Cosmopolitan Children

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In our ever-changing world, technology and production rates move at a speed that makes it close to impossible for anyone to own the latest and greatest for longer than a brief moment. Universities are becoming more and more accessible, factories for well-rounded individuals with degrees that are as common as rain in Vancouver. The world has become locked in a web of cross-cultural interaction and the job market is growing increasingly cut-throat and selective. So how does an individual begin to prepare for a world in such a state? According to Don Weenink, the answer begins from the time an individual is a child.

It has long been acknowledged that a child is equipped for society through the process of socialization in the family. The family is a smaller, more defined unit of society where an individual, as a child, can learn social interaction and other related practices before entering into school or the workplace. But with society changing as quickly as it is, the process of socialization changes as well. Long gone are the days when a child simply needed to learn how to handle basic industrial chores and school subjects. In today’s world, a child is being armed much earlier and with skills far more intricate. The goals and methods of socialization have changed drastically and now encompass a completely different realm of childhood and youth development. This new goal of socialization, according to Weenink, is being termed *cosmopolitan theory*.

Weenink’s 2008 article, “Cosmopolitanism as a Form of Capital: Parents Preparing their Children for a Globalizing World” asks two questions: “first, how do parents of pupils who attend [internationalized education] define cosmopolitanism? Second, to what extent is the desire to provide their children with an international outlook part of upper middle-class social
reproduction strategies?” 1 The answers to these questions propose the idea that in today’s time, parents are eager to expose their children to various international and cross-cultural experiences. The motivation for this, however, divides the parents into two very distinct groups: dedicated cosmopolitans and pragmatic cosmopolitans. Weenink’s article begins by distinguishing between these two groups and exploring their respective views on the concept of cosmopolitanism and its effect on their children’s development. He then draws the conclusion that the motivation behind cosmopolitan forces is in fact, tied to the parents and their own experiences with cosmopolitanism and the value that they have placed upon it. Weenink’s article engages in new ways with a combination of foundational sociological concepts to explain how the family is adapting to this changing world. It is this thought process that I will explore in order to see how theory has been employed throughout his study and how they affect the family.

First, we begin by understanding more thoroughly what Weenink refers to when he employs the term “cosmopolitanism.” In this article, he regards cosmopolitanism as relating to “an awareness of global connectedness and […] the idea of an orientation of open-mindedness towards the Other.” 2 It is the idea that the world, through technology and the growing exchange of information, is connected as one and that we as a human race can benefit from understanding and exploring other cultures. Hannerz, as quoted in Weenink’s article, notes that cosmopolitanism is based on a concept of culture that is “carried by a transnational network rather than by a territory”—the idea that culture is no longer tied to borders. 3

Weenink then describes the way in which cosmopolitanism could also be lauded as social capital. In White and Klein’s Family Theories, Coleman is quoted, stating that “human capital is

2 Weenink, 1089.
3 Weenink, 1091.
created by changing persons so as to give them skills and capabilities that make them able to act in certain ways.”  

Human capital is composed of “the knowledge, skills, and techniques acquired by the individual,” qualities that enable a person to engage in social interaction where their skills may aid them in an exchange. These qualities are often acquired through formal education and training but various life experiences outside of institutions can also contribute to an individual’s human capital.

Now, when we combine the idea of cosmopolitanism with the theory of human capital, we begin to see how the resulting qualities may help an individual in today’s quickly shifting world. Together, these two concepts form what Weenink terms “cosmopolitan capital.” It is “first of all, a propensity to engage in globalizing social arenas […], bodily and mental predispositions and competencies (savoir faire) which help to engage confidently in such arenas [and] a competitive edge, a heard start vis-à-vis competitors.” Cosmopolitan capital can be acquired and exercised through traveling and living abroad, interacting closely with individuals from other countries, immersing oneself in multimedia that caters to an international audience, and practicing fluency in English as well as a second language. In Weenink’s research, the focus is on parents who believe that instilling their children with cosmopolitan capital is an important and necessary part of socialization and preparation for today’s society. This in turn, directs us towards the family life course developmental framework.

The family life course developmental framework has three parts: the individual life span, family development, and finally, the life course. Each of these theories discusses development of

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5 White and Klein, 75.
6 Weenink, 1092.
7 Weenink, 1092.
8 Weenink, 1092.
the life course at a different level. The individual life span theory concerns “the ontogenetic development of the individual and the factors that affect that development.” 9 The family development theory discusses the “systematic and patterned changes experienced by families as they move through stages and events of their family life course.” 10 Finally, the life course theory “examines the event history of an individual and how earlier events influence later outcomes.” 11 It is on this framework that Weenink superimposes his cosmopolitanism theory. To set up his research, he proposes the idea that many parents today are socializing their children by placing more value on cosmopolitan capital. They then encourage their children to pursue cosmopolitan capital as a way of preparing for entry into society and for opportunities later in life; this highlights the sensitivity of parents to the life course of their children and the potential developments that may require some degree of cosmopolitan capital.

Together, it is these theories that make up the foundation of Weenink’s article. His study does not aim to prove anything earth-shattering, but simply to understand how the ideas of human capital have integrated themselves into the mind frame of parents as well as our current culture. After establishing a common understanding of cosmopolitanism and its function as human capital, Weenink sets out to gather data to explore this issue.

This study, based in the Netherlands, looked at 15 schools across the country. Of all the internationalized educational programs available in the country, these 15 institutions were the only ones that offered a full six-year program that required completion of all six years in order to graduate successfully. Of these 15 schools, only one chose not to be included in the sample. Weenink then sent out surveys across the 14 schools, of which “535 parents returned the

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9 White and Klein, 122.
10 White and Klein, 122.
11 White and Klein, 122.
questionnaires, a response rate of 53 per cent.” 12 These surveys were directed to parents of children who were enrolled in “internationalized streams and regular pre-university streams.” 13 On each of the surveys, parents were able to indicate whether or not they would be interested in also participating in a face-to-face interview to further elaborate on their responses. Of the 535 surveys returned, 60 per cent of parents agreed to an interview although only 19 interview subjects were selected. These interviews took place during 2001 and 2002 and were structured as informal conversations in the family’s home.

From talking with parents, Weenink found that two types of mind frames quickly emerged on the topic of cosmopolitan theory: dedicated cosmopolitans and pragmatic cosmopolitans. Of the parents interviewed, 7 out of 19 were classified as dedicated cosmopolitans. Weenink noted that this often meant that the parent “spoke at least two foreign languages fluently and had lived abroad, sometimes in various countries.” 14 These parents had a “willingness and the ability to look beyond borders” and their “socialization practices were to teach children to be flexible and open minded.” 15 They also encouraged their children to “be prepared to go beyond borders” and “also to be prepared to adapt to the situation.” 16 Parents who were considered dedicated cosmopolitans strongly emphasized the cultural benefits of cosmopolitanism to their children, the idea that their own personal lives and development would be enriched with the knowledge and exploration of another culture.

Pragmatic cosmopolitans, on the other hand, were parents who “had international work experiences and therefore saw the advantages of appropriating an international orientation,

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12 Weenink, 1093.
13 Weenink, 1093.
14 Weenink, 1094.
15 Weenink, 1094.
16 Weenink, 1094.
mainly learning English at a high level.” 17 Although these parents saw the benefit of cultural exploration and understanding, this was not rooted in a curious desire for diversity, but instead, they “stressed the advantages of such an international attitude for the future of their children as they regarded it as an instrument for a later career or study.” 18 Pragmatic cosmopolitan parents place their value on “learning English and speak of appropriating this asset as a competitive advantage.” 19 Despite not appreciating other cultures for the sake of experience and curiosity, these parents, however, are focused on the future of their children and are conscious of the role that cosmopolitan socialization may play in their future endeavors.

Although the differences between dedicated and pragmatic cosmopolitan motivations appear to be two sides of the same coin, they also have in common their ambitions for their children. Both categories of parenting understand that the life course of their children is intricately tied up with the fast-paced changes in society and technology and that as the first agent of socialization, it is their responsibility to prepare their children for the future.

At the core of his study, Weenink has carefully illustrated the way in which cosmopolitan theory finds its roots in past experiences of the parents. He details the way in which parents learn to value certain qualities and skills as a result of their experiences with other cultures and international exchange; this then feeds into their own roles as agents of socialization. His main goal was to show the connection between cosmopolitan theory and its function as a tool of socialization. Weenink’s understanding of cosmopolitanism also draws from the work of other sociologists and it is on their foundational work that he has built his own theory. Although he does not go into a detailed explanation of foundational theory, his references to other sociologists

17 Weenink, 1096.
18 Weenink, 1096.
19 Weenink, 1097.
and previous sociological studies on the same topic are helpful in guiding the tone of his article. He draws from “Beck and Sznaider’s perspective on globalization”; their work shows “globalization as a coercive force which is out of direct control of those who are affected by it.”

This idea that globalization cannot be influenced by one individual person further cements the motivation behind parents who feel the important necessity of equipping their children with the right approach and perspective when it comes to interacting with and adapting to the global community. Weenink also touches on Albrow’s theory that “the more extended the space over which social relations are perpetuated, the more resources are required by the parties involved.”

Coupling this theory with the idea of an interconnected world where job employment may be offered from across the globe, it reinforces the importance of understanding other cultures in order to gain full access to the wide range of opportunities presented.

Now, we are left to answer the question of whether Weenink’s study has resulted in something that contributes to the original cosmopolitan theory. Although much of his study is simply an evaluation of cosmopolitan theory and how it is related to the process of socialization, he also details how other sociological concepts work together in order to produce this effect. His initial proposal that cosmopolitan theory is linked to the past experiences of parents and their social class has only proven to be partially valid; the interviews conducted and data gathered has shown that social class seems to have a low influence on how parents go about employing cosmopolitan theory in the upbringing of their children. On the other hand, Weenink has found a strong connection between the prior life experiences of the parents paired with the value that they place on cosmopolitan skills and qualities for their children.

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20 Weenink, 1103.
21 Weenink, 1103.
Despite the intricacies of theory, Weenink’s article very clearly shows how it can affect various aspects of family life. He began by detailing the various theories and concepts of globalization and cosmopolitanism that he would focus on. Using these concepts, as well as the research of other sociologists, to build his research, he aligns the reader with his own goals. He then applies the concepts of human capital as well as the life course framework in order to further illustrate his suggestion that cosmopolitan theory has made its way into the family’s socialization processes. Weenink strikes a chord in his data and proves to be successful in his research—his results give us true insight into how families are adapting to the changing world. Although cosmopolitanism is a concept that reaches across countries, cultures, and continents, it continues to be important in the family, shown by Weenink to be a theory—as well as a unifying force—that is invaluable in both parents and children.
NOTES


2. Weenink, 1089.

3. Weenink, 1091.


5. White and Klein, 75.


7. Weenink, 1092.

8. Weenink, 1092.


10. White and Klein, 122.


12. Weenink, 1093.

13. Weenink, 1093.


15. Weenink, 1094.

16. Weenink, 1094.

17. Weenink, 1096.

18. Weenink, 1096.

19. Weenink, 1097.

20. Weenink, 1103.