

Small Distinctions

Socialization of (in-) Difference in Seemingly Homogenous Peer Groups

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Sammendrag

Artikkelen tar utgangspunkt i et funn fra en undersøkelse om forbruk og fritid blant norske 12 åringer i 1997. Til tross for at barna kom fra ulike sosiale og økonomiske forhold, ble sosiale forskjeller underkommunisert gjennom at barna på ulike måter først og fremst ønsket å framstille seg selv som "normale" eller "vanlige". Hvorfor er det slik at barna underkommuniserer sosiale forskjeller når de snakker om seg selv og samfunnet? Og hvilke konsekvenser har dette for den økonomiske læring og forbrukersosialiseringen? Artikkelen foreslår fire ulike rammer for å forstå dette. Innefor tradisjonelle sosialiseringsrammer og kulturteori kan en generell forståelse av det å være "vanlig" være knyttet til både en likhetsverdi og til en erfaring av likhet. I den tredje forklaringsrammen knyttes de underkommuniserte forskjellene til individuelle strategier og handlinger. Dette leder til den siste alternative fortolkningsrammen, hvor understrekningen av det vanlige blir en del av en sosial posisjoneringsprosess hvor det ikke bare er kulturelt "passende" å framstå som vanlig, normal og alminnelig, men en nødvendig sosial praksis. Dette leder til den paradoksale konklusjon at sosialisering til likhet og likegyldighet overfor materielle verdier og status også produserer en aksept for økonomiske og materielle forskjeller.

Let me introduce you to Kristian. Kristian is 12 years old and lives in the centre of town, and his school is also located centrally in the residential area where Kristian lives. As we were talking about how to describe the children at his school,

Kristian used the word “normal” and “ordinary” a lot. We had talked and explored what this meant for a while when Kristian sums it up:

Kristian: So, like, and ... if you have an ordinary house like everyone else, sort of like, its... its middle class in Norway, that's what I gather (it is).

Randi: And you gather that you are “middle class” in Norway?

Kristian: Yes.

The concept of middle class is quite sophisticated for a 12-year-old, but nevertheless Kristian sums up the sentiment that can be found in many of the interviews. “We are all equal. We are not poor, not rich, we are content, we are good kids” as if they also were saying, “don’t worry about us, we are fine”. As a presentation of themselves they claim to be equal, neither fortunate nor misfortunate, just normal, in the middle and quite ordinary.

The study was done in 1997 in a mid-size Norwegian town. 210 twelve-year-old children from eleven schools participated in a questionnaire study about their consumer habits, their every day lives and favorite pastimes. 17 of the children were randomly selected for conversational interviews around the same themes. Knowing that the children are selected from a range of social and economic backgrounds, it is interesting to see that the children are more likely to under communicate difference when comparing themselves to each other, rather than pointing out their privileges or potential misery.

Why do these children mute social class and class distinctions when they talk about themselves and their society? And what consequences does a leveling of social difference entail for economic education and consumer socialization? In this article I suggest four different analytical approaches to explain why the children in the study under communicate difference. I will also indicate how this “celebration of the ordinary” might in fact be a social practice reproducing social distinctions.

One possible explanation can be found within traditional economic and consumer socialization paradigm (McNeal 1987). Children will from this point of view reflect the social standing of their family and community, where their closest and most important socializing agents are found. A rather simple explanation of why the children level out the importance of difference and social class could of course be that there are no differences between the families to speak of. The first question I pose here is thus if children are merely reflecting equality in social status of parents or their families. To answer this I will have to ask what differences that might be between families and individuals in the sample, and if the lack

of actual differences can explain the children's emphasis of the ordinary, equal and "normal".

Another hypothesis which comes to mind to explain this is that the Norwegian ideology of equality and leveling may lead to a muting of class distinctions when children talk about differences. Based on the regular occurrence of "equal" and "ordinary" in the interview material one could draw the conclusion that we are talking about a basic value in the society being reflected through the children's talk (Weber 1976, 1982, Douglas 1996, Geertz 1973, Lévi-Strauss 1978). However likely this is, this structuralist approach has only a limited explanatory value beyond the fact that ideas and beliefs endure over time.

Along the same line of thought, yet within another realm of theories, one could ask if these egalitarian views are a reflection of childhood as an egalitarian domain. In theories of children's cultures the creation of equality is interpreted as a range of things, from an age related inclination (Coleman, 1961) to a social contract of interaction between peers (Frønes, 1998). The ideal of childhood egalitarianism is also part of our conceptions of childhood as innocent and not at fault for their social position. In result, we take measures to level children's playing field by regulating their material differences (Bodine, 2003). In either case, the children's general understanding of being equal reflects a value of egalitarianism as well as an experienced equality.

These explanations are for the most part on a cultural or a structural level. What if we were to interpret the inclination to mute social differences in terms of individual agency and interaction? Can we understand muting of material difference a strategy of deliberate unpretentiousness? What would children gain from leveling social differences, and could it be that such a social practice have an effect of reproducing difference rather than making them disappear?

The final discussion will by way of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990a, 1990b) suggest that an approach to understanding children's social practices as a strategy of positioning will give an alternative understanding of why small and subtle distinctions in seemingly homogeneous groups are under communicated.

Are children reflecting equality in social status of parents or family?

James U. McNeal has provided a map of the socializing agents and agency in consumer socialization which can be useful as a starting point. He presents: Parents, Peers, Teachers and Business as the four *main agents* of consumer socialization

(McNeal 1987). All these agents interact, of course, and it is next to impossible to put up a firewall between these different influences. But as an intellectual exercise we isolate the agent *Parents* and ask if the social status of the child's family, influence the manner in which children receive and display social status. Is status inherited from your parents and family?

One of the concerns here is possible marginalization by lack of participation in learning processes, and thus also a reproduction of inequality in society. This process has as we know been a concern of the Birmingham school (Hebdige 1979, 1988, Willis 1977) where sub cultures and youth cultures are described as a reshaping of a working class ethos. Despite the resistance and opposition to mainstream society built into the expressions of these cultures, they are in fact a new wrapping of a working class ethos, which eventually leads to a reproduction of class or a resignation to class. However, the children in my study does not show any attempts to "escape from class". Their individual style and preferences may differ, and often according to what their parents can afford, but most styles and activities are defined as ordinary and "normal".

Maybe more prevalent to understand the material difference, or should I say "indifference", found in my study is a report from SIFO (National Institute for Consumer Research) by Ragnhild Brusdal in 1998. Her report on parents as providers and educators is based on empiric material from three different counties in Norway, two age groups (11-12 and 14-15) and their parents. She concludes that Norwegian parents are fairly homogenous in their economic education and in their priorities on behalf of their children. She says it appears as if there is an unwritten and unspoken norm among parents on how much money they give as pocket-money, and how much they give them extra and for what reason. Parent's or household income shows little difference in what the children get, with one exception. High-income families spend more on their children's sports equipment (Brusdal 1998). This corresponds to my own data where the children have listed what they own. There is a cluster of standard items, fairly similar for all, but one marker of difference lies in the specialized equipment they have for sports (Wærdahl 2003).

But even if the social standing of parents does not seem to mean a lot for the children's social position, Brusdal's data shows clearly that parents have an important position as economic educators, also as educators of consumption and consumer habits. Or as James McNeal argues, children are consumer trainees of their parents, and learn consumer behavior through observation and participation in family consumption. McNeal also argues that the discussion families have with their children regarding priorities and purchases are crucial for the child's con-

sumer education (McNeal 1987). But does this imply that they are trainees in class? And is the class ethos of the Norwegian middle class then “equal, - until our sports equipment sets us apart?”

My data and how the children are distributed

My data set consists of 210 questionnaires and 17 open-ended interviews with twelve-year-olds from 11 different schools in and around one Norwegian town. To get an idea of their social background, we can look at their father’s and mothers occupation, which is an often-used signifier of social and economic class. If we take a look at the material as a whole we find that pending on whether we use father or mother as the source of status, “middle class” would cover 50-70 % of them (Table 1).

Table 1: Parents occupation as described by the child, categorized by the author. (%)

	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation	
No response	13	17	
Higher administrative position	2	1	2 % Upper (middle) class?
Technical-economic occupations	23	8	50-70% Middle class?
Caring occupations / Social services	12	27	
Administrative staff	15	34	10-40% Working class
Agriculture	1	1	
Workers (industry, construction etc.)	34	12	
Total	100	100	

This is of course not a very accurate statistical measure of class in general and in this material in particular, but a rough measure based on answers like: “My father works in an office”, “My mother make buildings” or “takes care of sick people in a nursing home” or just “factory”. But we can see that Kristian who we heard in the beginning is not far from the truth: Most of them are “middle class”, at least in his school, which is situated in what we could call one of the better parts of the town center.

But being “normal” or being “Middle class” does not make them all equal. There are some differences in parent’s occupation or social standing and there are differences that go beyond their social or economic status.

What other differences were likely to be found in the material?

The schools I visited were ranging from rather small, fairly small to downright tiny. So if children in the schools came from similar social backgrounds, the environments of the schools are small enough for every child to be visible and cared

for, the number of ethnically and racially diverging is so small that they don't even make up a group and the children themselves display values of equality, fairness and social inclusion. What distinctions are there to worry about?

Well, gender of course, and this can not be neglected, although to intricate to be dealt with as a parenthesis in this paper. And the few ethnic and racially different would probably have interesting stories to tell, if I had them in my material¹³⁸. Sociologists are often inclined to look for difference. And if difference was my first priority, I would have packed up my bag of questions and my tape recorder and head for greener pastures where differences were more visible and easier to access. But I was looking for the "ordinary", the "mainstream" childhood where I was certain to find some general information about growing up in a consumer culture. Apart from gender difference, I expected that density, or living in urban, suburban or rural areas would make a difference in how the children related to consumer culture, and did find some small differences mainly in their aspirations and trajectory to youth anticipation. But in general even the distinctions between mid town- and country living turned out to be small (Wærdahl 2003).

So the extent of diversity I found were mostly variations over the ordinary, or the "normal", as the children themselves would put it.

Looking for the ordinary, one could say that ordinary is what I found. Other sources of data would obviously be an advantage to get more information about the dynamics of material inequality. A critical look at my data would reveal that although I did ask about parent's occupation, about their house and their siblings etc., these questions were not sensitive enough to make an adequate ranking of their families social standing and the children's access to material goods or money. I did however ask the 17 children that I spoke to personally to consider if they were richer or poorer than most, if they felt privileged or misfortunate in matters of material distribution and other probes around this theme. The answers I got were in most part like Kristian's above: They felt ordinary or normal. So, it is this *feeling* of being equal, the self reported equality which is the element of interest and not children's status as influenced by their families economic position.

However, the data does reveal that the family and parents are very important when children learn and edit their own consumer choices. Several children demonstrate how they carefully considered their families income and expenses when making up their minds about what they want and need. Like Monica, who thinks about her siblings and how much it would cost if they all were to get brand new things when deciding what she cares about. Monica and I had been talking about "talk among the girls", and she told me that among other things, they talked a about clothes. Nice clothes.

Randi: So what would you say are nice clothes then?

Monica: Hmm. No, for me I couldn't care less, but the others want brand clothes I think.

Randi: Which brands are... (popular these days)

Monica: It's like Adidas and those things

Randi: And you couldn't care less?

Monica: Yes. I have (she lists the "nice" things she has inherited) and I use those, but...

Randi: So you don't really want it or wish for it then? Maybe?

Monica: Maybe just a little

Randi: So why do you...(say you do not care?)

Monica: No it's too expensive (...) my mother says it cost too much. If I get a lot of new stuff and they don't... or that... because I have a sister and a brother, and then it is kind of stupid, because they should get (some) too, of course, and then it would cost twice as much.

Most children reports on negotiated deals with parents on leisure spending, and several children argue back and forth about what they can afford and what their family can afford. These are examples where parents clearly are the agents of economic socializing involving children in "discussions (which) provide the children with some evaluative criteria that they may store and use later for product choices of their own" (McNeal 1987;16). The children show that parents and family matters in these matters, and the children learn to "level" their wishes and demands to what seems reasonable in a family context and to the community by norm.

But as for the influence of social class on the capacities to consume, I have not found these interview excerpts or anything in the numbers sufficient to make a good argument. This is in spite of the fact that several of the questions I posed to the children in the interviews tried to probe on social inequality.

This far I have suggested that even if there are some small differences in the material that one would expect had an impact on the children's status, the children look at them selves as "ordinary", and that they share an egalitarian view of themselves as a group. The communication of status within the peer group can not be accounted for by a display of goods that points *directly* back to access and affluence, or lack of such, even if their family background serves as one condition for their communicated status.

Instead of displaying wealth and access, the material side of social status is either under communicated or reinterpreted into factors pointing towards human

qualities and qualifications (Wærdahl, 2003). Why is it important **not to** show off or stand out as “rich” or “poor” or for that matter, as someone who cares about material values or status?

Could it be that the Norwegian ideology of equality and leveling lead to a muting of social class distinctions when children talk about differences?

Are egalitarian views a reflection of an egalitarian culture?

The question suggests a possible explanation that egalitarian values lead to a muting of class distinctions. This sort of explanation could be placed in a category of theoretical explanations that are based on structuralism. This field of explanation points to regularity in occurrences, rather than rules or norms. Social phenomenon that appears or happens on a regular basis, or as here, seems to be re-occurring statements, reflects back on the structure of a society. The agency is based upon a value, rather than a norm, and it is the value which serves as a guiding principle of what we could recognize as an unconscious regulator of a social mechanisms. We are familiar with these kind of explanations from Max Weber’s action based on value rationality (Weber 1976, 1982) and from structural anthropology since Claude Lévi-Strauss and onwards (e.g. Douglas 1996, Geertz 1973, Lévi-Strauss 1978).

Along a structuralist argument, the emphasis on being equal and ordinary can possibly be connected to a national (Norwegian, but not only) value of egalitarianism, where display of wealth through objects and possessions is almost regarded as immoral. Status that can be transformed to an individual qualification is more “deserved” (Wærdahl, 2003). This value of egalitarianism can be connected to a whole history of national independence and building of a new nation where leveling social difference, getting away with the rich landowners (taking their titles at least, if not their heads) and an appreciation of the common man, worker, farmer and/or fisherman has played a major part. All for one and one for all. Even if times are changing, it could be that this value has persisted so far as a part of the Norwegian cultural heritage.

But no matter how strong these national values are this can at best only be a partial explanation of why Norwegian children choose to present themselves as “ordinary”, “normal” or just like the other kid. Could it also have something to do with them being children?

Are egalitarian views a reflection of childhood as an egalitarian domain?

Egalitarianism is also a value that is ascribed to childhood in our conceptions of it or to the discourse of childhood. Ivar Frønes describes how the relationship between peers is recognized by (among other things) a sense of equal value, equality in position, equality in situation, level of development and not least they share an experience of equality. These are structural qualities of child-child relations, which make up part of the social contract of interaction, which are different from parent-child relations. (Ivar Frønes, 1998) This tendency to level the ground for social interaction has also been described as an age related inclination to conformity (Coleman, 1961).

Although being equal or egalitarianism seems to be subscribed to childhood, linking a quality or a value as inherent to a biological age seems a little suspect. The cultural definition of childhood as an age however, does indeed have connotations of equality and egalitarianism. Even in what we could refer to as non-egalitarian adult cultures, childhood as a domain is still inclined to egalitarianism. In a recent study on "School uniforms and discourses on childhood" from the United States, Ann Bodine found that in the public discourse, protection from gangs and violence is today the major argument for school uniforms (Bodine, 2003). However, the principal motivation given in the unofficial discourse on school uniforms was that of 'leveling the playing field for children'. She draws this conclusion from the reasons given by parents when adding their own words in questionnaires on the issue. Bodine ties this to an ideal of childhood egalitarianism, which has remained strong in unofficial contexts.

But also in public context, such as in President Clinton's 1995 State of the Union address, sentiments of the poor child as blameless can be found.

"I still don't think that we can in good conscience punish poor children for the mistake of their parents" (Clinton, in Bodine: *Childhood* Vol.10/1, 2003).

Bodine underlines that this is said by a democrat, in a social context and culture where some, mostly conservative voices are known to blame the poor for their own condition just as easily as seeing the entrepreneurial rich as deserving their wealth. Children are seen as and should be treated as equals, as not to blame for their poverty, or even as not deserving their parent's wealth as a source of status. So is it possible that differences in seemingly homogenous groups are tuned down

even more since they are children “talking”? Well, yes, this could be one of the factors explaining why differences are not articulated in terms of material inequality. It could also be one of the factors explaining why there are only small distinctions in material inequality in the child group, as found in Brusdal’s report and also in my own study (Brusdal 1998, Wærdahl 2003).

Of course, there are actual differences in wealth and economy, but we also know that there is a certain social sanctioning of not overspending, especially on your kids. The size and cost of birthday-gifts for example is very often negotiated to an acceptable level both between parents and between the children (Brusdal 1998). And to expensive stuff is often normatively sanctioned as “putting on airs”. The children are rarely served by having it all, because it makes them too visible as economically and materially different. Visible differences in material wealth between children who are in daily interaction could be discouraged because it would disturb the material equilibrium of the playing field necessary for them to compete for social status in terms of their human qualities and qualifications.

So far I have argued that it could be that the children’s self reported equality or plainness is a reflection of a social and cultural value praising the ordinary. It could also be a reflection of their position as children in a society that ties equality to the image and discourse on children. Both these explanations are in a sense structuralist, although maybe not in its strictest interpretation.

But what if we were to interpret the inclination to mute social difference in terms of individual agency and interaction? Can this muting of social inequality also be understood as an individual strategy of deliberate unpretentiousness?

Is muting of material difference a strategy of deliberate unpretentiousness?

In my fourth suggestion on how to understand the children’s focus on equality and ordinariness, I think it would be interesting to turn the attention to processes of internal stratification within the peer group as a socializing field for “learning” stratification and distinction.

This is where Pierre Bourdieu offer a possible theoretical tool to be able to grasp with the dynamics of material inequality in the material, and to understand the muting of class distinctions when children talk about differences. Bourdieu has taken the relation between object and status to its full potential in his analysis of taste, linking taste for certain objects to a classification system of class position. Objects are thus not directly linked to the position, but are part of *a strategy*

of positioning (Bourdieu, 1984). The main difference between Bourdieu and his earlier (structuralist) colleagues is that the structure evolving from taste is not directly linked to classes of specific objects, but to ways in which preferences relate to each other.

Making social distinctions and rankings between themselves as members of the peer group is done in processes where the valid currency of cool, good, and bad, accepted and not accepted is negotiated in a continuous process. The language of material possessions and goods are tools of this negotiating process, but these tools or objects are not directly linked to a position or a social status. If something, like clothing, an activity, a piece of music or a computer game is valued highly one day, it can easily turn into something not as valuable if it is adopted and used by the “wrong people” the next day.

The peer group defines and redefines the status of people and value of things all the time. But in spite of the concrete reference to objects in these negotiations, there is also a significant silence to the social rules of how the objects or possessions gain or change value as a marker of status. This allows for continuous reshaping a redefinition of the value of objects, which in fact, using Bourdieu, can be recognized as a strategy of repositioning the positions in the field.

To employ such powers of defining value and positions in the group, the individual must be able to have a practical sense of reflection, or a distanced taste. This allows them to change their preferences for objects and change their consumer patterns as they see fit. It is not the object, but the relation between objects and people in the social field which defines who they are.

The 12 year olds in my material choose to express status by way of personal and individual qualities and qualifications rather than by their possessions. At the same time they show reluctance to recognize material objects as symbols of status as such (Wærdahl, 2003). This could mean that they are already getting pretty sophisticated in their strategies of social stratification and distinctions in a modern consumer context.

Expensive equipment and clothes are ok if they manage to “transform” the objects into something “ordinary” or normal for themselves, something that they deserve because of their qualifications, or something that comes natural to their personality. The ability to transform material capital to social capital, to use Bourdieu’s terms, lies in your ability to transform your Levi jeans, your preference of music, your Adidas sneakers or your skateboard to highly valued human qualities such as kindness, trustworthiness or excellence in performance.

Pierre Bourdieu uses the notion of “strategy” as an instrument to break away from “the action without an agent that structuralism presupposes” (1990b:62).

Strategy is neither an unconscious program for action nor the result of a conscious, rational calculation.

Strategy is

...the product of the practical sense, a feel for the game (...) a feel which is acquired in childhood, by taking part in social activities (Bourdieu, 1990b: 62-63).

Applying strategies of positioning themselves in a social field is a qualification, which is learned by taking part in social activities in a non-transparent social field. Whereas Robert Merton's strategy of becoming a member of a new social group (reference group) are goal oriented and presupposes a choice of means to reach this goal (Merton 1957), Bourdieu's strategies are tied to an ability to change and reorient yourself as you move toward a multitude of possible beings (Bourdieu, 1990).

These strategies are in other words the "*feel which is acquired in childhood by taking part in social activities*". How to employ the strategies is historically and socially dependent, but there is no direct or necessary relationship between strategies and social structure. There is also an individual side to the employment of strategies, which has to do with abilities and capacities to put them to use. A good player, Bourdieu says, incarnates the game at every moment and does what is required of the situation. Thus also, the most strategic of all strategies is one that presupposes a permanent capacity for invention. And this strategic capability is indispensable if one is to be able to adapt to indefinitely varied and never completely identical situations. (Bourdieu, 1990b).

Can the muting of social difference also be interpreted as deliberate unpretentiousness? By way of Pierre Bourdieu, we could say that even within seemingly homogenous groups, a "social struggle" about the definitions of value is going on. Why then should they mute material differences?

Muting of material values and material inequality could be interpreted as part of the social mechanism, which as a paradox serves to create and maintain social difference. Good taste, the taste which shows distance from need, necessity and money, is dominant because of strategies which veil the true power relations in society. The same strategies can also be employed to veil actual material differences and turn just about any goods into variations of the "ordinary". These strategies can be called by many names. At one point Bourdieu calls this "strategies of condescension".

...those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist, thus reaping the profits of the recognition granted to a purely symbolic denegation of distance ('she is unaffected', 'he is not high-brow' or 'stand offish' etc.) which implies a recognition of distances." (1990b:27).

A strategy that ties specific objects or material possessions to certain positions in a social hierarchy is not flexible enough to meet the challenge of change. And what can we recognize modern consumer society by, if it is not change? Change of seasons, change of reason, and change of possibilities. Children face a future of possibilities rather than certainties, and even if this is a social landscape where social inequality and social differences may still be reproduced, the means of reproduction are not certain or visible.

This interplay of strategies of distinction within a peer group is also part of the economic and consumer socialization of childhood, but one that does not have a concrete syllabus.

Socialization of inconspicuous (in-) difference

Why do the children in this study mute social class and class distinctions? And what consequences does a leveling of social difference have for economic and consumer socialization?

Parents and families are visible agents of economic education in the studies material, making an effort to level out possible differences between friends and peers. The family seems to function less a real source of social status for the child, than as a conscious educator of values. One could argue that both the family and the general Norwegian culture carry an ideology of equality, which of course would be one of the possible explanations as to why difference is under communicated. We could also argue that Childhood as a discourse is egalitarian, and that children's focus on being equal is reflecting that they are in fact a part of this discourse. To create an atmosphere of inclusion and freedom to play for all, it is also important for the peers themselves to under communicate differences in their day to day interaction.

These elements of conscious economic and consumer education from family to child are evident in the material. So are children's own efforts to level the playing field between themselves. However, just as important for economic and consumer socialization is the unconscious transmission of ways to relate to the world, the ways to distinguish good from bad which is played out in the family scene,

among peers and in public. Learning to distinguish the social value of objects through reading, understanding and using the material landscape in social distinctions and strategies for such within their peer group, is an important part of economic and consumer socialization.

In studying consumer socialization we need to consider not only the conscious strategies of teaching children consumption, but the unconscious mechanisms of learning. How children eventually distinguishing good from bad consumption, value versus trash, good taste from poor taste, may very well be driven from their social class, or the combination of economic and cultural capital possessed by their parents and family. And this may be a socializing scene that needs to be examined more thoroughly.

Another socializing mechanism that would benefit from closer inspection can be found in children's ability to position themselves in relation to each other. The agency has to be understood in terms of strategies, and status negotiations among peers can be understood in terms of what Bourdieu calls a "social field", where individuals engage in a "social struggle" about the definitions of value. It is on this field, between peers, strategies such as deliberate unpretentiousness are played out, and the subtle art of social positioning is learned.

Deliberate unpretentiousness or a muting of difference is part of the advantage of the "taste of distance" which is a powerful tool in terms of defining the value of things (Bourdieu, 1984). The small distinctions are the differences which you can pretend are not there and you can pretend that it doesn't matter. Still, by reinterpreting difference as part of the "ordinary", you also achieve an acceptance of difference. If you are able to transform exclusive and hard to obtain objects as a gift you deserve because you are a good person, as something you have earned by your efforts or as something to expand your qualifications in an area, you are participating in quite a complicated social practice of veiling actual material differences. By making itself invisible and by avoiding strict categorization of objects, these processes can in fact reproduce social distinctions even within seemingly homogenous groups.

Children take part in a complicated game of social ranking where parent's social status only plays one out of many roles. As a paradox we could say that if egalitarian economic socialization equals learning to be indifferent to economic and material status, it would at the same time produce an acceptance for difference in economic and material status.

On that note, I choose to have Kristian close this article with a description of what clothes they wear in his school.

Kristian: It's not like a trend that everyone has to wear, its absolutely free as to what you want to wear in this school.

Randi: Is it?

*Kristian: Yes. It is **not** any (rules) like we have to wear such or such, and if you don't, you are not accepted. No. You can wear anything you like.*

Randi: Really? But in general what would you say people wear?

Kristian: They are quite ordinary. Everyone sort of wear whatever they like, and they are all quite ordinary, no special such things so that you will be left out, sort of.

Notes

1. Just for the record: there were 28 children out of the 210 who reported to have one or both parents born in a foreign country, 10 of these were from Scandinavia or other Nordic country. None of them fell into the selection that I interviewed.

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