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Child to youth trajectories and anticipatory socialization

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Changing schools at the age of 12 also represents a change in social age identity. Children prepare for this change of age identity in different ways, and their strategies vary across sociocultural contexts as well as between individuals. In this article, some of these strategies are explored through ethnographic observation and interviews with Norwegian 12-year-olds preparing and anticipating a change of school, making use of Robert Merton's concept of 'anticipatory socialization'. Merton's concept describes the building of personal abilities, alienation from one's former group and adaptation to new norms as social processes identifying change of social reference group. These terms are employed here to identify social processes initiating children's orientation to a youth identity. The functions that material possessions fulfil are related to the ability to symbolically communicate both categorically and self-expressively a growing normative awareness and a sense of value.

When a child reaches the age of 12, the Norwegian school system marks a major change in a child's life-course. For most children this change comes in the form of a physical movement from one school to another, in addition to the change in curriculum. More profoundly, from the perspective of the students the move also represents a change in social age identity. They will no longer be considered or consider themselves as children, but as youth.

Children prepare for this change of age identity in different ways, and their strategies vary across sociocultural contexts as well as between individuals. In this article, I explore some of these strategies through ethnographic observation and interviews with youth, making use of Robert Merton's concept of 'anticipatory socialization' (Merton, 1957). Merton's concept describes the building of personal abilities, alienation from one's former

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group and adaptation to new norms as social processes identifying change of social reference group. These terms are here employed to identify social processes initiating children's orientation to a youth identity, and as factors that influence its course and direction.

Possessions and age identity

Personal possessions, clothes and knowledge of cultural (consumer) objects are all elements understood as tools to extend one's social identity. The meaning of possessions changes over a lifetime. Life-cycle studies usually operate with a schematic division of three basic stages: youth, mainstream years (adult) and old age. The role possessions play differs across these life-stages. In general, one may identify the change as a movement from functional purposes in youth to contemplative and symbolic functions of possessions in old age (Dittmar, 1992; Gentry et al., 1995). A study from 1981 that focused on descriptions of most treasured possessions has shown that young respondents emphasize the active functions possessions fulfil for them as individuals. This is interpreted as an adolescent's preoccupation with establishing an autonomous identity. Old people, on the other hand, are more inclined to use possessions to record their experiences and relations to other people, which is interpreted as a function of retrospectively evaluating one's life (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's study is one out of several that shows not only that possessions serve as functional objects suited to an individual's life situation, but that commodities also carry meaning related to an individual age identity. Gentry et al. (1995) argue that the meaning of possessions varies in relation to future plans and past experience. In a simplified version, one may say that this orientation towards an object is changing on a scale parallel to the life-course itself. But there is also a significant difference within the life segments on how one relates to one's possessions in terms of future orientation, present reflection or in terms of past experiences. In terms of youth, this variation can be exemplified by the difference of meaning applied to possessions that reflect future plans, ability and control of future challenges or the meaning that focuses on present satisfaction and comfort. Accordingly, the *strength* of future orientation has an impact on the meaning ascribed to personal possessions:

> The meaning of possessions to the young may differ depending upon their outlook for the future. Some youths do not understand what it means 'to become', instead they focus on the present and satisfying themselves. For example, a student who drops out of high school a month before graduation obviously does not have a strong future orientation. Some do not foresee a future, instead they just act for now. (Gentry et al., 1995: 414)

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Anticipatory socialization and the change of schools

The children in this study are Norwegian 12-year-olds: at an age where they stand before an inevitable transition in the coming year from *Barneskole* (literally meaning 'children's school') to *Ungdomsskole* (literally meaning 'youth school'). To make reading easier in English, I use the terms elementary school and junior high. The change of age-group is inevitable, one that implicates personal as well as social identity. Preparing for this change may not be equally conscious for every school child, as their anticipation and expectation of future time also differs in strength and manner.

The analyses in this article focus on the different strategies employed by these students for the looming age identity transition. 'Transition' here indicates a general change of age status, whereas 'trajectory' is used to imply individual change. A trajectory describes a change that has a direction: it is aiming at a target ahead, even if that target is only vaguely perceived by the student as 'acceptance' by a new peer group.

Merton's notion of anticipatory socialization offers a useful analytical tool to analyse this transition. His example of the American soldier is analogous to the school children I have studied in that both find themselves facing a change in status that they cannot control. The soldier, knowing he is destined to move back into civilian life, anticipates this change by adopting and acting according to the values, symbols and lifestyle of the group to which he aspires. Of course, anticipation requires extensive knowledge of the desired group or class. It also requires personal ability and capacity to change in a convincing manner, and not least, that one has to alienate oneself from the group or class where one originated to be credible in one's social mobility.

Merton's deliberations on the possible consequences of patterns of conformity to non-membership group norms may also serve to clarify the situation for children who are leaving the social, symbolic and special realm of childhood and entering the stage of youth. This is an age-related mobility in which the children have no choice other than, to a degree, in the manner in which this will happen. According to Merton, anticipatory socialization seems to be even more functional for the individual where the social structure is providing for mobility, which should make the term more applicable to the inevitable age-group mobility of the individuals here in question (Merton, 1957: 265).

Still, the unavoidable fact of growing older does not necessarily imply an orientation towards the new reference group. I therefore find it useful to also consider the *strength* of future orientation, as pointed out by Gentry et al. (1995). They emphasize the impact of past experience to understand the meaning of possessions for the individual. As my data focus on the children's present time and the present reflection of the self, present peer group orientation will constitute the experience on which meanings are interpreted.

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Thinking ahead, this present will very soon be their past, and the evaluations and interpretations of their present will be used to understand their future orientation and the meanings attached to the strategies for meeting the future.

Here, three elements of anticipatory socialization are applied: personal ability and capacities, alienation from present reference group and knowledge of norms and values of the group one aspires to become a member of. Clothes are used as the primary element of discussion, because dressing is one way to signal group belonging, personal status and personal qualities and abilities. Through five examples of trajectory strategies, in this article I show that these students are all trying with varying degrees of success to define activities and objects that express their personal abilities and capacities. These activities and objects must be in line with a cultural symbolic interpretation to function as an extension of their personality and individuality, and thus to give a direction to their trajectory. The analysis also shows different ways of alienating oneself from being a child, which in Merton's terms would be an important indicator of the wish for social mobility. However, what seems to be the most significant element for the strength, direction and content of one's trajectory is the availability of knowledge about the norms and values of the group one aspires to become a member of.

I have chosen to sort strategies into two categories: delayed anticipation and explored anticipation. Delayed anticipation points to strategies that either employ generic youth symbols to symbolize a change of age or are very involved in an activity that is accepted for both children and youth to make a gradual transition. A trajectory can be both voluntarily and involuntarily delayed. If presence of live peer role models is low, and the information about the youth groups of one's future school is not readily available, it is more likely that generic symbols are used and stereotypical representations of both youth and gender from media, etc. are more easily adopted. Such strategies are here exemplified by 'the least common signifier' route to youth, as a 'core interest continuum' or as 'adopting gender stereotypes'.

Explored anticipation refers to strategies that develop where the availability of information about youth cultures and live role models are available. Gender stereotypes are of course present in these environments as well, although in a different manner and reception. Examples of explored anticipation here are 'subgroup aspiration' and 'youth prelude', where the main difference is the degree in which you are involved with youth and youth activities.

The strategies shown here cannot be seen as mutually exclusive, or exhaustive of strategies that might be employed, in Norway or elsewhere. They do, however, show that clothes and material possessions must be regarded as tools by which social identity is negotiated, tested out and developed. The meanings of these objects are negotiated within the sociocultural environment. Fluidity in the meanings allows young people to negotiate

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their own identity and autonomy through the use of objects. An age identity trajectory from child to youth implies a growing awareness and knowledge about the world of symbolic communication (Dittmar, 1992; Hebdige, 1997; McCracken, 1988; Miles, 2000).

Knowledge of the norms and values of the reference group is an important element of symbolic and social capital that both initiates and curbs their future orientation (Bourdieu, 1984; Gentry et al., 1995). The sources of information could be anything from live role models (siblings, friends, peers), to adults and media messages. All these sources are basically carrying cultural images of youth, symbolized by particular clothing, music, activities, etc.

In what follows, I present an analysis of five open-ended interviews with 12-year-olds about their consumer habits and social aspirations. These interviews are taken from a larger study of consumer culture as a condition for socialization and everyday life among 12-year-olds in a mid-sized Norwegian town community.[1] The interview data in this study are analysed by a grounded theory approach, where contrasting, comparison, negation, etc. in a continuous process allow one to understand the 'taken for granted' in alternative ways (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; van Maanen, 1988). Out of 17 interviews, I chose these five because they portray strategies of change or stability in different ways in relation to the important event in every Norwegian child's life, i.e. the transition from 'children's school' to 'youth school'.

Heidi: 'Maybe I'll need a pair of Levi's before junior high?'

> . . . at the end of the interview I just spent some time with more general talk about friends and leisure time. She told me about shopping for food in the city, about how it is to go with Mum to the city and maybe see something she likes. Maybe something she can wish for, get or not get . . . but she also told me that there is really nothing that you need. Not when you are 12 anyway, she said, before she added, 'Maybe a pair of Levi's before you start junior high?' (Heidi)

I took particular notice of Heidi's reference to Levi's jeans, because the item had come up several times during the interview and in other interviews as well. I also noticed her reference to future use. Do the jeans one wears walking into youth have a particular meaning? Could this specific item of clothing mean something for the trajectory period from child to youth? And did it have an additional significance for Heidi, since this was something she would not be allowed to buy for herself before entering junior high?

The following excerpts are from the interview with Heidi:

> *Randi:* What about clothes and such, does that mean anything at this school? I mean what kind of clothes you wear, could that influence your popularity or something?
> *Heidi:* A little, maybe just a little.
> *Randi:* It means a little, how do you mean . . .?

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Heidi: Well nobody gets teased for not wearing Levi's jeans or anything, nobody teases them or anything.

. . .

Heidi: Well, these jeans right here, I have inherited these.
Randi: You like those, uh?
Heidi: Yea.
Randi: And what kind of jeans are they? Is that a Levi?
Heidi: Yes. My mother will not let me buy them, so I love these jeans.
Randi: She will not let you buy them?
Heidi: No but she has promised me that I will get a pair when I go to junior high.
Randi: Do you know why she won't let you?
Heidi: Well they are sort of expensive. They are quite expensive in fact. And then my brother has promised me that I will inherit his pair, and then I inherit quite a lot [from others] so there is not much point in buying them.

. . .

Randi: Well, if you want a pair of Levi's so badly, would you consider spending your savings and buying them for yourself?
Heidi: Yes. Or maybe not. I don't want it that much right now. But I sure would have taken a pair of Levi's if I had them given to me, if I had a choice.

. . .

Randi: But why Levi's?
Heidi: Well yes, I like them, and they are very comfortable, really.

Levi's jeans have a wealth of social meaning and symbolic association. The American image of new frontiers and gold-mining, James Dean and the original image of 'youth' are a just few of the basic semiotic associations of this deceptively simple item of clothing. The functional basic wear and tear of these 'original' blue jeans has lived on for generations of youth and has also become a symbol of 'youthfulness' among adult users. Until recently, it was as good as currency in some Eastern European countries, where American Levi's jeans represented a rebellion and freedom that one could not be persecuted for. This apparently simple pair of trousers is basically packed with ideology and symbolism.

But, in the case of Heidi and the children in this study more generally, the relation between sign, signifier and the signified is not as likely to be read into a Barthesian mythology as it would be tempting to do (Barthes, 1989). The Levi's are desirable in these particular instances because its symbolism is so saturated that it could signify just about anything, which thereby minimizes the risk of making the 'wrong' choice. The trajectory to youth is believed to be less painful wearing a pair of Levi's. If we return to Heidi, we see that even if today she is wearing hand-me-down Levi's and seems to cherish the status of being one of the very few to wear Levi's in her school, she still clearly emphasizes that it really is not too much of a 'big deal'. Not yet, anyway. 'I don't want them that much right now'.

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Levi's jeans as a transitional object

The reasons given for wearing Levi's are functional. They are comfortable and come in all lengths. The social function of a pair of Levi's is that it reduces risk, allowing Heidi to hide herself among the rest and to avoid being the object of teasing. You are 'one among the crowd' in Levi's, even if the crowd does not necessarily wear them. Choosing a pair of Levi's as one's transitional object is a strategy where the anticipation is delayed. One doesn't really know what to expect, so one chooses the least common denominator as a platform. Or one knows that there are a whole range of possibilities for choosing an identity statement in the field of expressed youth culture, but one is not quite ready to make a statement just yet. In any case, the generic but significant symbolism of a pair of Levi's works. This trajectory route can be called 'the least common signifier' or 'delayed anticipation' strategy.

Heidi attends a small rural school with around 10–15 students altogether. She is the oldest and the smartest girl around, so she doesn't have to make a statement of any kind, as her position in the peer group is clear. She enjoys her hobbies, working in a stable, as she loves horses, and a folk dance group she attends once a week with a girlfriend one year younger than her. She is thus very confident in her present group orientation, and her future orientation is more of a silent anticipation. Whatever lies ahead comes. Heidi knows that the change will come, but she is not quite sure what to prepare for just yet. Her life right now is busy enough as it is, and she trusts that to start off with a new pair of Levi's jeans as a generic symbol of youth will cut her some slack in the beginning. Since 'everyone wears them', a pair of Levi's might function as a social camouflage.

Her role model of youth is primarily her older brother. She can wear his hand-me-downs for now, but she definitely thinks it would be nice to have her very own Levi's purchased just for her before junior high. But there is still more to be said about Levi's jeans. Heidi gives functional reasons for her choice and says they are comfortable and 'good to wear', perhaps to mask her social anxiety. Pia, a tall but timid girl from a rather large suburban school, says that:

> *Pia:* I only wear Levi's.
> *Randi:* You only wear Levi's?
> *Pia:* Yes, because I have a problem of long legs, so . . .

And of course, having long legs is a perfectly good, functional reason for wearing a brand that comes in all sizes. So do a lot of other brands of jeans in fact, so why not Levi's? Or to put the question straight: why Levi's? Again, the significant value of a pair of Levi's jeans, no matter what probable functional quality one chooses to give them, is the safest way to be 'straight', normal, not wanting too much attention. If one is timid, and unmistakably one head taller than one's classmates, this is certainly a quality one would look for.

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Pia: daring to be(come) different?

Moving beyond Levi's, a child may try to qualify for membership into a new peer group by adopting its fashions. As a trajectory, this strategy can be called 'qualification through fashion', a strategy that implies good knowledge of the new reference group but also a recognition that membership requires more than simple adoption of the symbols. By stepping out of one's present reference group, one is preparing for another, simultaneously signalling that one is 'ready' to move on. 'Subgroup aspiration' could be another name for this strategy, which embraces the conscious use of material symbols in an aspiration to qualify and be accepted by a group of older kids.

Pia, the suburban girl, is blooming. She talks about her pastimes with her girlfriend and that they have a 'walking and talking' kind of relationship. They go for long walks in the neighbourhood or they stay at each other's house talking. Most of all they talk about boys and in particular the boys in junior high, because they are 'cooler' than the ones in her class. Being able to hang out around the junior high school after school when there are discotheques or other activities arranged there has made her aware that being tall and beautiful is not as much of a drawback as she thought it was. At the same time, her grades have improved, which has led her parents to give her more independence. They still decide her curfew, but 'I would not let them decide what I should wear'. Pia is getting ready to step out of her Levi's.

> *Randi:* So what kind of clothes would you like to wear?
> *Pia:* Clothes that I might not get from home. Clothes like . . . I don't know . . .
> *Randi:* You don't know what clothes you'd like to wear?
> *Pia:* A Fila sweater.
> *Randi:* I see, a Fila sweater.
> *Pia:* Or jacket.
> *Randi:* Or jacket . . . (*pause*)
> *Pia:* A pair of dungarees. But there has to be like two people chipping in, since they aren't cheap . . .
> *Randi:* They aren't cheap? So you want more expensive clothes? (*Pause*) Dungarees would be cool, huh?
> *Pia:* Umm (*agreeing, almost dreamily*).
> *Randi:* Yeah that is pretty cool . . .
> *Pia:* Yes, and with a Fila jacket on the outside . . .
> *Randi:* Now, that is cool. And your parents wouldn't let you wear that?
> *Pia:* Sure . . . I don't know . . . I haven't really asked.

Pia has begun to want clothes that make her stand out from her crowd. She wants to adapt to the style where clothes are wide and comfortable (although expensive brands) to acquire a sort of urban, 'rap music', 'hip-hop', street look. This style of clothing was in fashion at the time of the interview, both as a subgroup youth image, and as replicas of this image for all children in general. Dungarees and a big Fila jacket would still be a fairly strong identity statement.

Pia may not become a hip-hopper overnight, and perhaps she never

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will. The important point here is that she dreams herself into situations where these clothes would suit her, and she feels old enough and confident enough to respond in this situation to the gaze and response of others. Her present appearance shows me that she has already started to wear the more fashionable things typically seen adorned on girls over her own age, rather than the good old Levi's she claims to be wearing all the time. Actually, she is not too fond of blue jeans anymore.

> *Pia:* . . . but I like flared trousers.
> *Randi:* Flared trousers?
> *Pia:* Yes, they come out under the knee.

Later on she admits that Levi's are OK as far as jeans go, but she would not wear any other brand like 'Exit jeans or Tex . . . they are sort of . . . No, I would not like to wear those brands, not me anyway.'

That 12-year-old girls are beginning to get particular about clothes should not come as a big surprise to anyone. What seems to be more interesting is how clothes serve as vehicles of a change in identity. In Pia's case, stepping out of her jeans and into a pair of flared trousers is one step forward. It is not a giant leap but it is one small step. Flared trousers are fashionable, but they are not kids' fashion. The primary symbolic categorical expression of her clothes is to show that she is not a child anymore. She needs to alienate herself from childhood as a category to achieve control of her own preferences.

A pair of flares is not a particular subgroup statement, as a pair of baggy dungarees and a Fila sweater would be. But to Pia it is one step closer to the image that she is striving for, the image of youth. Pia's primary role models are the cool guys in junior high, whom she hopes will accept her. Going all the way and adopting subgroup symbols of identity and belonging would be a rather risky affair, as she is not a member of the group. Not yet, anyway. Instead, Pia chooses to set herself apart from the other children her age, by refusing to wear 'kids'' fashions and brands associated with children. Not even the bright colours that could be associated with children are acceptable. This is in line with Merton's argument of the necessity of alienating oneself from one's present reference group in order to move upwards socially (Merton, 1957).

Negotiations of what is 'cool' or not are mainly done in the 'walking and talking' relationship with her girlfriend. Her parents have a say when it comes to the amount of money she can spend on clothes, but as far as what kind of clothes she wants, they don't have a clue: 'I wouldn't wear just anything.'

Pia finds her own classmates unexciting and childish. Her present peer group is just 'there': there are a lot of them and they are just a crowd. Pia's orientation goes literally across the field from her school, over to junior high. She is preparing for the change, and she is not afraid of it because she

has 'educated' herself in the codes and expressions of youth. Pia is getting ready for junior high. She is becoming a youth and she chooses to wear fashionable clothes, slowly narrowing her choices down to more subcultural elements or specific fashions or fads. This exercise in transformation has to be gradual because she needs to 'qualify' for the more extreme expressions belonging to certain and specific groups. This is helping her to bridge the transition and build up confidence with a new identity statement.

Elise: secondary experience and gender stereotypes

Lack of knowledge about the norms and values of the future reference group will curb a child's strategy for their trajectory to youth. When arenas for peer negotiation are few and equal status role models are not available, the simple but elaborate stereotypes of gender are all the more pertinent as categories of identification. The same goes for other roles, from personalities to professions, which are often simplified and glorified through the media.

Elise has a best friend who goes to junior high. 'We used to spend a lot of time together before, but now she is like a year older, or she's not even a year older, only 4 months. She was born in December.' Elise feels 'left behind' in a rural school. She is the only girl in her class now, in the company of boys.

Elise has come to the point where she experiments with her appearance. She wants to be tough and one of the boys, on one hand, but, on the other hand, she wants to underline the fact that she is a girl, or maybe even a young woman, and she wants to be acknowledged for both these qualities. She is proud to tell me that she can go outside in a T-shirt in the middle of winter and still be warm. This is a quality she got from her father, she says. She is also proud to tell me about competing with the boys in sport and play. She is one of the guys.

At the time of the interview, she is wearing a T-shirt under a big sweater and the kind of thick pants that are worn by workers, with pockets everywhere. She tells me that she usually wears jeans to school. Before I can ask more about her everyday clothes, she adds:

> *Elise:* On my birthday two years ago, I got a pair of Levi's pants from my aun[t] . . . from two of my aunts, and two of my uncles [too]. (*She is clearly thinking hard on how many people chipped in*.)
> *Randi:* I see . . .
> *Elise:* And three cousins.
> *Randi:* Umm, was that what you had wanted then, or . . .
> *Elise:* Yes.
> *Randi:* Yes.
> *Elise:* And then I got two [pairs] from one of my aunts for . . . 6 months ago.

Again, Levi's jeans turn out to be a valuable asset, worth mentioning. However, asked about her favourite clothes, she surprised me by saying:

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Elise: Miniskirts. That's what I like, and then. . . those short dresses.
Randi: Miniskirts and short dresses*? (not able to hide surprise)*
Elise: Yes.
Randi: That's what you like to wear?
Elise: Yes.
Randi: It would have to be summer then, right?
Elise: Yes, and in the winter too.
Randi: Really?
Elise: If I am going to birthdays and parties and things like that.
Randi: I see. So you enjoy dressing up?
Elise: Yes.
Randi: That's nice. Do you wear jewellery too when . . . [you dress up]?
Elise: Yes.
Randi: What kind of jewellery do you use . . . [on these occasions]?
Elise: Earrings and . . .
Randi: Are they gold, or . . . ?
Elise: No, I wear all kinds.

She shows me the earrings that she is wearing at the moment. They are her favourites, and they are attached to each other and pinned into both pierced holes in her ear. Both her ears are pierced twice, which is sort of 'cool', and works well with her overall 'boyish', rough appearance. She tells me about the difference between the kind of jewellery that goes with jeans, and the kind that does not.

As her story continues, it turns out that Elise is very family oriented, with a special interest in babies, and in her free time does a lot of creative and craft activities. Among other things, she seems to be an expert in making a special kind of pearl embroidery lace. She makes it to sell at church bazaars as well as for decorations around the house. She makes patchwork too, and she sews, and makes small ceramic figures. But when it comes to music, she will only listen to 'boys' she says, referring to male artists. 'I have gotten so used to boys and stuff, because there are only boys in my class', she explains. Her obvious gender mix of appearance and activities struck me as an ambiguity at first. But on second thoughts, it all became very obvious.

Elise not only feels left behind in an all-boy peer group, she *is* left behind. At school the only thing that separates her from the boys is a pair (actually two pairs) of earrings and an occasional necklace. At home, she participates in more cultivated feminine activities such as embroidery and sewing, encouraged by her family and the church community. But she is now at a stage where she wants to challenge these roles. She wants to be set apart from the boys, but the home and church ideals of girlhood or femininity are somewhat childish, she thinks. She wants to dress up as a girl or a young woman and to show the world what she is growing into. So where does she gather the information about what growing into a young woman means? Her old girlfriend obviously does not want to spend too much time

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with her anymore, as she is a year older all of a sudden. If they do spend time together, they sit on a goods delivery ramp outside the local general store, drinking Coke, watching the cars drive by. One clue, I think, lies in her absolutely favourite pastime: watching television.

In every interview, I start by asking about the children's favourite pastimes. In the case of Elise, I not only get the compulsory 'girl-scouts- and/or junior-church-club-once-a-week' answer. She gave me a long tale about *Sunset Beach* and *Home and Away*, the intrigue, the love, the drama and the jewellery. These are American and Australian produced daytime series, which she watches every day after school, because there is so much 'action' in them, so many exciting things happen. This is 'bigger than real life' for Elise; this is the world out there where men are men and women are women, and it is full of intrigue and love and hate and excitement. Compared to sitting on a delivery ramp drinking Coke and watching the cars go by, this is big time action.

Pia, the suburban girl, is moving from neutral (Levi's) to general fashion, aspiring to a tougher, boyish, 'hip-hop' style of youth. Elise is moving from a tough, boy-centred generic (Levi's) style accompanied with traditional feminine qualifications such as embroidery and care for small children, aspiring to be a 'daytime-soap' style young woman, showing her legs off in her miniskirt, flirting with her sexuality and capability to intrigue. For Elise there are few, if any, peer group role models that she cares about to challenge this youth image, so the soap operas provides her with her most significant role models.

Elise does not give the impression of being discontented with her everyday life. She keeps in the company of the boys at school, and is not bothered by the fact that she is the only girl. Still, the identity ties to her classmates are weak, as most of the time she sees them only during school hours. Her girl scouts group and church group do not give her satisfactory peer group relations. This, I suspect, is partly due to the fact that it is parent initiated, but also that there are no strict identity-related activities or 'uniform' in either group other than being 'a child'. She also has to travel to get there and the groups only meet every other week.

Unfortunately, the present reference group does not have many other individuals of the same gender and the same kind of challenges. While a stronger peer group could support negotiation of meanings and significance of things, Elise is most of the time left with adult women either live or in the television series. Elise's trajectory route from girlhood to youth seems to be through a changing gender identity adopting stereotypical expressions of adult female gender. The material signifiers are dresses, preferably miniskirts and jewellery. Her journey is quite lonely in fact, as there are few peers, and hardly any of them girls, to negotiate the content of this new young woman image.

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Turid: the relics of total dedication

The next strategy describes how activities and their accessories can serve as a bridge across the age-related changes of identity. If the identity is more strongly tied to the activity than to the peer group, the biological and psychological changes from child to youth will appear as a side-effect, and not a definite change that needs to be prepared for. The child's investment in props connected to the activity serves to symbolically enforce their autonomous identity. The more props and the more visible the dedication, the stronger the signalling effect. The various items of interest do not necessarily fill a function in the activity itself, but serve as reinforcement of their feeling of being someone related to the activity. Some of the items are not even shown in public, as they are confined to the wall of one's room, or even to a drawer in one's desk. They are still important as a means of self-reflection for these youth.

I have chosen to call these strategies 'a core interest continuum', and they could as equally involve a passion for playing music or being into computer technology as be related to a sport or athletic activity. My example is from the latter type.

Turid is a 'horse-girl'. This is a fairly common identity label for girls at this age, and can apply to a girl whether her activities relate to a mere interest in horses and an occasional riding class, or whether she spends most of her spare time in a stable. For Turid, clothes serve a functional purpose of instrumental symbolic meaning. She has a full thermal outfit, which was expensive, but keeps her warm working with the horses in the winter. She has a good pair of riding-boots for stable-work and a pair of leather riding pants with an unfortunate hole in the rear. She says she is eager to replace the pants when she can raise the money, but the hole is also a symbol of wear and tear, which proves her dedication and effort. She would also like to have a nice riding jacket. Her father has bought her a very nice, expensive designer label sweat suit that she can wear to school, but not in the stable. She spends most of her allowance money on equipment for the horse, such as horse shampoo, horsetail conditioner and brushes or on other horse things like books about horses and posters of horses. She also likes art classes, as long as she can draw horses and not people. She chooses friends with similar interests, or who do not show off too much, or make 'a fuss about nothing', as she puts it.

Turid is a good example in life-cycle studies of the functional meaning of possessions for young people (Gentry et al., 1995). Most of her belongings are connected to the active functions of her everyday life. She has established an identity as a 'horse-girl, as a capable and autonomous young individual. Her activity is basically situated outside school, so to identify with the activity inside the school environment she is dependent on 'style elements' to signal her group affiliation.

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She has no thoughts about outgrowing this identity. Changing schools is not even an issue for her, because school is something she thinks of as a mere requirement, which must be followed. Her real life is somewhere else, although she is confident that her peers know who she is through her appearance and identity statement. Turid comes across as very self-confident. She does not fear anything; not the gaze of her peers, not 'dirt', not falling off horses or having to work hard. Part of this is due to her strong feeling of identification with what she is doing. She spends most of their time, energy and money on one activity.

One of her strategies is what Mary Douglas (1996) would call cultural protest. She is protesting against being one of the 'pretty girls' by not wearing Levi's. She also expresses resentment towards their behaviour. Nevertheless, her individuality and somewhat loose dedication to her symbols allows her to experiment with different kinds of dressing up and taking part in other activities than those related to the horse and stable milieu. She says that she will wear a miniskirt, high heeled shoes, jewellery and even make-up when she goes to parties with friends. But she won't be caught dead in them at school. Wearing make-up at school would be out of character for Turid. Nights offer a different context and interpretation:

> *Randi:* Do you think it's fun wearing make-up [like that]?
> *Turid:* No, I hardly ever think about it. When you are in the stable as much [as I am], you don't make yourself up, you don't think about it very much. But maybe it is kind of fun.
> *Randi:* When you are dressing up*?*
> *Turid:* Yes, when you are dressing up it is kind of fun.

To have everything, from friendships, activities and peer group status to one's relationship with parents, built around one activity requires a lot of identity work. To 'step out of character' involves a higher risk as one is entering domains where one doesn't know the rules of the game (Goffman, 1971). Whether the activity-based identity is individual or group related, whether it supports individuality or a group identification, holding the material symbols of dedication high provides a system of support. Bedrooms are like shrines filled with relics and holy objects. Turid also has an image of herself, corresponding with that held by significant others. Her anticipation of a future change is as weak as her dedication to the present is strong. She uses her activity as a pillar for her identity, framing it with knowledge and commodities connected to the activity. As she has no intention of giving up or losing her interest in horses, it is this stability that is going to carry her over the threshold of youth.

Marius: a new image

Whereas the strategy of a core activity continuum is built on qualifications from childhood that create a bridge over to youth, choosing a youth image to

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aspire to is more like shooting out a life line into the future where one pulls oneself towards youth through hard labour. I choose to call this strategy 'a youth prelude'.

Marius has spent time learning skills. He started to play the guitar as a young child, and has moved from learning the basics on a classical guitar to rock 'n' roll on an electric. He has formed a band with some friends, and they practise in the basement of his house on their own and borrowed instruments. Music could as such be Marius's continuum from childhood to youth. But Marius differs from the other kids with a core interest or activity by having only recently chosen a new activity that is now his primary interest and identity. Starting the interview, I asked him what he did in his spare time, and his answer was short and definite: 'I skate'.

Skateboarding is something that usually is associated with older children and youth. This is partly because of cost and safety, but also because skateboarding is new and associated with play and young leisure rather than sports. Skateboarding is an unorganized or self-organized activity. And even more importantly, skateboarding is not only an activity, it is a lifestyle (Rushkoff, 1997). There are both clothes and equipment that go with this activity, and in addition to skills in skateboarding, one needs to have skills in how to maintain and repair the equipment. Furthermore, one has to have the knowledge about where to get the right stuff and what the right stuff is with regards to the board, the shoes to wear, clothes, headgear, music, etc. As this is a self-organized activity, one also has to be inventive and creative in discussing how to do it, where and when. To be a skater is, in fact, quite an elaborate image.

As a trajectory strategy, Marius has chosen an activity associated with youth and taught himself to be good at it. This gives him access to a group identity that also can transform his identity from child to youth. He has prepared himself by watching skateboarding on television, reading magazines and watching other skateboarders for long periods of time. So when his parents finally decided he was old enough to get a skateboard, he already had a lot of knowledge about the codes of the group, which eased his access to the total image.

Sometimes the line between children and youth is quite transparent. In terms of the physical environment, Marius's school shares the same playground as junior high, and thus students across age groups mingle in their recess periods, for 10–15 minutes every hour. As the school is situated in a densely populated area, students also mingle in the streets and around school after school hours. The interaction between the age groups is frequent, and the age difference between them is not always apparent.

This is not to say that the trajectory we have talked about so far is not there. Marius's strategy combined with the physical and social surroundings just makes it more of a gradual process. One reason for this is that his subgroup identification started at an earlier age. These groups are bound

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together by shared interest, by knowledge and capabilities and sometimes by the things one has or the uniform one wears, but not by one's age category. The activities usually carry their own style, whether it is sports, arts, wildlife preservation or music that binds them together. Some activities are age related, others are age-universal, and the scale from group to individual activity is continuous.

Both Marius and Turid serve as examples of a gradual change from child to youth, even if the time and energy to uphold a subgroup identity is spent in different ways. They are both clearly theoretically educated in their field of interest, and the use of material symbols to manifest their identity status is evident in both cases. In Marius's case, however, the activity he chooses to identify with is more closely connected to an anticipation of future reference group norms, as it is a stronger youth signifier.

Child to youth trajectories and anticipatory socialization

I have chosen to interpret children's strategies of age-group trajectories by way of three dimensions in Merton's concept of anticipatory socialization: individual ability and capacities; alienation from present reference group; and knowledge of norms and values of the group of which one aspires to become a member. I summarize how children prepare for an age identity change along these three dimensions.

Individual abilities and capacities

Wearing low slung pants and a loose hooded sweater do not make Marius a 'skater'. Skateboarding does. The no make-up and casual dress do not give Turid the 'tough' image of a 'horse-girl' unless she is involved with horses. 'Wanna-bes' are usually marginalized if the symbols of their aspirations are not in line with their abilities. If activities are to be an extension of your identity, you have to have some ability and capacity to perform, or show willingness to learn such abilities.

To be good at something, whether it is sports, academics, arts or special activities is of course an asset at any stage in life, and so also when moving from one age to another. Still, an ability that is of the upmost importance to find a place for oneself in a new peer environment is to master the field of material symbolic communication. The right or possibility to wear clothes, own sports equipment, musical instruments or even symbolic paraphernalia have to be earned. Carrying the symbolic items of a group as an individual statement is often a sign of confidence and the ability of someone who masters the symbolic capital of a youth culture.

Both Turid and Marius are involved in activities that have a large number of symbolic items connecting them to their cultural affiliation. The symbols also serve to reflect their identities. Even if Turid's identity as a 'horse-girl' is more traditional than Marius's skater image in a Norwegian context,

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they both have an activity that can ease their transition to youth. They are using activities and their related commodities as bridges to their new age identity. If employed well, these will give them time to adapt gradually to a new age identity.

Alienation from present reference group

Social mobility and a change of reference group is not only an adaptation to the new, but a farewell to the old. According to Merton, the 'climber' would also have to alienate him- or herself from the old social group in the process of entering the new reference group, to show some allegiance to the new values and standards (Merton, 1957). In the case of changing age group, one would think that an identity as youth could be built on top of one's identity as a child, as this is a process that most people go through. Still, the children do express alienation from their present peer group, and not least from the 'image' of being a child.

Pia refuses to wear childish fashions, and Elise wants to quit activities that she feels are childish. Certain brands of clothes are culturally understood as kids' fashion, and by alienating herself from this symbolic realm, Pia shows her aspirations to become more independent. Making one's own choices about clothes is a claim of autonomy from parents and from the position of a 'dependent child'.

Elise is also in a process of leaving childhood, and does not want to be associated with groups that treat her as a child. For Elise, there is a void in peer models, so her strategy is to aspire to alternative models such as adult women and, not least, media-projected images of young women. This alienation is in both cases important for the age identity changing process, because childhood is dependent and ascribed, while youth needs to be constructed by the individual (Miles, 2000).

Knowing the norms and values of the new reference group

Anticipatory socialization implies a social equation where the unknown parameters sum up to a predicated result. It requires some sort of preconception of a future identity. Children display different forms and degrees of anticipation of youth dependent on the extent of their knowledge and availability of role models, which again influence their confidence in social strategies.

The strategies of age transition I have identified in the data can broadly be sorted into two categories based on availability of knowledge of norm and values of the new reference group: delayed anticipation and explored anticipation.

The anticipation is delayed if knowledge about the standards of youth reference groups is limited. Heidi chooses a generic symbol of youth as her preferred transitional object, because she is not yet sure what to expect. Her limited knowledge of values, symbols and lifestyles of specific youth groups

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is compensated for by generic objects to smooth her transition to the unknown. In this way she can delay concrete anticipations.

Having an interest, hobby or special qualification may also serve as a bridge across to the new age groups, which allows for a certain delay of definite identification with new norms and values. Earlier, I described this as 'a core interest continuum' strategy, as employed by Turid. But this strategy does require quite extensive knowledge within a special field to be able to attach it to your identity.

Presence of peers and diversity of peer groups and activities strengthen one's aspirations towards one or the other identity, and strategies such as 'qualification through fashion', 'subgroup aspiration' and 'a youth prelude' are more likely.

While still a child, Marius is exploring the youth scene, first by educating himself at home, later by hanging out with the older skaters. Pia tries to dress herself into youth. Her aspirations are formed by media images, but maybe more importantly, by the older kids in junior high, just across the field from her own suburban school.

Knowledge of the norms and values of the available peer groups is easier to obtain in an urban environment, where the arenas for interaction between children and youth are plural and not always formal. This knowledge would no doubt give a child the opportunity to negotiate their youth identity at an earlier stage, for better or for worse. The better would be that the child has the opportunity to develop more confidence in who they aspire to be before the change of school and peer environment. On the other hand, both strong subcultural identification and informal interaction with slightly older youth are often feared by the parental and adult culture. This fear is mainly associated with the possibility that your child will fall in with the 'wrong crowd' when you lose sight and control of them. But we need to acknowledge that peer experience allows the child to negotiate abilities, individuality and autonomy, which supports their self-esteem. Knowledge of norms and values, expressed through styles and fashion and fads that govern the generation must also be acknowledged as important symbolic and social capital.

While the identity as child is ascribed, one's identity as youth must be achieved. To become a youth means to acquire both a sense of self and a sense of direction. Preparing for this age identity trajectory is not only a question of coming to terms with the biological and physical changes, but also a question of learning to be capable in the social language of a new identity.

Knowledge of the material expressions as well as the 'ideological' foundation of the crowds that form the internal structure of the adolescent culture is necessary to be able to play with the symbolic experiences of the objects, which refer to whole sets of ideas. The functions that material possessions fulfil are related to the ability to symbolically communicate both

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categorically and self-expressively a growing normative awareness and a sense of value.

Note

1.   The study was conducted in 1997, and consists, in addition to the interviews, of questionnaire data from 210 children aged 12 in 1997. The analyses presented here are based on the interviews only. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and focused on matters in the young people's everyday lives, their consumption, their leisure, friends, family, money matters, material choices and priorities. The children were randomly picked from the schools and the children in the sample for the questionnaire, and permission was obtained from both their parents and their schools. All interviews were done by me away from the classroom in the children's schools during school hours.

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