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Parents, Power, Poverty

On choice and responsibility in two parental communities

av

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores discourses about parenthood and subject ideals as they manifest in two Swedish parental web communities. The aim is to examine the perceived division of responsibility between the parents themselves and the institutions of the welfare state and furthermore to map out and deconstruct tensions between demands understood to be assigned to the parent and to society, respectively. The empirical material consists of extracts from web community conversations collected between 2006 and 2015. They are analysed using a deconstructive approach and by applying analytical tools stemming from discourse psychology. This means that the texts inserted in the parental web communities are investigated both for how they are rhetorically composed as well as for how the writer in question positions herself in relation to 'facts'. Theoretically, the material is probed by three large concepts that have guided the analysis – those of discourse, power and distinctions. They are broken down to more delimited concepts such as governmentality, discipline and technologies of the self, derived from the works of Michel Foucault, and distinction and misrecognition, which originate from Pierre Bourdieu. Perspectives of class and gender are intertwined in the analysis.

The analysis reveals a core metaphor about parenthood that seems to organise the content: Parenthood is conceptualized as work. The notion about parenthood as work is a residue from a more comprehensive ideal of the citizen-subject as morally upright, self-interested and hard-working, and from a view point about the world that emphasises the mental capacities of the subject and downplays structural inequalities or maldistribution of resources. In the web community conversations the parent appears to have a particular task assignment: To deliver human raw material (in the shape of the child) to a society full of demands. Hence, there is a bond established between the parent and the state/the society. In community conversations a notion of a particular societal promise of meritocracy manifests – if the subjects receive equal possibilities of refining themselves they now have the responsibility of transforming the possibilities into a good life.

The ideals for how to achieve the proper moral refinement are visible in the interpretative repertoires of the communities. The repertoires are versions of the world and prescriptions for how the world idealistically ought to function. The core repertoire was labelled *Mind over matter*. It summarises community opinions about the relation between the interior qualities of the subject and the external factors of the world and stipulates that things that take place in the psyche of the human being affect the material world, not the other way around. Three other repertoires regulate conceptions about the ideal subject. The first, *Morality comes first*, regulates the preferred constitution of the subject (who should focus on becoming morally sound and self-interested instead of formulating demands directed at the welfare state). The second, *You should reap what you sow*, revolves around expectations (the subject should expect returns that relate precisely to the amount of time or work invested in a particular venture). The third repertoire, *Don't take the easy way out* governs the discursively preferred work ethic of the subject (when working on one's refinement and when wanting to achieve something one cannot allow oneself any type of short-cuts). In the empiric material no repertoires are found that regulate society's tasks or responsibilities. Municipalities, political parties, boards and committees, law enforcement or taxes are absent as perceived prime movers of a subject. This discursive soil is the foundation of the prevailing community contempt for poor subjects, long-term ill, or unemployed, who are considered manifesting defect subjectivity and having neglected the duty to work with oneself. Economic situation is disentangled from the structural position of class and class is instead read as culture and behaviour which is thought of as possible to modify. The dissertation finds analytical connections between the preferred ideals and the transfer of a societal crisis embodied in neoliberal austerity programmes to a sense of uneasiness amongst the parents in community conversation, who imagine society falling apart, not because of austerity regimes but because of the people depending on them.