Negotiating children’s participation and autonomy within families

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Background

By introducing children’s civil and political rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has raised many questions related to restructuring of generational relations within families (Alanen, 2001; Chisholm et al., 1990). The problems are concerned with changing boundaries and power relations between parents and children, which are expressed through the issues of autonomy, control and participation within families. The issues become even more complex when combined with the ideology and process of “familisation”, which, by stressing parents’ responsibility, put families into a gap between “emancipation” and “participation” (Qvortrup et al., 1994).

The concept and the reality of modern family are based, among other things, on participation of its members in family life and on negotiation process. There is an ever-dynamic process emerging between parents’ intention to balance care and control and children’s struggle for autonomy and recognition. As their parents, children too are developing different individual and group strategies by which they resist adults’ pressures and diminish the uneven distribution of power.

Related to issues of autonomy and participation, the notion of children’s competence seems to be the core issue. The way in which a particular culture defines childhood determines in many aspects the status of children as well as the arenas for their participation in social life.

As stated previously, the starting point of my research is the thesis that family constitutes the basic social context for children’s participation. In other words, I believe that by participating in family life children realise a substantial part of their participatory rights, while “training” for participation in civil society (Tomanović-Mihajlović, 2000).

The research starts from a broader concept of participation, which encompasses identity, autonomy, communication, freedom of choice and decision-
making, as well as participation through acting. By implementing the broad concept of participation to the area of family life, I arrived at the following dimensions: 1. communication and decision making; 2. involvement and companionship; and 3. autonomy and control. The analysis is also aimed to discover the strategies parents and children employ when dealing with the above dimensions of participation.

*Communication and decision-making* within families are related to acknowledgment of children’s rights to be informed and to take part in making decisions about matters that affect their lives (Morrow, 1999). In the study, I am interested in issues of quantity (openness) and quality (topics) of communication, as well as in using communication as a mean of control (Brannen, 1996, 2000). The research was also concerned with children’s opportunities to express their opinion on certain matters, and with how much their opinions influence decisions within families. Children’s strategies of dealing with their influence in the domain of communication are also considered in the study.

*The dimension of involvement and companionship* is examined through two areas: participation in domestic chores in the household, and participation in joint activities that involve all family members, both supposedly carrying a meaning of companionship. Few studies have pointed to the significance of children’s contribution to family life (Brannen, 1995; Brannen et al., 2000; Morrow, 1996), both through domestic work and care, bearing meanings of “interdependence” and “reciprocity” (Zeiher, 2001: 41; Mayall, 2000: 254). There are also studies that point to the significance of domestic work for defining children’s status (Solberg, 1990) and increasing their autonomy within families (Brannen, 1996).

The issues of *control and autonomy* are strongly related to the size and quality of child’s participation within the family (Brannen, 1996; Alanen and Mayall, 2001). The control is determined by the perception of risk (Scott, 2000), on one hand, and developed senses of trust or mistrust into the child, on the other. Children’s autonomy (spatial, temporal, social, in personal choices) depends on the amount and quality of their competences acknowledged by parents. Parents employ different modes and strategies of control: communication, institutionalisation: structuration of time and space, protection, infantilisation, restriction, etc.

Paternalism, as one of dominant cultural patterns of still collectivistic patriarchal Serbian society, continues to influence family life – particularly parent-child relations (Tomanović-Mihajlović, 2000, 2002). Based on their need for (more) autonomy and perception of its restriction, children develop and employ different strategies of dealing with the problem (Alanen and Mayall, 2001; Backe-Hansen, 2001). Those are some of the issues the following research is dealing with.