

# Performing Perfectly

Presentations of Childhood in Knutby Filadelfia  
Before and After the Dissolution of the Congregation

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# Abstract

Title: Performing Perfectly: Presentations of Childhood in the Knutby Filadelfia Congregation Before and After the Dissolution of the Congregation

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The Knutby Filadelfia Congregation, founded in 1921, started out as a Pentecostal congregation. It has, however, been considered a deviant and semi-isolated new religious movement ever since it became known to the public after a murder took place within its community in 2004. The massive media attention it received revealed the presence of a charismatic leader within the group, and the development of a new theology in which the charismatic leader was considered to be the Bride of Christ. After 2004, the congregation reinforced its boundaries with society, and then suddenly began to dissolve in 2016. This study discusses the development of totalistic features within the congregation from the perspective of sociologist Erving Goffman; it highlights the simultaneous presence of in-group as well as out-group social stigma; and it explores the conflicting presentations of childhood in the congregation in performances from before and after the dissolution of the congregation.

The results are based on empirical material from 25 semi-structured interviews with children and youth aged 7–25, 2 focus group interviews with youths, and 24 days of participant observations. Goffman's theoretical framework, including the key concepts total institutions, stigma, and presentations, is used together with an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach in order to explore the experiences of childhoods as presented by children and youth within the congregation.

The findings suggest that their individual understandings of and responses to the presence of a charismatic authority, as well as the consequences of such authorities on parent–child relations, are individual. The Pre-Narratives focus on stigmatisation from society, while the Post-Narratives include stigma within the congregation in the form of social exclusion. The study further indicates that the presentations of childhoods given prior to and after the dissolution of the congregation, the so-called Pre- and Post-Narratives, differ due to changing dramaturgical loyalties, although they should both be considered front-stage activity in Goffman's terms.

Keywords: Childhood, Knutby Filadelfia, High-Demand New Religious Communes, Charisma, Presentations, Stigma, Total Institution