
HOW TO EDUCATE CZECH CHILDREN: SOCIAL NETWORK AS A SPACE OF PARENTAL ETHNOTHEORIES NEGOTIATION

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ABSTRACT

Paper introduces, upon the context of gender-role divisions, current parental ethnotheories applied to childhood learning in the Czech Republic. It illuminates work-or-care dilemma women are still facing and pinpoints different life strategies that Czech families conclude from it. It introduces a new term – *cosmology of education*, and relates to it theories of institution-centred learning and unschooling.

Data used to support the theory come from longitudinal research on schooling in the Czech society, especially the analysis of four most frequented on-line discussion forums regarding parenthood and education in current Czech society. Young women on maternity leave constitute today far the most numerous and active group to be found on social networks, blogs and discussion forums. Its analysis thus provides a valid field of studying ethnotheories of current generations and as such gives away dominant trends in all sorts of social interaction, including up-bringing and childhood learning.

Keywords: ethnotheories, learning, embodiment, schooling, Czech

INTRODUCTION¹

Czech children are for more than 230 years now obliged to undergo compulsory education. Over the time, years spend at school pro-longed from 6 to 8 and later to 9 years. Learning, reading and counting was over the time supplemented by chemistry, physics, biology, geography, history, art and many others. Content of teaching increased a great deal, methods of teaching remain remarkably constant, with stress upon frontal teaching, large groups and universal syllabus. Many indicators show that such system is over-lived and requires change. Change is slow and largely ineffective. In my paper I want to argue that this is due to rather constant and conservative parental ethnotheories, one of the key factors that pre-determine the child's learning perspectives.

A human being is a complex entity, born perfectly functional, yet mature after many years to come. One of the founding fathers of modern anthropology, Clifford Geertz [3] pinpoints the great importance of seeing people holistically – both products of their genes and socialization and specific acculturation at the same time. A man matures slowly and gradually, in a dual way: maturation of her body and brain is simultaneously accompanied by learning of all that constitutes culture. The same culture also defines what are the objectives and outcomes of learning. These objectives differ not only in between cultures but also within a single culture itself.

¹ Partial passages of this text have been discussed at an international conference *Women in the Cultural Mosaic: Dimensions of Live-space and Active Citizenship* in Krakow, 14-15th November 2013 and Belgrade International Conference on Education, November 2012

Although ideas about learning and education are culture-dependent and as such show great trans-cultural variability, within the culture, however, they remain remarkably constant, due to embodied schooling, intrinsic and inherent to each parent. While change initiated top-down encounters resistance in the form of different embodied experience of the parents, transmitted via ethnotheories to their children, bottom-up dissatisfaction with prevailing system may give way to birth of difference. In my paper, I pay attention to such alternatives.

Notes on methodology and the field

Early anthropological studies of childhood learning came from the period prior to changes established across the world with the outbreak of formal compulsory schooling. Formal schooling, build upon predominantly Western set of knowledge and skills, resulted in a failure of non-Western societies. The difference was so great, that since the 1960's it was the children's cognitive performance in cross-cultural setting that appeared at the center of attention of most behavioral scientists. As a result of this knowledge it was also recognized, that children across both traditional and post-industrial Western societies, although functioning well within their society, do not necessarily transfer their competencies to their classroom performance [11].

Harkness, Super and coll. see parental ethnotheories as one of the key factors that pre-determine the child's learning perspectives. It is defined as "cultural models that parents hold regarding children, families and themselves as parent, while the term *cultural model*, drawn from cognitive anthropology, indicates and organized set of ideas that are shared by members of a cultural group" [5, pp.67]. Ethnotheories embody the knowledge parents hold about their children, as well as strategies they use to help their children to grow up and become successful members of the society. Each society always holds parallel models of ideas how children can become adults successfully. Non-Western societies – contrary to the feelings of educated elite in modern, industrialized societies, do not see infants as learners. Their time to learn will come, once they acquire *sense* [10]. [9]. Across the anthropological literature these models are broadly divided into two (often complementary and intertwined) lines of ethnotheories. The first stresses children's own initiative, the other singles out a developmentally appropriate action on the part of the children and their caretakers [10]. Timing of this action – both on the side of the children as well as the adults, varies greatly both across and within a culture. According to it, learning may be accelerated by adult stimulation, or left up to the child, when she is ready. I label such network of relations between parental ethnotheories and prevailing cultural models *cosmology of education*.

The functioning ethnotheory of pre-industrial societies, the *village-learning* ethnotheory, offers following conclusions when it comes to children's guided acquisition of cultural practices: children learn best at their own, thus freeing the adults from the need of formal teaching. The whole village or a community functions as a classroom, all the adults and peers are potential teachers, who reinforce the correct knowledge and abilities. Period of infancy leaves the children free from any formal instructions on the side of the community. During the period of early and middle childhood, should a child desire, s/he is admitted into the hierarchically ordered activities of adults, according to child's sense and skill. Formal education is then expected at the period of adolescence and has a form of apprenticeship and a rite of passage [10].

Once confronted with modernization, this model is difficult, if not impossible, to transfer. Schooling brings about new sets of ideas that changes the very ground upon which the village culture is build up. There is a direct conflict between village-learning parental ethnotheory, which allows for children's independence and non-interference in learning and formal schooling, which expects systematic, continuous and uniformed daily leaning and preparation for class lessons.

Although Czech Republic was never included in any anthropological study of ethnotheories, there is a readily accessible forum available at hand, where current Czech ethnotheories can be studied- namely the virtual social networks and chat forums. With the massive popularization and affordability of internet, information formally secluded to private space and personal communications are becoming available publically. Nowadays, it is a standardized mode of communication. As Búrikova and Miller [2] have successfully proven, analysis of discussion forums provides a valid field of studying ethnotheories of current generations and as such gives away dominant trends in all sorts of social interaction, including up-bringing and childhood learning. Turek² argues that pregnant women and young women on parental leave constitute today far the most numerous and active group to be found on social networks, blogs and discussion forums at the moment. Internet broke their former isolation in the period of early motherhood, saturated around nappies and constant child-care prior to the cyber age. Virtual space granted success and allowed for spreading ideas connected to all sorts of human behavior, including child-care. Young women with small children are perfectly computer literate, they have plenty of time and very often they feel lonely and seek companionship via electronic media.³ They are used to sharing their experience in this way and also seek new information via similar channels.

I have chosen two most frequented Czech-language discussion forums (baby-cafe.cz; e-mimino.cz) as a field of my research. Over the past three years I have paid close attention to all the entries that arose interest of at least five responses from other participants, finding out to what *childhood learning* and *teaching*⁴ is indexed to at these debates. Although the sites are frequented mainly by mothers on parental leave (parents of children up to three years of age), both chat forums have sections concerning older children, as well as pre-natal stage/pregnant women. My respondents therefore include parents-to-be, as well as parents with one or more children, who are computer literate and are in their early twenties to forties. It is my intention to continue with my analysis into the future in order to capture any possible dynamics of change.

Along my analysis it became clear that the two chosen chat forums provide a starting point for most advice seeking parents, however, should the parents present alternative views, fairly quickly they drift away elsewhere. Two further websites emerged as most frequently cited sources of alternative view, namely www.svobodauceni.cz and www.domaciskola.cz. In order to cover these competing views, I have included them in my analysis under the same conditions, restrictions and specification as baby-café and e-mimino.

Parenthood, ethnotheories and learning in the Czech Republic

² Matky vládnou internet. Respekt online, 15. 2. 2014, on: respekt.ihned.cz/c1-61709200-matky-vladnou-internetu

³ For a specific situation on work-or-care dilemma see [7].

⁴ In the Czech language, to *teach* and to *learn* are both expressed by a same verb: *učit*. It is the context of the word that determines the nuances of its meaning.

Despite all the public debate about equal opportunities, statistics still point to a regrettable disproportion: if one parent is to give up a job totally in order to take care of a child, in a Czech society it is the woman. The arrival of a child represents a dramatic change in the life of most parents, especially those, who take upon themselves the routine of daily care. Becoming a member of the European community did not bring about many changes in family politics in the Czech Republic. While in most EU countries much support is given to enhancing equal opportunities in access to paid work, working conditions, professional training or career advancement, the issues debated in Czech society are very different. The conflict between paid work and family life is emphasized and women are pressurized into choosing one of these paths. Being a mother still equals and symbolizes a clear handicap in the labor market in the Czech Republic.

The incentive of the state to keep a woman at home through its elaborate benefit scheme which in the Czech Republic accompanies pre-school child care has been discussed elsewhere [7]. State-paid parental leave period in the Czech Republic lasts up to the age of four of the youngest child, by law the employer has to keep a workplace for a parent on child-care leave for up to three years. Bearing in mind the fact that a Czech woman has two children on average, the period she spends at home with children as a 'state-paid' full time care-giver ranges anywhere from three to six years. To support the state view, predominant conservative discourse of the Czech popular press often praises the first years of motherhood as 'a woman's most beautiful period of life'. Many women, especially those whom Hakim [4] labels home-centered would gladly agree. At the same time, her preferential theory pinpoints the fact that this group of women consists of only 10-20% of the total female population and thus a predominant proportion of women feel differently and aim for change.

According to my data, work-or-care dilemma rests upon one (almost universally) shared assumption: the parent, while caring for the child, cannot at the same time earn money through paid activities. The very existence of a child prevents her(him) from doing so up to the time, when the child will be cared for by somebody else, thus vacating the time of the parent and leaving it free for money earning activities. In the Czech context this parent-substitute is most frequently embodied by a school and any other way is still considered an anomaly by a general public. "*It is horrible to survive on the maternity benefit. We need money, I need to go to work. I tried to find a placement for Anna in the Kindergarten, but no chance, she is too young. We have to bear another year*" (Lucie, discussing family situation and Kindergarten placement of her two-and-half year old daughter).⁵

Let us look now more specifically, what are the ethnotheories of learning, expressed by Czech parents active at the chat forums. The result is surprisingly simple: learning – at all levels of childhood as defined by Lancy [9] is linked to some kind of institutionalized schooling. It is a third partner in a relationship: in the infant age the mother cares, the father earns and the school educates. From early childhood, school continues to educate, while the mother joins the father in earning strategies, since education of offspring becomes more varied and therefore more money-consuming.

In the Czech Republic assisted learning of children starts as soon as possible in infancy, especially in three areas: motoric abilities (swimming a physical exercise for infants and toddlers), cultural (music lessons and instrument playing – predominantly

⁵ All the italics quotations, unless stated otherwise, represent my own fieldwork data, ranging from the period 2010-2013.

recorder and percussions) and languages (with English leading the field). *“Helen has swimming on Monday and Wednesday, on Tuesday and Thursday we have English and on Thursday morning Helen also goes to ballet” (Anika, speaking about her 11 month old daughter Helen).* It is believed that an early start will have positive effect upon the child’s learning abilities in the future and thus will stand for a relative structural advantage in a competitive educational and employment system in the society these children will live one day. *“Especially English we consider important. Ricky learns English since he was six months old, I believe he will be fluent once he starts school. We want to send him to an English school, that way he has a better chance to study abroad” (Petra, commenting on her 16 months old son Ricky).*

Stress upon professional and institutional instructive learning continues among the Czech parents also during the early childhood period. Kindergarten and play groups are seen as ideal for pre-school learning and for school-age children it is vital to find a *good* school. While selecting a school, learning activities, demonstrated in a visible manner, (exhibitions of children’s work, extracurricular activities, percentages of successful higher-education entries, number of homework, etc.) are of key importance. *“I believe Kindergarten in Sadová street is the best. They really work there with the children. Three times a week they go for a walk, where the teacher tells them about various trees and history of Prague. She does not merely let them run about the garden. Also on Wednesday and Friday they have English class, they also speech therapy, take children for a week to the mountains twice a year. I can recommend it highly” (Iveta on her choice of Prague kindergarten for her twins.)* Similar comments accompany debates about the quality of primary schools. Quality of learning is measured by quantifiables, be it school marks, amount of homework or participation of the school in special events (competitions of any kind). *“We have very good experience with Heyrovského school. They really care about the knowledge of the children. They put stress upon home preparation, we have quite a few homework but I have to say, they really know how to teach the children. They are also very successful in getting their pupils to small gymnasiums (a type of secondary school – I.K.). If you want your child to know something, put him to Heyrovského I’d say” (Jana giving advice on schools in Brno area).*

Judging upon my data, learning is viewed as a process that is administered by a specialized institution and/or a professional. A child has an innate ability to learn from birth, the role of the parents is to facilitate contact between the teacher and the child. Learning and education of both children and adults is associated with formal infrastructure, which becomes the third partner in the relationship, standing outside the native family or the mother/parent figure. Costs of this partner are clearly identified and the prospective family behavior is organized around them. As Nestor of childhood learning studies argues, “today, diversity in learning reference relative success in progressing through the hierarchical school system rather than variation in the skill set with which one enters adulthood” [8, pp. 456].

Increasing number of families comes to dislike work-or-care dilemma arrangements for two reasons. First of all, there is either-or logic of choice, which is criticized by the parents. Pre-kindergarten years leave the child-care upon the parent without much possibility of relief or alternative such as part-time work. Once the parent returns to work, there is not much possibility of relief either, apart from standard means such as holiday and sick/care leave. It is thus obvious that there are two variables which are very much interdependent – child care and paid work of the parents and thus should

be addressed together. However, there is not much evidence of this happening on the side of the legislative and executive body.

While the first dissatisfaction concerns primarily the structure of social arrangements, the other brings to the center of a debate the purpose of education. Although philosophical in its origin, it opens up number of practical topics, such as hands-on experience, income strategies and many others. The reason for growing dissatisfaction is the content and especially the method of school education – the way children are taught. The methods used to transmit knowledge in most Czech schools very much still resemble the past. Much energy is devoted to memorizing, regardless the presence and accessibility of new technologies. It is still preferred to learn by abstraction and theory than by praxis; learning for passing tests and scoring points rather than keeping and using the learned knowledge. Surveys point to the fact that most Czech children do not like school and as a result of this – dislike learning [15].

Results of such scientific research, as well as growing public debate and dissatisfaction on the side of the parents lead to changes in the Czech Republic. Although still not considered mainstream and explicit, there are possibilities within the Czech law to allow parents to choose a way to educate their own child. Almost ten years of experience, since the law of individual education was introduced, point to the following results: The children educated at home achieve above the average test results – i.e. – no neglecting of children takes place due to the fact that they are not taught by professionals.

We can therefore argue, that contrary to the widely shared belief that paid work (money earning activity) and the world of children do not exist in symbiosis, there are alternatives, much debated across the Atlantic⁶ but also increasingly more and more pronounced within the public debate in the Czech Republic.⁷ They favor a different approach all together. They do not see the initial dilemma of a desperate mother who has to choose between child care and paid work. They are building with confidence upon the village-learning model that children can be and should be present to their parents' world, including their money earning activities. Rather than a specific job – it is a life strategy, which emphasizes the need to break down the walls of artificially created institutions which separate the generations in their daily activities, working and learning. This strategy is called *unschooling*.

Ethnotheories stand at the heart of cosmology of education. They describe cultural belief in child-development and “the ways in which society is to assist juveniles on the pathway to adulthood [8, pp.456]. The interplay between culturally determined part and its personal inputs that constitutes them however implies not only cross-cultural variations but also intra-cultural variations [5]. As I will demonstrate below, learning is seen in a very different light by another group of Czech parents. They associate themselves with alternative chat forums and are organized along schools that allow for their ethnotheories to come into praxis. The difference – I argue – rests in a different cosmology, believed and lived by its actors. It is based upon granting people (including children) autonomy to “construct their own lessons and learn at their own pace...without being so concerned about protecting their future prospects, that they would be denied a chance *to be*” [8, pp.457]. They are, whom Ray and Anderson call the Cultural Creatives [13]. Rather than placing their destiny into hands of institutions,

⁶ See ref. No. [6], [14].

⁷ Štefl, O.: <http://blog.aktualne.centrum.cz/blogy/ondrej-steffl.php?itemid=15600>.

they opt for self-sustainability in many areas formally reigned by professionals – including education of their children.

Their choice is accompanied by pronounced revision of values, including the ideas of family symbiosis, work and education. The family unit is of key importance, in the sense of being “both the habitus generating institution and a key site for the accumulation of cultural capital” [12, pp. 55]. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and cultural capital are closely connected with the process of unschooling as well as work-or-care dilemma, since “cultural capital that is effectively transmitted within the family itself depends not only on the quantity of cultural capital, itself accumulated by spending time, that the domestic group possess, but also on the usable time (particularly in the form of mother’s free time) available to it” [1, pp. 253]. The above connection places Bourdieu’s conceptual framework at the center of attention for the proposed research, since it “illustrates in detail how the operationalizing of social differentiation in schooling is tied into individual people’s activities” [12, pp. 57].

The founding father of unschooling, John Holt [6] aimed at educational reform; his project became a lifestyle strategy for his followers. Unschooling defines as a lifestyle with a variety of educational philosophies and practices, where learning comes about through natural life experiences, including play, game, household responsibilities, work experience, and social interactions rather than through a more traditional school curriculum. Adherers consider learning to be a continuous process and the world and daily routines, experiences and interactions provide the entire possible stimulus for learning [6]. Families living according to the principle of unschooling coordinate their work and family activities without keeping them separate.

My research documents that the life of unschoolers centers on re-organization of daily chorus in such a way, that (paid) work and family time are carefully intertwined. When possible, activities of the adults are organized in such a way as to include meaningfully the children, while giving them space and trust to get involved in the activities of the adults when sensible and ready. At the same time, children are encouraged to learn whatever they desire and the scope of culture offers – be it theoretical or practical knowledge, with help of books, other individuals or institutions. Such lifestyle is a conscious decision, carefully engineered by its adherers, where several structural and institutional barriers have to be individually negotiated and bended. By doing so, unschoolers modify mainstream culture and create alternative platforms of existence [13]. At the same time, these families bypass the usual work-or-children dilemma and the system which creates it. The life-long process of learning, where the world is the classroom, stresses the equality of individuals regardless of their age in the process of mutual inspiration, help and support.

There is, nevertheless, a major difference between the village-learning model and current unschooling movement in the Czech Republic. While in rural communities the cosmology of learning is shared by rather a large group of people (at least the village community), in the Czech Republic, unschooling families rarely move together to form a community. According to my research, most often they live alone among adherers of a different ethnotheory. Thus, it is the authority of a parent only, with all the pros and cons, who creates and guards for the children the newly-created rules, rather than a village. Although philosophically connected by social networks into a large community, in daily routines the child has only the nearest kin to correct her behavior. It leads to constant challenge and negotiation of differences, where the village and the peers play a different role to that assumed in the village-learning model of rural

communities. Thus, although philosophically based upon the village-learning model, unschooling is not its urban-setting copy. Rather, it provides yet another possibility of cosmology of learning. Judging upon the trans-Atlantic experience, it has a long life expectancy. Nevertheless, within the Czech context further research is still needed in order to elaborate upon the issue more deeply.

In the Czech academic writing, anthropology of education is still in its beginnings and the track of anthropology of learning is virtually non-existent. Partially it is due to pursuing belief of both the academics as well as research boards, that topics connected with learning and education are a domain of research teams belonging to Pedagogical faculties but more due to the fact that the legacy of communist uniformity bewitched mind and imagination of many, including the academics of social science. After all, they too are the product of uniform education system and thus have difficulties to imagine otherwise.

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