CHILDREN’S PLACE IN NETWORKS OF CHILD CARE IN SLOVAKIA: WHAT CHILDHOOD AND GENDER TELL US ABOUT POST-SOCIALISM

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Abstract: The paper explores one aspect of the everyday life of children from a deprived urban neighbourhood in Bratislava – their place within local networks of child care. Situating the paper within wider debates on post-socialism and childhood, we consider the local function of child care networks in post-socialism and discuss children’s place in them not only as passive recipients of care, but also as active agents and providers. Attention is given to the gendered nature of children’s involvement in these networks and how child care is shaped by gender roles in the area, as well as to how the nature of child care in turn shapes gender identities and has different impacts on the lives of boys and girls. We argue that increased attention should be given to children within broader analyses of post-socialist changes and the neoliberal processes they encompass as the study highlights patterns of exclusion absent in the accounts of solely ‘adult’ life in post-socialist regions.

Key words: children, networks of care, ethnography, post-socialism, gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we explore how gender matters in the everyday lives of young people caught up in the ‘post-socialist’ landscapes of a deprived neighbourhood in Bratislava, the Slovak capital. Our discussion stems from in-depth ethnographic research working in ‘the Neighbourhood’ in a local community centre which operates outreach youth work with local children and young people. In adopting this approach, the paper contributes to calls for reworking the geographies of post-socialism in East Central Europe (ECE) through the use of ethnographically grounded, differentiated approaches to develop the kinds of critically engaged geographies advocated by Timár (2003) and others (Hörschelmann and Stenning, 2008). In so doing the paper focuses on the lives of children, a social group whose
experiences remain marginalised in social research on post-socialism. Although the wider research project explores a range of themes in young people’s lives (family, friendship, institutions, play), we focus here on questions of gender in children’s lives, examined through the networks of care in which the children are enrolled (Evans and Becker, 2009; Evans, 2010). The following themes are explored: first, we discuss how an emphasis on children’s lives might re-shape understandings of post-socialism; second, we outline the methodological and political positioning of the research; third, we draw on empirical material to examine how gender matters to children’s lives with a focus on the diverse networks and practices of care in which children are involved; finally, we consider how these findings, and consideration of gender and childhood in general, contribute to wider research on post-socialism including, but not restricted to, neoliberal impacts in children’s lives.

2. RESEARCHING GENDER IN THE EVERYDAY SPACES OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIVES IN POST-SOCIALISM

Despite calls in the field of children’s geographies to consider the diversity of children’s experiences around the globe, there has been relatively little sustained engagement in geographical research with the lives of children in East Central Europe (or other post-socialist regions). Exceptions include Hörschelmann and Schäfer’s research on teenagers in urban and rural East Germany (Hörschelmann, 2009; Hörschelmann & Schäfer, 2005; Schäfer, 2007), Jeffrey’s (2008) research on young adults’ mobilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Pilkington et al.’s (2002) work on youth cultures in Russia. However, most of these focus on older teenagers and young adults rather than on younger children such as those who form the focus of this paper (Tomanović and Petrović, 2010 is a recent exception). Thus this paper makes an important contribution to wider debates about the diverse geographies of children’s lives in different global contexts (Katz, 2004; Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008; Holt, 2010).

Where research has focused on younger children this has typically concentrated on macro-scale analysis around indicators of child poverty (Menchini & Redmond, 2009), or addressed their lives indirectly through household coping strategies, including child-care practices, responding to neo-liberal economic reforms and changes in social welfare systems (Forster & Toth, 2001; Pavlovskaya, 2004; Szelewà & Polakowski, 2008), or through looking at attitudes to child-birth among women negotiating changing labour market and household gender relations (Hollos & Yando, 2006; Matysiak, 2009). Thus there remains limited

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1 Some aspects of children’s lives have received more attention: child health and health services, including sexual health; children and trauma, including ‘post-institutionalised’ children, sexual
understanding of how children themselves live their lives in everyday contexts across the diverse geographies of East Central Europe.

By addressing the geographies of younger children’s lives, this paper also contributes to critical studies of post-socialism (Hann, 2002; Verdery & Burawoy, 1999). Such authors argue against homogenising ‘diverse trajectories and transformations’ (Ekiert & Hanson, 2003), insisting that economic and political transformations in ECE not be thought of as determining all other areas of social life. The agenda for geographers has thus extended from a focus on ‘capitalism’ and ‘democracy’ towards wider notions of ‘uneven development’ in post-socialist regions (Bradshaw & Stenning, 2004), exploring post-socialist changes as changes of life-conditions (Hörschelmann, 2004) as well as institutional reforms. Special attention has been given to the ‘losers’ of economic change, political exclusions or processes of cultural commodification, especially women (Hörschelmann & Van Hoven, 2003), low-income households (Smith, 2002; Smith & Stenning, 2006), or ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma (Sibley, 1998). Such approaches build on ‘the everyday, grounded emergent formations that the core is unable, or unwilling, to see’ (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008, p.317), exposing ‘diverse and even divergent local meanings and motivations’ (Creed, 1999, p.223).

Our paper explores how the networks of care in which children are involved crystallize in the Neighbourhood as strategies to cope with the ‘post-socialist’ economic and social landscape, which is significantly affected by (but not solely determined by) situated performances of neo-liberal policies. While this adds to existing literature on networks of family support in contemporary Slovakia (Smith & Rochovská, 2007), we focus on children particularly, both as recipients of care but also as significant actors in these networks, and on the gendered nature of these networks along with children’s recognition of gendered patterns in domestic life. Thus the paper explores some of the processes by which the children in this neighbourhood are marginalised in post-socialism, and yet how they are active agents within the negotiations of the gendered networks of care in which they often play a central role.

3. SITUATING THE RESEARCH AND THE METHODOLOGY

The Neighbourhood is a relatively small urban area of Bratislava, built in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the huge panel-bloc construction projects across the city. The area is separated from other parts of the city by a motorway, railway and industrial areas, adding spatial isolation to other challenges, such as a lack of local facilities. It is also one of the most deprived areas in the city, with the perception of quality of life among the lowest in Bratislava. The Neighbourhood contains trafficking or conflict situations; and children as migrants to western contexts (as adopted children, asylum seekers, or part of wider socio-economic migrations (Mai, 2010)).
council-owned flats and a lodging house providing temporary council-run accommodation for families with children unable to find housing elsewhere. This policy has concentrated deprivation in the area and has increased the number of children and young people there. The place was for a long time also associated with crime and drug trafficking and although the situation has been improved, a vastly negative image of the place is still present in public discourses and the media.

The paper draws on a nine-month long ethnographic engagement with the community centre in the Neighbourhood from 2008 to 2009 where Matej worked as part of the youth-work team, participating in their detached street-based youth-work and in activities in the centre itself. Matej worked on a daily basis with children and young people between five and twenty-five years old. The aim of the centre was to provide counselling, leisure activities and social services by reacting reflexively to the needs of the children and young people. The policy was to minimize barriers or requirements that clients could not meet so that services would be accessible to children and young people for whom other clubs or leisure facilities were inaccessible for financial, social, geographical or symbolic reasons. These barriers reflect the neo-liberalisation of services for children over recent years, as ability to pay, requirements for regular and ongoing attendance, the ability of parents to transport children greater distances, or a focus on the individualised achievements of young people have all become increasingly important in filtering access to services. Work with children and young people in their own locality addresses the spatial exclusion of the young residents. The paper draws on one aspect of this intensive and long-term engagement with children from the Neighbourhood and participation in their everyday activities. For the purpose of anonymity, the names of children, of the locality and other details are hidden or changed.

4. (GENDERED) NETWORKS OF CHILD CARE AND THE ACTIVE ROLE OF CHILDREN

The Neighbourhood has a high proportion of single parents and families with multiple children. According to Census data and counting only the permanent residents (i.e. not the residents of the social lodging house), almost one third of all family units (defined as a household with dependent children) involved single parents (mostly mothers) or other single guardians (mostly grandparents). Of these households, almost half were families with more than one child, and of all the family units with dependent children in the Neighbourhood one in five had more

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2 The main method used (providing the material for this paper) was participant observation, recorded in a field diary. Other more participatory methods were also used, but these are not drawn on in this paper.

3 Data come from the Slovak national Census 2001.
than two children. All of these figures were considerably higher than numbers in
the surrounding urban area (also a panel block housing estate, but generally with a
higher socio-economic status), and also in Slovakia as a whole. Beside the size of
the family and extensive domestic duties of the often single parents, their socio-
economic situation also contributed to the vulnerability of the population. Although
there are no accurate statistics for average income, unemployment rate, or
incapacity benefits in the area, most adult residents were employed in low-paid
jobs and the proportion of residents without secondary education was 60% higher
than the district surrounding the Neighbourhood while the proportion of residents
with a university education was four times lower\(^4\). This weak financial position,
which prevented children from using institutional services and facilities outside the
Neighbourhood, was a key reason for establishing the community centre there.

The Neighbourhood was also characterised by extensive family networks
within the area\(^5\). Numerous family ties existed within the relatively small local
population and many children had cousins, uncles and aunts, or grandparents living
there. One reason for this was the socio-economic status and the low attractiveness
of the area which resulted in lower rent levels. Existing residents with experience
of living there attracted their relatives to move in, benefiting from the lower
demand and from knowledge and experience of the local housing situation – all of
this is not typical for residential strategies in the surrounding areas, but was a
valuable opportunity in the context of shortages of lower-priced flats in Bratislava
as a whole. Equally important is that many young people who were born in the
Neighbourhood remained in the area, establishing their own families. More than
forty per cent of the Neighbourhood residents were born in Bratislava, while the
average number for the wider district in which the Neighbourhood lies was just
over ten per cent. This confirms the presence of young second-generation
households and low in-migration to the area.

As a result, children from the Neighbourhood were often growing up within
complex networks of care. Many lived with their single parents (mostly their
mothers), while others lived with grandparents, in some cases along with their
cousins. On the other hand, uncles, aunts or other cousins were often living in the
area and took part in family affairs and support. The presence of even distant
relatives engendered networks of support through complex intersections of family
relations, including ‘split’ families where several cousins lived with their
grandparents in one flat while the mother of some of them lived in the social
lodging house with a younger sibling.

\(^4\) See Smith et al. (2008) on the working poor in post-socialism.

\(^5\) While family networks of support are a common strategy of survival among low-income households
in similar urban settings in Bratislava, these mostly operate over a greater distance rather than in the
immediate neighbourhood (Smith & Rochovská, 2007).
The complexity and extent of family ties in the Neighbourhood involved children taking part in family matters, often from an early age. Their role was especially in caring for younger siblings, but also cousins and nieces/nephews as the age difference across generations was often low, with the age difference between uncles/aunts and nieces/nephews in some cases less than ten years. Responsibilities included taking care of children when their parents or guardians were not at home, and many young children were allowed to spend leisure time outside their home only in the company of their older (child) relatives. Thus older children often involved younger relatives in their own activities or took walks around the Neighbourhood with them. Some children also studied with their younger relatives or accompanied them to educational (and other) activities in the community centre.

These patterns of care had a gendered character. While young boys often spent time with their younger sisters, engaged them in joint activities, introduced them to their own friends, or were explicitly given direct responsibility for them by their parents when going outside together, the care for children outside one’s own activities was predominantly the domain of girls of all ages. Many girls were required by their families to take care of their younger relatives – staying with them at home when the parents or other guardians were away, taking them out and watching over them, or helping them with their homework. The girls did not care just for their younger siblings; they were often asked to spend time with their cousins, nieces and nephews, or even with the children of family friends, within close and intensive ties and networks in the Neighbourhood.

Such routine involvement in domestic care served in one way as a mechanism of inclusion for the children as they were cared for not only by adults – and not only by their parents – but also by older cousins, siblings, and other distant relatives or even neighbours. Children were not just passive recipients of care but were involved in care for their younger relatives, often from an early age. On the other hand, networks of child care served as mechanisms of exclusion, as the duties of older children, especially the girls, in many cases distanced them from their friends or other activities. Several girls said that they either did not have time for their own interests, or had to integrate child care with their own activities – for example taking young children with them onto the streets and at least being near their friends when playing games, or trying to involve their friends in engaging with the younger children for whom they were responsible. Among the clients of the community centre over the age of 15, very few girls were in regular contact whereas the boys met the social workers frequently. When Matej asked centre staff about the reasons for this, the care for girls’ younger siblings or other relatives was key.

The intensity of involvement in domestic affairs might also be seen in the
structures of friendship among the (older) boys and girls in the Neighbourhood. Contacts among the teenage boys were more continuous – groups of the older boys (over 15) were more open for their younger peers to join them in their regular activities. The younger boys firstly took part in the activities of the older ones and later developed closer relations and maintained friendships. Girls, on the other hand, interacted in more closed groups. While they did network more widely in the Neighbourhood, girls’ contacts generally came from family and links to neighbours, and the friends with whom they usually spent time were less numerous, or came from outside the Neighbourhood. Contacts among girls of different ages were less intensive as they tended to socialise in smaller groups of the same age and spent more time with younger children in their families. There were also some important gender differences as the children grew up. The lives of many girls seemed to be less focused on the Neighbourhood, and especially on its public spaces. One of Matej’s first impressions after coming to the Neighbourhood was the presence of groups of older boys (over 15) on the streets with very few girls (or none at all) among them, and just a minimum of girls-only groups regularly showing up on the streets. Several factors contribute – girls’ responsibilities in their families, their relationships outside the Neighbourhood, or the fact that their friendship groups within the Neighbourhood were small and tight-knit.

Importantly, the children recognized the gender differences in care for family, although their experiences were often different from their expectations of gender norms. During a community centre activity with a group of boys and girls between twelve and fourteen, the children were asked to draw examples of activities that men and women ‘must/must not’ or ‘can/cannot’ do because of their gender. Both the boys and girls (working in separate groups) agreed on certain ideas – that both men and women should care for their families and should stand up for them in conflicts; that men should be responsible for the material provision and should have a suitable job; that women would be more involved in family care and domestic work. Despite the certainty with which the children wrote these delineations (and the topic of gender is not a part of the school curriculum or other educational programmes they had undertaken, so they had perhaps little experience of explicit reflection on gender roles), they were reflective in the subsequent discussion. The ‘looseness’ of each role was mentioned by the children and rather than saying ‘women/men must/cannot do something’, they reflected that the other gender can do most of the roles, although they admitted that only one gender usually does them, or does them better. Moreover, several children admitted examples where they had themselves undertaken activities they ascribed to the other gender – one boy emphasized how he was regularly given the duty of care for his younger brother (living only with his mother), other boys admitted they helped with some domestic tasks (shopping, baking) though they refused others such as
5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: WHAT CAN CHILDHOOD AND GENDER TELL US ABOUT POST SOCIALISM?

In this study, several findings emerge as interconnected, reflecting the transformed landscape of post-socialism and its relation to children’s lives and their participation in gendered networks of care. Firstly, it is clear that transformations of the urban landscape did not necessarily bring improvement in the living conditions in the Neighbourhood. The politics of relocating low-income residents into an area which is spatially isolated and socially marginalized (through the lack of services and facilities and a poor physical environment, including lack of playgrounds or green space) can be seen as a result of neoliberal processes of urban governance which maximize benefits from the most profitable localities while segregating low income social groups into already deprived and excluded areas. In the Neighbourhood, the concentration of children and young people into an area which lacks sufficient facilities for them is an additional aspect in the process of social and spatial marginalisation and reflects the marginalisation of many children’s lives under neo-liberalism found elsewhere (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008).

However, the post-socialist condition which children live everyday is not simply a consequence of neoliberal transformations and needs to be understood ‘in relation to other processes of change’ (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008, p.316). Other forces affect children’s lives besides neo-liberal transformations of the labour market, land use or institutional services, including children’s friendships, family values, or the cultural and social reproduction of gender roles and expectations. In parallel with other studies (Stenning et al., 2010a, 2010b), local residents are not just passive subjects of neoliberal transformations but actively challenge and contest their social and economic landscape. As Smith and Rochovská (2007) show, family ties are of special significance in the everyday survival strategies (including provision of child care) among residents in large housing estates in Slovakia, especially those with lower incomes. Our study shows that children are not only passive recipients of such care, but that they play an active and important role in domestic strategies of survival and provide everyday support to their families from the earliest age.

Although a full range of findings about the differences and heterogeneities of ‘post-socialist childhoods’ could not be included here, we have demonstrated the differences that gender makes for children’s involvement in the example of gendered networks of child care. Along with other studies on the constitution of ‘boyhood’ or ‘girlhood’ (Hey, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 2008), we emphasize that childhood should be considered as situated and differentiated rather than as a
universal state of human being. Furthermore, it is important to recognise how patterns of gendered behaviour and the way they have been impacted upon by post-socialist transformations and the neo-liberal practices these encompass are also being reproduced among younger generations. Van Hoven (2004) suggests that post-socialist changes evoked isolation of women in rural east Germany within the domestic sphere and the consequent shrinkage of social contacts because of the loss of jobs in the re-structured and masculinised labour market. Our study reveals similar paths emerging among young girls of the post-socialist generation almost fifteen years later: although for different reasons, girls from the Neighbourhood, particularly the older ones, had fewer social contacts and the frequency of their interactions with friends was less than that of the boys because of their contribution to domestic affairs and the duties expected of them, especially in child care. This suggests that it is not only the reproduction of socio-economic status which may be significant to on-going processes of marginalisation (Hertz et al., 2009), but that gendered norms and expectations (reinforced by socio-economic and other forms of marginalisation) may also reproduce (and perhaps intensify) from one generation to the next.

In the context of the experiences of children in marginalised communities in post-socialism, it must be said that the situation in the Neighbourhood is not typical of all large panel-block housing estates across Slovakia, nor indeed Central Europe. The level of deprivation is high compared to other neighbourhoods of Bratislava, the presence of extensive family networks is rather exceptional, and the social and spatial isolation is also distinctive. Nevertheless, to ignore this area, and particularly the experiences of children within such areas, means overlooking significant processes of marginalisation in post-socialism and the broad range of social (and spatial) problems that the residents of the Neighbourhood deal with. Furthermore, we argue there is a risk of overlooking children’s experiences at a more conceptual level in studies of post-socialism which focus too often on ‘adult’ lives and marginalise the experiences of children, many of whom are at greater risk of social and spatial exclusion than adult populations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the study demonstrates that critical and detailed analysis of the everyday lives of residents leads us to see how post-socialist change includes processes by which marginalisation is intensified in some areas and for some social groups. Post-socialist transformations thus cannot be understood as linear processes, but always as geographically, historically, socially and culturally situated (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). This requires sensitivity to local expressions of the particular workings out of neo-liberalism or other dimensions of social and economic change, but also to the situated strategies and everyday practices of ordinary residents who, in diverse ways, are active agents in
reproducing, challenging and shaping the complex geographies of post-socialism. Within this, the research emphasises the need to take seriously the role of children, including younger children, as actors who significantly shape the landscapes of everyday life in post-socialism.

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