

## *The Changing Nature of Childhood: A Metabletic Study*

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### *Introduction*

In Western society today, the meaning and the status of our cherished and long embraced concept of childhood is debated within and across various disciplines, including developmental psychology, pedagogy, sociology, and cultural history. Several alternative views have emerged ranging from the one extreme where childhood is dead or has disappeared, to the other where childhood is very much alive, with children today being empowered and liberated as never before. Some scholars claim that childhood is a cultural invention and primarily a product of the adult's imagination. Up until now, very few systematic studies have combined disciplines to throw light on the nature of childhood and on how it has unfolded over the course of time. The author here conducts a metabletic study, posing the research question of whether the nature of childhood has changed, and if so, how it manifests itself in our contemporary Western society in comparison to previous historical times.

The word *metabletics* has been coined by van den Berg<sup>1</sup> and is derived from the Greek verb which means "to change." The science of metabletics is a qualitative human science research approach, which can be described as a study of the changing nature of phenomena in human life as lived and experienced. It is a historical phenomenology in that the nature of a specific phenomenon is traced as it reveals itself in the everyday human life-world, within a particular historical time and place. It further holds that a change in one field of human activity tends to go hand in hand with a change in a related field. This perceived synchronicity in human life lies at the heart of metabletics. Van den Berg differentiates between homogeneous and heterogeneous synchronisms.<sup>2</sup> A homogeneous synchronism occurs when a similar discovery of a new phenomenon is made independently by different researchers. A heterogeneous synchronism points to the simultaneous emergence in time of very different but related phenomena. A *shift*, in a metabletic sense, indicates a significant change in a phenomenon that manifests itself in a new meaning, a new structure, and a new way of life.

To understand the phenomenon of childhood from a metabletic point of view, its historical development as well as its specific social and cultural contexts have to be taken into account, and possible synchronistic developments need to be explored. This raises the research questions of whether a metabletic shift—and thus a significant change—has taken place in childhood as it is lived today, in comparison to previous historical times, and of whether this change is simultaneously expressed in related fields of human activity. To explore this question, a brief historical perspective on the changing nature of childhood, from traditional to

the beginning of modern times, will first be presented. This will be followed by an exploration and description of modern childhood, and its transition and possible transformation into a contemporary, postmodern childhood. In all time periods, children will be seen in their life-world and primarily in the context of their family. For the child cannot be meaningfully understood without keeping the adult in mind, as the child and the adult are inseparably interrelated and mutually define each other.

In this investigation, the author surveys relevant metabletic and phenomenological studies, and draws on selected sources of literature, art, and media entertainment to explore and illustrate the ways in which children lived in the past and now live in the present. Within the confines of one chapter, this study certainly does not claim to be inclusive of all relevant material. A full metabletic inquiry into the changing nature of childhood needs more space to do justice to the vastness, the complexity, the concreteness, and the uniqueness of the phenomenon. The study is further restricted to an exploration of Western childhood as prototypically found in the middle and upper classes of society. We need to keep in mind that our Western concept of modern childhood applies only to a small minority of children in the world. The majority of children never had the privilege of living in a protected, separate world of childhood; we only need to think of children in developing countries, and, more disturbingly, of street children in Argentina, child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and child AIDS victims heading households in Southern Africa.

### ***Children and Childhood from Medieval to Modern Times***

In *Metabletica*, van den Berg was the first author who systematically explored the changing world in which children and adults lived in Western Europe from medieval to modern times. With this original and highly successful publication, he launched his new discipline of metabletics. Through an analysis of historical and literary sources, he provided vivid descriptions of how children in traditional families lived and were seen as “little adults” in their free intermingling and sharing with the adult world around them. Van den Berg revealed how a distance was gradually created between the world of the child and that of the adult when Western society became increasingly complex and incomprehensible for the child. He concluded that the modern concept of childhood was born in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

A few years later and independent from van den Berg’s initiative, the historian Aries traced the origins of the modern concept of childhood since the Middle Ages. His celebrated work, *Centuries of Childhood*,<sup>3</sup> is based on a thorough analysis of Heroard’s diary on the childhood of Louis XIII, which offered the most concrete and detailed description available of a child’s world. He also investigated the crucial role of education during those times. In his detailed descriptions of medieval life, we find that it was a nonliterate world where learning took place not through education, but through face to face social learning, apprenticeship, and service. Moreover, there was no reluctance on the part of adults to discuss sexual matters in the presence of children, as the idea of shame and the idea that adult secrets should be kept from

children did not exist. Aries quotes the historian Père de Dainville: “Everything was permitted in their presence: coarse language, scabrous actions and situations; they had heard everything and seen everything.”<sup>4</sup> Aries found that, amongst all age groups, behaviour was characterized by a certain childishness, and that there was no need for a sharp distinction between children and adults as they lived side by side and shared the same world. In a homogeneous synchronism, Aries came to the same conclusion as van den Berg, i.e., that medieval times had no concept of childhood as a separate stage of life, and that our modern concept of childhood, as well as our modern concept of the family, date from the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Another novel viewpoint came from Postman who also emphasized the role of education and literacy. Postman saw the discovery of the printing press in Gothenburg in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century as the pivotal event which brought an end to the medieval world of oral communication and transformed it into an age of literacy. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, scientific ideas, the Bible, literature, and manuals on manners and child-rearing were for the first time available to the reading public. The printing press thus opened up a new communication environment, a new abstract symbolic world which soon pervaded intellectual and cultural life and which created a new sense of adulthood. At the same time, children were left behind for they first needed to be educated and learn to read and write before they could enter this new abstract and symbolic world. At this point, childhood was perceived as a formative period, as “a description of a level of symbolic achievement.”<sup>5</sup> Gradually, children came to be seen as distinct from adults, with different needs that called for protection and cultivation.

In the early 1970s, a vivid interest in the history of childhood and of the family exploded in a typical homogeneous synchronistic manner.<sup>6</sup> For example, Plumb once again traced the slow evolution of our modern concept of childhood, culminating in a separate world for children. In a similar vein to van den Berg and Aries, he commented on life in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: “Certainly, there was no separate world of childhood. Children shared the same games with adults, the same toys, the same fairy stories. They lived their lives together, never apart.”<sup>7</sup> His description reminds us of Pieter Brueghel’s 16<sup>th</sup>-century village paintings which vividly and concretely show us how adults and children intermingled with playing, dancing, and eating alongside each other. Plumb concluded that the world of childhood seen as separate from the world of adulthood is a European invention.

Inspired by the works of van den Berg and Aries, I conducted a more circumscribed metaleptic investigation by focusing on the Dutch family in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>8</sup> Using selected historical, literary, and art sources, the study revealed the changing nature of both family and child, and of parent-child relationships over the course of two centuries. Some key conclusions were that in most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch family was still traditional, i.e., intergenerational, with an unquestioned patriarchal structure, multiple and clearly delineated roles and functions, and economically self-sufficient. From the age of 6 or 7, children indeed looked like little adults as they joined their elders in work and play. I interpreted that this was possible in the light of daily life being relatively visible, accessible, and comprehensible to both adults and children. However, during the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the major

social and cultural changes which impacted on daily life gradually transformed it to such an extent that it became relatively invisible, inaccessible, and incomprehensible, especially for the child. In line with the findings of van den Berg and Aries, my study confirmed that towards the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch child had gradually slid out of the once familiar adult world and was recognized as being distinct and significantly different from adults. In the Netherlands, this movement coincided with the transition from a traditional to a modern, nuclear family in the upper and middle classes of society. In a true metabletic sense, a number of heterogeneous synchronistic events emerged in related fields of human activity and expression. For example, children's clothing, which had been basically indistinct from adults', changed to become simpler, allowing freer movement in play. Also, child literature was born with its first book published in the Netherlands in 1778, followed by hundreds of children's books within the next three years.

Any reflection on the status of children in Western Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries needs to keep in mind the dual powerful and pervasive influences of philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke's new idea, in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, that children at birth are a tabula rasa implied that they can and should be shaped, trained, and educated by parents and teachers, and his extensive child-rearing manuals provided the guide to do so. In 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, Rousseau launched and popularized a new concept of childhood, emphasizing that children are important in themselves and that they have their own distinct way of thinking and feeling. He believed in their innate goodness, celebrated their perceived virtues of spontaneity, purity, strength, and joy and coined the famous romantic metaphor of the child being a blooming flower who will best grow under natural circumstances. Rousseau stressed that children needed to be educated in order to become aware of themselves and their world. He influenced educators and the reading public of his time more than anyone else, and can be called the architect of a new and modern concept of childhood.

Of all the studies on the history of childhood, Aries' monumental work has been the most influential. It became the core inspiration for the development of a new discipline by historians on the history of the family.<sup>9</sup> However, the scientific status of his work and some of his generalized notions have been criticized. Specifically, his main thesis, claiming that the medieval world did not have a concept of childhood, has been contested by research findings of recent medieval and Renaissance scholars.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on original medical, educational, and scientific texts, literary works, and visual representations, they concluded that both the medieval and Renaissance times did recognize the two life stages of childhood and adolescence. Such findings remind us to be very careful in making generalizations about the status of childhood and the lives of children in the past. Earlier researchers were pioneers and painted their new insights in large brush strokes on an empty canvas. Modern day researchers, with their wealth of new information and stringent scientific standards, challenged previously accepted beliefs and helped us separate science from fiction. Keeping this in mind, cultural historians today widely accept the thesis holding that the idea of childhood is one of the great inventions of the Renaissance. They also argue that the modern idea of childhood, as understood today in Western Europe and North America dates from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and

became widely recognized and accepted since that time.

### *Children and Families in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

In Western Europe, the large-scale transformation of the traditional family into the modern, nuclear family became firmly established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This fundamental metabolic shift was directly related to the tremendous social, cultural, and economic changes which took place in the light of the combined effects of the French and Industrial Revolutions, leading to division of labor, large-scale urbanization, and a break-up of the intergenerational family structure.

The modern family started to distance itself from its neighbours and moved indoors with a new sense of privacy and domesticity. Gradually, home became a safe haven, a bastion of comfort and security in a rather harsh and demanding outside world.<sup>11</sup> Prototypically, the modern family was tightly structured and provided clear boundaries between the worlds of adults and children, work and home, and private and public lives. Roles and functions for the various family members were clearly delineated, with father leaving home for work and mother staying home to take care of her children and perform domestic tasks. Children respected their parents and their authority was unquestioned as moral and religious values guided their lives. Shorter<sup>12</sup> found the modern nuclear family cultivated the sentiments of romantic love, maternal love, domesticity, and embraced the value of togetherness over and above the individual.

Childhood was increasingly seen as a separate stage of life which needed to be devoted to education and preparation for adulthood. Preserving the children's innocence and protecting them from the secrets and harsh realities of adult life was insisted upon and became key characteristics of the new concept of childhood. Separate children's clothing, special toys, and a stream of literature for and about children were developed. Gradually, the child's experiential world became a very protected and separate island, isolated from adults and society at large. In the European upper classes, children were even separated from their parents at home as they spent most of their time in nurseries and with tutors, and saw their parents only a few hours a day. As affluence spread to the working classes, they too participated in mass education and the creation of a separate world of children. In a sweeping statement, Plumb wrote of that time that "no child anywhere in the Western world was expected to share the tastes, the appetites, the social life, of an adult."<sup>13</sup>

In England, the Victorian era was coined a "golden age of childhood"—at least for the middle and upper classes. Growing attention was paid to children, not only by their parents, but also by artists, writers, and toy manufacturers. In this romantic period, many writers adored children for their perceived innocence. For example, Dickens wrote:

They are idols of heart and household;  
They are angels of God in disguise;

His sunlight still sleeps in their tresses,  
His glory still gleams in their eyes.<sup>14</sup>

This adoration was also reflected in many period paintings. Numerous sentimentalized paintings of boys and girls from upper and middle classes appeared, especially in the second half of the century. The period paintings did reveal large gender differences between girls and boys. Girls were mostly portrayed as sweet, pious, pretty, passive, and self-effacing. One also notices the image of the maternal little girl taking care of her siblings, pet, or doll, or role-playing the social roles of wife and mother performing domestic tasks. Actually, there was not much difference in the perception of girls and women. Casteras commented on the paintings of the time that “the perfect woman was girlish, and the perfect girl was womanly.”<sup>15</sup> Boys, on the other hand, were pictured as freer, more independent, adventurous, mischievous, and aggressive. Misconduct, bullying, and even violent behaviour were portrayed, especially in schools and school yards.

Where the upper and middle classes could afford the luxury of childhood, it was short-lived, endangered, or absent in the lower classes. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, armies of neglected and destitute children filled the streets of London, and juvenile crime, abuse, and homelessness were common phenomena. The plights of the poor and disadvantaged were superbly described by the famous English novelist Charles Dickens, known especially for his sympathetic characterization and his critique of social injustice. For example, in his well-known novel *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), Dickens vividly described how his little hero fell in the hands of London’s sordid underworld. *David Copperfield* (1849-1850) was partially modeled after his own boyhood suffering and referred to as his own “favorite child.”<sup>16</sup> The numerous child labourers in textile and other mill industries, who knew no childhood at all, revealed the darkest side of the Industrial Revolution. The avoidance of these painful and disturbing realities of everyday life was one of the many displacements characteristic of the middle and upper classes of the time.

### ***Two Worlds of Childhood in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

Under the impact of Western modernization, the transition from traditional to modern families and a modern childhood is still taking place in many parts of the world. In a remarkable phenomenological study, Edelstein<sup>17</sup> showed how this change was effected within two generations in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland. He described the life-world of traditional subsisting sheep-raising families in contrast to its mirror-image of the modern, urban, industrial family, and outlined the structural features that characterized each world. He pointed out that the three-generation traditional farming community was cyclical in nature and resistant to change. It was stable, ordered, yet clear and transparent to all, including adults and children. For the child, learning took place through direct experiential participation in the adult world of work. He wrote:

In principle, the universe of action is freely accessible to everybody. Intimate knowledge of all possible actions and any possible goal and intention, of every skill and every response, is shared by everyone on the farm, child and adult, man and woman, young and old.<sup>18</sup>

It is this universal access to all significant events and actions, and this complete sharing of meanings, that captured the essence of being a child or an adult in a traditional world.

In contrast, Edelstein found that the modern system, with its division of labor and dissociation of generations, dissolved the old cyclical, self-contained pattern, and replaced it with an inherently unstable and linear metaphor of incremental progress and change. In work, adults and children were distanced and father's work was beyond the children's experience and horizon, which made his intentions and actions inaccessible to them. Immediate participatory experience was replaced by verbally mediated, vicarious experience, which in turn led to obscurity in everyday life and to a very different understanding of the social world. Moreover, in the modern system, children were separated from adults in schools, where they received formal and abstract instruction and were ordered by age and grade. A further distancing took place as they discovered a peer group with its own educational power and a set of rules that applied only to them and excluded the adults. Edelstein concluded:

In sum, the division of labor, the division of the generations, and the dissociation of functions characteristic of the modern system led to a fundamental reorganization of the entire pattern of life and of the total set of cognitive rules guiding interaction among peers and parents.<sup>19</sup>

Edelstein's systematic phenomenological study endorsed the historical relativity of social and cultural change and transformation in constituting different worlds of childhood—worlds that are lived and experienced in fundamentally different ways. A similar cultural transformation is unfolding in South Africa, in the post-apartheid era, where many African children who grew up in traditional rural farming villages find themselves today as adults in a modern urban culture where they own their own homes, raise their own children, and actively participate in administration and leadership roles for the first time in history. The transition from traditional to modern families and childhood does not necessarily need hundreds of years to unfold!

The two worlds of childhood, traditional and modern, continue to interface and coexist in many countries around the world. A fascinating literary description of children's own experiences can be found in Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*.<sup>20</sup> Here Orleana Price and her four daughters, 15-year-old Rachel, 11-year-old twins Leah and Adah, and 5-year-old Ruth May, narrate their experience of living as an American missionary family in an isolated Congolese village in the late 1950s. To the astonishment of the girls, young village children ran around naked while playing and amusing themselves. They observed that from the age of 6 or 7, little village girls were helping their mothers in the fields by collecting food and water for the family, or by staying home to take care of their younger siblings. They also saw that the 10-year-old village

boy, Nelson, was quite capable of being a servant performing multiple domestic tasks. When Lea turned 12, she was shocked and amazed to see village girls her age being pregnant or having their own baby. She correctly concluded that there was little difference between the village children and their parents, and that these children have “no childhood at all.”

### ***Modern Childhood in the Early to Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century***

In embracing an evolutionary perspective, early social scientists saw the modern nuclear family and the recognition of childhood as a separate stage of life as indications of having reached the highest level of development and as manifestations of our belief in progress. The family reflected the modern themes of order and regularity, as well as the belief in universal moral principles and values. Within the interior of the modern family, the child continued to feel overall safe, secure, and protected from the outside world. The parents, from their side, continued to do all they could to protect the child’s innocence. The nuclear family’s structure, sentiments, and values were especially beneficial for children and reflected a degree of child-centeredness hitherto unknown in the history of childhood. This ideal of a sheltered, protected childhood was captured by Ellen Key when she coined the 20<sup>th</sup> century “the century of the child.”<sup>21</sup>

The evolutionary viewpoint and the modern assumptions of progress, regularity, and universality were also embraced by the emerging professionals of developmental psychology, who became the academic authority on children and childhood. Within their natural science paradigm, they studied children as ahistorical, isolated objects and searched for correlations and general laws of development. They came to believe that the growing child must progress through a series of predetermined, linear, age-related stages of development. Freud was the first to formulate a theory of psychosexual stages of child development and to open the door to the new discipline of child psychoanalysis. Thus, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the importance of childhood as a separate stage of life was endorsed by developmental psychologists, child psychiatrists, and an ever wider range of mental health professionals. For the first time in history, the child had become an object of scientific study and professional psychoanalysis.

With the inception of a family-consumer economy between World Wars I and II, the economic conditions improved to allow many more previously working mothers to also stay home with their children. In the modern family, mother, child, and home more and more formed a haven unto themselves as not only the children, but also their mothers, were separated from the rest of the adult life. The sociologist Liljestrom observed: “In the early part of the century then, in one country after the other, childhood is transforming into a motherland.”<sup>22</sup> However, wives and mothers became increasingly burdened by their perceived responsibility to meet the emotional and physical needs of their husbands and their children. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this condition created an *imbalance* in favor of children, but at the cost of their mothers, with cracks appearing in the family’s ideals and sentiments.<sup>23</sup> For example, the

sentiment of maternal love, which was at first actively endorsed by child psychologists and psychiatrists, fractured when these professionals attributed children's perceived emotional problems to maternal overprotection. The highly prized sentiment of domesticity, which portrayed home as a haven of comfort and love, was also challenged as it obscured the presence of conflict and unhappiness in everyday family life. Furthermore, women's home culture was undermined by a rising consumer society, which in turn contributed to smoldering feelings of emptiness and insignificance.

In Western Europe, the belief in childhood as a separate, protected space was blown apart by the realities of World War II. The children saw and heard the destruction and devastation around them, experienced their fathers leaving home, and partook in the anxieties and insecurities of the adult world.<sup>24</sup> In North America, the influence was less directly felt or experienced and the modern concepts of family and childhood remained more or less intact until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By then, the family came under mounting pressures in the face of a rapidly changing social, cultural, and economic world. The increasing industrialization and mechanization of life, with its values of production, achievement, and efficiency, threatened the familial values of love, caring, and commitment.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, mental health professionals became aware that society itself was contributing to psychological conflicts and suffering. In the mid-fifties, van den Berg astutely perceived the rise of neuroticizing factors in society affecting the well-being of its members. These included confusion about changing family roles and values, an increase in interpersonal conflicts, an unprecedented high rate of mobility, which in turn uprooted families and affected their relationships with neighbours and friends, and an increasing incoherence of society itself.<sup>26</sup>

Concerned about the well-being of children, medical and mental health professionals contributed to new ways of child-rearing and helping emotionally disturbed children. Highly relevant and influential amongst these initiatives were the works of Benjamin Spock, Virginia Axline, and Erik Erikson, which in their simultaneous complementarity reflected a homogeneous synchronistic development. Soon after World War II, in 1946, the well-known Dr. Spock published his *Baby and Child Care*.<sup>27</sup> This book was a revolutionary and instantly successful new guide to raising babies and small children. Spock broke with the strict, moralistic, and regimented child-rearing theories of the past, which he described as condescending, scolding, and intimidating. Instead, he emphasized children's needs for love, understanding, patience, and protection. He urged parents to show more affection to their babies, and offered quiet and reassuring advice on what he perceived as a commonsense approach based on discipline and love. In doing so, Spock hoped to contribute to a saner and more compassionate society.<sup>28</sup> His book became one of the bestselling publications of all times with nearly 50 million copies sold in over 40 translations. Spock helped raise three generations of children, "hailed by many parents as the savior of their young, and denounced by others as the unwitting architect of the permissive society."<sup>29</sup>

In a concurrent development, in 1947, Axline published her classic work, *Play Therapy*, in which she applied Carl Roger's new nondirective therapy to emotionally disturbed children.

Through rich illustrations, she exposed in a masterly way their inner world of pain, loneliness, fear, hatred, and love, and showed how they can be healed through expressing their feelings in the context of a warm and permissive therapeutic relationship. In his classic work, *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erikson made another timely and significant contribution towards understanding children in their social world. He expanded Freud's view of the child and addressed the sociocultural context and the social relationships in which children find themselves. His famous eight stages of psychosocial development offered a novel conceptualization, not only of the child, but of the whole lifespan from infancy to old age. Erikson's contribution was unique among traditional developmental psychologists, whose approach for the most part remained limited by not taking history nor sociocultural context of childhood into account.

A heterogeneous synchronistic development occurred around 1950 with the influx of television into American homes. For the first time, a visual portrayal of news and dramatized forms of entertainment were broadcasted directly to parents and children. TV's portrayal of childhood, family, and society was at first highly censored and selective. Period movies such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) vividly portrayed family sentiments and values.<sup>30</sup> For example, mother's love and total devotion to her husband and children, without any personal ambition, were portrayed as the ultimate source of emotional support. Common themes in family shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, and *Father Knows Best* were well furnished and clean homes, parents always available for advice, guidance and setting limits, games, winning and losing, homework and dates.<sup>31</sup> As Charren reported:

In the 50s and 60s, the typical TV family lived in a home that was always spotless, with a mom and dad who were always caring and always available, and children (always cute) whose most traumatic crises were homework assignments and broken prom dates. In those antiseptic TV families, mother was always around to serve cookies and milk, and father really did know best.<sup>32</sup>

In remaining silent about family problems and hiding the realities of poverty, violence, and abuse, the foremost aim was to protect and shelter children and youth.

Despite rising problems and tensions in personal, familial, and social relationships, the cherished view of childhood within the nuclear family was still actively cultivated in fiction and in real life, and upheld by the social institutions of the times. The world of children and the world of adults still occupied different spaces and were kept apart. Strong boundaries between children and their parents were maintained to protect children from knowledge about sexuality and adult problems, and to ensure a happy and carefree childhood. The phrase that claims "children should be seen but not heard" was still believed and the idea that parents could learn something from their children was unheard of.<sup>33</sup> Plumb remarked that in view of the myriad of warning signs, attitudes of parents and educators towards children needed to change, but instead adults held on to "old patterns of overt deference and unquestioned obedience. . . .

Repression, conformity, discipline, and exclusion were until lately the historically bred attitudes of most educators and parents.”<sup>34</sup> Children’s and adolescents’ clothes, hairstyles, and behaviour still had to conform to old standards, and reading remained strongly censored. Kept out of the adult world, the adolescents were the first to rebel and create a world made up of their own music, clothes, and morals—all closely watched by their younger siblings who would soon follow in their own way.

By the late sixties and early seventies, the structure of the modern nuclear family began to crumble and the boundaries between parents and children were challenged as never before in history. Shorter attributed the decline of the modern family to three interrelated and historically unprecedented factors.<sup>35</sup> In brief, first the adolescents rebelled and broke away from the value orientation of their parents in favor of a new peer subculture, which led to a definite discontinuity between the generations. Second, the family as a whole was undermined by a new instability in marital relationships as evident in a dramatic increase in divorce rates in the U.S.A. and throughout the Western world. Third, the new service economy opened the door to women, which enabled them in principle to break away from unsatisfactory relationships, in view of a new economic independence. After years of being subservient to the needs of their husbands and children, many women were ready to embrace their own interests and aspirations. As they became convinced that they could pursue a career and be effective mothers at the same time, they increasingly left home in favor of outside employment. At the same time, the child’s welfare became partially entrusted to the public realm. Gradually, a host of public services for children were created, including daycare centers and nurseries, served by an expanding range of professionals. To reflect these new realities of professionalization and socialization of children, Liljestrom coined the term “public child,”<sup>36</sup> in contrast to the highly protected “private child” of the prototypical modern Western family.

### ***Towards a Postmodern View of Children and Childhood***

In our contemporary Western world, we are once again caught up in an accelerated pace of change, this time of a speed and magnitude that seem unprecedented and a unique hallmark of our times. Over the past two decades, profound shifts in perception and thought have pervaded the social sciences and have filtered through to everyday life. Postmodernists feel that we live in a twilight of transition between an unworkable past and an unknown future.<sup>37</sup> They critique the age of modernism with its principles and beliefs in progress, regularity, and universality. They also reject the traditional natural science model with its clear logical boundaries and its objectified notions of truth and reality. In response to the perceived shortcomings of modernism, postmodernists celebrate diversity and a belief in differences, irregularity, and particularity.<sup>38</sup> Within this stance, they embraced anew the value of description and narration of daily life experiences in literature and in the human sciences. Postmodernism's very openness defies definition as it draws its inspiration from various philosophical and theoretical orientations, including hermeneutics, constructivism, and feminism.

The fundamental changes that occurred in Western society in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have, in my view, profoundly affected both adults and children as well as parent-child relationships. However, very little research has been done on the postmodern family and the concept of postmodern child barely exists. Developmental psychology, despite numerous intriguing and informative empirical studies on all aspects of childhood, still remained an experimental, ahistorical discipline, and as such failed to pay attention to the changing nature of childhood. Only recently have some developmental psychologists become aware of this limitation and, in a promising new initiative, started to collaborate with historians in their study of childhood.<sup>39</sup> From a metaleptic point of view, children reflect the sociocultural climate in which they live and are subject to social change and upheaval.

Today, the prototypical modern child in a modern nuclear family has almost disappeared as the majority of children find themselves with dual-career parents or in single-parent families. Many other children live in blended families or in alternate household arrangements which in turn may be reconstituted from time to time. This diversity gives many faces to the contemporary child and family living today. Elkind described the postmodern family as *permeable*, with flexible and osmotic boundaries.<sup>40</sup> In an unprecedented comparative analysis of modern and postmodern families, he described his perceived shifts in ideals and values. He found that in the postmodern family, the ideal of maternal love has been replaced by shared parenting, which involves, in principle, equal parental participation in child-rearing as well as the involvement of outside caretakers. Furthermore, the modern family's ideal of domesticity, which provided emotional security and protection to children, gave way in postmodern families to a certain urbanity, where home becomes primarily a meeting place for parents and children, a place to take a rest from their busy lives. With it, the once primary value of family togetherness gave way to the value of autonomy where the needs of the individual members are considered most important, and individual competence in both children and parents is valued above all. Despite the fact that these new ideals and values are fraught with difficulties and

tensions in daily life, they have brought about a transformation in the family's basic structure, roles, and functions. In Elkind's view, the postmodern family reflects a new *imbalance*, and this time in favor of the needs of women, but at the cost of children whose emotional needs for security, attention, and affection are not adequately met.

In the context of our changing society, family, and values, Elkind speaks passionately for children. He has argued that we have made life harder for them in service of our own interest by believing that they are competent and can therefore be hurried along to grow up faster. In his view, "our contemporary conception of Superkid, competent to deal with all of life's vicissitudes, must be seen as a social invention to alleviate parental anxiety and guilt."<sup>41</sup> It is true that children today need time to grow up and time to play. They want to and need time to share their own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings with their parents, who are after all the most important people in their lives and their primary role models. Influenced by self-help books and the writings of developmental psychologists and educators, parents today are more knowledgeable about their children than ever before, yet spend less time with them. Part of the answer lies in the rapid pace, the instability, and the incoherence of our society, which tend to evoke interpersonal conflicts and stress. Parents under stress tend to be self-absorbed and have difficulty seeing their children as whole persons in their own right. Many working mothers in dual-career families suffer from stress related to an overload of demands. The plight of single working parents without the support and companionship of an adult partner is even greater as they have to carry alone the full load of responsibility for their children. Some single parents demand too much of their children by expecting them to perform adult roles or in using them as confidants to provide emotional support when in distress. Children's own emotional needs tend to be overlooked when they are drawn prematurely into a troubled adult's world.

The movie *About a Boy* (2002), based on Nick Hornby's bestselling novel, offers an excellent dramatized illustration of the life of a 12-year-old boy, Marcus, living with his single, depressed mother. In a clear role reversal, this film vividly portrays the plight of the boy who takes on adult responsibilities by taking care of his depressed mother and helping a self-indulged bachelor, Will, to act like a grown-up. The adults rise to the challenge as the mother finds new hope to reassume her role, and Will in turn helps Marcus become "a cool kid." The movie is also a testimony to a child's power of love and concern for his mother, and to his courage and determination to help her.

In a general sense, we find that in the media's portrayal of postmodern families and children, the control and censorship of the fifties and sixties disappeared in favor of a candid openness towards the realities of life. By the end of the seventies, TV families had changed greatly and it was rare to find a happy, well-functioning family on-screen. From the eighties onward, parents and children viewed single-parent families and adults dealing with real life problems like infidelity, divorce, unemployment, and alcoholism. Sitcoms like the highly popular *Cosby Show* in the eighties, featuring a successful dual-career family with five children who still found time for each other and knew how to enjoy life, presented a clear minority voice.

### *Childhood and the Electronic Media*

In the early eighties, Postman questioned what made childhood at first unnecessary, then inevitable, and, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, difficult to sustain. In his thought-provoking book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*,<sup>42</sup> he argued that childhood emerged as a consequence of the age of literacy and was disappearing as we entered the age of electronic media. Postman explained that where the demands of acquiring the complex skills of reading separated adults from children, the discovery of electronic media once again transformed communication in such a way that it is bridging the distance between generations. Electronic media, and especially TV, which incorporated the electronic and graphic revolution, created a world of simultaneity and immediacy, releasing an increasing amount of anonymous and discontinuous information which bypassed personal experiencing. With TV, in comparison to books and reading, the predominant mode of discourse changed from word to image, from abstract to concrete, from rational to emotive. Unlike reading, watching TV required no skills and was available to everyone—young and old alike. Postman concluded that TV eroded the dividing line between adults and children, and led to the disappearance of childhood.

From the beginning, children were drawn to TV as it was immediately accessible to them without conceptual barriers and exposed them to experiences never available to previous generations. American children watch five to six hours of TV per day and have done so for decades. Today, children often join their parents and watch many of the same shows which openly portray problematic adult issues. As such, they have become quite knowledgeable about the major issues of our time, including sex, violence, drugs, and crime. Frequent concerns have been expressed about the meaning-impact on children of these readymade sensational experiences which tend to crowd out what they experience on their own. It leads to a pseudosophistication in which children know and can talk about things which they do not understand. In television watching, dramatized secondhand experiences replace personal presence, participation, and experiencing which are so central to the formation of childhood. Liljestrom warned that if the emotional needs of children are not respected and responded to by significant adults, they may seek satisfaction in the mass media and succumb to the emotional world of the “sensation industry.”<sup>43</sup> She spoke of the “commercial child” of the marketplace to reflect another and darker reality as increasingly younger age-groups are targeted and a growing children’s market has become evident.

Buckingham exposed and critically discussed two opposing viewpoints on childhood, in relation to the media.<sup>44</sup> The first is the “death of childhood” thesis which is directed mostly at television. The second holds a contrasting optimistic view, i.e., that children are liberated and empowered by the media, including television, the computer, and the Internet. In the despairing voice of the death of childhood thesis, the electronic media are seen as having the singular power of exploiting children’s vulnerability and destroying their innocence. Postman was its first and most vocal proponent, and blamed especially television for undermining the traditional view of childhood by giving children unrestricted access to knowledge and popular

culture. By doing so, the boundaries between adults and children were blurred and increasingly eroded childhood itself. In a less radical fashion, Elkind<sup>45</sup> and others accused the media of indoctrinating children into the secrets of adult life. Whereas this negative view of the relationship between children and electronic media remains the dominant one, the positive viewpoint provides a mirror image in which electronic media are seen as empowering and liberating tools, offering opportunities for learning, creativity, and interactive communication.<sup>46</sup> Here children are depicted as the new electronic generation and aren't considered passive victims, but active agents, sophisticated and empowered by the media. However, despite their enormous positive education potential, it is broadly acknowledged that computers can be potentially harmful. For example, computer games may lead to imitative violence, and chat rooms may actually become problematic to the extent that distant and anonymous virtual communication is preferred to direct face-to-face relationships and interaction.

In an incisive critique, Buckingham<sup>47</sup> claimed that the pessimistic and optimistic viewpoints about children's relationship to the media harbor similar weaknesses. As a social constructivist, he argued that both positions draw on essentialist notions of childhood and of technology. Both reveal a technological determinism in holding that electronic media present an autonomous force which will necessarily have a direct negative or positive impact irrespective of how it is received or used. As such, they reflect a romantic view of children and do not take the children's lived experience, in their relationship to the media, into account. His foundational critique can be endorsed from a phenomenological point of view.

Buckingham holds that the idea of childhood is not a given nor a fixed category, but is subjected to an ongoing process of definition. He argues in favour of research that will provide a systematic social account of the relationship between children and the media, within a broader context of social, institutional, and historical change. Herein he indirectly supports a metabletic research approach. In his own multiple research studies, Buckingham included children's increased access to social and cultural worlds that were until recently largely confined to adults. He found that children's TV, in the United Kingdom, has gradually changed over the past 20 years to incorporate previously forbidden topics such as sex, drugs, and family breakdown, and to reflect "a sensuality and cynicism" unthinkable before. Far from implying any direct, causal relationships, he noted that recent changes in the media and in childhood seem to reinforce each other. He wrote: "In general terms, the changes in both domains seem to be characterized by a growing sense of instability and insecurity: established distinctions and hierarchies are breaking down as new cultural forms and new identities emerge."<sup>48</sup>

### *In Search of Childhood*

From a historical point of view, our modern concept of childhood is comparatively recent in origin and reflects a minority view confined to Western industrialized nations. The modern concept of childhood as it emerged in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was based primarily on discourses about children, on our *ideas* about children, rather than on the experiential realities of their lives.

Until recently, the scientific study of childhood was the exclusive domain of developmental psychologists. Influenced by evolutionary theory and logical positivism, they tend to see childhood as a biological category and children as isolated agents who need to proceed through a logical sequence of stages towards adulthood. Children are held to be initially immature, irrational, asocial, and in need of a long developmental journey towards becoming mature, rational, and social adults. Notwithstanding their tremendous contribution over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, developmental psychologists still see children as incomplete adults and have endorsed a strong separation between childhood and adulthood. This stance is increasingly questioned by cultural historians and sociologists of childhood, and also by a few voices within the discipline itself, who critique its neglect of the influence of history, society, and culture.<sup>49</sup> Most of these scholars propose instead a social-constructivist approach and hold that childhood is a historical, social, cultural construction, or a cultural invention, rather than a biological category. In general, this research views children not in terms of what they are lacking, but rather as sophisticated and active agents who contribute to their own linguistic construction of meaning and reality.

In support of the social constructivists, we could say that the concept of childhood is at least partially constructed by the perceptions and interpretations of adults. But childhood is not *only* a social construction. Phenomenologically speaking, adult constructions of childhood remain secondary expressions of the children's own lived experiences of reality, which form the essence of their childhood as lived. Moreover, childhood is also partially a biological reality as the child has to grow up and develop his potential abilities through experience and over time. From a phenomenological point of view, children are social beings from the beginning as they are born into intersubjectivity and live in relationship to self and others. Children are also *embodied* subjects in the world. They live in a matrix of embodied relatedness where their primary perceptions and lived experiences form the basis of their personal, social, and emotional development. Children should not be defined as incomplete adults, nor as miniature adults, but rather as unique persons in their own right. They have their own ways of being—of relating, feeling, imagining, and thinking—as they journey towards maturity. Although the modern Western *concept* of childhood is rapidly disappearing in our age of electronic media, childhood as *lived* has not disappeared. From a metabletic point of view, childhood today is *lived differently* because the historical and sociocultural contexts have changed.

In understanding the changing nature of childhood, we need to see it in relationship to adulthood, for the child is only childlike to the extent that the adult is not.<sup>50</sup> Children in our

times tend to grow up faster and enter puberty about two and a half years earlier in comparison to children at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>51</sup> Growing up faster today is related to believing that children are competent and can be hurried along. It is even more strongly related to the flood of information children are exposed to in our society, especially information previously regarded as secretive and unsuitable to children, but now openly available through TV and the Internet. Some writers observed that the distance which so clearly separated adults and children in the age of modernism has decreased. Bly, for example, argued that children have become more adultlike and adults, more childlike. He claimed that with a decline in adult authority and the pressures of an equalitarian society, a certain *leveling* in adult-child relationships has taken place. In an alarming fashion, he wrote that we have created a highly technological and affluent society of half-adults.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, a minority of writers believe that the distance between childhood and adulthood has increased and that the boundaries between them have been reinforced in view of a rise in children's culture, which excludes adults and sets the children apart.<sup>53</sup> In both arguments, we see the remaining need for a dichotomous and categorical separation between the generations.

Rather than holding on to a categorical or a stage theory of development, it seems more realistic and productive to view adults and children in a *continuous* and dynamic relationship to each other. In our postmodern era, a complex reconfiguration of the relations between generations is taking place, with adults and children once again moving closer together in sharing much of the same world, but also moving apart in seeking separate domains which they can claim their own. In an interrelated fashion, these and possible other factors have led to an *end* of the modern conception of childhood, and culminated in a qualitatively different *type* of childhood, which is *lived differently* in comparison to traditional and modern times.

From a metabletic point of view, we can conclude that contemporary childhood has changed significantly in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A metabletic shift from modern to postmodern childhood has taken place in the sense that a new way of life with new meanings has emerged, expressed simultaneously across various fields of human activity. Contemporary childhood has a shorter duration, fluid boundaries, and stands close to the adult world. In comparison to modern childhood, it is less protected by adults, more exposed to potentially harmful influences, and consequently more vulnerable. Postmodern children are qualitatively different from premodern and modern children, as they move continuously forward and backward in a dynamic relationship to the adult world, and at the same time aim to maintain their own flexible boundaries and their own distinct characteristics.

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