

## Chapter 7

# The Visibility of the Invisible: What Propels Meaning Construction in Our Lives



“But he hasn’t got anything on,” a little child said.

*The Emperor’s New Clothes*  
(H. C. Andersen, transl., Jean Hersholt)<sup>1</sup>

In Chap. 6, I suggested that at least two types of dialectic tension are present in the background of children’s meaning constructions and the emergence of their presentational selves. The whimsical appearance of presentational selves can be attributed to the unpredictability generated by the tensions in our lives. Thus, elaborating the discussion concerning the selves emerging in meaning construction requires further understanding of how these tensions work.

This chapter focuses on one such tension: the tension of visible <> invisible, which is in close relationship with the reunion in children’s lives. As I described, the (in)visibility of children often establishes the meaning construction that identifies or clarifies who they were while invisible to someone else (e.g., mothers, teachers). The influence and power of invisibility are not limited to such habitual activities, but are prevalent in our lives. For example, we have a presupposition that our future surely exists, though the future is invisible and open to various possibilities, including the possibility that we will not be in a position to experience it. Regardless, we still believe in our continuity and we use concepts such as responsibility for our actions, which is deeply related to our belief in our own continuity. This example illustrates how invisibility constitutes the semiotic construction of our lives, and suggests that invisibility exists in several aspects in our lives. In other words, the invisibility of a child for his or her parents during the daytime and the invisibility of our own selves 10 days in the future share the common quality that they do not exist here-and-now, immediately, but they differ in how they are invisible to us and what disrupts their visibility. To construct an integrative understanding concerning the dynamics of visible <> invisible tension, this chapter attempts a typological understanding of invisibility, drawing examples from psychological studies and our broader society.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from [http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes\\_e.html](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html)

## Invisibility by Substantial Obstacles: A Simple Pattern of Impediment

As mentioned in the previous chapter, psychological research exists in close relationship with reunion and the visible <> invisible tension, and many studies have discussed human development in relation to this. Among these, certain studies by J. Piaget focused on when and how children become able to understand the permanence of objects that are temporarily invisible to them. Infants' understanding of object concept (Piaget, 1955) was tested by covering an object with some obstacle (e.g., cloth). Piaget (1955) also showed the development of children's understanding from simple detection of a hidden object to their consideration of possible unseen movement of the object.

This well-known study suggests that one function of our mind lies in coping with the invisibility of objects from very early in our development, even before children start to use language well. Our actions in the world, both at the very local level and at the global level, depend on our understanding of a substantially hidden sphere. I *know* there is a kitchen next to the room where I work now, and I move there when I feel hungry. I also *understand* one of my colleague lives in a country in another hemisphere of the globe, and I send an email to him when I have something to tell him. Thus, in the foundation of our actions, there is often an understanding that there is something that we cannot find right now, due to physical obstacles or distances.

The word "visible" as I use it here refers to our visual perception in the first place. Yet the point is not to emphasize perceptual visibility but rather the physical distance and obstacles between the desired object and ourselves. In other words, invisibility here means the impossibility of finding something in our immediately perceptible environment. Although the technologies of communication now blur such obstacles and distances, our living in the physical world requires us to construct a worldview that includes physically hidden spheres.

The invisibility caused by physical distance and obstacles is related to time, as we learn in the first step of the calculation of speed. To confirm what is in the invisible side or space requires us to move there or make it move, and it takes time. Here the extension of our physical world involves time to transfer, and to find out everything in our surroundings simultaneously is impossible given the restrictions of time and space.

## Invisibility Due to Physical Impediments and Meaning Construction

The concept of reunion discussed in the previous chapter mainly relies on this type of invisibility: i.e., the invisibility of children as viewed by others due to physical distance between them. In modern societies, institutions for children such as hoikuen or schools are usually clearly distinct from children's homes and there are substantial differences (distances) between them. Children's everyday movement between two

places causes their re-appearance in the view of parents at home or teachers at school. However, this invisibility is also based on the social norms that require us to separate the private sphere from public institutions. If they have enough time, it is physically possible for parents to go and stay at the school to look at their children all the time. Although it may happen on some occasions, in most societies few parents will do this every day. Thus, the visible <> invisible tension concerning children is a result of both physical distance and socially shared rules. As I discussed in the foregoing chapter, the emergence of children's presentational selves in meaning construction awakens from this (in)visibility of children and it regulates another dialectic tension of the same <> non-same.

The meaning construction from invisibility also works on many occasions in our lives, and modern society controls what is visible and invisible to control our desire to know it. Accordingly, the secrecy adds value to the given content (Valsiner, 2007). For example, we do not wish to know what celebrities really do in their private lives; our not knowing the details of their private lives is essential for keeping them special and different from ourselves. The clearest example of this dynamic is in the religious discussions concerning the possibility of visualizing the ultimate other, as I discuss later. Thus, the visibility of others is related to the determination of who we are in relation to them.

From this perspective, constructing the physical invisibility of children by creating a childcare system or school system in society works to make it clear that each child has his or her own uniqueness that is distinct from family members. This was already suggested in the interview with mothers introduced in Chap. 4 (Excerpts 4.1 and 4.2), in which the mothers emphasized the independence of their children. In their discussion concerning young children's autonomy, Vuorisalo, Raittila, and Rutanen (2018) also reported parents' understanding that their children need a space outside the reach of parents. Thus, the invisibility of others is not simply the source of our curiosity or anxiety about what happened when we did not see them, but rather what brings about the otherness of children to parents or teachers. The mother-child conversation is thus established upon the generation of otherness of children for mothers (and vice versa) through invisibility. Conversely, children's writings in nikki journals are made when no one is visible for the children, yet it works for them to suppose the independence of themselves from others, and to create readers who are invisible for the moment.

Such meaning constructions also involve perspectives on the flow of time in relation to (in)visibility. When a mother and child talk about the child's experiences, they are visible to each other, but they must each consider the time when the child is invisible. The child who writes a story in nikki must *imagine* an invisible reader by presuming they will become visible in the future. Here the flow of time becomes an indispensable aspect of the dynamics. Children write personal stories at home, preparing for their meeting the following day: i.e., the moment the teacher becomes visible. In other words, the visible <> invisible tension that leads to the emergence of children's selves works through the flow of time, which also leads us to extend the concept of invisibility, as follows below.

## **Visibility by the Semiotic Extension of the World: An Extension from Physical Invisibility**

When we expect an event to happen—i.e., to become visible—in the future, it is invisible for us at the time and will only be realized in the flow of time. Children *expect* to meet their teacher the next day, and it usually happens when they go to school. Given this realization of visibility in time, ways of achieving visibility are not limited to our physical movement in space. In school education, children’s solving questions in mathematics exemplifies this process. When they are presented with a question, the answer is invisible to them and they are expected to solve it to achieve an answer that appears visibly on the paper.

The fundamental steps in these examples are similar: i.e., something becomes visible in the flow of time. Differences exist in how visibility is achieved. As Vygotsky (1986) emphasized in the mediating role of psychological tools, our language use is crucial to these processes to recognize objects otherwise invisible to us. Children’s participation in educational practices involves such an orientation to make the invisible visible through their activities. Mastering calculations allows children to arrive at visible solutions, and children learn to read textbooks to say something hearable and understandable from otherwise meaningless sets of signs. In other words, school education is a systematic presentation of the invisible, from which children must construct something visible. In these activities, making the answer literally visible (e.g., writing into a notebook) is often recommended. Yet we also require children to have an *understanding* that enables visible answers. Thus, making something visible in such contexts means having a new understanding of it.

If I extend the tension of visible  $\leftrightarrow$  invisible in this way, visibility becomes more related to having an understanding of something latent. Returning to the examples of well-known tasks in developmental psychology, the discussion within research on “theory of mind” that is often represented by the false-belief task (e.g., Wimmer & Perner 1983) may exemplify this. In this procedure, children succeed in the task when they can reconstruct the false beliefs of another that are not apparent from (i.e., are invisible in) the episode presented to them.

## **Another Form of Invisibility for Promoting Children’s Meaning Construction**

Following the discussion in the former section, children describing their experiences in oral or written stories not only presents who they were, but also identifies what was formerly invisible. This orientation is clearer in children’s writing of *nikki* as a task in elementary schools. Teachers who lead this activity are basically interested in children’s experiences in their homes, and children’s stories look like

private products at first sight. However, as I discussed in Chap. 5, this activity was often intended to clarify the *meaning* of their experiences, or of their *lives*. In these contexts, educators placed emphasis on extending children's scope or visibility from the superficial viewing of what they saw to deeper meanings that they could possibly develop through their writings. For example, when a teacher recommends a child to write a story like Excerpt 5.5, in which the meaning of "milk jelly" extends into the past and the future, this represents the child uncovering a *meaning* of an object that does not necessarily appear just by looking at it.

This perspective on children clarifying invisible aspects of what they encounter was also emphasized in seikatsu-tsuzurikata education in the past, in which teachers often led children who lived in difficult circumstances. For example, they were expected to elaborate on their own or their family members' negative feelings in their lives, or to discover the meaning of work (Funabashi, 1996). In comparison with what is to be found in learning of arithmetic—i.e., one absolute correct answer—what becomes clear in writing personal experiences is basically dependent on the environment and characteristics of each individual child. However, when I consider the historical background, this activity shares the same orientation with what children perform in the classrooms: the clarification of what is invisible at first glance by their semiotic extension from the visible world.

The mother-child conversation about children's experiences involves a similar type of transition from invisible to visible. For example, a child and her mother collaboratively identify the reason why a bus is stopping on the street (Excerpt 1.1) and the name of a person whom they had met before (Excerpt 3.1). These examples are very simple but understandable as the clarification of what is invisible just by looking at the objects. It also suggests that at least a part of the meaning construction investigated through this monograph is, in a broader sense, semiotic extension for the clarification of the invisible that exists behind visible objects or events.

## The Complex of Two Types of Invisibility and Meaning Construction

In our environment, the two types of visible  $\leftrightarrow$  invisible tension mentioned above coexist and interact to influence our conduct. On one hand, the switch of the visible to invisible, or the invisible to visible, that is generated by *physical* obstacles promotes our meaning construction concerning our environments and ourselves (e.g., children's going back and forth from school, the invisibility of celebrities' real lives). However, such meaning construction often focuses on the clarification of the invisible aspects that visible objects have, through semiotic extensions (e.g., discovering past and future interpersonal relationships in a milk jelly, or understanding why a bus stops in the neighborhood). Moreover, the result of this clarification is sometimes expressed in physically visible ways (e.g., writing an illustrated story in *nikki*).

These processes are essentially relational and relative. With physical invisibility, two people looking at one object from different perspectives will find different views depending on their positions, and the same applies to semiotic clarification. When children try to solve a calculation in mathematics, children do not see the correct answer at first but that answer is already visible for the teacher who asked the question. Even single individuals find a new perspective, different from the old one, when he or she finds a new meaning or aspect of an object viewed. Thus, the tension of visible <> invisible always exists with our position in relation to others or objects. It implies that the emergence of children's presentational self in meaning construction also means children clarifying the position from which they see something in their experience.

This relationship between visible <> invisible tension and the construction of our position, or our self, in relation to the object, is not limited to the area of child development or school education but is a very widespread phenomenon in our society. In these processes, the visible <> invisible tension often involves conflicts between the positions we take. To understand this process, history offers us a path to further inquiry, and the next section will make an explorative discussion on the role of invisibility in society by introducing examples in history.

## **The Visibility of the Invisible Other: Struggles in History**

Our society has ample means for presenting the invisible other, which have been developed and maintained over generations. Visual symbols like icons or statues we see in museums are what people have long used to represent invisible others. Such symbolic images were not only for representing invisible and sacred referents, but also clarifying the worshippers' commitment to the community: that is, collective identity (Giesen, 2012).

As also discussed by Giesen (2012), such images are sometimes banned for their power to move people. Iconoclasm and the revival of depicted images for worship have recurred through history and are still observable even now. These things that sought to present the invisible objectively worked powerfully on our mind and our conduct, and our orientation concerning how to present them has long been the cause of conflict. The history of Christianity is filled with attempts to find a way of visually depicting Christ, and many figures were based on a variety of associations and allegories (Okada, 2009). Although the objects we find in museums or churches still display enormous variety in their styles, they are the results of convergence constructed through history.

In these trials concerning religious themes, some motives are depicted with values shared in society and desired by many people. For example, at least from my perspective, the Virgin Mary we find in churches or museums is often described as the embodiment of beauty and nobility. However, people's experiments always involve opposing orientations. Discussions concerning medieval history describe artists as sometimes depicting the invisible other as unusually ugly, absurd monsters

potentially capable of evoking strong emotional reactions and desire to flee from them, as well as curiosity about them. In his inquiry into depictions of monsters in the Middle Ages, Williams (1996) interpreted the appearance and development of monsters as follows:

In the Middle Ages and other periods and cultures in which the monster flourished, the existence of a transcendent, ineffable reality superior to and paradigmatic of mundane reality was undoubted. The representation of this essentially unrepresentable reality was the goal of both philosophy and art. The limitations of discursive language seem to have been recognized almost from the beginning of philosophical thought, and the general nature of those limitations identified as language's need for a sign to represent a truth, which sign, by its nature, remains different and distinct from what it signifies. (p. 85).

This understanding suggests that the depictions of invisible objects were people's attempts to extend their visibility of the world. However, because of the indefinite nature of the object in these explorations, these attempts are never-ending, and people always wished for the renewal of these presentations in history. In addition, as the iconoclasms of history show, these explorations are not constrained to one linear direction from invisible to visible.

## Regulation of Visibility for Construction of the Self

Attempts to depict the invisible, ultimate other in figures or pictures have been often in conflict with dogma that argues such depictions are impossible. This conflict was sometimes followed by the destruction of figures, yet backlash was also experienced from the strong desire to have concrete images. Major swings between these two poles are evident: for example, in the eighth to ninth century of Byzantine history, which shows repeated iconoclasms and revival of icons. If we consider visibility in a purely pictorial sense, these events can be understood as very large-scale, long-term adjustments of visible <> invisible tension. However, from the current discussion that includes both substantial and semiotic clarification of the invisible, they constitute disputes not about the possibility of visibility, but about the form of visibility.

Under complicated conditions, the control of invisibility becomes more complex. For example, Jonckheere (2012) discusses the characteristics of a painting by the Flemish painter Adriaen Thomasz Key (1554–1599) that was completed in 1575. It depicts the Mary Magdalene, and in a sense, this is a visualization of the saint. However, the painting is without iconographic symbols and contains many characteristics that precisely follow the description of Mary Magdalene by one of the leading Calvinists of the age. Thus, the painting clearly reflects the sway between Catholicism and the Protestant iconoclastic fury (the *Beeldenstorm* in 1566) and demonstrates very fine control of visibility, capable of coping with the kind of visibility that society demanded.

The worship of the crypto-Christians in Japan during the period when Christianity was prohibited in Japan (1614–1873) is another example. After accepting the

Catholic mission in 1549, many people in Japan, including some lords, converted to Catholicism. Although the propagation of and worship in the Catholic faith was later prohibited, some people on the western end of the Japanese archipelago maintained their Christian faith in secrecy for some 260 years, publicly behaving as non-Christian.<sup>2</sup> Under suppression, they kept various pictures and figures for their worship (e.g., crosses, statues of the Virgin Mary), but these were strictly hidden or blended with figures of Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> In this way, they owned *visible* objects that worked in special ways to limit the people capable of understanding their meaning. These examples show that control of visible  $\leftrightarrow$  invisible tension lies not only in the possibility of describing, but also in the possibility of accessing the visible objects.

This construction of a variety of visibilities of the indefinite other is also seen in the positioning of the self in relation to the other. Okada (2009) introduced the idea that Christ was a *mirror*, referring to the belief in early Christianity that the figure of Christ emerges in different ways depending on the knowledge and the virtue of the viewer. In some sense, it is similar to Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes" in which everyone except for one child does not wish to be seen as stupid and thus *sees* the new clothes. This fundamental relationship between the invisibility of the indefinite other and ourselves is even applicable to the meaning construction discussed in this monograph. In concrete terms, the way that others (e.g., friends at hoikuen, family members) become visible serves as a *mirror* that reflects the self of the child who engages in meaning construction.

## Conclusion: Ambivalence of Visibility

In this chapter, I discussed the tension of visible  $\leftrightarrow$  invisible in relation to the processes of meaning construction investigated in the former chapters. On the border of visibility and invisibility, the process that leads the emergence of presentational self occurs. Considering what brings about (in)visibility, this tension is discussed from two perspectives. One is the visibility controlled by some substantial impediment. Although obstacles that prevent our viewing may be physical, this also involves social customs and is inseparable from the flow of time. It suggests another type of tension that is accomplished by semiotic processes. I considered the writing of *nikki* stories one such attempt in school education. In our lives, these two types of invisibility are related to each other; rather, they act as a composite to promote our meaning construction.

I also extended the relationship between (in)visibility and meaning construction and suggested that the types of visibility concerning objects stipulate who we are in our relationships with them. This process is fundamental to religious attempts to

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<sup>2</sup>The forms of worship practiced among them differed, depending on the areas in which they lived. There is also a discussion concerning the understanding of their worship in relation to orthodox Catholicism. See Komatsu (2017) for further discussion.

<sup>3</sup>For pictures of concrete examples, see Komatsu (2017, p. 24, Figure 1)

depict the objects of our worship, and a very brief look at the history provides us various ways to construct visibility and our positions. Their orientation toward visibility positions worshippers in relationship with the ultimate other. Although the goal differs between religious practices and our everyday conduct, how we look at others serves to construct our observing selves in relationships, and the discussion here converges with the discussion of the presentational self that emerges in multiple relationships with others.

We are highly ambivalent in our relationship with visible <> invisible tension. Some well-known tasks in developmental psychology cited here emphasized the importance of understanding hidden and invisible objects, which can serve as an index of development. Further, in our everyday lives we naturally wish to extend what we can see, both physically and semiotically. However, these desires for visibility are gratified or approved because there always exist new invisibilities. For example, our society routinely needs surveillance cameras for visibility of events, but we also demand our privacy. In these ways, we constantly need and construct invisibility that competes with visibility. In other words, meaning construction begins with supposing something is invisible: for example, “My child is invisible to me now” or “The meaning of their experiences is invisible to the pupils.” This again suggests that the development must be understood in relation to dialectic dynamics, and I investigate these dynamics from a different perspective in the following chapter.

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