

Societies have clearly defined ideas of how childhood should look like. Deviations from this “normative pattern of childhood” are devaluated, sometimes stigmatized. In Poland growing up in a family with one or both parents working abroad is currently negotiated as deviant in public. The children are sometimes labelled as “European Orphans”. The scandalized public debate and “moral panic” contrasts with the actual number of transnational families which has increased due to the unrestricted freedom of movement within the EU. Approximately, one in four young people aged between 9 and 18 has experienced one parent working abroad. Transnational families especially extent to Germany.

From the perspective of childhood studies, phenomena like transnational families, which evoke heated debates, are of particular interest because they reveal the struggle about the social definition of “good childhood”. Studies on public discourse offer valuable insights into the adult perspective. Our project takes into consideration a neglected perspective: It examines how the phenomenon is explained to children in books and, that is the main part, how children perceive and evaluate transnational family arrangements. On this basis, we contribute to the research in childhood studies on the definition and construction of “good childhood”. We address this by using three interrelated approaches:

*A) Books about transnational families for children in Poland*

From a sociological view, books for children are not simply a mirror but a way of telling about society. They are a medium in which social phenomena are interpreted, represented and processed for young readers. In Poland, a small number of books deal with transnational family life. Part A of the project examines how these families are presented – as a deviation or a viable form of living. Central aspects of our analysis will be the legitimation and described consequences of the absence of parents, the generational order and the position of the child within it, its status as an actor or victim, and the presented reactions of others.

*B) Children’s reception of books about transnational families in Poland*

From a childhood studies and reader response perspective, children are considered as creative recipients of books who interpret the content against the background of their own experiences and conjunctive knowledge about “good childhood”. Part B of the project is inspired by literary studies, focusing on the interaction between book and reader. Elementary school children (with and without transnational experience) are invited to read a book about a child in a transnational family and write a letter to this child – giving advice, articulating wishes and comments. These letters will document how children position themselves in relation to the fictional figure, identify or sympathize with them – and the presented childhood. Differences between the pupils with regard to social status and experiences with migrating parents will be considered systematically in the analysis.

*C) Children’s conjunctive knowledge about “good childhood”*

What good childhood means is so much taken for granted that it rarely becomes explicit. Group discussions are a method to grasp implicit knowledge. Part C of the project uses group discussions with children. The individuals in the formed groups are homogenous with regard to whether they have experiences with parents living (temporary) abroad or not. An extract from a book is used as a stimulus to inspire an exchange between the children about living in transnational families. The analysis of this data aims to reveal the conjunctive knowledge of children about transnational families and “good childhood” – and differences within this age-group (especially with regard to social status and experiences with transnational families).

Transnational families strongly connect Poland and Germany, but are rarely investigated – especially the perspective on childhood and of children is neglected. Both principal investigators are renowned in childhood studies. The team in Germany consists of sociologists, whereas the team in Poland is more rooted in literary studies. By connecting both expertises, complex insights will be gained a) into the perception and evaluation of transnational family and, b) a contribution can be made to the elaboration of basic theory on the construction of childhood – especially from the perspective of children. To connect our results on the normative pattern of childhood with findings from other countries an international workshop is planned, including scientists from all career phases. In addition, the project will create a space for discussing and applying concepts/methods from different traditions of childhood studies and initiate a theoretical and methodological debate.