

## **Ethical Attitudes Among Young People In Late Modernity**

### **Authors:**

Mary-Anne Holfve Sabel [mary-anne.holfve-sabel@hb.se](mailto:mary-anne.holfve-sabel@hb.se) (presenting author)

Kennert Orlenius [kennert.orlenius@hb.se](mailto:kennert.orlenius@hb.se)

Firouz Gaini [firouz.gaini@svt.ntnu.no](mailto:firouz.gaini@svt.ntnu.no)

Network 9: Assessment, Evaluation, Testing and Measurement

**Keywords:** ethical attitudes, late modernity, individuality

### ***General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework***

Generally, the mission of schools in Europe is to support a process that promotes individuality. Late modern trends according to sociologists (Beck, Giddens & Lasch 1994; Ziehe 1993; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) focus on diversity, pluralism, relativism, individual rights, and independence. These are emphasized in the Swedish curriculum as core values behind 'individual freedom and integrity'. However, the aim of education is also fostering to loyalty, generosity, responsibility in terms of collective well-being – or in other terms, 'solidarity between human beings' according to the Swedish School Act (SFS 2010:800). The purpose in this paper is therefore to find out what kind of ethical attitudes children and youngsters express. Are there possible differences related to separate Nordic areas, ages or gender?

We address the following research questions: 1. Do young people express attitudes which focus on ethical altruistic attitudes or do they have a more egocentric approach in everyday life situations? 2. Are there any differences between young people in Sweden and the Faroes? 3. If so, how can these outcomes be interpreted in terms of cultural capital?

Late modernity is here seen as a continuation of modernity, rather than a new stage or a transition including a distinct new form of condition in Western societies, postmodernism (Giddens 1991). According to our interpretation, this state means that the individual is to a great extent omitted to herself and needs to trust in herself, even if not completely abandoned to relativism as a postmodernist might be inclined to argue. However, this process in European societies and schools differs depending on cultural and social capital, including issues about religious traditions and secularism. According to international comparisons Sweden appears as one of the most secularized countries in Europe. The Faroe Islands is on the other hand still influenced by a religious heritage. "The islands have an unusually high rate of believers and this gives them singular Christian status, both among the secularized Scandinavian societies and further abroad" (Pons 2011, p 83) – even if the cultural traditions of the Faroe Islands today are confronted by global challenges and in that sense are less 'exotic' or unique than they might appear (Gaini 2011).

Individuality, quite often more generally expressed in terms of individualism or individualisation, is a classical concept in European sociology as well as a controversial one. Individuality does not presuppose individualism, that is, individuality is related to the process of development as a unique person. These individual differences and talents reflect our theoretical frame. The process of individuality, individualisation, is connected to “diagnosis” of our time, and covers apocalyptic descriptions of societies in dissolution with risk for increasing hedonism, narcissism, freedom of choice and values, options and self-reflexivity”, according to Levinsen (2006, p. 54). However, there are optimistic prophecies about the potential for constructiveness of individual freedom which contributes to emancipation and personal responsibility. Therefore, individuality is in this paper seen as an outcome of a dialectical interplay involving individuation and socialisation, that is, individuality also includes socialisation (Fajans 2006). This means emphasis both on personal development and acting as a responsible citizen. However, late modernity according to several sociologists and anthropologists (e.g. Beck, Giddens, Hoffman, and Juul) includes personal reflexivity and self-consciousness as a token of the process of individualization. Possibly this process also embraces selfishness and self-centered attitudes. The stress on individual freedom and self-monitoring perhaps promotes a careless and indifferent attitude among young people towards others’ well-being (Holfve-Sabel, 2014).

### ***Methods/methodology***

The individual autonomy has been raised as a vigorous and all-embracing value in various studies (Orlenius 2014; Orlenius & Bigsten 2008, Bauman 2001; Hoffman 2000; Ziehe 1993, Giddens 1991), and sometimes combined with deregulation of permanent and solid norms and values. The questionnaire is based on 36 items as indicators for investigation of that kind of ethical attitudes among young people. The sample of totally 545 participants, 325 from Sweden and 220 from the Faroes, answered the questionnaire, each items with a four point Likert-scale. The data was collected during the years 2010-2011. The respondents represent grade 6 and 9 in compulsory school and grade 3 in upper secondary school; approximately the same number of students in each grade. The oldest participants represent programs preparing for academic education as well as vocationally-oriented studies. The intention was to use rather similar samples of participants from areas in Sweden and the Faroes. The participants lived in small-scaled areas, that is, quite small towns (less than 50 000 inhabitants) and municipals. The argument for this choice was based on the idea of comparison that is, in the Faroes there are no big cities or large-scaled urban areas.

The received data were analysed with exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with IBM SPSS statistics 21. Factorability was acceptable and three factors were found after maximum likelihood extraction with oblique rotation method. Coefficients below 0.40 were suppressed. Factor no 1, consisting of 6 items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  0.70) was called Responsibility Towards Others, no 2 with 3 items ( $\alpha$  0.68) Student Autonomy, and no 3 (5 items,  $\alpha$  0.65) was labelled Adult Impact. Regression factor scores were calculated and transformed to means of 500 and SD 100. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

### ***Expected outcomes/results***

A positive correlation was found between Factors 1 and 3 ( $r = 0.55$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and negative correlation between Autonomy and Responsibility Towards Others ( $r = 0.63$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The Faroe students showed higher scoring of Adult Impact compared to the Swedes (Mann-Whitney  $p = 0.004$ ). Sweden had higher Autonomy,  $p = 0.001$ , while scoring regarding Responsibility Towards Others did not differ significantly ( $p = 0.057$ ). The scorings both for Responsibility Towards Others and Adult Impact decreased with increasing grade, but faster in Sweden than in the Faroes. Autonomy increased strongest from grade 6 and upwards in Sweden. Girls scored higher in Responsibility Towards Others compared to boys both in Sweden and in the Faroes, but no gender difference was found in the two other factors.

The data indicate that a substantial majority of the students in both Sweden and the Faroes expresses pro-social ethical attitudes in terms of generosity, caring and responsibility towards others. The participants' attitudes are extensively align to traditional rule ethical values, for instance founded in traditional Christian ethics and humanism and also provided in UN:s Declaration on Human Rights. In sum, the participants from the Faroes scored to some extent higher on Responsibility Towards Others, and less than the Swedish participants on Autonomy but higher on Adult Impact. The Swedish participants state the importance of Autonomy but put less emphasis on Adult Impact than the participants from the Faroes. However, this seems more to be an utterance of self-confidence than an individualistic ego-oriented attitude. The pluralism and critical questioning of traditional values challenge education in schools and its normative task instilling, for instance autonomy into students. However, our study does not indicate a nihilistic, egocentric or unethical attitude among young people. They also seem to expect adults' impact on fostering and expectations on teachers as role models.

### **References**

- Baumann, Z. (2001). *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*. London: Sage
- Beck, U., Giddens, A. & Lasch, S. (1994). *Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in Modern Social Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fajans, J. (2006). Autonomy and Relatedness. Emotions and the Tension between Individuality and Sociality. *Critique of Anthropology* 26(1), 103-119.
- Gaini, F. (2011). Cultural Rhapsody in Shift. Faroes culture and identity in the age of globalization. In F. Gaini (Ed), *Among the Islanders of the North. An Antropology of the Faroe Islands*. Tórshavn: Fare University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hoffman, D. (2000). Individualism and Individuality in American and Japanese Early Education: A Review and Critique. *American Journal of Education* 108(4), 300-317.

- Holfve-Sabel, M-A. (2014). Learning, Interaction and Relationship as Components of Student Well-being: Differences between classes from student and teachers perspective. *Social Indicators Research 119*, 1535-1555 (published on line 16 January 2014).
- Juul, S. (2002). *Modernitet, velfærd og solidaritet. En undersøgelse av danskernes moraliske forpligtelser*. [Modernity, welfare and solidarity. A study on Danish peoples' obligations]. Kobenhavn: Hans Reitzels forlag.
- Levinsen, K. (2006), Individualisering og ungdom – en diskussion af Ulrich Becks individualiseringsbegreb. [Individualization and youth – a discussion on Ulrich Beck's concept of individualization.] *Tidsskrift for ungdomsforskning 6(2)*, 41-58.
- Orlenius, K. (2014). Individens frihet och solidaritet: En värdekonflikt i skolans uppdrag? [Individual autonomy and solidarity: a value conflict in school education?] In E. Johansson and R. Thornberg (Eds), *Värdepedagogik. Etik och demokrati i förskola och skola* [Values Education. Ethics and democracy in preschool and school]. Stockholm: Liber.
- Orlenius, K. and Bigsten, A (2012). *Den värdefulla praktiken. Yrkesetik i pedagogers vardag*. [The valuable practice. Professional ethics in pedagogical everyday life]. Stockholm: Liber
- Pons. C. (2011). The Anthropology of Christianity in the Faroe Islands. In F. Gaini (Ed), *Among the Islanders of the North. An Anthropology of the Faroe Islands*. Tórshavn: Fare University Press.
- The Swedish School Act (SFS 2010:800)*. Accessible at: *SFS 2010:800*. Skollagen [the Swedish School Act]. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet. Accessible at: [http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/Dokument-Lagar/Lagar/Svenskforfattningssamling/Skollag-2010800\\_sfs-2010-800/](http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/Dokument-Lagar/Lagar/Svenskforfattningssamling/Skollag-2010800_sfs-2010-800/)
- Ziehe, T (1993). *Kulturanalyser: ungdom, utbildning, modernitet: essäer* [Culture analysis; youths, education, modernity: essays]. Stockholm: Symposion.