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Beyond the Pages: Children's and Young Adult Literature and Sociological Research Through the Dodzi Project Alexandra König in an Interview with Jessica Schwittek and Katarzyna Jendrzej

Professor Dr. Alexandra König is based at the University of Duisburg-Essen, at the Institute for Educational Science, where she leads the Work Group Socialization Research. Her research focuses on childhood and family studies, with a particular emphasis on the question of what is understood as “good parenthood” and “good childhood” in different societies. These research interests led to the development of the DoDzi project, for which she assumes the leadership of the sociological research component.

Jessica Schwittek and Katarzyna Jendrzej: We are delighted to welcome you for this interview as a Principal Investigator, alongside Dorota Michulka, and as a co-initiator of the DoDzi project – particularly since this edition of Filoteknos has emerged within the framework of the project. Our focus in this interview is on the sociological perspective on children's and young adult literature and the way you use books as stimuli for data collection with children. We look forward to your insights and are eager to begin with our first question. As a sociologist, what is your perspective on children's and young adult literature and what potential do you see in this medium (for social analysis)?

Alexandra König: As a sociologist, books, as well as films and pictures, offer me impulses to think about society or to gain insights into worlds that are normally closed to me. As a sociologist, however, I don't regard books as

a depiction of society or social phenomena. Rather, from a sociological perspective, books, whether crime novels or children's books, are a way of "telling about society" (Becker, 2007)¹. They are a medium in which social phenomena are interpreted, represented, and processed for readers. Accordingly, historical analyses of children's books, for example, are an extremely exciting way of gaining insight into the variability of narratives about childhood and thus always about society as well. As a family and childhood sociologist, I also use children's books as stimuli in my research with children. In other words, rather than analyzing books, I instead use a book excerpt to stimulate a conversation with children. This is how we proceeded in the DoDzi project, for example – at least in one part of the project.

We have already introduced the DoDzi project in the preface, but we would be delighted if you could share more about the project's beginnings – such as its inspirations, initial ideas, or the thematic focus that shaped its development.

The DoDzi project was inspired by the observation that mothers who migrate abroad to work temporarily and during that time leave their children behind at home are often devalued in public discourse. There are several studies on this from different countries. It has been shown in Poland, for example, that the term "Euro-orphan" has been used in media debates since around 2008 to label children and that this is accompanied by a scandalization of mothers who work abroad. At the same time, we have observed that the discourse on such cross-border family constellations is predominantly shaped by adults and is therefore strongly adultist in its framework. However, little is known about how children perceive this issue and what perspectives they bring to it. For me as a sociologist of childhood, a central concern is to understand the perspective of children. Thus, in the DoDzi project, we investigate the question of how children in Poland perceive and evaluate this family constellation. In the sociological part of the project, our team in Germany approaches this question through group discussions with children, while the literary team in Poland is interested in how children understand and receive stories about transnational family life as told in children's books.

Not least, with your PhD thesis, Katarzyna, we also focus on analyzing children's and young adult books. In doing so, we explore different perspectives – both by analyzing the text and image levels and by interviewing publishers of children's books. This sociological work builds a wonderful bridge between the two main parts of the DoDzi project, that is, between literary studies and sociology.

¹ Becker, H. (2007). *Telling About Society. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing*. University of Chicago Press.

Children’s and young adult literature connect the two parts of the DoDzi project. Can you explain what role children’s and young adult literature plays in the sociological part of the project? Can you expand on the initial thoughts you formulated in your first answer?

Our Polish colleagues are the experts when it comes to children’s and young adult literature and its reception. In the sociological part of the project that we are responsible for in Germany, books serve primarily to facilitate discussions with children. We are interested in how children perceive and evaluate transnational family life, regardless of whether they themselves have experience of such family life or not. Since the focus is not on biographical experiences but on children’s ideas of what a “good childhood” is, we conducted group discussions with children between the ages of 12 and 14. We read aloud an excerpt from the children’s book “Tata gotuj kisiel!” [Papa Makes Jelly; own translation], written by Barbara Stenka (2016)². In this passage, Aśka, the young protagonist, learns that her mother is going abroad for three months to work. This is followed by a heated conversation between the daughter, mother, and grandmother, who each present different advantages and disadvantages of migration. The passage worked quite well as a stimulus in our group discussions to find out what children find problematic about this family arrangement, but also under what conditions they consider the absence of a parent to be acceptable. What they address differs significantly from what is discussed in the debate about Euro-orphans.

Can you describe the extent to which the methodological approach (a children’s book as a stimulus for the group discussions) proved successful, as well as what challenges it posed?

First of all, it was not easy to find a suitable book or passage. The passage couldn’t be too long or too complicated. It needed to appeal to the children in some way, i.e. by drawing on their experiences and knowledge and inviting them to think and talk together. Furthermore, the passage couldn’t present only a single view of the transnational family, so that the children would feel more invited to position themselves between the different perspectives. As you can guess, we searched and experimented for a long time. We also had to extensively modify our interview guidelines after a pre-test. For example, based on the first group discussion, we realized that, in some of the children’s statements, we were unable to distinguish whether they were trying to present their own perspective on “good childhood” or Aśka’s perspective. Accordingly, we modified the interview guidelines to talk more specifically about Aśka in a first

² Stenka, B. (2016). *Tata gotuj kisiel!* Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura.

block of questions and then in a second block about their own positions on Aśka's mother's migration plan.

You are not a “migration sociologist” in the strictest sense of the word, so why are you interested in researching transnational families and childhoods? What insights have you gained from the DoDzi project so far? What has surprised you?

As a childhood and family researcher, the temporary migration of fathers or mothers, perhaps even both, is an extremely interesting phenomenon because it breaks with the conventional expectation that parents and children live together in one place. Of course, we know of many constellations where this is not the case (after a divorce or the death of a parent, in the case of unknown paternity, for refugee children, within the global elite, etc.). My idea is that phenomena that are discussed as deviating from the norm are a good indication of the prevailing, self-evident assumptions about good childhood and family. What surprised me most in the analysis of the group discussions is how differentiated the children's views of transnational family life are. They argue less on the basis of universal needs of the child, which demands the permanent presence of mothers – as we can read in numerous media reports. Rather, the children discuss conditions under which the temporary migration of one parent can be legitimate. It is striking that the temporary absence of a parent is problematized to a lesser extent in the group discussions. Instead, they problematize the fact that children are often involved in such important decision-making processes only at a very late stage, so that they have neither time to understand the decision nor an opportunity to help decide where and how they will live during this phase of parental absence. For us, it becomes clear how important it is to capture children's voices. DoDzi has also shown the importance of considering the context of transnational families. There are many highly relevant studies on transnational families, but they are generally focused on non-European countries. These findings on transnational families are hardly transferable to the European area. For example, the distance between Poland and Germany is different from that between the Philippines and the USA, and both the legal conditions of labor migration and the economic situation of the migrants differ. All of these are essential framework conditions for transnational family life, so it is essential to expand the academic debate to include the perspective of children as well as labor migration within Europe.

The follow-up project also focuses on growing up transnationally. Why is the topic interesting? Even beyond academia?

While in the DoDzi project we captured children's perceptions of transnational families through group discussions, in the follow-up project – TraNa – we

want to focus on children's biographical experiences and their ideas for their futures. We were probably a little too cautious in the first project to ask the "affected children" directly about their personal experiences, because we considered the topic to be too sensitive against the background of its socially charged nature. Of course, it is certainly a phenomenon that requires a sensitive approach, but through the group discussions with the children and conversations with individual children that took place on the side, we learned that and how we can talk to children about the topic and, yes, even more, that some of them want to talk about it. With the TraNa project (PI in Germany: König/Schwitek; PI in Poland: Michułka), we now want to follow up on an important finding from the DoDzi project that has so far received little attention in research (or in children's books), namely the question of how images and knowledge of abroad are conveyed and shaped in transnational families and how transnational capital is generated or denied. Our starting point is that socialization in a transnational family arrangement has relevance for how children view and position themselves – in Poland, Europe, or the world.

Overall, we hope that our research leads to a better understanding of the perspective of children: Which impositions and/or opportunities emerge for children growing up in a transnational family arrangement and what do they consider a "good childhood." It is important to incorporate the perspective of children into the often very moralizing and scandalizing discourse led by adults and to make their perspective more accessible to teachers, for example.

To what extent has the DoDzi project changed your perspective – on migration, but also on children's books – both professionally and privately?

During the course of my research, it became increasingly clear to me that books are more than just helpful stimulus material for sociological thinking. Books are highly relevant media that interpret the world for us in a certain way and offer us readers a certain view of the world. Accordingly, analyses of the "migration narratives" in children's books, such as those compiled in this edition of Filoteknos, are valuable.

Thank you for the interview and for sharing your perspective on children's and young adult literature, as well as for providing insights into the sociological aspects of the DoDzi project. We look forward to continuing our exchange and building on the work of the DoDzi project within the framework of the follow-up project TraNa.