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How to Study the Childhood of the Prominent? The Conceptual Framework of the Project

Abstract

The article presents the conceptual framework of descriptive biographical studies on childhood among 114 prominent Poles. It discusses the methodological dilemmas related to the use of biography in the reconstruction of the past, and characterizes the applied research procedure as well as the categories for describing childhood, the Polish historical context, and the environment of the outstanding youth.

Keywords: prominent Poles, childhood, biographical studies.

Jak badać dzieciństwo Wybitnych? – ramy koncepcyjne projektu

Abstrakt

W artykule przedstawiono koncepcję badań biograficznych nad dzieciństwem 114 wybitnych Polaków. Przedstawiono dylematy metodologiczne związane z wykorzystaniem biografii w rekonstrukcji przeszłości oraz scharakteryzowano własną procedurę badawczą i kategorie opisu dzieciństwa, polskiego kontekstu historycznego i środowiska, w którym przebiegała młodość Wybitnych.

Słowa kluczowe: wybitni Polacy, dzieciństwo, badania biograficzne.

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Article received: 9.10.2022; accepted: 14.01.2023.

Love begins at home – as well as brilliance
(Simonton 2010: 81).

Introduction

The context of scholarship on the childhood of prominent figures refers us to two interlocking and complementary dimensions – individual and collective. Howard Gardner (1998: 72) writes that:

although [...] marvelousness can begin in personal talent, it will never fully blossom without strong support from the environment. Research on especially prominent children clearly shows that they all received enormous support from their parents, family members, teachers.

Both Garner (1993, 1998), as well as David Feldman (Feldman, Andrews 2019) or Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 1998) locate outstanding talent in the dynamic influence of people, specific domains and environments (field), while Feldman's coincidental theory of talents (e.g. Feldman, Andrews 2019) points to possible dependences. Analyzing other existing conceptions leads us to the words of Wiesława Limont (1994: 22), who defined it as: "cooperation with the social environment, with other people [...] is very significant for the development of talents."

It should be noted that the life of artists and their family relationships should be considered "within the panorama of the epoch," on many levels of "historical reality" (Kudelska 2005: 274), which refers to historical psychology and the history of social images of inner life (Spendel 1994). However, Polish scholarship still lacks a comprehensive study of the biographies of prominent Poles. In Polish literature these issues appear sporadically, most often on the margins of such disciplines as literary studies, history, history of art and musicology, and less often in psycho-pedagogical studies (e.g. Bożym 1979; Całek 2013; Czermińska 2020; Kasperski, Wolicka 2005; Mendecka 2019). In this context, the words of our excellent scholar of biographies, Anita Całek, are pessimistic:

Unfortunately, this type of research is not often pursued, although it would certainly offer us a plethora of information on the life of exceptional artists (Całek 2011: 418).

[...] there is no research on phenomena that are too complex, regardless of their importance. This is what happened to the biographies of outstanding artists – in most cases there are no longer studied because of these methodological difficulties (Całek 2011: 425).

The results of psychometric and biographical studies (e.g. Bożym 1979; Sierszeńska-Leraczyk 2010, Simonton 2010, Szmidt 2007, Lasocińska 2009, 2011; Gramlewicz, Gramlewicz 2008; Mc Innon 1978, quoted in: Sołowiej 1987; Goetzlowie, Roe 1952, 1968, quoted in: Sołowiej 1987) most often list the following features as representative of Prominent family members:

- education and intellectual roots;
- origin in small towns and the countryside;
- in the case of musicians – frequent continuation of interests and profession;
- understanding the value of education;
- professional passion;
- material conditions that enabled to develop talents, a high socio-economic status;
- formalistic system of values that privileges: hard work, patriotism, religiosity, openness, non-conformity;
- dominating, active and independent mothers, often the head of their families;
- fathers with intellectual interests, professionally successful, sometimes experiencing failures (e.g. economic);
- cordial (but conventional) family relations of Prominent children from the fields of science;
- close, but “conflicted” family relations among representatives of social studies.

The findings of the researchers are therefore not unambiguous and fully up to date, and their basis – a psychometric database – remains relatively limited and un-systematic (Feldman, Andrews 2019). Additionally, their changing nature is often conditioned by the type of talents and the historical period (it is difficult to compare American experiences with specifically Polish conditions). It is thus still an unexplored topic in Polish scholarship, and the only attempt at a more precise examination of the childhood of the prominent was a study by Grażyna Mendecka (2019), who based it on an analysis of the biographies of several foreign figures.

Methodological dilemmas and the limitations of research on the childhood of the Prominent

Although Całek (2011: 419) optimistically declares that “we should be happy that biographical studies have survived the attempt at negating their scientific character or the purpose of conducting studies of the life of artists,” the use of a biography as a source forces a scholar to face several problems, clearly reflected in academic discourse in the last years, and resulting from anthropological and literary reflection on the “biographical turn” (Kędzierska 2010: 46).

The use of a biography as a source has many opponents, and their arguments, together with counter arguments, are discussed in numerous studies (e.g. McKinley Runyan 1992; Całek 2011, 2013; Stasiakiewicz 1999; Szmidt 2007, 2016), as well as in edited collections dedicated to the field of biographical studies.¹ As Całek and Tokarz (2004: 156) write:

¹ See, for example: Całek 2011, 2013; Stasiakiewicz 1999; Kasperski, Wolicka 2005; Rzepa, Leoński 1993; Modrzejewska-Świgulska 2016. Due to the limits of this article, the bibliography is restricted to selected publications, excluding e.g. particularly interesting research on contemporary biographies being pursued at the University of Lodz (see, for example: 2019; Dubas, Słowik 2020; Dubas, Świtalski 2011).

Problems arising from the obvious aspirations to give the biographical method the value of greater objectivity and to emphasize its specificity [...] concentrate on three basic issues: the type of data, its status and value, a chronological *versus* problem-centered approach to biographical facts, and the relation between explained facts and the hypotheses or theories to which they refer to.

Scholars criticizing the use of biographical data as a source of knowledge point to the following issues:

- low credibility, possible incompleteness and selectivity, resulting from ethical limitations (censorship/self-censorship), distance in time, intentional or unconscious change in the valorization of information, e.g. the idealization of “childhood years” discussed by Małgorzata Czermińska (2020); biographers often also ignore sources which could falsify the preconceived theory of the conditioning of Prominent Authority Figures, thus eliminating any blemishes on their biographies; examples of such “omissions” are particularly related to e.g. mental disorders, homoerotic relations, violence towards children; according to a classic scholar of the topic, William McKilney Runyan (1992), the entanglement of biographical data in the process of proto-interpretation of the subject and the additional secondary selection on part of the researcher can imbue them with so-called double indexing which weakens the factual value of the analysis;
- subjectivity, non-representativeness, heterogeneity, arguing that a biography has symbolic character and speculative potential, is always fictional to some degree, and therefore represents only “actual hypotheses” (McKinley Runyan 1992: 77);
- unknown factor, whether it is a study of a person or of solely their biography – arguing that when reading it, a scholar is confronted with a text, and thus with the problem of its meaning and interpretation (Collini 2008; Fish 2008; Ricoeur 1989) which are subject to illusions and dilemmas; the social world which the scholar is entering is therefore a reality already interpreted, additionally mediated by the linguistic sphere, and any attempt at using it in research must consider this “double hermeneutic” (Giddens 2001);
- possible mistake of a “naïve reception” of a biography – relates to the borders and interpretative horizon, ignoring factual deformations; McKinley Runyan (1992: 41) writes that “a biography is precisely an image painted from a particular perspective [...] with the use of a number of conceptual tools and diversity of available material,” it therefore requires a consideration of its narrative and creational character;
- an unresolved conflict over their ontological status, connected with the question whether biographies are not “an inept reflection of the world” (Szlachciowa 2018: 32);
- untranslatability of the conventions of different epochs – the concept of cultural relativism states that it is impossible to achieve a universal understanding of the context of past events; from this perspective, it is important to consider the fact that personal documents are “embedded in everyday life, in the experiences of the

subject” (Doliński 2018: 17), including also specific canons, and both the temporal distance of the system of beliefs, as well as ways of thinking are difficult to access by a contemporary mind; and thus an immanent dilemma is the lack of historical accuracy and the fluidity of what delineates “childhood” as a construct, which results from an understanding that the end of childhood is shaped by culture and history; the second problem is posed by the frequent asymmetry of the descriptions of early life which, if they are not archived, do not offer any basis for reliable analysis;

- the anecdotal nature of exemplification (Silverman 2012) – matching cases and subordinating the collected material to the thesis or theoretical perspective adopted by the scholar.

Całek (2013) proposes to move beyond this methodological impasse by broadening the interpretative horizon so that it includes a “deep” interdisciplinary approach and methodological plurality. She promotes a principle of “a maximum available objectivity [...] as accurate and faithful as possible” (Całek 2011: 431). The evaluation of the explanatory power of conclusions is then transferred from the biographer to the value of the theory, and its interpretation (what is postulated by structuralists and poststructuralists) must be accompanied by a recognition of the author’s pre-assumptions, the incomplete transparency of his or her choices, and often a one-sidedness and involvement, manifesting in: the possibility to manipulate archives, omitting inconvenient or socially unacceptable behavior; censorship of the period’s taboo issues, stereotypes, cognitive attitudes (e.g. emphasis on didacticism, persuasiveness and moralizing function – portraying the artist as an icon) (Kudelska 2005). This principle is similar to the one employed in this study – the method of triangulation in which a justification of credibility can be achieved through a comparison of sources. However, as Całek (2013: 11) concludes, a biography’s attractiveness stems from “the biographical pact, which the biographer makes with the reader.” Taking this referential pact into consideration enables to trust the author who, “identically as academic texts is supposed to [...] provide information about reality that can be verified” (Lejeune 2007: 74). Indeed, this approach broadens the horizon of reflection, however, it also invites hypothesizing and an openness of the interpretative process, while – as Krzysztof J. Szmidt (2007: 359) notes – a focus on the conditioning of talent development, including the role of the educational environment, can be seen as “an interesting topic for biographical studies pursued by pedagogues.”

Conceptual framework and assumptions about research

The aim of the analysis was to present a typology of different family environments of prominent Poles. Additionally, it also strived to show the role of a broader environment consisting of significant figures (mothers, fathers, siblings) and the directions of early education. The author’s professional qualifications (educated in history, psychology and pedagogy) also enabled to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective on biographical studies, and most importantly – to try to describe the Polish historical context.

Several years of analysis covered the biographies of 114 outstanding Poles,² representatives – according to Gardner’s intuitions (1993) – of different domains of activity: artists (musicians, painters, film directors, actors, writers); scientists and inventors; politicians and social activists; entrepreneurs; travelers and athletes; philosophers, pedagogues and psychologists; mathematicians and chess players. The group selection method used the criteria of elitism, social value and universality of the individual’s achievements. It was assumed that the project will study people who, while exhibiting “remarkable intellectual or professional abilities” and paired with creative abilities, introduce revolutionary transformations in how their disciplines are imagined” (Limont 2005: 20). Agreeing with the assumption that one can talk about universal, mature creativity in the historical dimension only from the perspective granted by temporal distance, the project examined the biographies of no longer living artists, while the availability of sources and the possibility of verifying sources focused the selection on people of Polish nationality (born in Poland and/or identifying with Polish nationality).

The direction and intuitions of this research procedure were inspired by Gardner’s classic studies (Gardner 1993) and the model of studying prominent individuals (only a set of organizing topics was selected: relations between children and adults or their peers, studying the correlations between the conventions of the epoch and the environment for developing the talents of prominent figures, radical creative breakthroughs – “initial crystallizing experiences”). The research project studied personal documents and indirect sources – biographies which represent a type of nonfiction (Czermińska 2020; Rzepa, Leoński 1993), professional publications on biographies, often in the form of academic monographs representing “event history” (Zajewski 1998: 30).

Based on an indirect analysis of biographical documents, it was assumed that it is impossible to protect against possible mistakes, distortions and artifacts. In order to minimize this problem, the analysis would also compare several sources (“saturating” the portrayal of each figure and triangulation verification – multifaceted comparison of biographical facts), conducting the query in a way that “minimizes value judgments, consciously controlling one’s own interpretations” (Doliński 2018: 7), controlling the distortions stemming from adopting one’s or others’ perspective on the Prominent, and avoiding arbitrary hypotheses. In addition, the project also followed the principle of historical thinking (Spendel 1994): assessing the reliability of source materials and judgments; attribution of the goals guiding their authors; defining their cultural and political perspective. It was also decided to consider such cases when it would not be possible to access certified source of information or when the assessment of their credibility would be questionable. These areas were not filled by indirect interpretations (conjectures), but instead marked as “unknown,” since the researcher often encounters an “unknown” category during historical reconstruction, which within the conditions of this project had received an epistemological

² This concept is connected only with a fragment of the research project. According to plans, before the project is concluded in 2023, I am planning to examine 259 figures and present an extensive analysis of the social context of prominence, including: childhood, adult relationships and relationships with children and students.

status. Taking into account the open and indecisive discourse on the possibility to reconstruct the truth (facts) about a biography, it was assumed that each category describing experiences will only represent an approximation of the reality of the studied person. This asymptotic dimension of biographical studies is highlighted by many scholars. The research material was assembled using the following procedure:

1. Preliminary historical and cultural reconstruction
 - 1.1. selection of prominent individuals in each field (the method of competent judges);
 - 1.2. creation of a chronology – a timetable of objective life events of a prominent individual;
 - 1.3. analysis of the historical, social and cultural context;
 - 1.4. selection of problems, i.e. relating to the family structure, crystallizing experiences.
2. Collection of data
 - 2.1. selection of the body of work from the perspective of assumed problems;
 - 2.2. biographical saturation – collecting documents, autobiographical texts.
3. Analysis of accuracy and reliability of data description – triangulation verification
 - 3.1. evaluation of data according to:
 - 3.1.1. historical objectivity;
 - 3.1.2. data comparison;
 - 3.1.3. assessment of narrative (facts versus hypotheses);
 - 3.2. posing questions regarding:
 - 3.2.1. arbitrariness of biographical interpretations, strengthening stereotypes;
 - 3.2.2. subjective interpretation of sources.
4. Profile and typological synthesis (search for common patterns)
 - 4.1. analysis of the body of work from the perspective of the assumed problems;
 - 4.2. analysis of indirect biographical descriptions;
 - 4.3. secondary historical and cultural reinterpretations – searching for a profile for each group of artists and recurring typical patterns of behavior, circumstances, constellations of environmental factors.

Taking into account the methodological limitations, it was decided to treat the acquired data in an interpretative way – idiographic (allowing for a deep and multifaceted examination of the unique life story of prominent individuals) and nomothetic (enabling to reconstruct typical behavior, patterns and models) (Całek 2011, 2013; Kosnarewicz 1993; Pietrasiański 1993), since:

[...] acknowledging the uniqueness and exceptionality of the path of life of each person does not exclude from interpreting it using categories of similarity and difference, from selected aspects, compared to the lives of others, characterized from the perspective of their repetition and regularity (Dymkowski 2003: 120).

A vertical analysis was conducted, focusing on observed differences and similarities between the life trajectories of representatives of diverse talents, as well as a horizontal analysis – considering the historical dimension of the lives of the Prominent, connected with their social and cultural environment. Both of these analyses circled around two interlocking levels of analysis:

- generational – the level of historical time determining the temporal horizon;
- socio-cultural – family roles and traditions, social roles – cultural horizon;
- the microsphere, connected with a child's closest surrounding – environmental horizon;
- individual family conditions, connected with the features of closest family members – horizon of closeness and intimate relations.

Each family is characterized by its specific functioning – characteristic customs, rituals and traditions, partially independent, and partially interacting with the socio-cultural environment. However, a family home as seen through the eyes of a 18th or 19th century child had to differ from modern standards (Leszczyński 2006). Philippe Ariès (1962: 368) writes about modern times:

[...] the child soon escaped from his own family [...] Thus the family at that time was unable to nourish a profound existential attitude between parents and children. This did not mean that the parents did not love their children, but they cared about them less for themselves [...] The family was a moral and social, rather than a sentimental, reality.

And although the Enlightenment, and other modern ideas about education introduced later, had brought on a significant change in the educational systems, it is difficult to translate the emotional relations and patterns of behavior from the 18th and 19th centuries onto contemporary standards of understanding.

A topography of childhood

The childhood of young artists, their biographies, and the models of the relation between “me and the world” were imagined with the use of approximations – comparisons and metaphors – which, then taken together, construct a certain “topography of childhood.”³ The topography of family places is an image “attempting to depict something – what could be called a geographical and cultural personality of a region [...] the unique climate of a region, the aura of time and place” (Czermińska 2020: 171). However, today it is highly unlikely to recreate the local specificity of “a geography of childhood,” “an oneiric reality” (Bachelard 1975), expressed through cultural difference, since it remains saturated by the imagination of successive generations. Metaphors allow for an supra-individual reading of the life trajectory of the Prominent, by referring to their historical and cultural context.

The characterization of the childhood of Prominent individuals is connected with two spheres of experience: memory and studying memories – an arcadian and dystopian childhood. What follows is a brief characterization of the categories used for description.⁴

³ These approximations should be regarded as mutually connected, polyphonic, as well as categorically overlapping and interpenetrating, characterizing different elements of a dynamic and complex relation between a child and a family home. The classification of the types of homes of the Prominent is also inseparable, since very often e.g. a noble's home at the same time functioned as an artistic open house, and the tradition of a borderland home, according to Czermińska, connects two aspects: “the idyllic life among nature and the heroic knight's legend” (2020: 195, 223).

⁴ Due to the limitations of this article, this description does not offer an exemplification, which will be presented in the planned monograph.

“A childhood of lyricism and nostalgia”⁵ – fairytale years – experience of influential beginnings

In the memories of Prominent individuals the family home is seen both as a horizon and a beginning of the universe, a space, and as a reference to rootedness, safety and order in childhood. However, it is often a place to which there is no return, and leaving it often marks the turning point of adulthood (sometimes inconsistent with the temporal border). Particularly forced migration can strengthen the sentiment to one’s homeland, an experience shared by many families from the eastern borderlands, oftentimes connected with a decrease in socio-economic status and family problems. “A childhood of lyricism and nostalgia” was typical of Prominent individuals from different social classes, and it highlighted different types of values and interests significant for each family.

A childhood spent in the utopia of Arcadia – a noble’s home – relations were determined by traditional customs, ceremonies, with strong elements of patriarchal protectionism, puritanism, and the absence of parents and emotional coldness. For the child, however, it was a type of childhood “beyond the world” and a home located at the world’s peripheries, on its (real or symbolic) borderlands, a space where it was possible to safely experience the birth of one’s talent, distanced from world events. It was a space for cultivating interests, a place for free play and informal contacts, which also provided a chance to “spy on” the adult world.

A politically-engaged childhood – a patriotic home – specifically for Polish conditions, many Prominent individuals emphasized the dimension of external symbols and manifestations of patriotism, values, upholding Polish traditions.

A childhood spent in the center of a city – an intelligentsia home – the city allowed for early maturity, confrontations with peers, diversity, multiculturalism, multiethnicity, it taught social and intellectual openness. In this type of home the relationships between children and adults were often much closer and more personal.

A childhood spent on Parnassus – a 18th and 19th century literary and artistic home – the openness of the home, a wide group of friends enabled to broaden intellectual horizons, but also created the possibility to network, meet new people, listen to their conversations, to enter into the world of a given discipline, and in the case of the musical world, socializing with adult artists was a chance to promote the talents of a “wunderkind.”

A cosmopolitan childhood – an international home – in homes of rich landowners, their relatives would come from different countries, and they would speak several languages. Childhood spent in such a cosmopolitan environment opened up to diversity, confronted with “otherness,” allowed for contact with tradition, literature and high art.

A childhood of a supersaturated ephebe – a home focused on the child – concentration on excellence meant activity in three directions: migration to scientific or artistic centers, accumulating funds for studies, often connected with

⁵ Quote in: Kaja Kaźmierska (2008: 44).

continuing education abroad, and looking for professional support (patronage) among family and friends.

An unlimited childhood – an open home – the rhythm of life was dictated by “the cause,” “the idea” (revolution, national liberation, resistance against the state), it was characterized by chaos and randomness of requirements and duties, emphasizing the autonomy of family members, as well as naturalist, “realistic”, stress-free upbringing or ignoring the needs of the child.

“Lost childhood” – borderline experiences – biographical cracks, wounds and “scars”

A crack symbolizes difficult experiences, often unexpected, demanding a change of conditions and ways of living, expectations and plans. According to scholars, creative persons in different stages of life struggle with “a split, internal drama, ambivalence, contradictions in terms of values, attitudes, choices” (Limont 2005: 64). Such a childhood would strengthen sensitivity, and was a space of hardening and developing ways of self-managing one’s life. The genesis of the trauma was heterogeneous. It was connected with a loss (death, divorce, abandonment by important people), with memories “borrowed” from family members – a post-memory (Hirsch 2011), with a low standard of life and health care, and with historical tumults (wars and struggles for national independence, transgenerational trauma).

A cracked childhood – a traumatized home – was characterized by abrupt development, very often divided into a “before” and “after” – after the loss of a parent, relocation, migration, war, frequently negatively affecting the child’s psyche, although Stasiakiewicz (1999: 94) warns us from automatically over-interpreting a Prominent figure’s difficult childhood, writing that: “It is not only early childhood experiences, but also the mechanisms of their «consolidation» in the psychical structure of an individual, which decide about their influence on how they function later in life.”

An alienated childhood – a broken home – was dominated by loneliness and alienation (a sense of strangeness, otherness, incomprehension, more frequent among artists and writers who grew up in less conventional, less stable homes undergoing many crises). It is however impossible to state whether conditions in such a family always resulted with a greater sensitivity and insufficiency of close relations, or on the contrary – whether a greater vulnerability, over-sensitivity and self-reflexivity created a basis for greater expectations from close family members.

A lost childhood – a home of precocious adulthood – filled up with house chores, work, and not leaving much space for freedom and carelessness. It was a rare instance, since a peasant or worker genealogy was very rare among outstanding artists, as was extreme poverty, which seems to confirm Simonton’s thesis (2010).

A hidden childhood – a home that is forgotten – as Kaźmierska (2008: 43) notes, returns to the land of childhood were not always undertaken willingly, often they were deliberately left unsaid, as they can be associated with very strong negative emotions, trauma, a sense of loss, as well as with the destruction of family documents.

Family constellations

Although children were seldom included in the affairs of adults until the end of the Second World War, research has demonstrated that the development of Prominent individuals most frequently happened “within” the family (79 people), sometimes “outside of” it (22), and rarely “despite” the family (13). Activities which could be described by Simonton as “intellectual and cultural inspirations” (2010: 81) were identified in most families. The primary role in upbringing and education was reserved for mothers, governesses, fathers and sibling.

Mother – educated, active and possessive Inspirator

The mothers of the Prominent often had higher education, broader intellectual horizons, they were also very resourceful and active when forced to bring up their children by themselves. What was characteristic was a maternal overprotective attitude. This possessive motherly love, leading to a “monopoly” on emotions, was rather burdensome and limiting in the adult life of the Prominent, nonetheless they generally remained under their mothers’ indirect influence. After losing their child, these mothers would sacrifice the rest of their lives to keep memory about their children alive, not unlike the archetypical Niobe.

Father – authority figure, compass and space for development

A strong, authoritative, but also socially respected father-guardian, who also enjoyed prestige in professional life, would very often impact the lives of the Prominent in different ways. Following their footsteps very often turned into opposing “parental tyranny.” However, an example of how these categories cannot be separated is the complicated relation e.g. in the Witkiewicz family, who despite a discrepancy in manifested aesthetical canons, were active within the same creative fields. For a small percentage of fathers, a decidedly negative attitude towards the child’s “wrong” passions, or general helplessness in life, was characteristic.

The world between – siblings and peers

Inheriting talent, but also developing in an identical environment, offered a basis for similar interests among siblings. It was also not uncommon to observe a specific “transfer” of the father’s role to an older brother or sister, who would pave the way for their younger siblings, using their experience, social position and knowledge in some field.

Spending childhood “on the peripheries” limited one’s relationships to family members and close relatives. In turn, the urban world, often also serving the role of

an intellectual, scientific “center,” was connected with systematic school work, while also influencing more frequent contacts with the peer group, although it sometimes had negative effects. Paradoxically, the contrary was much often true – peers would remember a Prominent individual’s collegial nature, sociability, strong character and the ability to achieve desired goals, and relationships were often based on mutual fascinations, mastering one’s craft, creating associations or patriotic activity.

Early education – from the home to the center

A child’s upbringing and education in a noble family, a bourgeois family, or an intelligentsia family, took place in the home and primarily without the participation of the parents. In such cases the educational space was created by assemblies of nursemaids, tutors, private teachers and coaches. They should be therefore considered as the pillars of the intellectual development of the Prominent. However, their role is difficult to assess, since they would often become “invisible” in later memories, or appear only as anecdotal references. In this constellation, the parents remained the icons, sometimes verifiers, or figures inspiring to receive specialized knowledge.

Demonstrating interests and passions early in life is a characteristic feature of the Prominent, although precisely pinpointing specific moments of “fruitful asynchrony” (Garner 1993) of crystallizing experiences in childhood years reveals itself a difficult task. What was characteristic for some Prominent was however a late onset of talent reveal and developmental asynchrony, compensated by more than average talent, often self-taught. These difficulties were sometimes a result of the social distribution of professional prestige, since many families preferred to plan a more “concrete” and respected profession for their children.

Conclusions

It should be noted that both the homes and the families of the Prominent were rarely ordinary environments. It remains an open question to what extent the emergence of an above-average gifted child was the effect, and to what extent the cause of the unusual structure, relations and forms of functioning of their closest environment. On the other hand – these were houses subjected to conventional forms and lifestyles, characteristic for each social class and historical period.

The analysis of biographies shows that the vast majority of the Prominent grew up in suitable developmental conditions, enjoying the proper care and efforts of their guardians. Even when confronted with war trauma, poverty or ethnic cleansing, most parents tried to guarantee them a safe and happy childhood. This observation seems to be contrary to the common “legend” of a suffering, poor genius, although the individual lives of the Prominent are characterized by a more or less intensified exposure to problems and a lack of understanding. Naturally, the existence of a “double

elitism of talents” should also be taken into consideration – we do not know how many potential talents were lost in the past centuries of Polish history, either for socio-economic (poverty, serfdom, lack of access to education) or political reasons (wars, uprisings).

Considering the many methodological dilemmas and discussed categories, these conclusions should be interpreted solely as heuristic approximations, these up for discussion, which can offer an intuitive, literary, and anecdotal-mythical supplement to the descriptions of the childhood of the Prominent. The acquired data is therefore of historical value, and it can also “suggest” relevant moments in the development of geniuses, or universal qualities of families (Dubas 2020: 120), although – it is important to emphasize – they do not offer any direct solutions, useful for the everyday development of talent. However, learning from the lived experiences of the Prominent (Dominicé 2006; Dubas, Świtalski 2011), as well as studying the gifted, can offer us “the most visible guideposts, which future generations – both those ordinary, and those outstanding – can use to plan their lives” (Garder 1998: 227).

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To cite this article

Czaja-Chudyba I. (2023) *How to Study the Childhood of the Prominent? The Conceptual Framework of the Project*, “Nauki o Wychowaniu. Studia Interdyscyplinarne”, no. 1(16), pp. 92–107, <https://doi.org/10.18778/2450-4491.16.06>.