

# Poverty Is Not a Human Characteristic: A Retrospective Study of Comprehending and Educating Impoverished Children

Kerstin Holmlund

Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

This article describes and compares the differences between a feature-oriented understanding and a relational understanding of a child's behavior and the different ways of educating children which these two empirical and theoretical perspectives offer. The feature-oriented perspective focuses on the nature and character of impoverished children as the cause of their life situation and behaviors. However, the relational perspective focuses on how material assets affect children. In the first case, education is a question of saving the children from bad genes or a nonexistent upbringing. In the second case, it is an opportunity to change the material conditions for poverty-stricken citizens. During the industrialization period, gender and power issues were phenomena which were full of value judgments. Hence, this article also discusses what it means for a child to be born in a tradition-bound patriarchal society and have her/his future in an emergent industrial world which, yet, was still unequal.

*Keywords:* poverty, childhood, education, upbringing, feature-oriented understanding, relational understanding, industrialization, social instability

## Introduction

The context surrounding the child can be regarded as an urgent societal and future issue (Arendt, 1998), and therefore, always current. This article takes its point of departure from such a perspective and begins with a brief description of cultural and societal circumstances that characterized the industrialization period in Stockholm, Sweden between 1870 and 1910. Towards the end of the 19th century, industrialization led to migration from rural areas to urban places of work and, hence, a rapid increase in population in industrial cities, such as Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. The new residents came to a city with a long history which was now in the throes of change. Government offices and public institutions and offices were centrally located, while public elementary schools were scattered throughout the city (William-Olsson, 1937). The industrialization period was characterized by social instability, housing problems, overcrowding, segregation and poverty. New professions were created in the office, business and transport sectors, while the population of industrial workers grew and the proportion of women in the workforce reached 40%. New demands were imposed on schools and punishment for begging and rules concerning unemployment were enforced. Housing reflected levels of income. In certain districts, the lower class was extremely overrepresented. Many citizens were concerned about the social change and the unpredictable future of the city. What would be the significance of the presence of children and youth on the streets and squares, who was responsible for their actions and how would this scenario develop? These were key questions for decision-makers and members of the public and constituted a

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Kerstin Holmlund, professor, Department of Education, Umeå University.

storm cloud for those who relied on the values of tradition to educate and mold the younger (underprivileged) generation of the time. However, for the wage earners and low-paid industrial workers, it was a question of a daily struggle to secure the necessities of life. It was in the midst of this progressive change, between a dysfunctional tradition and an uncertain future that the children of the lower class found themselves.

Although they had the same basic needs as the children of other social groups, lower class children felt their conditions of life differently. Some of the characteristics governing the lives of poor children included the following: (1) the children lacked the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing and proper housing; (2) the children were in danger of becoming sick and dying from sub-standard living conditions; (3) the children were involved early in providing for their families; (4) the children became a part of public scrutiny when they were in public places due to divergent external attributes connected to social grouping, such as clothing, footwear and begging; (5) the children were likely to become separated from their homes and families by decision-makers; (6) the children were placed in correctional institutions and foster homes; and (7) the children between the ages of 12 and 14 often had two tasks of attending school and working for wages.

The national regulations of the Poor Relief Board gave clear directives as to how the adult population should go about providing for the individual. Every healthy adult should be responsible for his/her own subsistence and parents should also provide for their children. The duty to work characterized the zeitgeist as well as the function of poor relief in Sweden at the time. The legal interpretation of the duty to work obligated mothers to provide for themselves and their children by earning wages first-hand. The factual possibilities that the mother had were not to encroach on her requirement to be a provider. Having a large number of small children was not seen as an obstacle to this requirement. However, these were unrealistic demands with which many parents, especially those who were low-paid, struggled constantly. If people who were fit for work failed to provide for themselves, then the representatives of society pointed out their weaknesses and shortcomings.

### **A Relational Perspective on Children and Childhood**

The industrialized society was laden with inequality and there were obvious differences between diverse social groups. The opinions as to what caused the current societal problems and why some children were poor varied in Sweden, as it did in many other countries (Carlsson, 1966)<sup>1</sup>. In the following text, two different ways of understanding contemporary social problems will be presented and analyzed.

The author of the internationally distributed book, *The Century of the Child*, Ellen Key<sup>2</sup> was familiar with contemporary social issues and the living conditions of poor children. She was interested in children and gave priority to a relational perspective in her social analysis of the society of the time. For example, she noted how the same illness could affect children from different social backgrounds. Key (1909; 1910; 1996) argued that the standard of housing could imply that poor children died in unhealthy dark hovels from an illness, while children of wealthy citizens survived it in healthy and light dwellings Key. The standard of housing affected children's lives and it was the poor children who were the losers. These conclusions were supported by studies of the living conditions of workers in Stockholm.

The family's financial resources were considered crucial in determining how many lodgers were needed to

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<sup>1</sup> Sten Carlsson claims that the social transformation in Sweden went faster than in the rest of Europe. His view is that, from a social perspective, the difference viewed retrospectively between the 1960s and 1860s in Sweden is greater than that between the 1860s and 1560s (pp. 309-310).

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Key (1849-1926), was a Swedish author, teacher, atheist and feminist. Her book *The Century of the Child* has been translated into 26 different languages. Key lived much of her life abroad between the years of 1900 and 1910.

pay the rent as well as for choices of the standard of the housing<sup>3</sup>. Inadequate wages of the workers and their living conditions were discerned as the real problems.

Another contemporary phenomenon, which Key linked to the workers' wages, was the causes and consequences of child labor. Within the glass industry, every second glass factory worker and every third glassblower had begun their profession by the age of 12. The work of the children was seen as a driving force behind the development of the industry. Key doubted whether the employers would hire child laborers if they received the same wages as an adult. Child labor was considered both psychologically and physically damaging to children and Key was critical over the treatment and judgment of these working children. She examined contemporary social relationships in her analysis of child behavior. Gangs of boys who were prevalent on the streets in the city were not viewed in isolation, but as a part of a larger social context. "Boy gangs" were considered as the result of a precociousness which was indeed rooted in child labor. These working children were thought to have been influenced by the way in which older men, with considerable financial and cultural capital behaved,

There hardly goes a week without boys reading about embezzlements within the upper class, often by grey-haired men, who nevertheless, had their childhood impressions in "the good old days", when today's "relaxed upbringing" could not exercise its influence! Not a day passes, without them seeing how members of the upper class, both old and young, satisfy their appetite for enjoyment. But for them—the children of the tenement and street—there is a call for Spartan virtue or an attempt to beat them into virtue. (Key, 1996, p. 66; 1909)

The term "embezzle" here is close in meaning to the idea of tricking someone. It has been previously seen in expressions, such as tricking the poor out of their money. It was, as such, loaded with value judgments and used to refer to phenomena among young and old men within the upper class. The term "upper class" had begun to be used in the 1880s (Hellquist, 1993) by certain groups of authors<sup>4</sup>. When Key's text was published, the concept had been in use for two decades.

In Key's vision of the future, the individuality of every person was to be respected and that included the child. Child labor and physical punishment would not exist. Her writings were seen as provocative at a time when laws, standards and social institutions unilaterally advocated harsh demands on the lower classes to solve contemporary social problems. Key was severely criticized by contemporary social actors. She has even been criticized for being conservative in her statements regarding gender differences (Lindén, 2002). If these statements are related to the contemporary regulations and praxis of poor relief advocating that (lower class) mothers, regardless of their social situation, should be wage earners to provide for their children, then her views can be considered as a part of the safeguards for children and thus progressive. Her criticism of feminism was also focused on the social aspect, not to elicit class hatred and the realization that poor women were in greater need of the existing jobs than those women who were wealthier (Levin, 1994). A clear commitment to equal social conditions was obviously included in her idea for society. Child development required the support of high-quality surroundings, and hence, the actual living conditions should be improved. But her proposals, knowledge and insights into these complex issues were never allowed to benefit the poor children (Holmlund, 1999). The abundantly expressed concern about contemporary social circumstances was founded on the view

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<sup>3</sup> Several studies of the living conditions of workers were carried out in Stockholm at this time.

<sup>4</sup> Jonas Love Almqvist (1793-1866), author and government official was considered the first person to use this term in print. Nils Herman Quiding (1808-1886), lawyer, journalist, writer and political thinker, is reported as having first used the terms "upper class" and "lower class". Quiding wrote under the pseudonym, "Nils Nilsson, working man". He is described as a utopian socialist.

that it was character that governed the situation of poor people and how they acted in different situations. Moral discussions offered solutions to problems and acted as a cover for preserving those social relationships which Ellen Key criticized.

### **A Vision of the Future**

How can we understand Ellen Key's thinking from a scientific perspective? It was social inequality and its effects on childhood that Key made discernible. The actions of children as individuals were related to the social context, so that social structures could appear. The identification of social patterns indicated that it was possible to understand and explain human behavior by analyzing structural relationships. These comparisons spoke against the prevalent contemporary view that it was the poor themselves and their personalities that were the main problems. Such a relationship-oriented train of thought has been advanced by researchers during the 1900s and 2000s.

In Bourdieu's analysis of society, he warned against a "substantialistic" way of viewing the social world. Characteristics which are removed from their context appear to prevent understanding of the social meaning that different capital resources provide for the positions, dispositions and choices of individuals (Bourdieu, 1989). Bourdieu (1998) proposed a relational analysis so that context-bound differences in the social world can appear. When a child's social behavior is related to the family's capital resources and the current structure of society, these context-bound differences can then be construed as social distinctions which have arisen due to the capital and social positions and dispositions which have shaped the conditions of the child's upbringing. Actual living conditions give rise to certain lines of actions—patterns that can work for the individual and be suited, and thus, also unsuited, to different social contexts and different norms. Relational analysis makes the material basis of social differences discernible. One of Bourdieu's methods of describing the significance of social background is connected to the concept *habitus* and reads as follows,

... (*Habitus*) makes distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong, between what is distinguished and what is vulgar, and so forth. But, the distinctions are not identical. Thus, for instance, the same behavior or even the same good can appear distinguished to one person, pretentious to someone else, or cheap or showy to yet another. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8)

This way of thinking about the actions of individuals and groups differs from schools of thinking in which events are isolated and not seen in the context of other contemporary situations and experiences. To assume that, it is inherent characteristics that determine how particular individuals and groups act is thought to lead to misjudgments which unjustifiably can adversely affect groups with weak capital resources, such as poor children and parents.

### **The Character as a Governing Motor for Poor Peoples' Social Situation**

Anna Hierta-Retzius<sup>5</sup> was a well-known public figure of the time and was the initiator of, among other things, the *arbetsstuga* (work cottage) for children. She was also the author of a book about these work cottages (Hierta-Retzius, 1897). Hierta-Retzius was socially concerned and had many social and political assignments.

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Hierta-Retzius was born in 1841 and died in 1924. Her father was a financier and founder of the newspaper *Aftonbladet*. A foundation as established in the memory of her father to donate money for the building of work cottages. Hierta-Retzius was chairperson for the committee for these work cottages. She was an active social politician in Stockholm. She was married to the physiologist, doctor, and professor Gustaf Retzius, who was also a member of the Swedish academy and who was nominated 23 times for the Nobel Prize yet never received it.

She enjoyed a comfortable position in society as well as economic, cultural and symbolic capital unknown by citizens who were less well-off. In her book *Work Cottages for Children*, poor children on the streets of Stockholm are viewed as (potential) criminals wandering around in gangs without parental supervision. Such descriptions appear to have risen from an adult perspective, in which fear and anxiety for the situation in society clouded the view of the conditions under which poor children were living. This is an explanation which has appeared in previous historical research about the children of the poor (Cunningham, 1991). The presence of these children in society has, therefore, been emotionally charged and has led to anxiety for both the future and the care of the so-called “helpless” children.

Hierta-Retzius (1897) explained to the reader what poor children, apparently unsupervised and uncared for by their parents, were up to. The text is written, as if the character of the writer was identical to that of the children. It states what the children saw, how they felt, what they did or did not do, as they passed shop windows full of wares. The reader is informed about what the children knew, what they owned or did not own, what they dared to do, how they disguised themselves and what happened during their “raids”. The reason why the poor children were seen in unfortunate circumstances on the city streets stemmed from a lack of upbringing. The reader is also informed that the result of this way of living for the children was self-evident. The future was mapped out for them. In fact, it was an ominous scenario that was depicted.

These descriptions did not clarify factual social situations and societal conditions. Value judgments of different events led the author to draw her conclusions about the permanent characteristics and traits of the children whose future could easily be predicted. These descriptions were in line with a contemporary understanding of the poor as a group with specific characteristics. As a group, the poor were judged, according to how well they followed rules and regulations. This socio-political understanding presented to the reader was characteristic of the time. It was colored by a praxis-oriented concept of causality which implied that an individual’s observation of a certain event resulted in a conclusion based on a certain empirical causal relationship. Begging may serve to illustrate how we understand this phenomenon. If a child was seen begging, it was judged to be the reproduction of an “impoverished character”. Begging should, therefore, always involve intervention on the part of society to correct this behavior, or even better, to break the process of its reproduction. Repeated offences of begging should lead to more stringent measures, such as flogging and correctional institutions. Similar thoughts existed regarding the dual roles of mothers both providing for their children as wage-earners while taking care of their children. If the mothers failed to pay their expenses, such as rent, food and fees for foster parents, then this resulted in increased control of their sphere of behavior. If any unfortunate incident occurred when the family was receiving government-financed assistance, it could be immediately withdrawn. If the social authorities considered life at home in any way unacceptable, children could be taken into care. If we transpose these examples into the scientific realm, they can shed light on the weaknesses of those contemporary socio-political phenomena and relevant concepts of causality (Bhaskar, 2008). The transgressions of mothers and children against the social norms may lead to measures being taken by society against them, but this does not imply that these events can predetermine the characters or actions of these individuals either at the present time or in the future. If the economic conditions of the children and parents had changed, the representatives of society would probably had been able to observe that the events that were expected had not taken place (i.e., no relationship of causality had been apparent).

When Hierta-Retzius (1897) presented her arguments for the value of the work cottages, fathers were depicted as slaves to alcohol. Mothers were viewed as passive observers with a number of “listless, ragged dirty

children” around them. Hierta-Retzius (1897) wondered why mothers did not try to change their situation. The author implied that the situation in question depended on those parents who had not learned to work when they were young, were unused to discipline, and hence, failed to take care of their homes. Similar conclusions were reached by poor relief authorities. Statements about the shortcomings of parents, right or wrong, became an indication of a scenario that the society of the time truly wanted to regulate. It became logical to argue for measures aimed at breaking the relationship of causality, educating parents, teaching children to work, keeping a level of order, and hence, transforming society.

### **Poor Relief—A Closed Organization**

Social measures built on causality with low internal validity can bring about unplanned effects when they work in a complex reality in which children and family relationships are affected. An organization that becomes instrumental in directing attention to agreed moral rules tends to exclude unknown social phenomena and inconvenient groups (Levin, 1992). Instead of utilizing the strengths and forces of different objects and actors, as in an open social system, the organization makes a strategic choice and becomes predictable. Standardization becomes both much desired and profitable. People, both adult and children, with unknown prerequisites have difficulty being seen and heard in such a system.

It is possible to apply another view of humanity (Archer, 2003). When people are given the opportunity to actively participate, they affect the sequence of events and prevent observers from reaching conclusions pointing to biological or environmental determinism. Reality (material and human) is by no means, therefore, a one-dimensional area only to be observed. A person’s own strength and the force of other objects in relationship with the individual can concur to reach certain goals, even those which are unstated. There are other ways of viewing the relationships of causality. Reality has a definable structure which does not depend on our understanding of it (Sayer, 2007; Scott, 2010). This structure implies that there is a collection of objects and actors that are internally related. Social systems are considered to be unforeseeable and social processes are assumed to be affected by how people cooperate with each other. When the causal forces of different objects meet, they bring about change. The expression that the change takes depends on the interaction between different actors and objects. The development of these events cannot be predetermined. The explanation for what has taken place can first be given when we have found the relevant mechanisms and unraveled how they have functioned, whether they have been activated and under what circumstances. To predetermine a child’s future based on their facial expressions, external attributes and situationally-based behavior, as when they were out on the streets, is impossible according to this understanding of the relationships of causality.

Hierta-Retzius’s (1897) observation about the characteristics of poor parents and their children was not a peculiarity for this writer alone. It has served as an example of a contemporary phenomenon within the poor relief organizations, where many varied analogous assumptions were made as to the reasons for poverty. The character of poor people and its relationship to poverty created an invisible line of action during the period in question. This attitude has been identified as a basic contemporary problem with restrictions for public undertakings both nationally and locally.

### **A Gender-Structured Society**

Male authority, with the support of the state, local authorities and associations dominated the public life in Stockholm at the time. It was men who passed laws and regulations, and for instance, decided that women

should not have the right to vote. Ownership, education and the correct gender—in other words, access to economic, cultural and symbolic capital—gave some men access to positions of power in society. Male dominance was extensive, but not all doors were closed. Within some areas of society, people united, created associations, proposed reforms and demanded change (Göransson, 2007; Broady & Ullman, 2002).

Gender and power issues were phenomena which were full of value judgments. The demands on unmarried and common law mothers, to provide for and take care of their children, were uncharacteristic of the time when compared with the situation of women in the wealthier social groups. Within the working class, there was a juxtaposition of a mother's requirement to provide for her children and the negligence towards the father's responsibility. Women were subordinate to men in the entire society, but some forms of subordination were linked to social class.

The division of gender roles was clearly self-evident, and having existed for a long period, was established and belonged to the spirit of the age (Hirschmann, 2008). The gender definitions of the time, though often unexpressed, had been created in a process that enabled an arbitrary social construction to function as a legitimate principle for classifying the public and private lives of women and men. A dominance relationship had attained status through an inherent condition by taking as a starting point the different gender-based biological conditions, giving the male a higher status, and then transferring these value principles to the social sphere (Bourdieu, 2001). Through such a transformation, this dominance appeared to be neutral. As long as both women and men, in their daily business, acted according to these principles of division, then seeing, thinking and language merely confirmed the existing divisions. The principles for gender order had forced their ways into the subjective idea of identity and society (Scott, 1998). This order was instinctively learned by people's experiences of how the family, school, church, state and society differentiated among strong-weak, heavy-light, above-below, etc.. These concepts corresponded to the foundational distinctions between what was male and female (Bourdieu, 2001). The principles had been there during the whole lifetime of the citizens of the day and had provided an invisible dividend in the form of growing symbolic capital for those groups whose lives could be organized according to these principles. Theoretically, it is still possible to speak about a false relationship of causality which, in this case, had power over gender relationships in the public sphere. Gender order was relationally constructed and implied different positions, rights and responsibilities for women and men, both within the family and society. The children of the time, some poor and others better off, were born, grew up and became adults in this male-dominated, socially stratified and yet progressive industrial society. Which gender norms, conscious or unconscious, did they bring into the future?

### **Conclusions**

This article has described two historical ways of addressing a young generation's education and future. At the beginning of the industrial era, the compulsory school was engaged in various fostering activities. The moral values that dominated the contemporary society were also essential for poor children's schooling. The school accepted child labor, adapted education to the employers' wishes, was engaged in combating child begging. A minimum of knowledge was obligatory. Thus, poor pupils' possibility to use the school as an opportunity to be integrated in the industrial society decreased. Gradually, the school became more independent and the focus on education became stronger. Education became a part of the democratization of society. Today, we face similar challenges as during the industrialization period, even though we live in a quite different society. Child poverty, false causalities, unequal educational systems, job opportunities and global

environmental issues are still social facts. Today, as well as then, a central issue for the future is what types of childhood opportunities exist. Do today's young generations meet transparent local and global communities where living conditions, interests and abilities are appealing for new democratic solutions to significant complex societal problems?

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