

RECENZJE/REVIEWS

Flack J., Lechevalier A., Wielgoths J. (2013). *Cultural Distinction and Example of the “Third East German Generation”*, in: A. Lechevalier, J. Wielgoths (eds.), *Borders and Border Regions in Europe – Changes, Challenges and Chances*. Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.

Reviewed by: Vincent Helbig

The chapter of *Borders and Border Regions in Europe* is addressed to people who are interested in German culture and identity. Everyone should have heard about the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, but not everyone knows about what happened to the people of East Germany after the reunification. For about 18 million people the state they lived in ceased to exist. They had to deal with a completely new way of thinking, new values and unknown freedom. Often the East German people were abused by their “compatriots” from the other side of the “united” Germany and had to fight with prejudice against the “Ossies”. The chapter shows what happened to the East German identity as a result of the reunification of both German countries. Therefore, the authors use, among other things, interviews given by people born in the GDR (East Germany) for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*.

The article begins with a citation from Czesław Miłosz, the famous Polish/Lithuanian writer and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980. Miłosz said that it is hard to delineate the location of Central Europe by means of national borders. It is the way of thinking and mentality of the inhabitants that define the borders of Central Europe. Then, Jaqueline Flack and her coauthors describe some phenomena that were noticed after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Unfortunately, the quote from Miłosz is not linked with the authors’ subsequent thoughts; it would definitely be interesting to see how the coauthors would connect it.

Flack, Lechevalier and Wielgoths write that the separation of the German people has outlived the wall and also points out how deep the differences had become over the 40 years. In every sphere of the human life you could notice the differences between Eastern and Western Germans. As an inhabitant of an East German city who spent his whole childhood in the Eastern part of the already united Germany, I agree with that

fact. Remembering summer camps with East and West German children, I realized that the children from the “other side” behaved differently, and it often bewildered me. It was also harder to have a “deeper” relationship with them. I assume that it had something to do with different ways of being and thinking. After the reunification, the differences between East and West became a subject of analysis for many researchers.

In the following part, the authors show that the title of the chapter alludes to the term “third generation migrant”, which is really interesting. Later in the text, this is explained by saying that the East-German people experienced a migration into a new culture and society without changing their place of residence. At first, this explanation was surprising, but also logical. As a result of the contacts with the “other Germany”, Western Germans started to create an image of the Eastern Germans. Western Germans used, therefore, many of the already existing prejudices. This image of the naive and simple “Easteners” was also used in the media. Eastern Germans who migrated to West Germany had to deal with a negative behavior and with some forms of discrimination towards them in their daily lives. Whom we call “Easteners” had to compare what the media said about them with what the reality looked like. This caused a process of personal redefinition of the East German identity, and finally, lead to the fact that people formed their new individual definition of what it means to be “East German”.

Subsequently, Flack et al. show how the cultural shock after 1990 looked like, by using interviews of the citizens of East Berlin. One man remembers that, on the one hand, suddenly it was possible to buy West German products everywhere. On the other hand, he was shocked by seeing homeless people and junkies. Another example is given by a man born in 1973, who said that even younger people born after the fall of the Berlin Wall keep struggling with discrimination. The most common stereotypes are, for example, that “Easterners” are not willing to work, are atheists or vote for the left wing parties. Studies have shown that The Left (left wing party) and Alternative for Germany (right wing party) gain higher percentages of voters in the former GDR.

The Left was the party that governed the GDR. The reunification of Germany was connected with lots of hope and enthusiasm. The reality after 1990 in East Germany was defined by homelessness, worklessness and instability. Because of that people started to want the GDR back, meaning that as a result they vote for The Left even today. Ironically, the right wing party is much stronger in the former GDR than The Left. During the election in Thuringia and Saxony in 2019 the AFD (Alternative for Germany) obtained nearly 25% of votes. “Ossies” are also strongly dissatisfied with the Government and the media. They complain, among other things, that freedom of speech is under attack and say that there is no safety. Regardless of that, they do not really want the GDR back again.

One interviewer remarks that the public often associates East Germany with the “Nazis”. To call somebody a “Nazi” in the German society is a way to exclude someone from the society; you do not even have to talk to the “Nazis”. You can make fun of them and emphasize how stupid they are. East Germans, of course, do not agree with this statement. In the part titled, “Cultural Distinctions”, Flack and her coauthors wanted to

figure out how East German identity is visible in daily life. Therefore, the authors use again the interviews conducted by *Der Spiegel*.

Today, nearly 30 years after the reunification, being East German is “trendy” and very often associated with rebelliousness. East German identity is hard to define. During the interviews East Germans described the identity as a “diffused” feeling, combined with an emotional affinity to other Eastern Germans. Participants said that they felt more protected within their own group. They also had the feeling that they could speak more openly about their problems. This identity is also connected with products like Nudossi (East German chocolate cream) or Knusperflocken (East German chocolate).

Reflecting on myself as an East German, I also tried to buy East German products because it was important for me to support “our economy”. In Germany, they named this kind of behavior among East Germans “Ostalgie” (an amalgam of words “Nostalgia: and “East”, in German: *Ost*). In the conclusion of this chapter, the author underlines that Eastern German identity is the product of a reaction against the negative ascription and socio-cultural practices. In my opinion, Flack, Lechevalier, and Wielgoch could have drawn the conclusion more precisely. To sum up, the coauthors of this text dealt with a very interesting topic in a neutral and patient way. They allowed the authentic Eastern German voice to be heard, which made the chapter of the book credible. In some parts of the chapter the topic could have been deepened, but, all in all, the three authors write about an uncommon but important topic very sensitively and professionally.

Collins S. (2008). *Statutory Social Workers: Stress, Job Satisfaction, Coping, Social Support and Individual Differences*. “The British Journal of Social Work”, 38, 6: 1173–1193.

Reviewed by: Beatriz Gonçalves

The following article introduces the theme of stress in statutory social work. Unfortunately, this is a subject matter that has not been fully explored yet since there are not many studies in the area. However, after reading the article I believe that there is an urge to discuss the subject further. As a matter of fact, the article highlights all the dark sides of being a social worker, the disadvantages and troubles that this job entails. It reveals how social workers deal with stress and which coping strategies they select, how relationships within this job can influence their outcomes, how they handle demotivation and dissatisfaction with the job and how personality traits can contribute to a better or worse job performance.

In fact, at the very beginning of the article the author reveals that many social workers feel demotivated, exhausted and stressed when performing numerous tasks they are burdened with. In my opinion, this is not surprising since social workers have to carry out numerous duties. First of all, their main priority is to answer other people’s

needs and to watch over their well-being. However, sometimes this may not be easy since as a social worker you have to be ready to deal with any type of people, and even if you do not identify yourself with the client you have to perform your work in full. For instance, and believing that I will become a psychologist one day, I may have to work with someone that did something terribly wrong like committing a murder and even if I do not consent with such behavior, I have to try to be neutral and treat the patient like any other. Also, other disadvantage is that social workers tend to focus so much on other people's well-being that if they get overly emotional and too involved in the life of their patients, they can suffer from distortions in their identity or even losing it by getting too focused on the people they are trying to help. According to the author, such situations tend to happen more frequently with people working either with children or the elderly, since these age groups tend to be more sensitive.

Despite the disadvantages of being a social worker, the article reveals that some studies mention that being in a constant contact with other human beings can be extremely enjoyable and bring job satisfaction. This may have to do with the fact that as a social worker you are constantly helping others and trying to make a difference in their lives. Also, you are continually challenged and that motivates you to perform better in your job despite the stress it involves, rather than having an undemanding job which can lead people to stagnation and being demotivated by it.

The author believes that there are many coping strategies to deal with stressful situations that can be useful in social worker's lives. Positive coping strategies can be divided into problem focused coping and emotion focused coping. The first one refers to strategies which aim to prevent or control the source of stress, for instance, seeking help in support groups, while the second one refers to how people cope with emotional distress, for example, positive people tend to think about an unpleasant situation and believe it could have been worse. Both of these strategies are very useful in stressful situations. However, it is important to be careful when trying to differentiate helpful coping strategies from the unhelpful ones. Positive coping strategies make the person deal with the issue and seek for a solution, while negative coping strategies tend to make the person deny the problem and turn to, for example, addictive substances like alcohol or drugs.

Nevertheless, from my point of view, one of the best coping strategies is social support. In the article we find many studies claiming that healthy and positive relationships between job colleagues, managers, family and friends generally benefit the social worker. In my opinion this correlation makes perfect sense since well-being of a person is influenced by having good relationships with others. Having a positive relationship with colleagues provides a more comfortable environment since workers tend to feel like they can ask for help and have some counselling. The author even reveals that in some organizations a "buddy system" is used to provide social support to the younger social workers by the older colleagues. This method seems to be extremely helpful since it prevents burnout and helps improve job satisfaction. Although some studies argue that manager's support is the least important, I believe that it should be supervisor's responsibility to attend to the emotional demands of social workers, value them and give

them a lot of positive feedback (when suitable) in order to improve their self-esteem and increase their job performance. In spite of the fact that formal support may play a very important role in the lives of social workers, it seems that informal support may be even more effective. The more support people receive from a beloved person, the weaker the feelings of being overloaded with demands from work get.

It is also important to remember that, as the article reveals, every individual is different and even people performing the same job can react to and do things differently. There are some personality traits that directly affect the way workers deal with coping behaviors. For instance, more negative people tend to have lower self-esteem which means that they are more likely to develop bad coping strategies such as denial and disengagement, and consequently, have lower job satisfaction. On the other hand, more positive people tend to have higher internal locus of control, resilience, hardiness and self-esteem. Also workers who are more nervous and sensitive to rejection are more likely to experience higher levels of stress and have difficulties in developing positive coping strategies. Although terms like hardiness are associated with being older and having more experience, being a daring individual is highly associated with working in a hardy organization.

In conclusion, I believe this article is very relevant since it refers to many aspects that have not really been considered in the field of social work. After reading the article, I came to a conclusion that there is still a lot of work to be done in order to promote better job conditions for social workers. Thus, the most interesting part of the article, for me, is when the author ends it with a reflection about what strategies people should acquire in order to make a job exciting, challenging and fulfilling in social work. Well, firstly, I think it is important to have qualifying social work education programmes with the aim of recruiting qualified staff. In order to promote job satisfaction it is crucial that social workers are constantly encouraged on a personal and organizational level. I am convinced that having constant group support, like psychologists in a corporation, would be extremely helpful so that social workers can easily deal with daily stress. Also, I think that there should be free programmes available to teach workers the best coping strategies. Lastly, organizations should always try to promote the best work conditions between colleagues and managers by trying to be helpful to each other and be on more familiar terms.

Ferguson H. (2017). *How Children Become Invisible in Child Protection Work: Findings from Research into Day-to-Day Social Work Practice*, "The British Journal of Social Work", 47, 4 (20170601): 1007–1023.

Reviewed by: Marta Kamińska

Even in cases with assistance of social workers and institutions, child deaths due to abuse or neglect still happen in Europe sometimes. One of such incidents made Ferguson write an article about what he claims to be the phenomenon of the "invisible child". In his text, he aims to show that detachment from children, which might ultimately lead to such horrible tragedies, is driven by a range of different factors and is happening repeatedly in the everyday practice of social workers.

Ferguson speaks to social workers, students of social work as well as institutions and organizations operating in the field of child care. However, with his statements he also addresses the authorities and the public, as his clear goal of the research is to protect children and raise the awareness about this issue.

Invisible children are those who are not thought of by social workers. Often this involves emotional distance along with lack of physical convergence or playful rapprochements. Without "embodied communication" and intimacy, children are also not held in mind by professionals, they are "invisible" and "unheld". Consequently, not having them on the radar might pose the risk of neglect, abuse, and worsening of an undetected situation.

Ferguson's research is far away from purely theoretical treatises, he instead makes holistic observations of the social workers' experience. Even though social workers are asked to be objective, rational and neutral, they are still human beings and driven by their emotions and instincts. The author takes this as a premise and tries to include not only the thoughts participants can externalize and articulate, but also their emotions, sensations and feelings. The key question is what is going on in the very moment that children become invisible to agents. That is what makes his approach interesting and different from other articles included in this discussion.

In this ethnographical research, twenty-four cases have been observed in total. Ferguson accompanied and shadowed house visits (including the way there and back) and conducted qualitative interviews immediately after the visits. In three cases out of those twenty-four, he identified the children to become, at least partly, invisible.

The first two case studies showed that during the visit, the child was invisible, yet the social workers were able to reflect on it afterwards. Anyway, the third case ("case Brown") was on another level regarding the seriousness. The child was completely invisible and unheld. Ferguson describes the case really meticulously and points out all the components and circumstances that prove its seriousness.

First, the social worker was not really prepared mentally for the visit, did not show real motivation and he missed out on making a clear statement and explanation about purpose of visit or introducing himself. Secondly, the atmosphere was rather negative, and

no approach was made towards the children and other persons in the room. During the very short visit, the housing conditions were not properly examined. This minimal engagement resulted in a very superficial report and assessment.

Nevertheless, the workers performed better during other visits, so it was not the quality of the workers themselves that led to disappointing observations. Instead, the social workers reached their emotional boundaries and experienced a sense of being overwhelmed due to organizational pressures.

It has been common consensus for a long time that hardly ever there can be found one single reason for a tragedy; it is always a complex system. Former research identified the following possible determinants:

- breakdown in communication between agents,
- bureaucratic overload,
- interpersonal distance and lack of interactions,
- failure to recognize patterns that could indicate risk,
- partiality (sympathizing with parents),
- wrong optimism.

Yet, in the present case studies, as mentioned, it was the complexity of work that led to a feeling of overstrain which resulted in superficiality, detachment and the phenomenon of invisible children.

The text shows that social workers must be pro-active in order to avoid ignoring the children and constantly seek for a good state of mind. Supervision and containment support this process, as they might help to be more self-reflective and avoid mirroring adverse behavior of clients. Joint visits might also help in this regard as they relieve the individual social workers. Because, in the end, it is not only the individual competence of the professional that matters but it is rather a “combination of organisational processes and the dynamics of interactions with service users [that] lead social workers to experience emotional and sensory overload and become detached from children and also in significant ways from parents” (Ferguson 2017: 1008).

What stands out is the positioning of the scientist in the research. It is in the nature of the social sciences and especially in social work that it simply cannot be completely objective. In this case, Fergusons aim is to protect children and speak for them. Which is acceptable in this field because of the triple mandate that Staub-Bernasconi described for social work, meaning that social workers are agents for the public, the clients and for themselves. Anyway, it can be criticised that the research seems to be on behalf of the children, they were not directly involved and had no chance to participate in any form.

Having said that, it should be clear that with this kind of qualitative research design only individual cases can be discussed, which he also admits. Even though it is meant to be an article about a widely spread and reoccurring phenomenon, it was more like an interesting commentary about exceptions. Not only was there only one case which met all the criteria, but also observing only one house visit does not say much about the

whole care process. Hence, also his attempt to provide solutions to avoid future failures in child protection fell short as they remained vague, imprecise and not objectifiable.

Also, the discrepancy between the reasons that can be found in former research and the actual factors observed in the case studies were not further analysed. Wrong optimism for instance seems to contradict the described pessimism before the visit in the “Brown case”. Personally, I also think that this fits better as social workers somehow should believe in the good in people or they might have chosen the wrong job.

Talking about ethics in science, the researcher also tries hard not to blame the social workers for their performance, but sometimes a sublime critique can be read. Moreover, Ferguson interferes in the reflection and starts asking about children. Thus, even in the “Brown case” it cannot be said for sure that the children would have remained invisible if he would not have impinged in his stream of consciousness.

All in all, the author succeeded in drawing social workers attention to the phenomenon of invisible children. With the close connection to the daily work routine, he contributed to closing the gap between research and practice. But most of all, he showed that the precarious work environments in social organizations, going along with tight time resources and a lot of pressure, has a huge impact on the state of mind of social workers, which in turn influences their performance. Policy makers are called upon to take this to heart and to take it into account in their actions. With enough resources for the child care sector, cases of child abuse or neglect could be avoided or at least reduced.