

## Children's Home Life in the Past and Present

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# CHILDREN'S HOME LIFE IN THE PAST AND PRESENT

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The crucial role of the childhood home in the psychological and social development of an individual is acknowledged not only from a scholarly point of view, but probably even more so from the individual's emotional point of view, irrespective of having good or bad memories of the home (Hecht 2001; Manzo 2003). Memories of the childhood home are often vivid and can be triggered by a familiar smell, sound, or an image, such as a photograph. As such, they have been a rich source of literary inspiration, and accounts in memoirs and autobiographical novels give unique insights into children's experiences of the home, its atmosphere, spaces, sounds, and smells (Cieraad 2010; Jones and Cunningham 1999: 31–5; Pallasmaa 1995). These remembered experiences touch upon all aspects of the home environment, from its materiality to the spatial layout, from the convivial life of the household to the sensory dimension of sounds and smells, and the wider environs of the street and friends in the neighborhood (Mallett 2004).

Most of the research on children and the contemporary home concentrates, however, on the effects of the material, convivial, or wider home environment on children's public destinies, like their school careers or their future prospects in life. Also, for the most part, the prolific research of human geographers on children and the home is outwardly directed in its focus on children's movements within the wider home environment (like the neighborhood) or between countries (as in migration) (Dobson and Stillwell 2000; Hatfield 2010; Pinkster and Droogleever Fortuijn 2009). Far less scholarly attention has been directed at children's own perspectives on and experiences of the multiple dimensions of their home environment (Bhatti 1999; Cieraad 2007; Mand 2010; Schiavo 1987; Winther 2006). This lack of research, notably on young children's lives within the home, has been attributed to the so-called privatization or domestication of childhood over the past two centuries (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 774–6).

The same observation on the gaps in the research on children's home life was made by the UK-based specialist network on the Histories of Home (SSN), which organized its third annual conference on the topic of Children at Home, stating that “while childhood itself has been the subject of scholarly interest, relatively little has been written on the place of children within the home, their position within the household and their lived experience of the home.” Hosted at London's Geffrye Museum of the Home in March 2011, the conference successfully brought together historical and contemporary research on issues like children's sense of home and belonging, their familial relationships, children's use of space within the home, and the domestic material culture related to children. The papers represented a wide range of disciplines and mainly addressed the position of prepubescent children within the Western home or institution. However, only two papers presented children's own perspectives on the home.

In the selection of conference papers for this special issue children's own perspective was a first priority, followed by the material and convivial dimensions of children's home life in the past and present. Presented as the main cause of the lack of research on young children's home life, this introduction will first critically discuss the history of the so-called privatization or domestication of childhood and its relation to the selected articles. In the second part of the introduction, an alternative explanation for the lack of research is presented in addressing the obstacles of doing research on children's home life and children's own perspectives in particular. The selected articles also illustrate a range of research methods used to overcome these obstacles; some are more traditional methods of social and historic research while others are new and challenging strategies. Hopefully, this special issue will stimulate further research on children's home life in the past and in the present.

### **THE DOMESTICATION OF CHILDHOOD**

Theories of the privatization or domestication of childhood address the phenomenon that children, particularly young ones, spend most of their early years within the confines of the parental home under the supervision of at least one female adult. The late-eighteenth-century acknowledgment of children's psychological vulnerability and need for parental protection and affection is presented as the main reason for the domestication of young children, which ended at an earlier age for boys than for girls. According to historians of the modern era, however, there were a number of parallel and related developments taking place, resulting not only in the domestication of childhood, but also the domestication of women and the spatial and emotional separation of the spheres of home and work (Coontz 1988; Davidoff and Hall 1987). Women, and in particular married women and mothers, came to be identified with the secluded and private space of the home as a feminine domain, just as all the activities within the domestic domain from childcare to housework came to be seen as women's work.

The historiography of children's home life, however, is full of informed guesses and assumptions. More recently, a long-standing dispute among historians on the emergence of affective relations between parents and children has been settled in favor of medieval parents, whom Philippe Ariès in the 1960s had denied any affections towards their offspring (Ariès 1962; Orme 2001: 4–5). In the first article in this issue the historian Colin Heywood diligently pieces together a picture of children's home life through the ages, relying for its many fragments on authors who have used a wide variety of primary sources, such as chronicles, records of courts of law, and probate inventories, from very different European regions. Although written sources are expected to offer more information on children of the nobility, historians now doubt whether these children spent their home life in castles or even in timber houses next to them. More than

scholars in other disciplines, historians often disagree on the interpretations of their predecessors. For instance, Ariès (1962) assumed a connection between the conditions of the material and the convivial home environment, and his contention that poor homes necessarily resulted in emotionally poor family relations has been refuted. Meanwhile, the assumption that an affluent and comfortable home environment will generate warm and affectionate relations is still widely accepted among historians. Material comfort and affectionate relations are also implied in the dual meaning of domesticity.

Furthermore, there is an ongoing discussion among historians on when the spatial separation of the spheres of home and work as a parallel development to the domestication of women and children actually started. The implication is that the gendered zoning of the material home environment set apart a living space for women and children from the male domain of the workshop (Hamlett and Hoskins 2011). Although in general historians are reluctant to use pictorial sources in their analysis, images might give additional information. For instance, medieval miniatures depicting domestic scenes with young mothers and their children suggest an earlier division of these spheres than the beginning of the nineteenth century (Orme 2001: 31, 61, 67, 99, 135). Also, medieval images of family togetherness that include a father figure are rare and seem to be an indication of the growing divide between the female-gendered domain of the home space versus the male-gendered domain of the workshop. The exceptions to the rule are the images of the Holy Family, which are often set in Saint Joseph's carpenter workshop and suggest that work and living spaces were less separated for the families of craftsmen than for merchants' families. Such an observation is justified by Colin Heywood's conclusion on the pioneering role of the urban class of merchants in the Middle Ages and the later urban middle classes in the creation of domesticity.

The historians Hamlett and Hoskins (2011), however, rightly criticized the concomitant and romantic idea of the home space as a separate economic sphere outside the forces of production and wage labor, as it ignores not only female domestic labor and crafts, but also the wage labor of domestic servants who were often teenage children. If, however, the domestication of both women and children both began early, its parallel, continuous, and progressive development is open for questioning. This applies especially when we consider the custom among the eighteenth-century European aristocracy to put their newborn babies into the paid care of a rural wet nurse for several years till the time these aristocratic toddlers were house-trained (Hardyment 1983). Wet nurses were young mothers of humble descent who were healthy and strong enough to breastfeed not only their own baby, but also one or two babies from wealthy families for payment. So there was no domestication of infants of high birth. They spent their first years in a humble abode that was not their parental home and were

nursed together with children who were not their siblings (Roberts 1998: 78–87).

Only in the early nineteenth century, when wet nursing declined, did gentlemen's houses and mansions start to include nurseries (Eleb and Debarre 1999: 240–51). However, there was a discrepancy of class in the case of nannies and nursery maids, too, since childcare remained wage labor, even if performed within the confines of the parental home. Both wet nurses and nannies allowed upper-class women to lead a life less tied to the home than their female inferiors. In his series of portrayals of an aristocratic mother visiting her baby boy at the wet nurse's house and her adolescent daughter at boarding school, the eighteenth-century painter George Morland criticized the separation of parents and children (Saumarez Smith 1993: 340–1). As such, he was an early promoter of Victorian family values when breastfeeding became part of the sanctity of motherhood. Not only Morland's, but also other depictions of humble home interiors portraying a convivial situation of a young woman amidst playing children, might have contributed to the Victorian illusion of "the poor but happy homes" cherished by writers like Charles Dickens (Styles 2006).

Industrialization and urban growth provided the decisive impetus for the parallel domestications of women and children, but also for the spatial separation of the spheres of home and work in the West. Nineteenth-century cities were overcrowded as emerging industries attracted impoverished people from the countryside in search of employment (Cieraad 1991). Although the pace of urbanization differed from country to country, the overcrowding of cities became evident at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the urban masses were increasingly feared by the ruling classes for their revolutionary disorderliness and so-called immorality (Chevalier 1973[1958]; Dyos and Wolff 1973). From the period's dominant male perspective, the delicate nature of women and children in particular had to be protected against the threat of the unruly masses in the public domain (Perrot 1994). In sum, patriarchal protectionism coincided with philosophical ideas on children's innocent nature, unspoilt by corrupted urban civilization (Charlton 1984: 135–53).

The protective domestication of women and young children, however, was a luxury only the better-off could afford, for it implied the help of servants to run the household and male attendants to protect women and children when in public. Yet while these developments took place concurrently, it did not necessarily mean that mothers and their children shared the same domestic spaces. On the contrary, in her article on the Victorian nursery the historian Jane Hamlett (this issue) explains that spaces like the day and night nursery and the schoolroom were meant to separate the home life of children from that of their parents. Parents either visited the nursery or children were invited into their parents' spaces, which explains why Victorian children often had a distant or idolizing relationship with their parents

and a closer bond with their immediate caregivers—a forced coalition that could engender warm and caring relationships, but also terror and abuse. Given these conditions, Hamlett demonstrates that the material comforts of the Victorian home did not automatically engender more affective family relations.

Although the nineteenth century is perceived as the period when the domestication of women and children became a shared ideal, it clashed with a historic reality fraught with social contrasts. There was not much of a home life for women and children of the urban poor and the laboring classes, as Jane Humphries explained in her lecture at the conference. Cramped housing and poverty drove mothers and children onto the streets as vendors and beggars (Humphries 2010). Children of the urban poor probably lived in harsher circumstances than ever before. The luckier ones had to leave their kin at an early age to become servants or apprentices in the households of the better-off. Child mortality in nineteenth-century cities was extremely high. Not just orphans but also many illegitimate babies died after their desperate working mothers had put them into the paid care of so-called baby farmers, who were notorious for their brutality (Zelizer 1994).

The spatial separation of the private and essentially female domain of the family home from the public and essentially male domain of the breadwinner's workplace was accelerated in the nineteenth century when urban upper- and middle-class families left the immoral city for the green and natural surroundings of the suburbs (Hamlett and Hoskins 2011). Although it meant a daily commute between home and workplace, the sacrifice was made for the benefit of families' offspring, offering them a safe home environment with a garden for playing. The spatial distance between the female domain of the home and the male domain of business and commerce fueled high-spirited and romantic ideas about the home, glorifying it as a sanctuary of motherly love and care with all the implied religious connotations, much to the detriment of the ideas on fatherhood, with the father becoming a patriarchal tyrant at worst and at best a distant figure in the home life of children (Tosh 1999: 43–50).

Although feminist and historic research like Tosh's have criticized the male/female binarism in the ideology of home, it nonetheless had a profound impact on twentieth-century urban planning. Housing districts were built far away from industrial areas and business districts, as shops were more and more concentrated in shopping centers. Architecturally, the contrast was expressed in different languages of design. While the material family home became an architectural expression of a haven set apart from the cold-hearted world of business and commerce, the convivial home was celebrated as a moral sanctuary where love and attention reigned over profit and calculation (Cieraad 2008; Nippert-Eng 1996). In due course, suburbs and housing estates were appreciated as safe and child-friendly wider

home environments allowing for children's de-domestication without parental supervision (Cieraad 2009).

The prevailing ideology of contrasts engendered interpretations of the family home as a non-hierarchical space, ignoring the intricately zoned territory of the domestic domain (especially where young children are concerned (Munro and Madigan 1999)) or the infant's progressive domestication and symbolic transformation from a natural into cultured state, as shown in my article on the changed position of infants in twentieth-century Dutch living rooms (this issue). Karen Lury, in this issue, illustrates the symbolic and gendered zoning of Scottish middle-class homes in her analysis of amateur domestic comedies of the pre- and postwar period. Children played a pivotal role in these, and the scenes were set in and around the children's own family homes in the suburbs, representing the traditional situation of a mother and full-time housewife and a father and full-time breadwinner. The father-filmmaker scripted the comedies according to the proper time and space-zoning of children in the home with most of the comic effects resulting from the spatial and temporal transgressions of the acting children, like girls making a mess in their mother's kitchen or the nightly escapades of a toddler.

The rising labor participation of married women and young mothers in the second half of the twentieth century has propelled the progressive de-domestication of mothers and young children over the past decades. As a result, women's ideas on the home increasingly developed in opposition to their paid jobs and places of work outside the home. However, not only the booming business of commercial day care for babies but also state-initiated after-school programs, from recreational to homework classes, have caused a silent revolution in the home life of present-day generations of children, now tuned to the work schedules of their parents. Lydia Plowman and Olivia Stevenson's article in this issue on the weekend home life of three- and four-year-olds in the UK and my own article on the playpen as a reflection of the changed home life of Dutch babies are both illustrations of this.

Working parents, or lone working mothers who cannot afford commercial day care, however, have no other option but to ask relatives, neighbors, or older siblings to keep a watchful eye on their children. Courageously parenting older siblings as well as the many home-aloners has triggered a paradigm shift in the perception of children's role in the convivial home from a passive and receptive role to an active, resilient, and coping role—a shift reflected in a changed terminology where latchkey children are concerned, who are nowadays termed self-care children as opposed to parent-care children (Kerrebrock and Lewit 1999). The sociologist Allison James (in this issue) assigns parent-care children a similarly active role as social agents in family relations and co-creators of the convivial home. It is also one of the few articles that adopts the perspective of contemporary children on their home life. Although the interviewed teenage girls strongly identify



home with family and family togetherness, James illustrates the girls' different roles in the convivial home, extensively quoting them on their acts of bonding or dissent.

The empowerment of children contrasts with the disempowerment and subjugation implied in the concept of domestication, but parallels more democratic power relations within the convivial home since the 1970s (LePoire 2006: 115–19). Even so, it still obscures the fact that all dimensions of children's home life, and especially that of young children, are determined by the public and private destinies of their parents. Parental income, employment, or unemployment will determine not only material home conditions, just as working hours will determine the convivial home situation, but they will also determine children's wider home environment of neighborhood and friends, as job opportunities might require moving house (Menaghan and Parcel 1995; Putnam 1999; Rheingold and Cook 1975). Also, due to the increased divorce rate, the number of one-parent households has multiplied. Nowadays, ever more children have to alternate between two households, which means they have to get used not only to another material home, another bedroom and toys, another convivial home, but also to another wider home environment when one or both parents move to a different neighborhood or town. Despite children's resilience, they are often traumatized by the effects of a divorce (Butler *et al.* 2003; Simpson 1998).

The startling numbers of children who are victims of domestic violence and abuse also are an uneasy match with the paradigm of the empowered child. Alyson Leslie, a researcher on child fatalities, presented some shocking figures in her lecture at the conference. Today, the counter-image of the home as a hostile place and a site of oppression and abuse receives more public attention than ever before. Child protection officers are pressed to make a clear distinction between the good and the bad home when children are concerned. Ironically, however, they disempower children who are taken out of their homes and put into a foster home or a children's home without their consent. Overall, the domestication of children is no longer self-evidently equated with their protection, also considering the dangers that teenagers in particular face when they lock themselves into their rooms to chat and game within a virtual community of seemingly benevolent strangers.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Historians and social scientists alike struggle with the limited access to information on children's home life, and in particular on children's own perspectives of home. Traditionally, historians depended on the availability of written sources, which are very limited in the case of children. Ego-documents, like diaries or letters, are even rarer for the early modern period, and the few known dairies are the product of well-educated children able to write and urged to do so (Baggerman

and Dekker 2009). For her research on the Victorian nursery, therefore, Jane Hamlett (this issue) took advantage of the many published autobiographies of distinguished authors who described their childhoods in upper- and middle-class households in the Victorian era. Hamlett acknowledges that memories and recollections tend to focus on contrasts with the author's present and far less on continuities. Even so, autobiographical accounts are the closest historians can get to the children's perspective on their home life in the past.

Written information on lived experiences in the medieval home, let alone how children appreciated their home life, appears to be absent, much to the frustration of Colin Heywood (this issue). Therefore, his picture of medieval children's home life, be it in a peasant's hovel or in a nobleman's castle, is inevitably incomplete and most likely inconsistent in the forced combination of regionally diverse information. Pictorial sources from that period, however, portraying children in- and outdoors, are more abundant, like the famous painting by Pieter Bruegel of children playing all kinds of games on a market square, or the beautiful miniatures depicting domestic scenes of young mothers and their children (Orme 2001: 31, 61, 67, 99, 135). The careful study of these images may help to remedy our gaps in the written information on children's home life in the Middle Ages, if only historians could set aside their distrust of pictorial sources.

Social scientists, for their part, depend on the verbal ability of children to express themselves in interviews, which is expected from about the age of seven or eight. Allison James' article, which discusses the interviews conducted with two ten-year-old girls on their experience of home and family life, is a fine example of qualitative sociological research and discourse analysis. The girls' frank and often critical comments, however, suggest that they were interviewed outside the home without the danger of their parents' eavesdropping. In-home research confronts researchers with meddling parents, who might complicate observations or interviews with their children (Bloustien 2003).

Unsurprisingly, however, parents are also key informants when it comes to the home life of their offspring and, as my article illustrates, are also the key orchestrators of their children's material home environment (Newson and Newson 1976; Pomerleau *et al.* 1990). That said, not only the parents', but also children's consent is required when adhering to ethical research codes, which require children's explicit consent at every stage of the research, and especially in the case of young children, who tend to be more mischievous, researchers run the risk of a sudden withdrawal (Bushin 2007). Moreover, the obvious age difference forces researchers to assume a suitable and familiar role to achieve an effective and confidential relationship with a young child.

Considering these obstacles, it is not surprising that researchers venture into new and more time-efficient research avenues for gathering information on children's home life. An excellent example of

resourceful research is that of media scientists Lydia Plowman and Olivia Stevenson on the home life of three-year-olds. They asked the parents to take pictures on their mobile phones of their child's activities when prompted by the researcher's text messages. To ensure the collaboration of busy working parents, however, the snapshots' timing had to be determined by parents' availability and co-presence with the child during weekends. Nevertheless, their research resulted in a wonderful series of snapshots of the weekend activities of three- and four-year-olds, who proved to be less homebound than expected.

Photographs as such, however, have been a widely used medium to collect information on children's material home environment in the past and present, as demonstrated by Jane Hamlett's and my research in this issue (see also Calvert 1992; Cieraad 2007). Photographs and, to a lesser extent, videos have also become crucial tools for the research on own children's own perspectives. For example, the Australian media scientist Bloustien (2003) asked teenage girls to make videos of the things they like to do in the privacy of their rooms, while Schiavo (1987), Winther (2006) and Hatfield (2010) asked children to photograph their home spaces and the objects most important to them. It comes as no surprise that their own bedrooms and beds were most often portrayed. However, the subsequent discussion of the photos in the so-called photo-elicitation interviews on the meaning of the portrayed spaces and objects again depended on the children's verbal ability. Video recordings made by the researcher proved to be a more effective tool to trigger children's comments on their material home, as done by Isabelle Makay (in Cieraad 2007) who confronted teenage girls with videos of the girls in their rooms made a year earlier. During the confrontation she registered, also on video, their lively comments on the changes in the room's decoration and removal of "childish" toys.

Reality television programs like *Supernanny* suggest that surveillance cameras could also be a practical research tool for the observation and gathering of information on young children's home life. Normally, surveillance cameras in the home would have been considered an intrusion of the family privacy. The participating parents in Jo Frost's television program, however, were beyond despair to allow cameras in their house to register the domestic mutiny of their toddlers. From this point of view, Karen Lury's research (this issue) on amateur domestic comedies of the pre- and postwar period, in which the mutiny is scripted by the father-filmmaker, illustrates an interesting reversal in parent-child power relations. In contrast to the authoritarian relations typical for the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, more democratic relations have to be constantly negotiated (Grieshaber 1997). Today's parents do not need to script the mutiny of their offspring, and they are far less likely to see it as funny or cute, but rather as signs of their own incompetence. Frost's (2005) recipe to restore parental authority is to reinstall the traditional time and

space zoning of children in the domestic domain, which means that children have to abide bedtimes and stay in their beds and in their rooms.

Repeat home visits, however, are the most common methods to research children's home life, often entailing a combination of observation, interviews, and photo or video documentation (e.g. Nilsen and Rogers 2005). Media scientists especially have done a lot of in-home research on children's use of media technologies (Hoover and Schofield Clark 2008; Plowman *et al.* 2010). However, anthropological in-home research involving participant observation, recording day-to-day home life with its ordinary practices and yearly rituals, like Christmas and birthday parties, is virtually nonexistent. The necessarily lengthy presence of the researcher in the home conflicts with Western notions of family privacy and time-restricted hospitality. In other words, more than the domestication of childhood, it is the practical, methodological obstacles of doing research on young children in the home that have contributed to the underdevelopment of studies on children's home life.

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