Tussen kind en puber: Een etnografisch onderzoek

Kuik, S.N.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Summary

In the early 1990s, the Dutch media paid a lot of attention to children and their supposed ‘lack of values’ and ‘disrespect for authority’. The parents, it was said, had lost control and children were described as little monsters that controlled them. This simplification does not take into account that parents and their children are subjected to the same kinds of discourse: both use the same dominant ideas to position themselves in their social worlds. Though I started my research with the question with which discourses parents and children identified themselves, this thesis takes the children’s points of view in relation to this question as its only focus. In this sense, this thesis fits into a rather recent tradition of Childhood Studies, in which social scientists investigate childhood from different perspectives, but take the agency of children as their starting point.

For this dissertation, I researched a group of children at a school in Amsterdam for a year and a half. When I started the research in January 1997, they were nine and ten years old and attending the sixth grade (the Dutch elementary school system has eight grades, called ‘groups’ or in Dutch groep(en)). When I resumed my participant observation in August 1998, they were eleven and twelve years old, and in their last year of primary school, ‘groep 8b’.

One way to show the ways that children are part of, and influenced by, the ‘bigger’ world, is to focus on their ‘citations’ of different norms, or conditions. A discourse is a set of ideas and imaginations in relation to a certain theme that tells us what is true and real, what can be said, thought, imagined and showed, what is right and good and possible, but also what is wrong, untrue, impossible and not allowed. Discourses are implicit or explicit in language, verbal and non-verbal, in written and spoken language, in images and in behaviour. Based on the children’s interactions and ideas, I detected three interconnected discourses (adolescence, gender and sexuality) and two core assignments based on two other discourses. The first core assignment stems from the discourse of authenticity and was translated by the children as ‘be yourself’. For the second core assignment, no good English translation exists. It stems from the discourse of maakbaarheid (the direct translation is ‘make-ability’) and was verbalised by the children as ‘show courage’ or ‘do something about yourself’. I call these the core assignments because they were interwoven in every discourse.

I took the interactions of the children and their verbal and non-verbal behaviour to be ‘performances’. Though inspired by Judith Butler’s ideas, I had my own interpretation for this word. To look at interaction and behaviour as ‘performances’ of adolescence, gender and sexuality made it possible to discover what conditions, claims or norms they constituted. The children did not invent these norms themselves, but ‘cited’ them in their performances. Here lies the connection between the world of the children and the wider so
Summary

ciety they were part of. My focus on norms made it possible to show that conditions and assignments affect performances and are indissolubly connected with the children’s verbal and non-verbal interactions. I also wanted to show that the children tried to direct their performances. In their efforts to gain control over their performances, the children tried to combine all conditions and assignments. In this sense, directing is not only an individual phenomenon but a social one as well. To direct is to give oneself a recognisable form in the outside world. This dissertation takes the experiences, efforts and difficulties of the children to gain a social position as its point of departure.

This thesis shows that pre-adolescents, just like adults, try to conquer a place in the social world, in the hierarchy of the group. Pre-adolescents find themselves in a liminal phase between childhood and adolescence. My research shows that the quest for social recognition in the broader social world starts in pre-adolescence. This quest is not a purely individual one. It is a social one as well: the children pursue this social recognition together and in relation to one another. The conditions and norms of the aforementioned discourses are treated separately in different chapters (2, 4, 5). The two core assignments are recurring in almost every chapter (except for in the introductory chapter 1 and the Intermezzo).

In chapter 1, I introduce the thirty children of group 8b (nineteen girls and eleven boys). I show that the social cohesion was low. Though most children belonged to a subgroup, friendships were, with some exceptions, not closely knit. The children said that they missed that kind of friendship in the group. In the different subgroups, the children did hang out with each other and shared opinions on main topics. The different subgroups were: The Adolescents, who set the tone; the two Journalists who followed the Adolescents closely; The Professors, with their own leader, who explicitly turned away from the Adolescents (apart from one girl). They got along well with the Quiet Boys, who also placed one boy at the top of their hierarchy and the ‘Childish Girls and Boys’, who were intrigued by the Adolescents but not taken seriously at all by them. The low social cohesion made the children vulnerable: no one defended another. Because of this the fear of being marginalised was big.

Chapter 2 has popularity and adolescence as its main themes. It shows that the children divided each other into three categories: childish, already-adolescent and adult-like. No one wanted to be accused of being childish. The ‘already adolescents’ were admired. ‘Adult-like’ was rejected. The Adolescent girl that, in the eyes of her classmates, pretended to be an adult, was followed with a mixture of fascination and aversion. The children identified themselves with ‘later’, with adolescence. This identification with something they themselves said they were not stems from an already present desire for a socially accep-
table position. This desire shows that there are no other social identificatory possibilities for pre-adolescents. I show in which ways the children took over the dominant developmental psychological image of ‘the child’ as a ‘growing being’: the child exists in its own preparation for later. They speeded up the process, so to say, to adolescence as the first moment in which they meant to find social recognition. As an example of the fact that this desire is individual and social, I present the popularity of the Adolescent girl Jaya.

According to social scientific literature, popularity consists of main traits of popular children. However, I look at popularity as a phenomenon that carries a promise that connects to a collective desire of classmates. This consisted of the desire to be(come) a beautiful, socially capable and socially in control adolescent. Jaya became the most popular girl because she performed adolescence in such a way that everybody wanted to identify with her. The portrait of Jaya shows that identification is accompanied by efforts to gain control over one’s position and to influence others. Jaya cited from the discourse of authenticity that demanded ‘to be yourself’, from the discourse of maakbaarheid that requested to direct yourself; from the gender discourse that demanded modesty; from the discourse of adolescence that dictated to be preoccupied with falling in love, giving adults cheek, and being indifferent to school work; she cited from the discourse of sexuality that demanded to design both the desire for someone as the own desirability. Jaya knew how to manifest herself as socially invulnerable. She radiated the promise that once one was an adolescent, one would be ‘real’ and ‘strong’, that one would overcome socially complicated relations, that one would finally be ‘really someone’. This was a nice promise, since the social cohesion in the groep was weak (‘Later in life we will feel strong’). Secondly, the promise was nice because it solved the fear of the approaching adolescence (‘Adolescence will not be that bad’). Thirdly, the promise redeemed the desire for a recognizible social role (‘We will really become someone’). At the same time, the painful thought ‘At this moment (as not-child and as not-yet-adolescent) we are not yet someone’ was hidden. To study popularity is to study collective identifications, promises, desires – and what lies behind.

The counterpart of popularity is marginality. In Chapter 3, I show that a couple of children were marginalised. They were excluded from the gossiping and the sharing of secrets: the material of social capital. With the aid of somatic and behavioural criteria or norms, they were said to be too fat, too thin, too ugly, not well-dressed, too unathletic, too stupid etc. Their classmates legitimised their marginalisation on basis of these criteria.

Social psychologists investigated bullying among school children and describe individual character of behavioural aspects of the bullies and their victims.
this chapter, I wanted to show that it merely seems that children have to marginalise; that marginalisation is inherent in using dominant discourses, for in the effort to live up to its claims, children install demarcations between ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’. The process of demarcating consists of permanently evoking the demands concerning the body and behaviour. On the one hand, dominant ideas concerning the adolescent body, the gendered body and the sexualised body were more or less implicitly present in these demands. On the other hand, the discourses of adolescence, gender and sexuality induced behavioural claims. Who did not live up to these claims was marginalised. In this process, the children’s struggle with the two core assignments also played a major part.

The authenticity assignment is to develop one self, to display one’s talents and to be real or authentic. The children summarised this assignment in the words ‘to be yourself’. The assignment of maakbaarheid holds the individual responsible for success and failure. Among the children, I found this assignment in a demand ‘to show courage’ and in the words ‘do something about it’ (have the courage to defend yourself). The children struggled to combine these two assignments. ‘To be yourself’ was not that easy. One needed courage ‘to be one self’, for that meant to be different from the rest, to position one self clearly, to make one self socially vulnerable. Self management was needed, but this had to be practiced invisibly. The children who managed themselves too obviously were called ‘fake’. Self management was ‘fake’ and ‘courageous’ at the same time. On the other hand: the children that did not direct themselves simultaneously were ‘weak’ and ‘real’. The marginalised were condemned for not managing themselves, for a lack of courage. Legitimising marginalisation, the children evoked the maakbaarheids assignment, time and again. In doing so, marginalisation became a ‘warning’: to be socially strong is your own responsibility, beware!

After two chapters in which I describe the children’s social struggle, I inserted an Intermezzo about their moments of harmony. Moments of harmony occurred regularly, for example when the children worked together on a project or showed each other (athletic) tricks they were good at. In those situations, differences between the children as basis for evoking and consolidating demands seemed to disappear to the background. At the end of the school year, however, social harmony increased. The situation in the classroom had changed in two ways: firstly, the children rehearsed the theatre play to be performed as a closing of their primary school years. Secondly, the Adolescents had chased away the ‘adult-like’ Valerie: the last weeks of the school year she did not return to school. I take the increased harmony to be an example of Turner’s description of communitas. Communitas arises in situations of shared trans-
formation, in a stage of a liminality or transition. Old structures (hierarchies for example) temporarily make place for feelings of mutual solidarity. The harmony among the children resembled Turner’s communitas, which could arise as the children seemed to realise that they all were in the same boat together, that they were all to say goodbye to their childhood, and that they all would enter their high schools as adolescents. In this way, the children realised their liminal status as pre-adolescents, as in between childhood and adolescence.

For the children actively awaited adolescence as girls and boys, Chapter four 4 deals with gender struggles. It shows visible that also on the terrain of gender, the fear of being marginalised forced itself a way through the surface. Gender performances were constituted around a coercive ‘hetero-normativity’. For the boys, this meant demands of being cool and being good at sports, and for girls to be modest and pay attention to their appearance. In making homophobic jokes and remarks the boys hid their fear of being unable to fulfil the demand of coolness. At the same time, in doing so, they consolidated this demand. I found the same mechanism among the girls, who hid their fear of failing demands as at the same time evoking them by constantly judging their own and each other’s appearances. The girls really had to show modesty by repeating, all the time, that they were unable to meet the demands that were made on them.

Boys and girls competed in their own groups about demands: the boys had to display themselves as cool and big as possible, whereas the girls forced themselves and each other to downplay themselves. In competition, both boys and girls disguised their fears of marginalisation and also created possibilities to consolidate or confirm their positions. Humour is an example of this as well: in humorous play, the boys used the demand for coolness to create solidarity and laughed off the difficulties of meeting up this demand. The girls released the effort to fulfil the demand by having the giggles. Alternative gender positions also existed: the cool girl and the uncool boy. To not be marginalised completely, it was important for these children to be able to meet some of the gender demands. The cool girl, for example, showed enough modesty to be accepted in her alternative way of being a girl. And one of the uncool boys was very good at sports, therefore he managed not to be marginalised. In social scientific literature, these alternative possibilities are called norm transcending and norm confirming: on the one hand these positions did offer alternative ways of being a girl or a boy, on the other hand, the fierceness with which one of the non-cool boys was marginalised and the basis on which the girl was included, was extremely norm confirming.

In connection with the demands concerning adolescence and gender, the children also tried to meet the demands of sexuality. Chapter 5
treats the question why sexuality was such an important issue in groep 8b.

The theme of sexuality in relation to children is mostly described in terms of abuse. The image of the child as (sexually) innocent influences our expectations of children strongly. When I started my research (the children were nine and ten years then) I was struck by the explicit ways in which the children made sex jokes, and constantly referred to sex in their interactions. Sexuality still was an explicit theme when I returned to the now eleven and twelve year old children. From a psychological developmental perspective, the interest of the pre-adolescents is not surprising. The interest, invoked by biology, in sexuality finds its forms in interaction and therefore is a social phenomenon as well. I show that, and how, the children desired to be(come) sexual subjects, or tried to distance themselves from it and in doing so, designed their interest socially in relation to each other.

I describe sexuality as consisting of two components: to (physically) desire and to be (physically) desirable. ‘To have sex’ is implicated but is not necessarily desired for. To divide sexuality in two active parts refers directly to the fact that desire requests ‘work’: both components need to be given form to. Designing desire and desirability means meeting demands. Both forms arise in social interaction and are inspired and motivated by the demands of the sexuality discourse: these were demands concerning the body and behaviour. The division into two active components also makes it possible to overcome the stereotype of boys as merely desiring subjects and girls as merely desirable subjects.

As the children were nine and ten years old, the subject of sexuality already was inescapable, mostly because of the daily verbal and drawn references to and jokes about sex. In this way, all children were forced to take a position in relation to sexuality. Secondly, the children made sexuality a coercively present theme by permanently commenting on Valerie (Adolescent girl), whom they called ‘porn Valerie’. Sexuality was centered on hetero-normativity: boys had to desire girls and vice versa. Homosexuality was ridiculed by homophobic jokes and remarks (mainly made by boys). The Adolescents proclaimed themselves and were proclaimed the norm: they met all demands. Who was unable to show his or her desire or desirability according to the demands, was marginalised, as happened to the Childish Boys and Girls, for they laughed about being in love and sex. The Adolescents saw themselves, and were seen, as more developed. Their sexual attitude was of a different kind. Every child had to relate to sexuality, but not everybody identified with the sexual position of the Adolescents. The Professors and the Quiet Boys for example thought of sexuality as something that belonged to the children in high school. They explicitly stated that
they were still children. These children chose the position of child themselves, whereas the Childish Boys and Girls were marginalised into that position. Even though the Adolescents desired a sexual position, this did not mean they could take it up easily. They had to navigate between the assignments of authenticity and maakbaarheid and the demands concerning appearance and behaviour.

The boys had to display their desire in cool competition, girls also had to exhibit a cool and provoking way of expressing desire. Girls referred to the discourse of Girl Power, in which girls are told to be active instead of passively awaiting boys’ attention. The girls however, had to show their desirability with modesty. I did not find explicit norms concerning boys and their desirability, but this does not mean they did not exist. During my research I fell into the stereotypical trap of boys as not being preoccupied with their desirability. Once I was behind my desk, I realised my mistake, where I saw my material on this subject was scarce. However, I did find that both girls and boys struggled with their desirability. The girls called the boys ‘small’ and ‘childish’ on a daily basis: even the Adolescent boys got these accusations. The boys struggled with the classifications of being ‘young’ or ‘small’: in comparison to the girls, they were indeed smaller and showed less physical features of adolescence. In the eyes of the girls, the boys were not desirable, whereas the boys wished to be desirable: they invested in clothes to look cool and attractive. The constantly expressed opinion of the girls gave more input to act cooler and stronger, to act more grown up than they actually were.

The girls felt themselves reduced to their physical desirability, whereas they longed to be desired for their ‘inside’ too. They struggled with the core assignment of authenticity on the one hand and taking a sexual position on the other: how to be ‘oneself’ and simultaneously be sexy in the eyes of others (to live up to the claims)?

The discourses of sexuality and adolescence were interwoven: those who desired to be an adolescent had to be sexual at the same time, had to design their desire and their desirability. Although taking up a sexual position brought about struggle, its appeal lied in the image the children had of it: they thought they could put it on or off, like a piece of clothing. In this way, they made the illusion for themselves that they were in control of what would happen to them (and in which they had no say): adolescence and the concomitant sexuality. Navigating between all claims and assignments, the children actively used the discourse of adolescence. Navigation came with fears.

In the concluding chapter of the thesis, I write about the fears, the struggles and the becoming of sexual subjects. In foregoing chapters, I pointed out three fears: the fear for adolescence, the fear of being unable to meet the claims of the authenticity assignment and the fear of being mar-
Summary

ginalised. I am aware of the fact that I write about individually experience fears, whereas I can not claim to know that every child really did experience these fears. However, I think I brought about acceptable arguments to demonstrate that these fears were hidden in collective identifications and rejections, in paradoxical and contradictory statements of the children, as well as in their struggles with different claims and assignments. Therefore I state that these fears were socially induced and fed, and found a collective shape.

I found the basis for the fear of arising adolescence firstly in the shared opinion about Valerie and her expulsion, secondly in the struggles with being desirable, and thirdly in the identification with the popular Jaya.

It was striking to me how much the children held the same negative opinions of Valerie. The popularity of Jaya began and was confirmed by her on going fight with Valerie. Jaya was seen as ‘already-adolescent’ whereas the children called Valerie ‘already-adult’, ‘fake’ and ‘Porn Valerie’. Her classmates permanently followed Valerie’s whereabouts, her ways of dressing, and what she said and did. They looked at her with a combination of fear and fascination. Even the girls who were her friends whispered to me what they ‘really thought of her’. Why was she so important? What sentiments were hidden in their rejection of Valerie?

The power with which Valerie was condemned meant that Valerie represented something for the children. The classmates called Valerie ‘already adult’, ‘already fourteen’ and ‘fake’ but in fact they knew Valerie was an adolescent and not an adult. Their opinions reveal a fear for arising adolescence and the ‘task’ that awaited them all: to become successful sexual adolescent subjects. On the one hand, they were attracted by the demarcation of a sexual position. Valerie showed them how to do this: you put on sexy clothes and there you are, a sexual subject. On the other hand, I think the straitjacket of it (there did not seem to be that many possibilities) was frightening to them. The sexual position seemed so easy but was difficult to appropriate.

I found another basis for the fear of adolescence in the expulsion of Valerie at the end of the school year. In the Intermezzo, I explained how the children suddenly played children’s games again. With the expulsion of Valerie, they expelled ‘adolescence’. In this way, they celebrated their liminality and demarcated the end of childhood.

A second basis for my assumption is that ‘fake’ and ‘sexual’ became articulated: all of the children were to become sexual adolescent subjects, but how, seemed their question, were they to become sexual and to stay real and authentic at the same time? This struggle with being authentic became visible in the struggle of the girls with desirability. The girls permanently judged each other’s sexiness. The de-
sire for it was not allowed to be too obvious. The claims of sexiness were narrowly defined. The girls did not seem to feel the space to be sexy (appearance) and themselves (inner character) at the same time. Sexiness was available as a model, but the appropriation of it caused serious conflict. Since sexiness and ‘fakeness’ were articulated, the assignment to combine authenticity and sexiness seemed impossible. However, the desire to be an adolescent was strong. The adolescent Jaya radiated another promise that fuelled the desire for it. The children put Jaya at the top of hierarchy, unanimously. By doing so, they masked their fear for adolescence. For in their collective identification with Jaya, they adhered to the promise she radiated: that once you were an adolescent, it was possible to be socially strong and sexually desirable and desiring. By subscribing to this promise, they not only solved their own present social vulnerability, they also masked their fear for what was to come. It is even possible that the fear was woven into the dominant imaginations of adolescence and sexuality itself. In this way, it is not astonishing that the fear for adolescence found a collective form. The second fear I mention in this thesis was the fear not to be able to live up to the claims of the authenticity assignment: the fear of not being able to be oneself. I read this fear in the children’s opinions about anger and, secondly, in their ways of dealing with the marginalised. The children demanded to control emotions. Anger was seen at the same time as the moment in which someone showed to be socially strong as the moment in which someone showed his or her ‘real’ self. According to the children, to show oneself in anger increased the chance of being marginalised. Here, they met the impossibility of the authenticity assignment that demanded of them to be able to show their real selves. This way of thinking reveals that the children feared that when they would really show themselves, they would be rejected. The children navigated between the authenticity assignment and the maakbaarheid assignment. Maakbaarheid demanded that the children directed themselves, did their best to conform to all claims, and, in this way, put themselves into a recognisable form in which they were socially strong. On the other hand, the authenticity assignment demanded of them that they were able to show themselves and dared to be different from the rest. The children blamed the marginalised not to direct themselves and to be guilty of their own fate. By pointing out their failure to them, the children closed off the road out of marginality and kept the marginalised in their position. The explanation that children who do not conform to the group norms get marginalised, is not satisfying enough. The children did legitimise marginalisation in this way. But every child who was marginalised had a counterpart with the same physical or behavioural components who was not mar-
Summary

ginalised. I think the strong urge to marginalise stems from the fear that ‘being yourself’ means being different and that being different means to be marginalised. In essence, the fear consisted of not being different from the marginalised. To mask this fear of the impossibility to be ‘yourself’, the children found a collective form: to marginalise others.

The third fear I mention in this thesis is the fear of marginalisation. In contrast to the two fears I just described, this fear was verbalised by the children themselves. The maakbaarheids assignment put a big responsibility on the children: their social success as well as their social failure depended on the extent to which the children were able to direct themselves and hide their self management (direction), taking all demands into account, navigating through all contradictions. Not every child made the same choices: some chose to be in visible positions, others desired the social shade; some chose to take the position of adolescent, others rejected that position. Some were able to choose, others had their choices made for them. But everybody, in every position, aimed to live up to the claims and demands. In this sense, my thesis is about the becoming of (sexual adolescent) subjects.

The children made huge endeavours to get a recognised position. As Sherry Ortner makes clear, agency partly consists of the desire to pursue ‘cultural projects’ (that is: to conform to demands). In this thesis, I have described Ortner’s cultural projects as three interconnected discourses. From these discourses emerged the desire to seize the position of sexual adolescent. In my dissertation, I have made clear to which extent the children were conscious of the fact that they had to design this desire for social recognition. Social recognition can only take place in socially recognisable forms. The word implies ‘constraints’: ‘in this way’ (demands). The word implies ‘to fit’: ‘in this way, you do fit in and: ‘you don’t’ (in- and exclusion). In this way, agency always means that (deliberate) action takes place within relations of inequality. Those who are able to set the demands/to live up to them themselves are capable of in- and excluding others. In this way, assignments and demands of discourses influence subject positions and agency. They create the desire to conform as well.

Subjection took place through what Althusser has called ‘interpellation’: the calling of a subject to a position. The children ‘interpellated’ each other as subjects, using dominant ideas or demands from the discourses: ‘Hey you, adolescent!’ They also subjected each other: ‘In this way (demands) you should behave!’ Interpellation creates a subject position that someone identifies with, opposes (contra-identification) or partly identifies with (disidentification). By interpella-

268
being the subject (one fits); for the outside world one gets a recognisable form.

From this point of view, a discourse not only is an abstract collection of ideas. Discourses manifest themselves in statements, imaginations and behaviour. In every interpellation, a discourse is implicitly present. The daily interactions and performances of the children show how they constituted and subjected each other as adolescent subjects. Though discourse theory acknowledges the contradictory in the process of subjection, the experience of subjects disappears. In my thesis, I took these experiences as my starting point. I showed how the children took a head start and tried, very consciously, to become sexual adolescent subjects. They felt they were subjected to demands they did not fully create themselves. Those who succeeded in hiding the maakbaarheid (self direction) automatically seemed to meet with the authenticity assignment: they ‘really were themselves’, as the children put it. Here lies the struggle: (the desire) to meet with the demands made them doubt the possibility to simultaneously ‘be themselves’. ‘The self’ was thought of as something that escaped construction, something untranslatable to a subject position.

Whatever the struggles they encountered, the children tried to find ways to design the demands and assignments together. The way to adolescence had to be taken, but along the road they actively tried to meet with demands. The beginning of the sexual adolescent subject is, aside from a biological and psychological developmental process, a through and through social phenomenon.