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Book Review:
Parenting and Inclusive Education
by Chrissie Rogers. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 189

"Parenting and Inclusive Education" written by Chrissie Rogers is an exceptional sociological work. It was constructed on the basis of narrative interviews (intimate stories) conducted with 24 parents of children with special educational needs (SEN)[1]. The text treats about parental experiences, especially the experiences emerging in parents' and children's interaction with British educational system. Roger's interviewees – white British citizens from working and middle class were bringing up 30 children (4-19 years old), some of the informants had two or more disabled children. The level of disability was differentiated - from dyslexia, dypraxia, AD/HD through epilepsy, hearing and visual impairment to Down's syndrome and autistic spectrum.

Chrissie Roger's work gives the opportunity to follow her sociological reflections on British educational system based on the assumption of social inclusion. We consider the issues of social policy and - at the same time - we look at the social world with the eyes of the person who has experienced the mothering of a disabled child – the author's daughter was also diagnosed a "SEN" child.

The assumption of Roger's was to give contribution to the debate about parenting/mothering, impairment and education, "to create a sociological space to discuss in depth issues about dealing with difficulty and, specifically, learning disability (both at a theoretical and experiential level) (p. 3). The author treats the private world depicted in the narrations ("intimate windows to the lives lived") - "as emotional response to the social world in relating to the self and well being" (p.4). She mentions C.W. Mills and feminist researchers and states that experiencing disability is the result of social construction within a social model of disability, which means that the parents not only experience the everyday difficulties resulting from the child's impairment but also experience the impairment as a social construct.

The book consists of several layers of analysis. The first layer (chapters 3 and 6) regards the experiences of parents whose "children do not merge easily into social world".

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[1] According to definitions, children with SEN have greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children at their age or have the disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities provided for other children at their age (p.4).

The 3rd chapter, "Mothering: Identification and Diagnosis of Impairment" is designed as "a building block" for the following chapters. The author discovers the "dark side of parenthood", starting from the point of diagnosing impairment up to the child's growing up. Following Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Rogers underlines that rearing a child is a complicated task in individualized, postindustrial society and that it is much more complicated in the situation when a child is disabled. Expecting parents are not prepared for dealing with ill or impaired off springs, on the contrary - they are seduced by "romanticized notion of a perfect child" and myths about the ideal motherhood, according to which a woman has to sacrifice herself to a baby. The information of child's impairment is experienced as a catastrophe, a deep trauma which can be described within the frame of three concepts: denial, shock and disappointment associated with the whole spectrum of difficult, negative feelings – emotional pain, anger, anxiety, sense of guilt, sense of loss (of the dreamed, healthy child) etc. As having a child is also often experienced in the relation to an extended self, the delivering of the impaired child is threatening to the parents' identity. Thus parents, "stripped of their hopes and dreams", put into practice different strategies of denial like placing the difficulty in „less severe brackets", allocating problems to a different class of events (my child is not like others – these "retarded" ones). Although the reaction to the impairment is differentiated by sex – fathers need more time to accept a disabled child, both mothers and fathers follow the process from the initial shock and denial to acceptance towards the child and his/her "difference". This process can take weeks, months or even years. Furthermore, in numerous cases the accomplishment of biographical parental plan, based on the idea of rearing a child from infancy up to independency is blocked – parents are aware that their children will not finish the university, will not create their own families, will not have children etc.

When the impairment is visible, obvious and severe, parents experience emotions which are strongly conflicted with idealistic picture of parenthood, motherhood especially– when a child suffers deeply, they can even dream about his/her death and such thoughts inevitably provoke the sense of guilt.

In some sense not only the child is impaired. In chapter 6, "Living with impairment", the reader can gain some knowledge about the impacts of impairment on the whole family system. The presence of impaired child means the end of 'normal' life and the family members begin the biographical career of a "disabled family". The child's impairment produces the "disabled" parents and "disabled" siblings. Family members suffer from poor mental health (e.g. a higher level of anxiety, depression to suicidal feelings and fear of harming a child purposely). The high stress level and "the emotional roller coaster" results in escapes into drinking, withdrawing from family life and emotional breakdowns. The impairment strongly influences all aspects of family members' life. They face situations in which they can not avoid renegotiating life paths - from organizing the everyday reality, resigning from previous forms of activities, learning new forms of interactions with social world to changes in important biographical aims and plans (e.g. dilemmas on having next - hopefully – healthy baby). The impairment of the family is constructed also by the definitions formulated in the social environment.

The child's disability strongly influences also parent's vocational careers. Half of Roger's informants work part-time, one third are 'full time' parents. We can observe how the child's impairment pushes parents back into traditional family roles – mothers more often stay at home to take care of a disabled baby and fathers take up the sole breadwinner's role again.

Rogers draws the pictures of disabled family interactions with 'normal, social word', especially with parents of healthy children. She mentions "yahoos" created by J. Swift and Shelley's Frankenstein and states that having an impaired child can be described as delivering to the world someone unaccepted by all (relatives including) and who, as Frankenstein, provoke fear in others. The impaired child's appearance, his/her weird, difficult behaviour cause strong reactions of the social environment which can be described in terms of stigma and social exclusion (even baby-sitters are running away, especially when a child needs some special medical and rehabilitative treatment and/or breaks social norms). Rogers cites Shakespeare's opinion that "fear and objectification are key aspects of how disability is perceived". The practical result of this kind of perception means either isolation and (self-) exclusion or strong anger and readiness to fight for their rights and rights of their children. Parents who are afraid of being ostracized stay "at worst imprisonment at home – caring distress and potential anger". The obvious, but important, notion is that support in such a situation is a foundation of well-being – Rogers discovers that the experience of "support" depends not on a real support, but the definition of being supported and the expectations towards the others.

Obviously, the world described by Rogers is not the unified one. The situations of researched families are differentiated by their social status, material resources, education, by the impairment type, but also by the biographical fates (e.g. time of diagnosing the child – at birth, at early childhood or even in primary school). However, in my opinion, the analysis of "disabled families'" private world has a universal dimension in euroamerican culture. The stories and parents' experiences would be similar in Great Britain, Canada, France or Poland. I regret only that the author concentrated just on mothers' experiences (Rogers writes much more about mothering than about parenting). To some extent it is "natural" as in the described families, these are women who play the role of primary care-takers, still a thorough analysis of fathers' stories would contribute a lot to the text.

The analysis of helping and educational system activities is the second layer of the book (chapters 4: "Statementing and Partnership: Working together?", and 5: "Experiencing a "Special Education"). In modern societies the maintenance of the private, family sphere is impossible when a family member (a child especially) presents some kind of "deviant" behaviour or suffers from the illness which hinders taking up the process of school education. The questions about social norms of adjustment and maladjustment arise, followed by the issue of responsibility for "such a child" and her/his family. These questions are usually connected with interventions of sets of experts into family life.

It seems to me that Rogers' reflection on the assessment process is very important, both for practitioners and social scientists. First of all she discovers that the British social care, medical and educational systems do not supply parents with enough support structures, while a child is being in the complicated and often long process of diagnosing and identifying the impairment. For sociologists the important conclusion is that Rogers's research shows us different connotation and understanding of labeling processes which in sociology is mainly associated with deviation. Due to Rogers' informants' experiences, diagnosis understood as a label of impairment engenders the relief that the child's disability is not "produced" by parents or by the lack of parental abilities etc. On the contrary – the assessment opens the possibilities of professional intervention. Parents wait for the label, fight for it, exploiting themselves emotionally and financially, they can even "buy" the label because it is perceived as a tool of understanding and therapy - "a passport to

obtaining resources of help" and enables the control of everyday reality. Rogers draws our attention to the fact that parents have instrumental attitude towards the labels – for example the children with autistic spectrum get more social acceptance than children with AD/HD.

The most important for the child's education is "statement of SEN", the legally binding document prepared by numerous professionals which is both a kind of portfolio of child and his/her educational needs and a kind of contract between local education authority, education provider and the parents. Rogers states that the interactions between parents and professionals are tense and difficult. The unequal status of these social actors is depicted in the processes of mutual communication. Officially parents are expected that they will take part in the process of stating. But parents often feel misunderstood, misinformed, overwhelmed by the expert professional language or even humiliated, and it seems that professionals quite often do not take into consideration the feelings and opinions of their clients and are not aware that "SEN" parents experience their situation as emotionally exhausting or even tragic. Some of SEN statements are not adequate to family and institutional reality. In such situation parents can negotiate it in the legal way, even in High Court - their emotional, financial and temporal costs are enormous in such cases.

The most difficult situations occur when a child's behaviour is perceived as "anti-social" and a family system is identified as problematic. Parents are "vindicated", "accused" of being a cause of child's difficulties and forced to participate in family therapy sessions which provoke traumatic experiences ("we were slated as a family", p. 77). In such stories we can notice the traces of professional maltreatment and evidences of systemic violence. Paradoxically, when the assessment proves that the impairment has a different origin, the issue of family therapy is located aside and a family needs to wait for the support via education route.

The inclusive education is the central issue for Rogers – she considers what social inclusion and inclusive education mean for the "SEN" parents. The standpoint of British government is that "SEN" children should be educated mainly in the mainstream schools. This standpoint corresponds with parental expectations (parents' dreams about adjusting a child to the norms of mainstream society or on the contrary their attempts to avoid negatively perceived 'special schools'). Rogers states that official assumptions do not fit the educational system based on the standards of academic excellence. Besides this, there is a strong tension between the needs of 'normal', gifted pupils and the needs of the impaired ones. It happens that disabled children are attacked by their colleagues, whose parents formulate stigmatized opinions about a disabled child, suspect that she/he comes from "pathological" family or threaten that they organize the school boycott if a child continues the education within its walls. British teachers are supposed to be trained for inclusive education system needs – but "SEN" parents mention very strong negative teachers' reactions ("I have the bloody retard in my class"). Even acceptance of school environment does not mean that a child will be protected from exclusion. Impaired pupils are often described as "sweet" or lovable" and treated as school "mascots". Officially included, they are excluded practically, intellectually and emotionally. Some informants resigned thus from mainstream education after having noticed that this experience was too difficult for a child. Rogers describes the long journey followed by parents in their attempts to find the best educational settings for their offspring in 'special schools' or residential placements and the spectrum of their reactions towards the special education institutions from shock to a final acceptance.

Respondents' children entered the education system in 1980-2002. The youngest group embraced the largest group of children in mainstream schools, thus it seems that the system has been developing towards the standards of inclusive education. Anyway, Rogers concludes: "This idea of an inclusive education system theoretically runs parallel with the idea that family life should be uncomplicated and stable to a certain extent, as with expectations of mothering and child rearing" (p. 103).

The reader can also observe the functioning of other helping institutions like support groups and social work agencies. The first ones are rejected by persons who begin their career of a parent of a disabled child – they do not want to "confirm" child's impairment or they perceive support group as depressive organization with a tragic element. Later on – when a child is finally diagnosed - parents treat self-help groups either instrumentally – as a useful source of information or as places of common understanding in which they can resign from their "façade" and gain a temporary relief. As for social work agencies – in parent's opinion the social workers do not support "disabled families" enough. Moreover, most parents – the participants in Rogers's research, were in conflict with educational and helping institutions.

The 3rd layer of analysis regards the assumptions of social and educational policy and possibilities of creating the inclusive social system (mainly Introduction and Chapter 2: "Mothering and Disability. The Social, Cultural and Political Spheres"). The terms and concepts in which disability is described have changed entirely. But the questions arises – if the shift to non-labeling onomastics have brought the expected results in social reality and what relationships there are among the language of official documents, the philosophy of learning and the educational practice. What does inclusive education mean? - asks Roger – is it a policy, directive or a kind of rhetoric based on the ideal of tolerance towards the difference which ignores or hides the everyday excluding experiences of families with the impaired member. According to Rogers, the inclusive policy masks excluding experiences, and furthermore, the discourse on impairment regards the issues of class, unemployment, gender, ethnicity etc.

In the last chapter titled "Discovering Difference, Experiencing Difficulty" Rogers concludes that her work touches deep-seated cultural assumptions about difference and difficulty in post-modern reality. This plot was introduced in the second chapter and I cannot agree with the J. Young's opinions cited by Rogers that in modern societies the diversity has become the object of celebration, but this celebration does not regard "difficult classes" and "difficult people".

The methodological issues of Rogers's research are rather controversial. The position of the author who is both the educational sociologist and the mother of a "SEN" daughter is a particular one. Rogers is aware of the difficulties resulting from this doubled (or even tripled) role. She was acting not only as a researcher, but also as an interviewer, who needed to define her role in interactions with the interviewees and consider the possible changes if the research had been conducted by some other person coming from the outside. The obvious disadvantage of the author's situation is that the readers can impute her failure of non-objectivity. I wonder for example if a pessimistic description of intimate parents' world depicts the whole spectrum of their experiences (I can imagine that the situation and feelings of parents who rear a child with dyslexia are very different from the situation and feelings of parents who bring up a child with Down's syndrome). However, the advantage of this peculiar author's position is that we can acquaint ourselves with the social world of "impaired families" looking at it through "the glasses" of an inner observer who shared experiences with her informants. This peculiar position is a doubtful issue in

this project, but I leave this question unsolved as I do not know the answer to this dilemma.

In my opinion Rogers' book can be interesting for social scientists. Although the lecture of the text can be very difficult for persons with idealistic attitude towards parenthood and individuals who celebrate the value of life as a such, the book can be recommended as an obligatory text for professionals working with impaired persons and their families as well as for social sciences students.

Citation

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