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Katarina M. Mitrović

*Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology,
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade*

Marija Brujić

*Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology,
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade*

GOOD PARENTING IN POST-SOCIALIST SERBIA: TOO MUCH PARENTAL CARE OR TOO MANY CHILDREN'S NEEDS? ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Abstract: The topic of this paper is the phenomenon, well known in sociological literature, of “prolonged youth” in contemporary post-socialist Serbia. Anthropological accounts, however, remain largely absent. We are interested in cultural representations of parenting and raising children in Serbia, in comparison to Western, mainly EU, parenting models. Therefore, we have conducted twelve semi-structured open-ended interviews with female EU citizens and Serbian parents living in Belgrade, on how their experiences of living in Serbia and/or different EU countries influence their cultural perceptions of being a good parent and having a good parenting style. We show that cultural representations of parenting and child-rearing and related practices influence family dynamics and the process of growing up in Serbia. Our results show that Serbian parents favour the “Western” parenting model even though they do not practice it. They find justification for being forced into “abnormal” parenting in the current political and economic situation.

Keywords: prolonged youth, post-socialist Serbia, cultural representations, European Union/the West, comparative perspective

Introduction

The position of Serbian youth, their perspectives, their issues, as well as growing up in Serbia, are popular topics in both Serbian public discourse

and academic papers.¹ Bearing in mind the wider context of post-socialist transformation, it is common to hear or read about the political and social engagement of local youth, the difficulties that young people are facing in the job market, as well as the economic perspectives of working and living abroad as “the only way out”. On the other hand, the narratives of “European youth” can be heard as a parallel, living very differently in many aspects, including their political and economic situation, family life, educational system, preparedness, and perspectives in the job market.

In this paper we analyse cultural representations of raising children in Serbia and the West/the EU among Serbian and foreign female citizens in Belgrade. In this regard, the term “cultural representations” refers to

a more or less consistent set of ideas that a certain group of people has about a phenomenon from reality, and includes factual knowledge about that phenomenon, its symbolic references in the culture to which the group belongs, discursive, normative or real connection with other cultural artifacts, symbols, phenomena, processes and similar, as well as stereotypical views on a given phenomenon, based on its socio-cultural treatment in reality (Žikić 2013, 19).

In this respect, we pay special attention to cultural representations of the life of “other”/Western/European children/youth and their parents, while seeing it as a “tool of cultural cognition” (Žikić 2013, 5). We consider the idea of culture as the “basic anthropological cognitive tool for understanding the world” (Gačanović 2009, 34), in this case, in terms of imagining and describing the position of people who share the same social and familial roles.

At the heart of our study is the phenomenon of “prolonged youth”, also known by other names in sociological and anthropological literature,² “characterised by the discrepancy between the full psychological, social and political autonomy of young persons on the one hand, and their simultaneous economic dependence on the other” (Corijn and Klijzing 2001, 3). The problem of growing up in Serbia and prolonging the transition from one key life event to another (Ignjatović 2009, 9) is mainly observed in the context of post-socialism and socio-political transition: a weak and corrupt state apparatus, orientation towards individualism, self-interest, profit enhanced mistrust toward the state and lower regard for collective benefits (Trifunović 2019, 516–521).³ In this respect, the omnipresent general feeling is one of insecurity in everyday lives,

1 For instance: Mihailović 2004, Tomanović 2012, Trifunović 2013; RTS 2018, *Danas* 2020.

2 Some of the common formulations are *postponed adulthood*, *post-adolescence*, *extended/prolonged childhood*, *prolonged/mature co-residency* etc.

3 In the Serbian context, post-socialist transformation has involved the dissolution of Yugoslavia; the wars in its territory during the 1990s; economic (hyperinflation, increasing unemployment, social differentiation, the flourishing of the informal economy, transition recession) and further political crisis (conflicts in Kosovo, NATO bombing of the then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999). Political changes in 2000 aimed more actively at the “stabilisation of the market economy, political democracy, and civic freedoms”, however,

but also in public state health, legal, social, political, administrative, and other such systems in Serbia (see Žikić 2013). Scholars believe that the economic and political situations in the country have been reflected in psychological, social, and economic changes in society and the family (Divac 2009, 125). Research on young people as the “losers of transition” emphasise their inability to live the life they would like to live. Moreover, various authors point out the difference between young people in Serbia and their peers in the world (see for example Mihailović 2004; Divac 2009; Ignjatović 2010; Trifunović 2013; 2014). Crises, and social and political events, in conjunction with economic factors, came to the forefront of the analysis of prolonged youth. In this regard, the authors also question the “forced prolongation” of youth in Serbia (Mihailović 2004, 29) as opposed to the “chosen postponement” of adulthood in the West. In this respect, we question the issue of “good parenting” (in the narratives seen through upbringing practices), and the cultural representations of its influence on further family dynamics and the process of growing up.

We therefore concentrate on the phenomenon of “prolonged youth” as a “prolonged economic and financial dependence of young people” due to longer schooling, obtaining professional status later in certain professions (doctors, lawyers, engineers), and difficulties in finding a job (Milić 2001, 165). Moreover, we focus on cultural differences expressed in the narratives of growing up and raising children in Serbia and in “the West”, mostly the EU. Our focus is consequently on the cultural representations of child-rearing among Serbian parents and female EU citizens living in Belgrade. In an attempt to see how the experiences of life “there” among our EU interlocutors serves for understanding the situation “here”/in Serbia, we emphasise in this paper their cultural representations of everyday life. The main goal of this paper is, consequently, to explore how foreign and local citizens in Serbia envisage parental roles concerning children’s upbringing within the context of post-socialist transformation in Serbia. We hypothesise that EU women and Serbian parents have different parenting styles which each regards as the best.

In the following sections, we firstly delineate our theoretical approach and explain the methods we used. In this respect, we interpret the results of twelve interviews (six with EU mothers and six with Serbian parents). In our analysis of their narratives, we use Abu-Lughod’s method of the “ethnography of the particular” (2006[1991]). The potential of this method is recognised in migration studies and, more importantly, in the anthropological analysis of migration narratives (Čapo Žmegač 2008; Brujić 2016). In this regard, this paper represents an extension of anthropological research about female EU citizens in Belgrade (Brujić 2016; 2018; 2020). Bearing in mind the statistical data⁴ and the public narrative of very protective parents and overly supportive

this was a slow and uneven process (Lazić and Cvejić 2007, 55, 58–60), which had its repercussion in socio-cultural spheres, as well.

4 Extensive sociological research on youth in Serbia (Mihailović 2004, Tomanović 2012) emphasises dependence on parents and the parental home. According to 2011 research, 74.1% of people in employment aged 19 to 24 and 52.8% of those aged 25 to 35 were fully or

households in Serbia, no matter how old the children are, this paper also represents a contribution to the anthropological approach to the concept of “prolonged youth”. Finally, we extrapolate the major points from our results and explain our findings within the given context of “prolonged youth” in Serbia. We discuss how our interlocutors see their identities and child-parent relationship with the idea of the same identities and relationships in Europe. Through the analysis of representations of “decent job”, “life milestones” and responsibilities within the household, as well as notions of things that are “normal” and “required”, we analyse the self-understanding of our Serbian interlocutors and how they use cultural representations to describe their post-socialist socio-cultural reality.

Methodological approach

In this paper, we compare the narratives of six women who originate from different European Union countries with the narratives of six Serbian mothers. For this research, we conducted semi-structured face-to-face open-ended in-depth interviews, as an established tool for the research of narratives. It leads to valuable information about interlocutors’ thoughts and opinions, and additionally, to explanations and clarifications of stated behaviours and choices.

During February and March 2018, the second author interviewed eight middle-class EU women. As a matter of comfort for the interviewees, the interviews were conducted either in Belgrade cafés or in their own homes (see a similar approach in Christou and Janta 2018). For the purpose of our topic, we have chosen to reflect upon the narratives of six interviewees conducted in Serbian or in English (with a British interviewee). The analysis of migration narratives/migration life stories is already an established field within migration studies (see, for instance, Čapo Žmegač 2008, 325; Kožar Rosulnik et al. 2016), and we will show that it is certainly a useful methodological approach for the issue of understanding prolonged youth in Serbia. By discussing macro-processes on the micro-level, we aim to apply Abu-Lughod’s “ethnography of the particular”, thereby seeking to avoid the “othering” of our respondents, generalisation, homogenisation, coherence, and timelessness, which are the usual outcomes of social science studies (Abu-Lughod 2006[1991], 474–476). In this manner, this study is in accord with Roth’s notion: namely, ethnologists and socio-cultural anthropologists should listen to “what ordinary people have to say” and with “already proven techniques study their daily activities, expressions, values, norms, and perceptions” (Roth 2012, 19). Our female

largely supported by their parents (Tomanović 2012, 84). When it comes to housing, 71.5% of people in employment aged 19 to 24 and 44.2% of those aged 25 to 35 lived with their parents (Tomanović 2012, 85).

interviewees were born between 1951 and 1976, and come from Austria, Great Britain,⁵ Greece, Slovenia, Finland, and France. Five came to Belgrade in the 2002–2004 period, and the sixth in late 2015. Five women are married to Serbs and do not have current plans to move from Serbia; one is divorced from a Serb and at the time of the interview was planning to return to her native country. Four have children born between 1996 and 2016. The children have been/are being educated in Serbia in private or state schools, are fluent in Serbian, and spend their free time mainly in the company of their Serbian friends. Finally, we focus solely on the women’s narratives about child rearing in Serbia, as children are commonly understood as a female topic. In this manner, we also stress the importance of studies among middle-class well educated women in the context of migration from more developed to less developed countries, such as Serbia, which is a topic barely explored in the social sciences.

The interviews with Serbian mothers were conducted by the first author between August 2019 and May 2020. As they were interviewed for the purposes of a broader study on prolonged youth in Belgrade, some of the interlocutors were interviewed with their spouses. For the purpose of this paper, we analyse the narratives of six middle-class women, born in Serbia between 1960 and 1973. They live and work in Belgrade, as do their children, who are young adults born between 1991 and 1998. The children of the Serbian mothers interviewed are all employed in the private or public sector, and they all currently live in their parents’ household.

The women from Serbia who were interviewed often compared Serbia and “Europe” or “the West,”⁶ having in mind Western European countries, and sometimes the United States and Canada. Respondents talk about the West as a centre of power and order, as opposed to the political and economic periphery where they live, and where, as they say, “the rules do not apply, but individuals improvise as best they can”. Furthermore, while describing the West, the respondents talk about “a system made for people, and not the other way around”, and a standard that enables “life as it should be, compared to the life achieved by adaptation and improvising”. The concept of “the West” stands out as an axis of “normality”, “order” and “progress” which simultaneously serves as a comparative framework for measuring the situation in Serbia, and the political, economic, and infrastructural achievements for which Serbia strives (Žikić 2013, 10; Brujić 2018, 152).

5 During the time of the interview, the UK was still a member of the EU.

6 Serbian interviewees use the EU and the West as relation categories, or more precisely, interchangeably. In this regard, Europe is “symbolically relatively recognisable” as the centre of the capitalist economy and liberal democracy (Radović 2007, 52). Moreover, the European Union or Western Europe also include countries that are not formally members (Norway and Switzerland), geographically belong to Northern or Central Europe (the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden; Austria and Switzerland), but are culturally imagined as part of the whole (Antonijević 2011, 1014; Brujić 2018, 29).

Results

In this section, we will present narratives about prolonged youth in Serbia. The EU interviewees think that children in Serbia are, from an early age, treated as less mature, incompetent, and are overprotected from cold, diseases, dirt, work, and draughts, for instance. A Greek woman⁷ explains:

When something falls on the floor, nobody [from the Serbian mothers] will give it to her child to eat. I believe that they must eat everything from the start, to get used to bacteria!

Before settling in Serbia, she lived in Portugal and studied in England. She has three children who attend a public primary school. She explains that in Greece parents also do not allow their children to grow up.

One of my brothers still lives [in an apartment] below our mom and dad. Mom and dad still pay half of his bills, and he has two children, but he and his wife don't understand that [it is wrong] (...). But I wanted, for instance, like my other brother to leave [the parental home] because we understood that [if we stay with parents], we'll become morons”.

On the other hand, Serbian parents do not represent good role models, because they pass on habits that do not exist or are forbidden in the EU, such as lack of care for the environment and lack of road safety. In the latter case, several women stressed that parents in Serbia drive their small children in dilapidated cars, or in their front seat.

A Slovenian woman, who has travelled throughout the world, was also annoyed about the following:

(...) for me the worst was that a mother and a child are walking, and she unwraps some sandwich and throws away, ... I mean, I was already ready to tell her 'excuse me, if you are doing that, the child thinks that it's normal, and you should put it in a rubbish bin or carry it [the wrapper] with you. I carry [my rubbish] to the bin. But, my parents taught me not to litter when I was a child and so I don't do it.

A French woman who has also lived in various countries apart from France, such as Senegal, Morocco, and Venezuela, also feels that in Serbia children are raised inadequately. She came with her spouse and two little children to live in Serbia, and gave birth to her third child here.

I mean, from a selfish point of view, it was super to be here with little children because you tolerate everything. They could be rude everywhere and it was easy for me. But I don't believe that it's a solution because I don't like the way, I speak generally of course, people talk with their children as if they are

⁷ According to basic ethical procedures in social science research (Israel and Hay 2006), information that could easily reveal informants' identities and is unnecessary for this paper was hidden.

morons or as if they don't understand what is being said (...). It is also too widespread for people to be lazy with their children. So, they will opt for an easy solution, a temporary one, but then they will not build a relationship that will pay off afterwards. For example, lying to a child: 'mommy will come back in five minutes', and she's going on a trip. I have seen that a dozen times! Let him suffer, let him cry, let him cry a lot 'don't go on your trip', but he will trust you the next time you say something, you know. It's just a trick that his mind is not developed so that a child cannot understand at all. If you want a wise child you have to invest in him. I don't like that.

An Austrian woman, who has four children, points out that her Belgrade friends misunderstand her. She gives her children the freedom to make decisions about their lives, even if they are young. For instance, some of her children decided to attend primary schools abroad. In this respect, she often heard "we Serbs prefer to be together". She noticed that in Serbia, on the one hand, very often parents deny freedom of thought, self-decision, and mature behaviour, even to their young adult children. On the other hand, young people choose the path of least resistance and expect their parents to fulfil their obligations. She explains this in more detail:

(...) we've met people who already know what their son will study, and seriously, he has now started to study that. I told them at the beginning 'hey, what are you talking about? My parents also thought that I would do one thing, and then I came and said: well, now I'm going to do something completely different.' (...) I also had one experience, I was just working for three months, and then the father of my lawyer colleague came with some paperwork. 'What is your father doing here?' 'Well, he's going to register my car.' 'Why is your father doing that?'. 'Well, he has time'. 'Well, you have it also, why does he have to do that?' Then I thought that everyone does it here – sending parents somewhere. OK, if you have parents who want that, but my parents wouldn't have that idea! (...) It's another approach, and yes, I'm sorry for these young people that still have to live with their parents. And that's also financially easier. A mama hotel. (...) Another [acquaintance] goes to these pole dance exercises. It's not that she goes to some club, but it's a sport now. She's in her 30s or more, but she says 'I can't, I can't tell that to my parents' [laughs]. 'OK, show them your pictures where you're dressed, that it's ok show that you don't go to some club, 'No, no I can't do that'.

A British woman, who has lived in Belgrade since 2002 and has worked with children and young people as an English language teacher, also finds that children in Serbia are raised improperly.

The expectation here amongst an amazingly high number of young people is that the parents are going to provide them with a flat, paid for and put in their name, and a car. You might possibly get a car in the West, most likely though, it would be a second hand one, but for your parents to buy you a house or a flat, you really would be lucky [a laugh]! Whereas here it's an expectation! [Serbs are] so much poorer with far greater expectations.

(...) People here still think that British parents are cold, unfeeling monsters who throw their children out of the house at the age of 16 'get out and never darken my threshold again'. There are some cases, yes, but they tend to be where the children are being extremely badly behaved, however. (...) Generally speaking, British parents bring their children up to stand on their own two feet NOT [an emphasis] to expect their parents to be picking up the bill for absolutely everything for the rest of their lives. In fact, in a proper society, one should expect a reversible situation. (...) by the end of your life, you should be looking after your parents as if they were children, and this doesn't happen here. Unfortunately, children have been so indulged here that they expect their parents to be giving everything to them until they die and when it comes to their parents' old age the children ignore them.

A Finnish interlocutor, whose three children attend either state schools or university, explained that experiences of growing up in Finland, for instance, early independence and gaining work experience, are completely different from those in Serbia. She also thinks that in Serbia there is an unrealistic relationship toward money because parents pay tuition fees and outings for their children.

(...) for my eldest son it's completely natural that he lives with me in a house. He's 22, and for me, that's not natural at all [laughs]! It upsets me a lot that he takes that [living with parents] for granted. He is also a sports player, and he knows to call me at home to ask whether there's enough meat in the house! Because he needs proteins (...) And parents let that go. You have young people, you can see that very clearly in Belgrade, who sit in kafanas and spend their parents' money. And they do nothing with their lives, they don't think that they should perhaps do something, try something out. Also my eldest (...) he doesn't think that he should seek a summer job. I already sent him some websites. I mean, come on, I have worked since I was 15 years old, always when I had to! And you have the support from the [Finnish] state when you study, and still, I was working, because we highly appreciate the working experience. It's not enough to have a diploma, but during your studies, you have to gain some connections. And now, these ones [students] only study, are nice, good, and think that's it. Somehow they don't have a real picture, if they're at home doing nothing apart from studying, and don't have a sense of working life. (...) It is very nice to see a city full of people, but then when you start to think 'what do these people do?', and that half of them are unemployed but sit in expensive cafes, that's not good.

However, according to her, there are benefits of closeness in a family and taking care of the elderly in Serbia:

When you leave home in Finland, somehow you're let loose, 'go on, find your way', and something is probably lost, some warmth. It's the same with old people, we have very good nursing homes for people, but then again, everyone wants to be in his own house. My-95-year-old grandfather still lives in the house and I cannot imagine him going to a nursing home. He would die there immediately. And here, you have to take care of your old parents. I heard it's in the law as well. If they have helped you when you were young,

then you have also a commitment toward them (...). There's always some neighbour [in Serbia] to help out or someone to jump in if there's nobody else to help. That's a nice thing.

In their narratives, the Serbian parents also stressed the importance of the “working life” or “real life” of children and youth abroad, as opposed to Serbian youth – sitting in cafes, while utilising the money, housing, and good will of parents who are ready to do anything for the full benefit of their children. One Serbian interlocutor emphasised that parents in Serbia provide for their children beyond the realms of their possibilities:

Children of our friends worked three times a week during their studies [in the Netherlands]. A daughter in an open bakery on some square. And she could earn and save some money. This is where our parents differ from the Western system; differ a lot, a lot, from Westerners, when it comes to the sense of teaching them [children] correctly about the value of money. Here a parent who doesn't have [money] buys a child sneakers that cost I don't know how much (...) who doesn't have money! There [in the West] there is no such thing as branded things, clothes, all that nonsense. When I travelled, I saw young girls walking around Madrid in sneakers, sandals, no one was wearing heels, full 'war gear' for going out, make-up, and other things. It is so nice there.

Serbian parents also commented on overdoing things for their children (no matter how old they are), noticing this custom among their friends, neighbours, and their own parents. One interlocutor described the exaggeration of parental servility and children's expectations while referring to her experience with her children (28-year-old daughter and 25-year-old son):

It is dreadful what we do for our children. (...) I caught myself doing many things – [imitates children] ‘You don't mind [doing something], do you? Can you pick something up for me? Is it convenient for you?’ I did that and then I said ‘nothing is convenient for me anymore!’ (...) we make children terribly incapable. So when they start living alone, they don't know what is going on. And financially, they don't know how to allocate money – [imitates parents] ‘Oh son, just so you don't miss anything!’ – so let him miss something! There is a Norwegian proverb, ‘Children should always be a little bit cold and a little bit hungry’.

Just like the interlocutor from Austria, who emphasised the issue of parental obligation for children among Serbian parents when it comes to administrative matters, respondents from Belgrade state that they obediently fulfil these tasks that their children impose on them. They go to the post office and the bank because they are *on their way*, and that they take over most of the responsibilities within the household because they are a *well-coordinated team*, or they *know where everything is* (cleaning supplies, vacuum cleaner etc.). One Serbian mother and her husband explained their children's obligations (sons 27 and 23, daughter 22 years old):

For some time now, they have gone to the doctor on their own. (Husband: Here, they vacuum their rooms!) Yes, they vacuum their rooms! At one point it was really hard to achieve anything because we were physically tired and I worked night shifts. (...) Husband: Well, if it can be said that they also do something, they sometimes take out the garbage, they take out the green bag for recycling, but we have to remind them about that... sometimes they take something out of the basement. And so, sometimes they pick up the laundry. However, sometimes I go too far – when I make them lunch, I make everything too easy, for example, I make spaghetti, and put spaghetti in one bowl and the sauce in another bowl, then I put the cheese and the grater, and I put sauce and ketchup, and I arrange everything for them, and set the plates. And I even leave a note, ‘The Parmesan is in the fridge’.

Another Serbian mother claims that her sons of 29 and 23 take care of their rooms and that they would help with some other housework, but she has to wait for them to be free and get ready:

The distribution of work is as follows: my husband does the grocery shopping, except when we go to the supermarket for larger purchases, then we go together. When it comes to cooking and everything related to food – that is my job, as well as the laundry and ironing. We do the housework together – cleaning the bathroom, washing floors, and so on. When they [children] got their own space, they were obliged to keep it clean. I only clean it when I do the big general cleaning of all the house. (...) When it comes to the garden, I can’t do a lot of things physically due to health issues, so there is G. [husband] who has to bring things, lift things etc. (...) I. [elder son] does things when I tell him to, and he doesn’t take that as an order. Z. [younger son] would also help, but it is a process. It lasts while he goes, changes his sneakers, changes his clothes, returns... and then we go mad and do everything ourselves. And we don’t call him next time because we know that the procedure of getting ready takes so long.

The interlocutors from Serbia also emphasised the problem of gratitude or, more precisely, the lack of gratitude in child-parent relationships, especially in the sphere of household maintenance. Maintaining the hygiene of the household is, in the opinion of all interlocutors, seen as a parental duty:

There [in Europe], children also participate, and they appreciate everything more. They thank their mothers when they do their laundry and so on. And that is implied here [that parents do household maintenance jobs]. Although it now appears with my children as well – the “thank you” thing – I almost fainted. They are growing up, so that is going on, who would have guessed? [laughs].

Almost all our interlocutors from Serbia think very highly of working youth, claiming that young people who start working earlier get ready for life faster, become more disciplined and appreciative of money and the goods they can buy with it. However, it is important to mention that none of the children of the parents interviewed worked before finishing secondary or university

education. Several interviewees emphasised that they knew what was “normal” or “right” when their children were growing up, but they didn’t do it because it was not common or was not considered to be “normal” in the local context. People mainly complained that there are no decent jobs for young people in Serbia, that they are either underpaid or offered only manual work. Moreover, the educational system is not adjusted to working youth, while “allowing kids to work” is to some extent considered to be bad parenting. While working is seen as a rational choice for young EU citizens for many reasons, such as saving money and building a career, working during schooling is perceived in Serbia as a potential threat of youth exploitation, putting health at risk, or leading to pupils dropping out of school. One interlocutor, whose son got his first jobs during his last year of university studies, and whose daughters after they had graduated from university, said:

Work is considered a good concept there [in Europe]. And I am absolutely for it. But it is so common there, that children who work are not some weirdos who distribute newspapers or work, and other children do not look down on them because they are earning money. It’s not like, ‘You’re left on your own, your parents are morons so they make you work, and you go to school, and plus you work, so you have to get up even earlier to deliver the newspaper’. That behaviour [working] is common there, and it’s very stimulating and good for a young man to earn, to feel what it means to earn his own money. Then, in later years, he does not have a problem with arrogance, with not valuing material goods. Because he knows how hard it was to earn or save the first \$50 or €50 – maybe he earned one or two euros a day for two months, then spent one – put one aside, to reach some goal. This is not the case here, because our children are protected under the shield of parental care and they do not have the right attitude toward material things and do not value them in the same way. But that’s the way it is with us. I couldn’t force my children to work, although I share that opinion that youth should work – I think it’s right. But I could not hire them to sell ice-cream on the corner of our street because their peers would have a different attitude towards it than the peers in Western Europe. It is completely common and normal there.

As we have already mentioned, another perceived threat against working youth is dropping out of school, emphasised in the common expression “yours is just to study”. Most of the children of our Serbian interlocutors did not work while in school. Those who had seasonal or part-time arrangements did not contribute to the household. It is the same nowadays when they are done with education – interlocutors insisted on emphasising that the money their children earn is “their [children’s] money” and that they are free to contribute to the household if they want to, without any obligation. According to the narratives, the salary of the children who live with their parents, regardless of how old they are or how big the salary is, is perceived as their pocket money. One woman claims that she and her husband started spending more money on their own needs after their eldest son got a job:

And then we planned to travel a little around Serbia, to get to know our country a little more and to go further. So yes, I even think we've started spending a little bit more. Well, less is spent in the sense that S. [son, 27 years old] has a salary now, so it's less money for his pocket money.

Another woman who has two daughters (26 and 29) states a similar case. With their salaries, her daughters could afford to buy things for themselves, but she and her husband never expected them to contribute to the household:

They started buying their own clothes, and sometimes they buy something for the house, sometimes hygiene supplies, but it is more sporadic, for personal use or if they think of something specific. But we didn't introduce a 'now when you work you have to give us money' rule, not for one second! But let's say N. [younger daughter] earned enough that she could afford some things, and bought what she needed. We just didn't have any more expenses of that kind, only the necessities like food and things.

Finally, as our results show, Serbian parents are well aware of the incongruent relationship between children and parents in which parents serve their children due to cultural, socio-economic, and political reasons. Although they speak highly of European and, more generally, Western youth, they would not change positions with Western parents.

Serbian parents emphasise the close family relations in Serbia. Some of them state very dramatically that "they would not survive 'charging' their children for food under their roof", "could not imagine that the children would have to announce their visits to the family home", and use similar cultural representations to describe the "coldness" of life "there" and the "warmth" "here". Other than imagining Western parents as cold, some interlocutors connect the warmth of Serbian parents to the unstable political situation that has dogged parents and their children for many decades:

Our [Serbian] mentality is still like that – we are a people with a tradition of devoting a lot of time to our children. Maybe too much. Certainly, more than they do in the West. I'm not saying that they like children less, but the ways of upbringing are different, and the possibilities and positions of parents are not the same. Because the parent does his best to fill the gaps with his great love and care. I think that many parents who take care of their children, following their abilities, try to cover all those things they cannot afford in other ways. So maybe it's that attachment, care, amount of love, attention, which at some point starts to bother the children while they are growing up.

Both our Serbian and EU interlocutors provided various examples for what, in their opinion, is overindulging and over-nurturing, and what is considered "good parenting" and "normal parenting" in the local context. While overindulging young children is seen in the practices of tolerating too much and overlooking inappropriate behaviours, with young adults overindulging and over-nurturing are perceived as the prolongation of dependence and lack of obligations.

Discussion

Our Serbian interlocutors believe that life in contemporary post-socialist Serbia has made the upbringing of their children more difficult, “chaotic” and to some extent “abnormal” compared to the West. They emphasised what is “normal” in their opinion and why, while also explaining how the local context has influenced their parenting style. For example, some Serbian parents place a high value on employment during high school or university studies for various reasons: young people can learn about the work ethic and discipline, or gain experience and connections. However, none of the children of the Serbian parents interviewed had either a permanent full-time or part-time job in the period of youth discussed. This postponement of employment and job search can be analysed through the prism of cultural representations of “good parenting”, which implies calculating the costs and benefits of certain practices for children.⁸ In this regard, the main narrative concerns a “decent job”, which for Serbian youth is especially hard to find. Working conditions in the West are idealized through ideas about the perfect system, flawless infrastructure, work culture, and a notion that people in the West can perform multiple roles (for example, student and mother or student and employee) where one role does not suffer because of the other. The idea of “dignified” work, except when it comes to the type of work, is based on the idea of imagined (good) compensation for time, effort, and health risk in the case of physical work. Interestingly, similar jobs are perceived differently in different contexts. For example, distributing newspapers appears in almost all interviews as a way for young Westerners to easily earn their first pocket money. The seemingly similar job of handing out leaflets in Serbia is perceived as diametrically different, as an “undignified” and tedious job that people do during winter blizzards or summer heatwaves.⁹

It is particularly interesting that some parents emphasised “correct behaviour” in the parenting or upbringing attitude that they considered to be “normal”, while saying that they intentionally did the opposite for the benefit of their child in the local context. Therefore, we delineate several dichotomies that appear in Serbian narratives: “normal” versus “preferred” upbringing and “good parenting”; “work culture” versus “lack of decent jobs”. Our study confirmed that Serbian and EU parents have different relationships with their children. In

8 Health risks while undertaking physical labour, dropping out of school, potential bullying, or being down on.

9 The common narrative is also about youth wasting time on public transportation. Although the interlocutors would surely know that it sometimes rains or snows in the West and that there are traffic jams in other cities as well, it seems that newspaper distribution in the West is imagined in a particular vacuum of the image of a rich American movie suburb. Following the premise that the essence of the cultural representations is relational, and that “their existence is based on the need to evaluate the appropriate state of affairs in their own environment” (Žikić 2013, 11), we think that respondents use this selective image of the West to emphasise general differences in systems and to “justify” their own experience.

this respect, the idea of parental love and care among Serbian parents functions as compensation for economic and political instability and consequently for prolonged parental care. The current political and economic situation is thus “used” as justification among our Serbian participants for being forced into “abnormal” parenting.

It is especially important to recognise and emphasise the idea of parental responsibility for the complete well-being of children, regardless of the child’s age. In this regard, the perceived responsibility for the “basic needs” of children does not end after they enter employment. As the interviews showed, within households there are 1) general costs and obligations related to parents (costs of electricity, water, landline telephone, cable TV, food, cleaning supplies; duties: doing laundry, washing the dishes, housework, etc.) and 2) special expenses and obligations of young adults within the household (paying their mobile phone bill and internet; maintaining their bedrooms or other personal space, buying groceries for special occasions and personal celebrations). Further research among Serbian parents on prolonged youth shows that young adults who are working and live with parents contribute in specific and sporadic ways, such as taking the family out for dinner, buying new furniture or home electronics, helping out with home renovation, surprising parents with plane tickets or booking them accommodation in some destination they have always wanted to visit. Some of these gestures are more expensive than part of the household bills for a certain period, but we would conclude that, in this context, they are more culturally acceptable for both children and parents. Travelling, dining out, new home electronics, etc., are perceived as luxury items and services that represent occasional expenses, without the pressure of repeated commitments. On the other hand, buying groceries and paying joint bills are a permanent obligation on which the family’s existence depends. In this case, we can draw certain dichotomies: permanent vs. sporadic, necessity vs. luxury, family use vs. personal use. In this regard, the material value of goods and services, as well as the amount of work within the household, is not as important as the idea of the obligation to provide children with the “basic” needs. According to this, children’s participation is perceived as a nice gesture involving something the family can live without. A “weak spot for children” can, therefore, be interpreted through the prism of the cultural representation of the parents’ obligation to provide safety and necessities for children, as long as they live in the household, regardless of how much they earn and how old they are.

Finally, it is important to mention narratives among Serbian parents about “cold” and “warm” societies and family structures, as well as the cultural representations of parental goals. From their perspective, lack of “coldness” is sometimes an issue, but “warmth” and family closeness are local qualities that cannot be found in the West. Roth noticed similar attitudes during his extensive studies of Southeastern Europe. He explains that for Southeastern Europeans the EU is at the same time a goal and a threat: it is an ideal picture

of modernity and a functional nation state; the negative outcomes of this ordered state are, however, coldness, superficiality, rationality, heartlessness, and an orientation towards consumerism and profit among its members. On the other hand, Southeastern Europeans perceive themselves as spontaneous, honest, emotional, and hospitable (Roth 2012, 318–326). Overindulging and prolonging youth are explained and rationalised through the economic and political situation, together with the general instability in which parents and children live, on the one hand, and by looking at the parents' parents, and their own prolonged dependence on the other. Moreover, our interlocutors emphasised the cultural representations of two parenting styles, one to make children safe and protected, and the other to make children wise and self-sufficient.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have analysed cultural representations of parenting, child upbringing, and growing up in Serbia. We interpreted twelve interviews with Serbian parents and mothers from the EU living in Belgrade. We analysed how they saw their own identities and behaviours, how they are modified to the local context, and what was specific about it. Since all of the interlocutors used the EU or the West as a symbolic reference, convenient for comparing and explaining reality, we came to some significant insights into how some women who are raising children in Serbia see parenting, upbringing, and growing up in the local context.

Our interlocutors from the EU were very familiar with child upbringing in the EU and Serbia due to their own experience of growing up, living, and/or raising their children in different countries and systems. According to our research results, we conclude that the EU women consider prolonged youth to be a syndrome of growing-up in Serbia, a consequence of a specific upbringing. However, we assume that this is not just a typical Serbian phenomenon, but something wider – perhaps a Balkan one. However, this is a hypothesis which should be investigated in further research with more participants and long-term multi-sited fieldwork. On the other hand, interlocutors from Serbia interpreted the West based on three main sources: the media, personal (mainly) tourist travels, or the experiences of friends or family members who live abroad. Regarding parenting, growing up, and being a young adult, the West is generally perceived as drastically different, and it is suggested that people in “both systems” would consider the life of the “others” incomprehensible. Although it is clear that while individual European countries, the United States, and Canada are not one complete or organic system, they are presented collectively, as a set of countries that are developed, regulated and that share the same value system. We believe that the same group of Serbian respondents would analyse cultural

identities and their differences more precisely, if they were asked different, more precise, questions focusing on the assumed lifestyle and cultural representations of, for example, French and Americans or Germans and Spaniards. However, as we were looking for a comparative factor for the situation in Serbia, the respondents used the idea of the West or the EU as a whole.

We believe that this research is an important contribution to the scarce anthropological works that deal with youth culture and parenting in Serbia in general, and the phenomenon of prolonged youth in particular. This paper should, therefore, contribute to a better understanding of the cultural factors that lead to the creation and maintenance of the phenomenon of prolonged youth. Finally, by focusing on the analysis of cultural notions about life in the West, as “the life to which one aspires”, the paper emphasises important social achievements that the interlocutors considered necessary, although non-existent in the Serbian context.

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