



Book Review

The autonomous child by Ivar Frønes

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In the book *The Autonomous Child*, Ivar Frønes undertakes the ambitious task of exploring the process of child development and socialisation, reviewing how these are understood in various disciplines, and brings these together to create a holistic picture of socialisation, especially in relation to the changed reality and demands placed upon children by today's knowledge society and economy. The book is structured in two parts and ten chapters. In Part I, which comprises the main body of this work, Frønes provides an overview of how 'socialisation' is conceptualised and understood in social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, life course studies, and perspectives of biological-social interactions. The second Part of this book then links the created holistic understanding of socialisation with current demands of post-industrial knowledge societies and economies.

Frønes begins in Chapter 1 with a review of common definitions of the term *sociology* and deduces the general "understanding of socialization as a core mechanism of social and cultural integration: we are all shaped into members of different societies and cultures" (p. 2). However, Frønes argues that this understanding of socialisation faces a range of challenges in today's culturally and socially diverse societies. He also challenges the traditional understanding of socialisation being "shaped by the past ... [and reflecting] beliefs and ideas about the future" (p. 3). Frønes claims that the traditional slow fusion of past and future, the melting together of the past becoming the future, of the industrial age (mainly since the 1950s) is no longer stringent, and the future, although to some extent built on the past, is now mainly perceived as uncertain. Therefore, socialisation of children today has to be influenced by loose ideas and assumptions about how the future might be.

Based on this evolving understanding of socialisation, Frønes begins an overview discussion, an exploratory journey, of the many aspects of human life and society that influence and compose socialisation of children while growing up. In Chapter 2, sociological perspectives are explored, such as the individuality or uniqueness of each human being, the part of society in the upbringing of children, and the basic and cognitive skills that are important to develop to become a functioning member of society and culture, to name only a few examples. Frønes further discusses topics such as norms and values of society and culture, the role of families and the importance of peers and media on the socialisation process of children today. He argues, already linking to knowledge societies today, that the image of the child has changed over the last decades and children are faced with increasing demands to acquire high levels of education and a wide range of social, cognitive, technical and other skills, to be prepared for the uncertain requirements for success in the knowledge economy of the future.

In Chapter 3, Frønes explores anthropological perspectives of socialisation, including the institutionalisation of socialisation, mostly in educational settings. The significance of communication and language is explored; language understood in a wider sense of all signs and expressions, including the spoken and written word. The role of culture and the aspect of culturalisation in relation to socialisation is explored, as well as the role and importance of rituals and transitions between life stages for the development of human beings.

Psychological perspectives of socialisation are discussed in Chapter 4, including but not limited to, cognitive development, the formation of identity, the self and perception of 'the other', and norms and values from a developmental point of view. Frønes explores socialisation in relation to theories by Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Vygotsky, among others. An interesting contrast is provided by comparing



Vygotsky's model of the 'zone of proximal development', which Frønes claims to focus on the adult-child relationship, with Piaget's developmental steps model, which emphasises the importance of peers for the social development and socialisation of children beginning from an early age.

Frønes discusses *Socialisation and Life Course Analysis* in Chapter 5, in which he takes a broader view on human development from a life stages or phases perspective. Frønes discusses the impact of historic and demographic changes on socialisation, such as changes in gender roles, male and female success in education, the impact of education on life phases, and the potential impact of generational cohorts on the development of identity of human beings during puberty and adolescence.

Chapter 6 provides a short review of the nature versus nurture discourse and Frønes highlights the importance of the interaction of environment and genetic dispositions. He indicates the difficulties around identifying each aspect's influence on particular developments, but he argues that it is important to remain aware that both environment (social, cultural) and genes play an important role for the development and socialisation of children.

Frønes summarises and brings together the discussion of the different understandings and aspects of socialisation, as discussed so far, in Chapter 7. Here, he describes the child as an individual and active agent of the socialisation and culturalisation process. He identifies a 'desire for recognition' (love) as one motivational aspect for children to engage in this process actively; another is the inherent human desire for making meaning of the world and bringing meaning to one's life. Frønes concludes this chapter and Part I of the book with his view on the development of Self: "The development of the Self is both a process, a purpose and a desire; the Self is a product of socialization as culturalization and of socialization as emancipation" (p. 96).

Part II of the book is relatively short in comparison to Part I and is focused on contextualising the developed understanding of socialisation in current forms of knowledge societies (Chapter 8) and the dimension of life-phase dynamics in such a setting (Chapter 9). Frønes discusses the changes of today's knowledge societies in relation to industrial societies, mainly of the Western world, since the 1950s. He points at the transformation of childhood: a wide range of new skills to be learned, an intensification of educational demands and the need for qualification, and at PISA studies, which are seen as a tool, as he claims, to measure the preparedness of children for knowledge, society, and economy. Frønes explains that, with an increase of children attending pre-schools earlier and earlier in life, the impact of the education system and educational institutions on socialisation, culturalisation, the development of a child in general and the predicted academic achievements have increased significantly. In Chapter 9, each life step, or phase, from toddler to emerging adult, is visited, discussing the changes to earlier generations and the impact on the socialisation of children today. Frønes links each stage with aspects of the discussion from Part I. Frønes concludes his book in Chapter 10 by presenting the child as a self-determined agency with their own rights: the autonomous child.

This book stands out in the holistic and comprehensive approach towards the notion of socialisation, especially in relation to current knowledge societies. However, due to the broad approach taken, each section is rather limited in depth and provides more an overview than a detailed discussion of the points provided and the arguments made. The second Part could have been strengthened by a more rigorous discussion of the implications of Frønes' developed understanding of socialisation on the various disciplines and the process of bringing up children in societies today, taking into account the perceived uncertain future. Implications for education as a discipline, which is considered as more and more important in the discussion, would present an especially interesting line of argument. However, the book sparks a good number of ideas and reflective thoughts around the topic of socialisation and seems to be mainly intended to raise awareness of the complexity of socialisation and culturalisation today, rather than presenting an argument for a particular cause of action – other than considering children as autonomous human beings, that is.



References

Frønes, I. (2016). *The autonomous child*. New York, NY: Springer. DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-25100-4