outside the domestic “everyday” radar of childcare practices, among children in need of help with most aspects of everyday life, outside the family home. The following section will delve deeper into the idea of relationality, as emphasized by other articles in this special issue.

Relationality in individualistic societies

The individualistic nature of our secular societies has been a recurring topic in research in Nordic and Western societies (Gullestad, 1992, 2006a; Howard, 2007). The transferal of such dominant cultural notions of individualization and the value placed on the autonomous and independent child also formed the basis of Childhood Studies in its establishment in the 1980s, but have undergone scrutiny since then. Several researchers have emphasized the need to take a relational approach to child research, such as focusing on the intergenerational and interdependent nature of children's lives in relation to their social surroundings (Spyrou et al., 2019), for example, through concepts such as generational order (Alanen, 2009) or relational rights (Ursin et al., 2022). In this special issue, several of the articles touch on the relational aspects of children's lives through an emphasis on children's relationships with significant others, also when these fall outside the nuclear family, such as children's relationships with staff in residential care (Godø et al.), and in research on contact persons and contact families (Molainen et al.).

In their article **“Tenk deg at du balanserer på en line’: Unges fortellinger om å få til skolen når de bor i barnevernsinstitusjon”** (“Imagine Yourself Balancing on a Tightrope’: Young People's Narratives About Mastering Schooling While Living in Residential Care”), Helene Toverud Godø, Guro Brokke Omland and Astrid Halså emphasize the relational agency of young people in residential care in Norway, and the connection between children's schooling experiences and the relational processes and activities between the young people and adults working there. Through interviews with young adults who completed upper secondary education, the authors explore their experiences of “what worked” in a

retrospective light. The authors use theories of relational agency and “middle class” parenting practices to explore the relationality of schooling, and how the combined effort of the youths and the cultivation of their interests by the adults, helped “thicken” their agency. By focusing on the relationships the youths had with adults in the institutions, we see how schooling became a relational project.

Although the Nordic welfare state and social services have, in general, constituted a strong research emphasis in Nordic Childhood Studies, there are practices that have remained under the radar within this field. One of those topics is pointed out by Johanna Moilanen, Tiina Lehto-Lundén, Lotta Jägervi, Johanna Kiili, Kerstin Svensson and Anu-Riina Svenlin in their article **“Being, Becoming and Belonging in Constructing Children’s Lived Citizenship with Contact Persons and Contact Families”**. By applying the concept of children’s lived citizenship, the authors seek to discuss how contact person and contact family interventions support children as “here-and-now” and not (exclusively) as becoming future citizens. Drawing on empirical research from Finland and Sweden, the researchers conclude that such interventions may provide children with new resources. As they witness active citizenship in practice through the engaged volunteers they meet, children’s chances of becoming more aware of their rights and responsibilities are strengthened. However, the article shows that children’s active participation is often governed by adults. Thus, it is important that research methodologies consider relational interdependencies and children’s intergenerational connections, i.e., adults’ roles in shaping children’s citizenship.

As the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad has written about extensively, individualism in the Nordic societies is of a particular nature. The concept *egalitarian individualism*, equality as sameness (Gullestad, 1992, 2006b), creates a specific understanding of what “we”, e.g., Norwegian, or Nordic people, are. Homogenizing the Nordic can thus create a specific kind of imagined Nordic sameness, which can lay the foundation for “othering” of those who do not fall neatly into the category of sameness (Lyså, 2022). Such “othering practices” can take different forms in the political, civil, and theoretical landscape of the Nordic region. In the following section, we turn our gaze to various forms of “others” as vital parts of Nordic childhood research.

Expanding Nordic childhood – embracing the “other”

Postcolonial and decolonial approaches have emerged as important perspectives within Childhood Studies (Abebe et al., 2022; de Castro, 2020; Kaneva et al., 2020; Liebel, 2020; Nieuwenhuys, 2013), emphasizing the need to critically examine the Western-centric core of the field, especially when approaching itself as a “global” field of research. Such perspectives are also relevant in the context of heterogenous Nordic Childhood Studies and childhoods in Nordic societies. The myth of the culturally homogenous Nordic region has been expressed by several researchers. In Norway, ethnic minorities such as the Sámi people, Roma people, and Jewish people have a long-standing historical presence, illustrating the culturally heterogenous history of the country. The Nordic countries are also increasingly culturally heterogenous, being part of a world where mobility and movement are

an integral part of human existence, with people traversing national boundaries for work and education, or war and persecution. The idea of the culturally homogenous Nordic countries, at least in Norway, has also been connected to the idea of “colonial innocence” (Osler & Lindquist, 2018). Although countries such as Norway were not historically as actively involved in colonial expansion as other European countries, colonial history still served as a backdrop in the creation of national identity and state formation, although such narratives are not part of the national imagery (Jensen & Loftsdóttir, 2016).

If we accept such aspects as a frame for the conversation, the need to open up, understand and interpret “other” childhoods, cultures, and worldviews is elevated, as significant aspects of our societies. Some of the articles in this special issue deal with how different groups of immigrants might have different life experiences in the Nordic context, such as the complicated relationship of trust for immigrant parents who are assessed by the Norwegian child welfare services (Terrefe) and how expatriate children in Finland, conceived of as “privileged” migrants, fall outside the guidelines for migrant children, portrayed as unprivileged and vulnerable (Korpela). Historical assimilation practices and processes of “Norwegianization” of national minorities, such as the Sámi people, are also in focus in this issue, through an emphasis on how Sámi ECECs actively work with strengthening children’s “cultural well-being” in a political and national landscape where the past and present are closely intertwined (Bjerklund & Åmot). Finally, other-than-human childhoods, a field that has received little focus in our journal thus far, explores what Nordic Childhood Studies can gain from research on multispecies childhoods and child-animal relations (Tammi et al.).

In his article **“Immigrant Parents’ Experiences of Child Welfare Assessment Processes in Child Maltreatment Cases: Implications for Trust”**, Tesfahun Alemayehu Terrefe looks into the intricate trust relationship between immigrant families and child welfare services in Norway. Based on semi-structured interviews with six immigrant parents, Terrefe explores how trust is a relational and multifaceted notion. The parents’ feeling of trust is connected to their lived experiences in the engagement with child welfare workers, the transparency and (un)predictability of the assessment process, and the perceived emphasis on the adversarial nature of the communication between parents and case workers. The contextual individualistic nature of child protection services is questioned, as it overshadows variation in cultural backgrounds, which may be more interrelational and collectivistic in nature. In cultural encounters such as these, where power differentials can have serious consequences for communication and family relationships, the deliberate integration of transcultural perspectives is called for.

Mari Korpela discusses migration and stereotypic images attached to migrant children in her article **“Under the Radar: Expatriate Children and Integration in Finland”**. Both in policies and research, migrant children tend to be seen as unprivileged and vulnerable, which has set the guidelines for their integration programs and educational policies. This discourse ignores skilled professional families that sojourn in the Nordic countries only temporarily as expatriates. Korpela elaborates on the contradiction between being a “privileged” temporary expatriate child and being defined as an “unprivileged” permanent immigrant. The contradiction becomes visible in international schools that follow the national

curriculum, including extensive Finnish language studies and exposure to Finnish culture, which may pose unexpected challenges for expatriate families. Korpela asks how integration aims affect these children's lives, and what they tell us about our ideas concerning Nordic migration policies in general. During the last decade, recruitment of highly educated professionals from abroad has become a more and more central topic in the Finnish labor market policy. However, little attention has been paid to the everyday experiences of families and children that encounter Finnish integration policies at school.

In their article **“Supporting Children’s Psychosocial Well-Being in Sámi ECECs”**, Monica Bjerklund and Ingvild Åmot explore how some Sámi kindergartens in Norway deal with the consequences of Norwegianization and assimilation practices from the past, and the collective trauma from such processes that continues to affect Sámi people on the individual, relational and societal levels to this day. Through individual and group interviews with ECEC educators in seven Southern, Lule and Northern Sámi ECECs in different regions in Norway, the article explores how educators contextualize their work to support children’s psychosocial well-being in ways that counterbalance the consequences of Norwegianization processes, address children’s risk of discrimination and threats of racism due to being indigenous, as well as highlighting Sámi culture in positive ways.

The final article in our special issue explores “the other” in human–animal relations, challenging the anthropocentric characteristics of childhood research by looking at multi-species childhoods. In their article **“From Child-Animal Relations to Multispecies Assemblages and Other-Than-Human Childhoods”**, Tuure Tammi, Riikka Hohti and Pauliina Rautio turn their gaze to multispecies childhoods and ask how our current understanding of Nordic childhoods could be explored through the recent “animal turn”. Their study highlights previously marginalized children’s experiences of their animal relations, such as caretaking, companionship, and affective engagement with animals.

By turning our attention towards what has been unsaid, understudied, or undertheorized in the field of Nordic Childhood Studies, we aim not only to expand the field but also to sketch the contours of what the future of our field might look like. We live in a dynamic, complicated, and ever-changing world. Large-scale societal changes and movements, such as environmental, political, and transnational connections and crises, influence children’s lives on various scales, and everyday lives are diverse in geographically near and close contexts. Research needs to reflect such variation, also in the Nordic context. The journal *Barn* wants to continue to publish research on omitted childhoods, and urges researchers to dare to follow new paths and to think in untraditional ways about research, children and childhoods.

Shared historical and cultural experiences in the Nordic region, despite national and regional differences, have been explored in previous publications of *Barn* (Kristjánsson, 2002). In this special issue and at the coming Anniversary Conference for *Barn* in Trondheim in August 2023, we emphasize ‘the Nordic’ as an overarching frame for conversation on children’s everyday experiences and conditions for children’s lives. We could also ask if the Nordic is a useful angle of departure. What can such a geographical delimitation and focus bring? Are we limiting the academic conversation, disconnecting ourselves from the interconnected and mobile world in which we all live? Which challenges do we

encounter through our focus on the Nordic child? We hope that our readers will take up the task to continue exploring and expanding on these and other such questions in the field of childhood research in the Nordic context.

Enjoy reading!

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