

Zorica Divac

Institute of Ethnography SASA
zorica.divac@ei.sanu.ac.rs

An Ethnological Look at the Issue of Prolonged Adolescence *

In our environment there exists a special kind of intergenerational connectedness within the family in the form of a strong commitment of the parents to support their children in the course of their entire life (financial assistance, paying for education, providing for housing/shared housing, attending to and care of offspring). The Socialist system had recognized this role of the family and the social care was directed towards the family (allocation of flats according to the number of members of the household, cheap holidays for employee families provided by trade unions, etc.)

In the turbulent times of the post-socialist period, social care and safety from the previous Socialist system vanished. The family became the most important and only source of support for young people. This led to so-called extended childhood or delayed growing up, which is expanding so as to involve increasingly more generations and age groups, including even persons from 16 to 35 years of age.

Key words:

extended childhood, post-Socialism, inter-generational relations.

Numerous research was carried out in order to establish the interdependency and causality of various aspects of family life, with the aim of better understanding the nature of relations within the family, the interdependency of roles and functions of certain family members. The study and observation of family life, as well as determining the factors of family changes, are at the same time enabling us to recognize and determine the course of development of the family.

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The interest of researchers in the family is completely understandable for the latter is, on individual basis, the strongest and the most effective emotional, social and economical connection, which plays an important role in protecting all its members. That is particularly manifest in times of social crisis, when the function of the family is to alleviate negative social influences, assuming functions that should have been exercised by other social institutions. The family is much more than raising children, a Christmas dinner or a family feast. It provides the individual security, advice, loans; it protects him from the outside world, it provides him connections, leaves him inheritance, heals the wounds of failure, encourages him and takes part in victories. The family is the place where the child is raised, upbrought and prepared for starting an independent life and making his own family. It is precisely the latter – teaching young people how to become self-supporting and how to start their own family lives – that is the theme of this essay.

The family map of Serbia is dominated by two kinds of households - single unit households or two-member households.¹ Data obtained from the research carried out by the Youth Coalition of Serbia show that barely a tenth of young people aged 25 years or more are living independently. In other words, up to 70% of youth in Serbia are enjoying all the benefits of prolonged adolescence. At the same time, official statistics are showing that only a quarter of young people from the same age group are getting married. One third of people in Serbia are not married and are most often living with their parents – whether it's because they don't have a job, they did not graduate or do not have a romantic partner.²

Merely a third of all married couples live independently, making their family nest outside of their parental home after having left the house where they have spent their childhood. The number of young married couples living in their own flats is measured in per thousands, while exact data show that only 2,5% of young couples have the privilege of living out of wedlock in their own home, namely a home inherited from their parents. According to a survey by Media Gallup, up to 57% from 25 to 34 years of age in Serbia are living with their parents. The figure is 32% for the 35-44 age group and up to 27% in the 45-54 age group.³

The decline of the modern city family is also evident from the large number of families functioning as family cooperatives. Comparative sociological-ethnological research show that – as opposed as to the West, where single unit households consist of young and educated singles without children, who are pursuing a career and enjoying travel – in our country, such households comprise mainly

¹ Blagojević Marina, *Demographic Picture of Serbia in the 90s: Dichotomy and Stagnation*, Societal Changes and Everyday Life: Serbia in the Early 90s, ur. Silvano Bolčić, ISI FF, Beograd 1995, 31-55.

² *Youth in Serbia 2002. National Study of Youth*, Ministarstvo prosvete i sporta i Centar za proučavanje alternative, Beograd, 2002; *What is Serbia Offering to Young People*, Magazin, Studentski svet, 2007.

³ TNS Medium Gallup, Kompanija za istraživanje javnog mnjenja, tržišta i medija, Extended Childhood nov. 07, www.tnsmediumgallup.com

elderly married couples without children or with children that have emigrated abroad.⁴

A rise in the number of multi-generational families is visible and emergent – up to a third of city families comprise three generations of people. The phenomenon of the family cooperative, as the ideal model of family life, was for centuries the most desirable form of community in our patriarchal environment. However, the time of change after the Second World War, accompanied by the economic boom, overrode that patriarchal pattern of living. Newly-wed grooms carried their brides over the threshold of their own homes, as proud holders of housing rights to a socially-owned apartment, while the easily obtainable multi-decennial loan enabled an optimum figure of four tenants per flat. This favorable economic period for the families of the Socialist Yugoslavia lasted almost four decades, more precisely until the second half of the eighties, when the crisis forced young couples and families to move out of their rented flats and return to the homes of their childhood. Amid the general social chaos, the family rallied together, tightening its ranks. Parents made space for the younger generation in their apartments and houses, physical and spiritual space was being compartmentalized, walls are torn down, but with them also many newly assumed roles and position. A new climate in the family was ushered.

What is the cause of this re-traditionalization of the Serbian family? It should be reminded that psychological, social and economical bursting at the seams of the modern family started simultaneously with the historical breakup in the early nineties, which marked the end of half a century of national unity. The middle class family, stripped of its relative social abundance, suffered the deepest structural changes. A substantially impoverished family budget, sometimes on the brink of poverty and bare existence, led to everyday variations on the theme “there isn’t any”, “we can’t afford it” and “not now”, as well as to radical changes in the value system.

This was a particularly difficult period for young people to start an independent life, due to the generally hopeless condition of the entire society. At that time, the only genuine path to independence was probably immigration, as a large number of youth was forced to leave not only their family and city, but also home country, and even the continent.

A strong immigration wave of Serbian youth started in the nineties, when the younger generation, faced with a harsh crisis, decided to take their university diplomas and foreign languages proficiency abroad, so that their children get to chance to be borne in a more peaceful, safer and happier place. The Ministry of Youth and Sports claimed in a presentation that in the ten years between 1990 and 2000, more than 500.000 mainly young and well educated citizens left Serbia. In

⁴ Smiljka Tomović-Mihajlović, *Childhood in Rakovica, Daily Life of Children in Worker's Families porodici*, Institut za sociološka istraživanja, Beograd 1997; Ista i Suzana Ignatović, *Youth in Transition: Between the Family of Origin and the Family of Choice*, Youth Lost in Transition, Centar za proučavanje alternative, Beograd 2004.

addition, according to certain expert estimates, precisely in that period, our country lost more than 12 billion euros due to a brain drain.⁵

The biggest problems of youth relate to unemployment, housing, mobility, education, culture, healthcare, a poor social climate and non-participation in decision making.

When a young couple decides to have a family, due to the inability to secure housing, they accept the kind proposal of the young woman's or young man's parents to live together with them. The young woman/man assumes the spousal role overnight, but at the same time remain a child, even when they become parents themselves. At one time, however, that young woman/man shall, for any reason whatsoever, accentuate that role in that family, causing at least two persons to be unhappy. In a multi-generational family one question is always looming – who is the “boss” and whose rules must be respected. In such a situation, the youngest marriage is most often the first to break up, because it represents the most fragile and weakest relationship, since all other relations are cemented with emotional, economic, organizational and hierarchical ties, spanning back several generations. Needless to say that the authority of the parents in such situation is brought into question and that the roles and models for identification are irrevocably muddled up.

No doubt that different generations under the same roof have different views of the world, the upbringing of children and life goals. It's precisely there that the breakups occur – at the level of roles, life cycles and loyalty. Moreover, in the family cooperative all members have multiple roles to play and that “play” is, in every sense, a huge burden. For example, a overt and merciless war often erupts between the first and second generation, which war may last for decades, involving the parents inducing their children a huge sense of guilt for having sided with its partner or star and finish every conversation with the words: “Until you are under our roof...!”

Since he/she is unable to sit on two chairs, one of the partners often escapes into alcoholism or some other emotional “island” engulfed in a storm of raw emotions, sending thereby the message to its spouse that he/she is unable to assume the role of husband/wife and be the other part of the couple. I will here quote a discussion from an Internet forum: “My wife and I spend the first year of our marriage thinking about how we would settle down on our own in a cute little home we would arrange with a lot of care and love. The second year passed with us dreaming how we would soon hear the sweet laughter of our children resounding in that home! In the third year, we were concerned about whether our virtual home would be too small for the kid that in the meantime already started walking and running? In the fourth year, we stopped dreaming and arranged my room in my parents' apartment, transforming it into a living room. The fifth year marked the final demise of the principle of parliamentary democracy in the multi-generational commu-

⁵ *What is Serbia Offering to Young People*, Magazin, Studentski svet, 2007.

nity! And the sixth year? Everything I wanted from it was a bit of peace and calm in the bathroom! That nobody is knocking on the door when I go in and that I never hear “Are you coming out soon?” again. I WILL – all these years I had to wait for my father to shave himself first, my wife to take a shower before leaving for work, my mother to take the laundry out from the washing machine, my daughter to play with her dolls while sitting on the chamber pot, for our frequent guests doing the same while reading the newspapers from cover to cover, the dog running into the bathroom to drink some water, for the water in the boiler to heat up... Living in a with one’s parents is such a chore!”⁶

The independence of couples in terms of earnings and housing space is typically considered as one of the necessary preconditions for getting married and starting a family. Without such independence, marriage and children are “postponed”, often indefinitely. Certain couples opt for the so-called temporary/initial “version” of married life – living with the parents of one of the young spouses, namely receiving financial assistance and shared housing space. Such a decision is not the outcome of a mutual desire, but is most often made out of necessity, as a transitional solution until the young couple becomes self-reliant and financially stronger.

Apart from the problems suffered by young people wanting to have a family, young adults are also having difficulties when wanting to live on their own. Namely, prolonged living with one's parents often results in problems of adult children trying to become self-reliant. Due to a poor financial situation, such young adults are faced with serious obstacles even to the prospect of leaving the parental home. Consequently, their adulthood is postponed, namely their childhood is prolonged. The parents are “helping” their children over 20 years of age in every respect: they attend to all administrative chores for them, they take them to the doctor, buy them clothes, upbringing the children of their children, enroll them in faculties, take care of their exams and generally – the parents are burdened by the problems of their children. We, hence, have “children” that should live their independent lives, but can’t or won’t and parents who, consciously or unconsciously, behave as if their adult children are still wearing shorts. There are many Internet fora on which the parents of adult children are complaining to one another about their problems and exchange experiences:

“You said it yourself – you have a problem with self-reliance. Although I don’t think you have made a drastic mistake somewhere along the way, I would rather say it is a consequence of excessive attention and the spoiledness of mum’s daughter and firstling. Nothing unusual, we are all late in noticing that our children have grown up, especially our first-borns. They are, as a rule, overprotected and excessively coddled and pampered. The next child is another story, not that much time is devoted to it and it must rely on its own, which is not bad at all. On the contrary. We are dumbfounded when we get to see how self-unreliant our firstlings have

⁶ <http://www.zenskisvet.com/forum/tema/118-1/Odrasla-deca-i-roditelji.htm>

grown up to become. But it's never too late. They have to stumble upon life once, don't they?⁷

„This is, actually, a major societal problem. My friend has a daughter who is finishing her studies at the Music Academy who DOES NOT WANT to pass her final exam for the last two years... The son of my bridesmaid is preparing his graduation thesis and is announcing HE WILL NOT get a job, but continue some kind of post-graduate or doctoral studies... When we were young students, everything was completely different and it's difficult to make comparisons and blame only the children. My main motive for studying is to have a better living standard than my parents. Our children see that when they become independent, they might end up with having a lower standard of living! Consequently, they lack stronger motivation. That, of course, doesn't mean they have the right to be insolent, lazy...“⁸

Family research on the territory of our country reveal changes to the family structure and functionality, associated with wider societal developments and transition. In addition to changes in family constellation (single parent families resulting from divorce, accident, wars or the desire to raise a child on one's own), social and political transition are believed to be at the core of the decline of the number of children in families, increased divorce rate, later marriage and a return to multi-generational families.

Changes may be also observed in the functionality of families. Research has established that families are moving closer to more complex, multi-generational families. These changes may be understood as strength of the family and its response to the wider societal uncertainty. The family is an institution that can and should protect its members. Hence, in difficult, turbulent and stressful times, it represents a safe haven for all its members. Contrary to the harsh environment, the family provides salvation, but this protected environment has led to inter-family problems: strong control over certain members, acceptance/tolerance or lack of young people's autonomy in making their own decisions and forming their own positions about life, The incidence and intensity of conflicts in the family, etc.

(Translated by Bogdan Petrović)

⁷ http://www.ana.rs/forum/problemi_sa_odraslom_decom-gde_smo_to_pogresili

⁸ Ibid.

Зорица Дивац

Етнолошки поглед на проблеме „продуженог детињства“

Кључне речи:
продужено детињство, постсоцијализам,
инергенерацијски односи

Истраживања породица на територији наше земље указују на промене у породичној структури и функционалности, које се повезују са ширим друштвеним догађањима и транзицијом. Осим промена у констелацијама породица (једнородитељске породице настале услед развода, несрећа, ратова или жеље да се самостално подиже дете), са друштвено-политичком транзицијом повезује се и смањен број деце у породицама, учесталост развода, касније ступање у брак, али и враћање вишегенерацијским породицама. У периоду транзиције посебно је тешко осмостаљивање младих особа због лошег и бесперспективног положаја у коме се налази цело друштво. Највећи проблеми младих везују се за незапосленост, стамбено питање, мобилност, образовање, културу, здравље, лошу друштвену климу и неучествовање у доношењу одлука. Познато је да се у нашој култури негују јаке везе између родитеља и деце, у несигурним и тешким временима оно постају још јаче, а то се огледа у постојању јаке обавезе родитеља да подржавају своју децу током целог живота (финансијска помоћ, школовање, обезбеђивање/дељење стамбеног простора, чување и нега потомака). Тако одрасли потомци остају деца својих родитеља до касних тридесетих година живота.