

TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

This study is on the transformation of the idea of childhood in a peripheral neighborhood of Istanbul where the reference point to understand this transformation is the emergence of a twilight culture in between the traditional and the new following the phenomena of urbanization and modernization.

Keywords: Childhood, urbanization, modernization.

INTRODUCTION

Bearing the idea in mind that parent-child relationship is constructed in a social and cultural milieu and the idea of childhood is not a biological but a social category, the main aim of this research was to seek for the ways that the parents from lower income families living in the suburbs of Istanbul construct their relationship with their children, what they ascribe to the idea of childhood, and how they evaluate the changing aspects of the concept in a historical process.

In order for grasping the meaning of childhood among parents who were interviewed one must be aware of the culture and ways of life of those in a historical continuum since it is important to note that those people living in the suburbs of the city are in a way between the culture that passed to the present day from the ancestors living in the villages of the Anatolia and modern way of life they introduced to in the city. That is to say, the ways they comprehend, evaluate, and form as discourse may be influenced or determined by this culture of binary opposition between the village way of life and urban values and norms. Here, the main argument of this study is to claim that there is a fast growing merge of the two different worlds, and the impelling force behind this process is the youth who are more open to change and ready to get the new information and technologies; therefore, this causes parents try to adapt to the new world. However this is not an easy process since people insist on keeping most values of the former way of life alive by trying to pass these to the kids in various ways. The fast growing change in the way of life and in “culture capital” influences the understanding of the concept of childhood in many ways. Before mentioning about this new understanding of the concept it is necessary to look at the bases of the idea of childhood and family in a historical perspective since the present day understanding of the concept one way or another is linked to the accumulation of older values ascribed to it.

Meaning of Childhood in a Turco-Islamic Context

Ariés in his famous book, *Centuries of Childhood*, wonders: “in the tenth century, artists were unable to depict a child except as a man on a smaller scale. How did we come from that ignorance of childhood to the centering of the family around the child in the nineteenth century?” (Ariés, 1962: 8). This was also the case in the Ottoman Empire until the Tanzimat period which is a cornerstone in the westernization of the country; there had been no distinct place and status for children, they had not existed in society as a different unit. Similar to what Ariés says, in the Ottoman photographs, too, children were wearing the same clothes as

adults (Okay, 1998:26). Ariés suggested that the recognition of childhood as an independent stage of the life cycle occurred first during the 16th and 17th centuries. Before that, the child had been thrust abruptly from early infancy, where it had depended entirely on the care of its mother or of a nurse, to the world of adults (Van de Walle & Van de Walle, 1990:150). Available data show that the Ottomans did not have the concept of childhood as a different and independent category from adulthood. In this sense children were thought as “little adults”. There are not large amount of documents giving clues about how children used to live in the Ottoman Empire except some pictures depicting children as wearing the same clothes as adults.

On the contrary to the case in the Middle Age Europe, in Islamic civilization childhood was a longer period. In Islam a child is not accepted as responsible for his/her doings until s/he reaches the period of *bulug* (means the end of childhood in terms of biological determinants). Moreover the most important thing to be done in the period before *bulug* is to give *terbiye* (to discipline, teach good manners) to the child. According to Canan (1990:11), the period before *bulug* is more important for *terbiye* than others since parents, “the guardians” of the child, are responsible for this period. The most important responsibility of each parent is to give *terbiye* to the child. This is because there is argued to be a potential in human nature to do evil which can only be killed through becoming true believers who are given *terbiye* of Islamic tradition.

Terbiye is not only achieved by the parents of a child but there are some other agencies playing role in this process. Ortaylı (2000) argues that in the classical society there is the control of family, relatives, neighborhood, and community over the child. This is a mechanism of societal support and solidarity. Showing affection in the case of success and condemnation to unsuitable behavior go hand in hand. Everybody congratulates the newborn, and everybody condemns the child who behaves as ill-mannered. The center of social and economic life was *mahalle* (neighborhood). In *mahalles*, which were separated from each other with ethnic boundaries, there was, to a certain extent, an independent control over everyday happenings, community solidarity, and many informal ways to regulate and direct the public morality (Duben & Behar, 1998).

The most important aspect of *terbiye* in family and *mahalle* was to raise children as religious people who are loyal to the state. Furthermore with the nineteenth century after the Tanzimat Period education took the first place in the programs of the Ottomans as a result of reformist policies and of the wish to develop the nation (Duben & Behar, 1998). The aim was to create uniform children who are loyal to the Empire. According to Duben & Behar (1998) the new view was to see the child as a security for the Empire, and due to this naturally education of the child became the center of attention.

Coming to the Present Day

Beginning with the Tanzimat there has been a rapid transformation of everything; culture, way of life, beliefs, institutions, and even clothes. In every sphere of life there began to be seen aspects of westernization, struggles for a modern way of life. Among those education was perhaps the most important one. There began a rapid modernization of the institutions of education; some new modern schools were opened, but most importantly traditional schools in *mahalles* were not replaced with them immediately. They were still very important factor in “educating” children. Those schools in *mahalles* and modern schools are the symbols of two different paradigms; while the first insisted on reacting against change and western way of life, the other was a struggle of leaving everything related to “old” and “traditional” way of life behind. The influences of the “tension” between the two on the present day understanding of the concept of childhood should be noticed.

Separation of the schools accelerated the separation of ways of life, and of settlements. Moreover the modernization discourse treated former institutions and ways of life as “absent” in the society, as if they were not alive. Therefore, there has always been a “tension” between “traditional” world views and the adherents of modernization. This tension accelerated the separation of the two in terms of settlement, too: there have always been uneducated, “childish” villagers living in Anatolia who are in a position to be educated and “civilized” by the modern men coming from the urban way of life.

A New Field of Research on Studies of Childhood

Most researches related to studies on childhood focus on the “underdeveloped” villages of Anatolia who are just on the counter side of modernization. The villagers there lack information and technology, they are uneducated, they still keep pre-modern values, they have a patriarchal social structure which genders all aspects of life, etc. An important example of this may be the related part of Delaney’s book (1991) “The Seed and the Soil, Gender and Cosmology: Turkish Village Society”. There she talks about exactly a “pre-modern” social structure. However, as argued in this study, there is another social structure that has rapidly emerged with urbanization: the villagers who migrated to big cities living in the suburbs. This should be a totally different category since in the cities they introduce a new way of life even though they try to keep their own culture alive via some kinds of solidarity. This category of people experience the “tension” much more intense than any other because they are just in the middle of the two different ways of life; the culture in the city and the culture left behind. Moreover their children are much more ready to adapt to the other culture, to acquire new way of life. The argument here is that the tension experienced in the city between the modern-urban way of life and the life in the suburbs is similar to or as a result of the tension between modernization process beginning with the Tanzimat and the culture in *mahalles* remaining from older times. There are some arguments claiming that the detachment from the *mahalle* culture is much more rapid than expected. Türkođan (1977), for instance, argues the clothing fashion, interest in entertainment, spread of alcoholism and gambling among the young, and retail consumption habits and usage of new technologies among the old show that there is a quitting of the identity of being “villager”. Due to this the inhabitants of the suburbs represent a “twilight culture”.

In the frame of this research this new culture in the suburbs is the focus of attention. Since people living in the suburbs are in the middle of two different cultures they are at the same time, when it is roughly put, in the middle of two different child paradigms. That is to say they have attained Anatolian creation of the concept of childhood, but they have faced with a different conception of childhood. The aim in this research is to show that there are some indicators of change in these people’s mind while, at the same time, they worry about saving their own. This opposition is clearly seen in the concepts of “respect” and “affection”, and in the dialogs between parents and children. There are some perceived changes on raising children, while at the same time; there are some issues that are strictly rejected. In the following parts of the study there are going to be some topics to be discussed, which are most clear in the interviews. These are as follows: deconstruction of the concepts of “respect” and “affection”, projection about the future, perceived changes, unacceptable aspects of new childhood, good children, gender, and child as an old age security.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative one which relied on semi-structured interviews as data collection tool. 20 people were interviewed in a slam area of Istanbul, Turkey. They were

housewives and guilds of the neighborhood. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes on average. The place of interview was the interviewee's house or work place.

RESULTS

Respect and Affection vs. Participation of the Child

One of the most important themes that show up quite often in the interviews is respect and affection. The parents emphasize this mostly in order to show that they are not happy with "new children". But when they are asked about "positive" aspects of new childhood they talk about participation of children to the decision making process in the family, and they praise children's relax dialog with parents. Moreover they blame their parents not to allow them create a similar atmosphere. This may be evaluated as hints about the future of childhood among those people. Respect and affection, and the new situation seem not to go hand in hand, and this causes one think that there may be more rapid changes in the concept of childhood in the future as the cultures are more and more merged.

In our times we used to list to our elders by hearth... There is no embarrassment in youth nowadays (Nedret, Female, 55).

A twenty five years old hairdresser at first gets angry with "new" children:

Well, there are a lot that have changed. Respect, affection... Today's children are more rebellious... In our hometown there is more respect... A child is good and dutiful as long as he respects to his mother, father, and traditions...

But then he confesses that there are some "good" aspects of new life:

It is not like the old times anymore! For instance they give their daughters in our hometown. The guy does not ask the opinion of the girl. You must take the consent of the person before everything else. You must sit down and talk to your daughter.

Another thing that they find as "positive" in the new idea of childhood is the comfortable dialog with parents. A taxi driver is happy with the new situation:

I cannot accept such thinking. In those times you could not lie down on a couch... But not children can comfortably do so... In the past it was impossible to share our problems with our parents... That is to say, there are positive sides, too (Male, 36).

Perceived Aspects of Change

While there is a tendency, at least at the level of discourse, to protect their own culture, there is, at the same time, a fast growing change in both their way of life and discourse. Moreover, interestingly, they do not interpret this as "confession", but it seems that this is because they try to legitimize their doings. For example they react against having lots of children because then there is a danger of not being able to realize a high quality child rearing. A taxi driver asserts this in a very interesting way:

People with low intellectual level do not care for this... For instance, you gave birth to a child, but you have to give his future to him (Male, 36).

A lady who works as cook says that:

Today's children are so lucky. There is everything now. Everybody thinks good things for their children... because there was no opportunity (39).

There are many aspects of change that they experience; their way of life is being transformed, and they seem to be okay with this process. Moreover this is not evaluated as in conflict with the old life's concepts of "respect" and "affection". A taxi driver confesses:

Children are lucky. They have the opportunity to talk to their parents as friends... this was not possible before... Now the father can listen to the problems of his daughter or son. That is to say, he has can feel them emotionally (Male, 36).

Unacceptable Aspects of New Childhood

Admitting and adapting some aspects of change, essentially, there is an obvious discourse of protecting the real culture. And this is what limits an eventual total change in the culture in the suburbs of the city. A lady who works as cook explains this in a marvelous way:

My parents changed, too. They had to do so. Nevertheless, we cannot give up our roots, family culture. If not 100%, we must keep them at least 50% (39).

If you live in a city you have to change a little bit, but essentially you are the same, and you must raise your children in a way to transfer and pass the "family culture" to them. Naturally there are some points of this compulsory change that they are not happy with. The most emphasized of those changes is about "lack of respect" in new children. Another point is moral degeneration of new children, and technological vehicles of this process:

I want to talk about the issue of erosion... Let's assume that there is a movie on TV, but one should not watch the scenes of it. However you see that the kid is watching those dirty scenes. This means that the morality of the kid is spoilt (Saime, 52).

"Ideal Typical"

The ideal typical child is someone who has grown up in a social environment where s/he has been educated in a way to get *terbiye*, and who is supposed not to struggle for his or her own benefits, but s/he should do the best to be "useful" for society and to be servant of the state and nation. Moreover this is achieved not only by just the help of family, but also the community is responsible for the child. There is reference to *mahalle*:

Today's children do not have the childhood we had. There are big buildings now. There used to be houses with gardens. There used to be fruit trees (Ayşe, 62).

Everybody used to know each other... Now as a father I have the doubt if my child plays with anybody in the street... That is to say, we do not know the people we live in the same street (Ferit, 61).

Delaney argues (1991), children, it is said, do not yet have reason and therefore cannot be reasoned with. Adults rarely tried to offer children rational arguments for or against certain behaviors. Undesirable behaviors were called shameful, but the child was not held responsible. Even though the case is not such strict in the research there is something for sure, children are not "objects", but they can only be shaped and formed in order to create *hayırlı* (good and dutiful) children/citizens. The most repeated theme about child rearing was this *hayırlı* concept, and there was no need for a lower level of abstraction, the meaning was so obvious. In order to be a *hayırlı* person one had to serve the state and the nation.

I would like to see them in future in certain positions serving to the nation (Melahat, 26).

I wish they could come to a certain post, be a man.

Belli bi mevkiye gelsinler, adam olsunlar. Kendileri için değil toplum için faydalı kişiler olsunlar (Yüksel, 35).

Going back to the Tanzimat policies of rearing good citizens the basic idea behind having *hayırlı* children is linked to the interests of the state. However maybe most crucially there are different expectations from each sex while serving the nation and society.

Meaning of Being a Male or a Female Child: Genderation of Roles

When asked about ideal daughter and son, the answers are differentiated. While girls, because of their image of sexuality in terms of traditional male gaze, are seen in a continuous danger of being exposed to “bad” results, sons are always seen as the servants of the society. That is to say, girls cannot do what men do to help society because of their “natural” inability to be free and comfortable in society. There are always guardians around her to form a safe space. Otherwise there is a very important danger against the *namus* (honor) of her and family.

We could not go outside the village alone... We used to be scared... And now we do the same to her (Neriman, 40).

Girls should always potentially be kept under control. There are “normalizing agents” in the society which determine who the deviant and normal is. *Namus* is a very important institution of punishment and normalizes the deviant.

Girls are the source of sorrow. You really get scared of some environments (Neriman, 40).

Time is so bad. It is so difficult to live in Istanbul. And yet rearing a daughter is much more difficult (Mehmet, 38).

The only danger a son may face is not about his *namus* but about material accidents.

Now there is heroin, marihuana, everything among youngsters (Zeki, 29).

Child as an Old-Age Security

When the respondents are asked about their attitudes toward expectations from children in the old ages they say that they cannot claim any right of demanding such a thing. Because child rearing is accepted as their responsibility they say it is compulsory to rear a child, but then they do not demand any material gain. However when one looks at the issue from the view point of *mahalle* culture, and from communitarian way of life s/he can see that children are not evaluated as old age security at the level of discourse, but on practice there are many clues that seem to the reverse.

I do not know, that is, God knows. There is a lot of time... May God give a good and dutiful child (Neriman, 40).

We did not expect of our father anything. He taught humanity, respect, and affection (Zeki, 29).

But then one can see that there is a very strong idea of serving the nation. That is to say individual success and happiness is important only in the case of its instrumentality to serve the nation. Moreover there is a reaction to leaving children after the age of eighteen. These all show that, in fact, they all want their children live with them, and this may be an indirect way of serving both nation and parents.

Not only until the age of 18, but until the death can we never let our kids go as Turks and as our parents? But let's assume that the child is at 18 and works. Then he can go, but you still keep an eye on him in case he needs something materially or psychologically (Mehmet, 38).

CONCLUSION

The main focus of this study is to suggest that the life in the suburbs of the city is in a position to be in the middle of traditional culture and modern way of life in cities. While analyzing the meaning of childhood it is important to be aware of the tension between the two. Children are regarded as the bearers of the culture of their parents; however, they are, at the same time, more open to new life styles. In such a milieu parents mostly see children as the subjects to be educated in order to create good citizens who are respectful, and dutiful. Most importantly the roots of the tension go back to the process after the Tanzimat when there is a rapid modernization of institutions, while the *mahalle* culture was retained.

As a result the main argument of the study is that among the interviewees living in the suburbs of Istanbul this tension may be seen clearly. While they are worried about losing their own culture, they are, at the same time, in a position to adapt to the new way of life. Their attitude is to acquire some aspects of the change without experiencing any conflict, that is to say they internalize some aspects of the life in city without suffering any regret, but fusing it with their own.

The merge of new way of life in the city into their own culture seems to continue much more rapid than ever since not only children are changing but also children are causing their parents get used to live with change. Therefore one cannot define and describe the idea of childhood in those settlements since there is not a clear-cut definition of it, but it is in a process of fast transformation. However it is certain that in this process of transformation while there are some aspects of old understanding of the concept of childhood being retained, there are some other aspects of new childhood being adapted.

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