
SELF-SACRIFICE OR NATURAL DONATION? A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE ON GRANDMOTHERING IN NEW ZAGREB (CROATIA) AND EAST BERLIN (GERMANY)

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Abstract: *In this article we explore grandmaternal care and its interpretations in two European capitals of former socialist countries, Zagreb and Berlin. We describe the scope and variety of grandmaternal care practices both field sites and then contrast two grandmotherly interpretations of their intensive caring for grandchildren. The different appraisal of their similar practice as self-sacrifice and natural donation respectively is embedded in different life course experiences of these two women. Both grandmothers lived in socialist states and made the experience of profound change with political and economic restructuring. But while socialist eastern Germany and Croatia had many similar traits they also differed in important aspects. While our interlocutors attributed their practice generally to post-socialist developments, they based their judgements on different aspects of state responsibility. While demographic developments might create similar opportunities for child care, national and local contexts vary and local actors attribute different meanings to their action.*

Keywords: *child care, grandmothering, life course, post socialism.*

Resumo: *Neste artigo exploramos o cuidado das avós e suas interpretações em duas capitais europeias de antigos países socialistas, Zagreb e Berlim. Descrevemos a extensão e variedade (da prática) do cuidado das avós nos dois campos de pesquisa e contrastamos as interpretações de seus cuidados intensivos para com os netos. A avaliação distinta da prática similar como, respectivamente, autossacrifício e doação natural é resultado das diferenças de experiência de vida destas mulheres. As duas avós*

viveram em Estados socialistas e vivenciaram a mudança profunda na sua reestruturação política e econômica. Mas enquanto a Alemanha Oriental e a Croácia tinham vários aspectos em comum também havia várias diferenças em aspectos importantes. Ao atribuir suas práticas no geral ao desenvolvimento pós-socialista nossas interlocutoras baseavam seus julgamentos em diferentes aspectos da responsabilidade do Estado. Enquanto desenvolvimentos demográficos podem criar oportunidades similares para o cuidado infantil, contextos nacionais e locais variam e atores locais atribuem significados diferentes as suas ações.

Palavras-chave: *cuidado infantil, cuidados das avós, experiência de vida, pós-socialismo.*

Introduction

In popular imaginaries, the “traditional” grandmother is often depicted as a loving nurturer who provides for her grandchildren with homemade food and time to listen or play. Historically speaking, this notion of grandmother as nurturer is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe. A combination of demographic changes and state policies have contributed to the prevalence of this image. Because of general trends of increasing longevity and decreasing fertility, today more grandchildren can expect to have living grandparents for a longer period of time, and these grandparents have fewer grandchildren (Hoff; Tesch-Römer 2007; Höpflinger, 1999; Lauterbach, 1995, p. 71; Uhlenberg; Kirby, 1998). According to some estimates, one out of every five Europeans is a grandparent and devotes a greater number of years to grandparental care than they did to parental care (Attias-Donfut; Segalen, 2007, p. 7). But for grandparents to devote so much time to the care of others, grandparenthood also has required state policies that free the elderly from the exigencies of income generation. Pension schemes were established that guaranteed the elderly a satisfactory income, thereby creating cohorts of elderly people with time to care for their grandchildren (Hagestad, 2007; Leira; Tobío; Trifiletti, 2005; Segalen, 2003, p. 352).

But having grandchildren and having time do not automatically lead to an intimate caring relationship between grandmothers and their grandchildren. Apart from the potential for intergenerational conflict, the development of a close relationship necessitates a social construction, the

“invention of grandparenthood” as Keck and Saraceno (2008, p. 133) phrase it. Grandparenthood as a life stage and a meaningful role within the family has only developed since the second half of the eighteenth century as part of the European bourgeois ideal of the family (Chvojka, 2003; Keck; Saraceno, 2008). According to this gendered ideal, care of children is the responsibility of mothers and grandmothers more so than of fathers and grandfathers. While, in recent years, grandparenthood has begun to attract heightened scientific interest,¹ there is still little in the way of qualitative comparative work concerned with the perspectives of grandmothers themselves.² In this article we explore grandmaternal care and its interpretations in two European capitals.

Herein, we present data gathered over nine months of field research³ on the meanings and values associated with kinship and the impact of kinship networks on the provision of social security in the settlement of Travno, New Zagreb in Croatia, and Marzahn-Hellersdorf, Berlin in eastern Germany. Data was gathered through a number of methods including participant observation, biographical interviews, and semi-structured interviews with members of various age groups. In addition, we conducted twenty-five standardized interviews about kin networks and support systems that were conducted with a random sample drawn from lists of residential units in two large housing blocks. While data was collected on kinship support more generally, herein, we primarily concentrate on material related to grandparents’ and especially grandmothers’ perspectives. We do not aim at a representative study of practices but rather focus on comparing two selected life courses in order to gain a

¹ When not simply ignored, grandparenthood has long been underrepresented in sociological and anthropological research. For example, in a 1998 survey carried out on ageing in Europe, neither grandparenting nor grandmothering were indexed (Hagestad, 2000); see also Attias-Donfut and Segalen (2007, p. 1). This has begun to change over the last decade with the publication of research focusing on grandparental care – see, for example, Segalen (2010) for an overview of case studies in the KASS project; also Chvojka (2003), Hagestad (2007), Höpflinger (1999), Keck and Saraceno (2008) and Uhlenberg and Kirby (1998).

² One exception is Herlyn and Lehmann (1998).

³ Fieldwork was conducted within the framework of the interdisciplinary project “Kinship and Social Security” (KASS), which was funded by the EU- 6th Framework Programme (see also: www.eth.mpg.de; Heady, 2010, Leutloff-Grandits; Birt; Rubić, 2010; Thelen; Baerwolf, 2010). The aim of the project was to compare the role of kinship in social security arrangements in eight European countries (France, Italy, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Croatia, and Russia). Within the project, Tatjana Thelen was the lead researcher in eastern Germany and Carolin Leutloff-Grandits in Croatia. We would like to thank Astrid Baerwolf and Simone Streif in Germany and Tihana Rubić in Croatia for their fruitful collaboration on our teams.

deeper understanding of meanings attached to apparently similar practices in two different contexts and how these interpretations are constituted through individual life courses.

First, we describe the scope and variety of grandmaternal care in our two field sites. In order to approach the difference between a preference for all-day grandmotherly care and a preference for public care with supplementary grandmotherly care we second, contrast two cases of intensive grandmotherly care that the protagonists respectively interpreted in terms of “self-sacrifice” and “natural donation”. In accounting for the differences between these two interpretations of a similar practice, we seek to avoid simplistic dichotomies of socialist versus post-socialist or traditional versus modern. Instead we locate these practices and interpretations against the backdrop of the respective actors’ past experiences. Taking into account demographic and policy changes as well as post-socialist conditions, we argue that subtle differences in the interpretation of similar practices and attached norms are deeply embedded in life course experiences and transitions.

Grandmaternal care: a comparison

Both of our field sites, Travno and Marzahn-Hellersdorf, are typical “socialist” settlements, built in the 1970s on the outskirts of the respective capitals of Zagreb and Berlin. Today, Travno has a population of approximately 12 thousand inhabitants, while nearly 250 thousand inhabitants live in the amalgamated districts of Marzahn and Hellersdorf. Under socialism, both settlements primarily attracted young professionals and their families.⁴ Although it is imaginable that this development could have contributed to a loosening of family ties and isolation of nuclear families, the participant observation and interviews we conducted reveal a great variety of intensive intergenerational relations and the prominence of grandmaternal nurturing practices,

⁴ The buildings in both areas predominantly consist of multi-story housing blocks with modern equipment. Flats vary in size, with two- to three-room flats (50-80 meters-squared) in the majority. Although the districts in both cases are often portrayed as ghettos in the media with limited cultural programming, low quality of life, and high crime rates, the local population of both settlements tends to find living conditions convenient. During our research stays, residents habitually described their districts as quiet, green areas, conveniently close to the city center and well-equipped in terms of infrastructure.

in particular. Grandmothers provide food for grandchildren, eat with them, provide them with transitional or permanent housing, care for them when they are sick, and simply spend time with their grandchildren.

Often support is described in terms of direct help for children, but grandchildren also indirectly profit. Food provision is an apt example of this kind of intergenerational support. In Travno, this support often takes the form of a daily routine. Grandmothers go shopping at the nearby market place and then cook for their children (including in-laws) and grandchildren, who they invite over for lunch or provide with boxed up meals to be heated up later at home. In Marzahn-Hellersdorf, in contrast, instead of providing food on a daily basis, we more often found grandmaternal care expressed in regular invitations to elaborate meals catering to the individual tastes of family members (see also Streif, 2006, p. 39).⁵ In both settlements, respondents explained that this form of care saved time and money, while also entailing symbolic notions such as convictions about what makes for good and healthy homemade nutrition. Often in interviews, respondents did not even explicitly mention these forms of material support as care; rather, they described in social and emotional terms how these practices bring family together and reinforce intergenerational ties.

In both field sites, we also found cases in which grandparents were providing temporary housing for grandchildren whose parents were in the process of divorcing or had divorced. In two cases in Marzahn-Hellersdorf, for example, grandparents provided housing or temporary housing for grandchildren after the children's parents' divorce. In one case, grandparents cared for and housed a grandchild who suffered from serious drug problems (Streif, 2006, p. 40). Similarly, one grandmother in Travno took in a granddaughter when her parents divorced.

The most widespread form of grandmaternal care is caring for young, pre-school age grandchildren. In both settlements, grandparents who live near their children accompany their grandchildren to and from nearby nurseries, kindergartens, and schools and look after them on weekends and when they are ill. In some cases, grandmothers even gave up their jobs to support their

⁵ However, this might not be a significant difference as cooking by grandmothers was mentioned by 70 percent of ten- to eighteen-year-olds in a German study (Zinnecker et al., 2002).

daughter's or daughter-in-law's career. In other cases, grandmothers had never entered the job market but worked at home all (or most) of their lives. In our interviews conducted in Marzahn-Hellersdorf, more than one fifth of the elderly respondents indicated that they were currently involved in childcare. A much higher percentage stated that, at a previous point when both they and the grandchildren were younger, they took an active role in caring for their grandchildren (Streif, 2006).

Despite such commonalities, we also found a major distinction between the two field sites. Children under three are more often exclusively cared for by their grandmothers in Travno than they are in Marzahn-Hellersdorf.⁶ One might explain this in the following way: in Marzahn-Hellersdorf, public childcare facilities are common and many grandmothers are still employed. However, as it turns out, Travno has a nursery for children between six months and three years of age. Waiting lists are short, and young working couples in Travno can leave their children at public facilities. If availability of institutional care does not account for the difference, how else can we explain it?

In this respect, it is interesting that in both cases grandparents blamed the state for the fact that they (the grandparents) had to care for their grandchildren. While generally agreeing that failures by the state forced care of children onto grandparents, east Germans blamed the state for not creating enough childcare facilities, whereas Croats blamed the state for not providing enough income for men, which, they believed, would enable young mothers to stay at home and care for their children.

We argue that the preference for grandmaternal care over public daycare in Travno in comparison to Marzahn-Hellersdorf results from the different experiences Croats and East Germans have had with state policies and differing normative evaluations regarding female responsibilities in reproduction and the labour market. In order to approach these differing experiences, we present two cases of extended grandmotherly engagement with grandchildren.

⁶ The lower incidence in Marzahn Hellersdorf is in accordance with the picture provided by national statistics of Germany more generally: an average of only 12.7 percent of all grandparents in Germany have daily face-to-face contact with their grandchildren; 39.9 percent see their grandchildren on a weekly basis; and 47.7 percent see their grandchildren less than once a week. In terms of care, 7.6 percent of grandparents look after their grandchildren on a daily basis, with another 16.2 percent doing so several times a week (Family Survey 2000, DJI Kinderbetreuungstudie 2005, both quoted in Keck and Saraceno (2008, p. 149, 153).

While these cases are not necessarily statistically representative, they can nevertheless be fruitfully deployed as heuristic tools of comparison, as they help us to understand why seemingly similar practices in Croatia and East Germany are perceived differently by Croatians and East Germans, respectively.⁷

*Mrs. Becker: caring for grandchildren as self-sacrifice*⁸

Born in 1939, Mrs. Becker is a widow and lives in Berlin. She has three children (born in 1959, 1963, and 1966) and seven grandchildren. Under socialism, she was a lecturer at the economics university, but she lost her job when the university was closed down in 1989. Instead of searching for new employment, she accepted early retirement at the age of fifty-five so that she could take care of her grandchildren.

In 1989, Mrs. Becker had five grandchildren by her two elder children. Her first granddaughter was born in 1977 to her son, followed by two siblings in 1983 and 1987. In 1984 and 1988 respectively, her elder daughter Susanne had two sons. Mrs. Becker's son and daughter were both in their early twenties when they had children. Compared to her two older children, Mrs. Becker's youngest daughter Hilde became a mother relatively late in life at the age of thirty. Hilde had her two children after German unification: one in 1996 and the other in 1999.

Mrs. Becker's son's children were taken care of predominantly by their maternal grandmother because Mrs. Becker's son and his parents-in-law did not want "to burden Sabine [the mother] so she could unhurriedly study". In contrast, Mrs. Becker played a major role caring for her two grandsons by her daughter Susanne. Susanne had a university degree, but after German unification, aspiring for a more secure economic future, Susanne pursued a second professional education as a bank clerk. At the time, her sons were one- and five-years-old, and her decision to pursue further education made child care indispensable. In this situation, Susanne turned to her mother for help. Mrs. Becker recounts: "She said, 'Mum I want to do it this way.' And I looked after her children. It was to my disadvantage."

⁷ For reasons of confidentiality, we use pseudonyms.

⁸ Mrs. Becker was selected as interviewee in our random sample (see footnote 1) and was subsequently interviewed three times on her kinship network and accompanying flows of support.

Mrs. Becker's last sentence indicates that the move from professional life to retirement and towards full-time grandmotherhood was not an easy decision. Subsequently, she describes her ambivalent experience of the transition: "From the mental process to washing nappies and so forth. It was horrible. But the children [grandchildren] are grateful. You only do it for the sake of your daughter. It's not your own initiative." In the insecure context of economic and political restructuring that made socialist qualifications questionable, Mrs. Becker's decision to support her daughter in pursuing a more secure future made more sense than investing in her own professional life. The joy of being with the children, who were grateful, did not fully compensate for the loss of more inspiring mental work. Although she describes her experience of caring for her grandchildren as rather demanding, in retrospect, Mrs. Becker thinks that her daughter made the right decision because she now has a good income. As Mrs. Becker says: "It's recognized. She's earning a Western income."⁹

Mrs. Becker presents her grandmaternal care with ambivalence and in terms of a sacrifice for her daughter. In contrast, our second example, Mrs. Dukić, who also took over extended childcare responsibilities after the demise of socialism, discusses her own grandmotherly care rather differently.

Mrs. Duki: caring for grandchildren as natural donation¹⁰

Born in 1949, Mrs. Dukić has two children and four grandchildren. She lives with her husband in a joint household with their son and his family in Travno. Her eldest grandchild was born in 1990 to her son, followed by two siblings in 1999 and 2001. Her daughter gave birth to a girl in 1991.

Like Mrs. Becker's elder children, when their first child was born, Mrs. Dukić's son and daughter-in-law were both in their early twenties and still had to complete their education. At the age of forty-one, Mrs. Dukić gave up her job and became a full-time grandmother in the joint household. Mrs. Dukić

⁹ This is a reference to ongoing payment differentials in Germany (including differences within the now unified city of Berlin).

¹⁰ Mrs. Dukić was not part of our random sample but was recommended to us for an interview by neighbors in the settlement because of her strong involvement in looking after her grandchildren. The interview was conducted in 2005 and was followed by participant observation of Mrs. Dukić's everyday life.

also began to look over her second grandchild – born to her daughter a year later – after her daughter decided to return to wage-work a year later.

At the time, all the members of the family lived close to one another near Šibenik. By the mid-1990s, Mrs. Dukić's son and daughter-in-law had taken up employment in and relocated along with their daughter to Zagreb (about 350 kilometers from Šibenik). When Mrs. Dukić's husband retired and she herself was out of work, they decided to follow their son and his wife. Mrs. Dukić and her husband first moved into their own flat but again formed a joint household with their son and daughter-in-law after the birth of the young couple's third child in 1999.

Mrs. Dukić explained the decision to form a joint household in terms of its practical advantages for both generations. Although at the time of our research, Mrs. Dukić's younger grandsons were attending kindergarten, her assistance was still desired by the younger couple, as she says. Both her son and her daughter-in-law leave home at 7:15 a.m. for work, while Mrs. Dukić does not wake the two youngest children until 8:00 a.m. She gets them ready, takes them to kindergarten and collects them again at 3:30 p.m. and brings them home, while the parents work until 5:00 p.m. Her son sometimes works late, returning home after the children are already asleep. In the afternoon, Mrs. Dukić takes the children to the park or to German lessons, sports, logopedics, or a children's workshop. She also cooks for her grandchildren every day and prepares other meals. In fact, her daily rhythm is completely structured by her grandchildren and attending to their needs, positive development, and happiness. Mrs. Dukić regards her situation positively: "The grandchildren need us [the grandmothers] and we [the grandmothers] need them."

Interpreting grandmaternal care

The life courses of Mrs. Becker and Mrs. Dukić exhibit similarities in regard to past experiences, while also exhibiting key differences. Both women lived in socialist states; both married and have children and grandchildren. Both made the transition to full-time grandmotherhood after the political changes of the 1990s, after which time their attention was fully absorbed by caring for their grandchildren. In their accounts, both grandmothers emphasize that they abandoned their respective professional futures for the sake of their daughters/

daughters-in-law (not their sons or sons-in-law, who, it seems, would have pursued wage-work in any case). But they do not blame their daughters(-in-law) for motherly failure; instead they understand grandmaternal care in terms of obligation towards the younger generation. Thereby, the grandmothers support their adult children's well-being in insecure economic circumstances, and they do not think it would have been better if their daughters/daughters-in-law would have given up employment for the sake of their children.

Despite such similarities and the fact that grandmotherly care is apparently taken for granted in both cases, the two accounts differ with regards to the normative evaluations of the respective grandmothers. In contrast to Mrs. Becker, who presents her care as self-sacrifice, Mrs. Dukić views her care as a natural donation. The shift from professional life to full-time grandmotherhood in Mrs. Dukić's account was smoother than in Mrs. Becker's depiction. Used to mental work, Mrs. Becker experienced the transition to childcare tasks and household chores as a loss, only inadequately compensated for by the love of her grandchildren. Nevertheless, she is convinced of her daughter's wisdom in securing well-paying employment and of her decision to support her daughter in this matter. Mrs. Becker's positive evaluation of her daughter's decision becomes evident when she talks about her second daughter, who moved to the western part of the country with her husband, where she now lives as a full-time mother and housewife. Mrs. Becker comments: "Now she sits at home, does the cooking and the housework, but is utterly miserable." She feels that her daughter's decision to be a full-time mother is making her unhappy, whereas she believes that her first daughter, who has pursued the socialist model of mother-worker, is happier. More than just enjoying intergenerational ties across three generations or contributing to the happiness of her grandchildren, Mrs. Becker sees her help as a contribution to her daughter's well-being.

In contrast, Mrs. Dukić presents her transition to full-time grandmotherhood with much less ambivalence. It was a decision that made *her* happy. She "needs" the grandchildren as much as they "need" her. Moreover, consecutive generations within the family share the notion that children should not be sent to kindergarten before the age of three. Furthermore, rather than framing her support in terms of its contributions to the self-fulfillment of her daughter/daughter-in-law, Mrs. Dukić frames it in terms of the wellbeing of the whole family. Mrs. Dukić believes that children constitute the foundation

of the family, binding generations together. And she is willing to contribute by supporting her children (in-law) and grandchildren.

Some of the differences between these accounts can be explained in terms of the differing social backgrounds of the two protagonists. Mrs. Becker is more educated than Mrs. Dukić and had a successful socialist career. Grandmaternal care became a new task for her at the age of fifty-four when the socialist system collapsed. Mrs. Dukić, on the other hand, did not pursue a professional career and began as the chief caretaker of her grandchildren much earlier in life, at the age of forty-one.

However, both women also share some similar experiences and transitions in their life cycles. Most obviously, they share the experience of the demise of socialism and so too the profound changes of economic and political reorganization. Like other women we interviewed, both Mrs. Becker and Mrs. Dukić understood intensive grandmaternal care to be a new phenomenon brought about by post-socialist economic insecurity. In order to confront this perceived insecurity, both believed that the best response was to enable their daughters(-in-law) to work full time after a year of maternity leave. Mrs. Dukić did not question the aspirations of younger women for wage-work, and Mrs. Becker clearly supported her elder daughter's wish for an education with good economic prospects. In order to understand to what degree grandmaternal care in fact is a new, post-socialist phenomenon and why the two-breadwinner model is the preferred answer to perceived economic insecurity, we consider demographic developments and employment and gender policies under socialism and their post-socialist transformations.

Grandmaternal care in a demographic context

As was previously indicated, increasing longevity and decreasing fertility rates have greatly contributed to the phenomenon of intensified grandmother-grandchild relations.¹¹ Apart from this universal development in Europe, socialist states shared several demographic features that equally contribute to close intergenerational ties. Compared to western states, socialist

¹¹ Nearly a third of all grandchildren in Germany today still have grandparents when they reach the age of thirty (German Socio-Economic Panel, quoted in Keck; Saraceno 2008, p. 143).

countries typically displayed a low age of first marriage and, for mothers, a low age of first childbirth. The average age of women at first childbirth in East Germany in 1980 was 22.7 years, whereas in West Germany it was 25.2 years (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2003, p. 76). Similarly, the mean age at first childbirth in Croatia was 22 at the end of the 1960s, which increased to 23.9 years in 1989, while in 2001 the average was 25.5 years (Stropnik, 2003). Consequently, the grandparental generation has also been comparatively young.¹²

Both of our cases fit into general patterns of (post)socialist demographic developments. Born before the war, Mrs. Becker was twenty-five-years-old when her first child was born. Reflecting the socialist pattern, her first two children married earlier and had their first children at an early stage in their lives. Her two older children were eighteen and twenty-one, respectively, when their first children were born. Thus Mrs. Becker was forty-four-years-old when she became a grandmother. In contrast, her youngest daughter reflects the post-unification drop in the birth rate to almost zero. She postponed marriage and pregnancy, as did many others from her generation who were born in the late 1960s and had only just become adults when the transformation occurred. She was thirty when she had her first child in 1996. In the Croatian example, Mrs. Dukić gave birth to her first child at the age of seventeen and was therefore younger than the average woman at her first childbirth. However, her children display a typical fertility pattern. Her son became a father at the age of twenty-three (in 1990) and her daughter at twenty-five (in 1991), reflecting the still young but slowly increasing age of first childbirth in Croatia in the beginning of the 1990s. Like Mrs. Becker, Mrs. Dukić became a grandmother in her early forties.

Some of these fertility decisions are strongly linked to socialist family and welfare policies. In order to explore the extent to which the socialist past may have influenced current forms of grandmaternal support, it seems useful to follow economic developments as well as state policies on family and female employment. Both shaped much of the experience of the grandparental and the parental generation under consideration here.

¹² People between the ages of forty and eighty-five in eastern Germany have more than twice as many grandchildren and great-grandchildren as their western counterparts (Kohli et al., 2000, p. 17).

Grandmaternal care: socialist pathways

Socialist policies supported early marriage and birth both intentionally and unintentionally. One decisive factor was socialist housing policy, which in conditions of general scarcity favored young couples with children. In towns in which communal housing was distributed to young workers and their children, this led to a (further) nuclearization of the family, as young parents and their small children moved to into urban apartments. Grandparents often remained in the rural areas where they had built a family house, which they shared with another child. In this way, social housing policy often led to the geographical separation of the young family from the (grand-)parental generation and made direct help almost impossible. In these cases, pre-school children were placed in nurseries and kindergartens, taken care of by neighboring women, and sometimes sent to their grandparents' home in the countryside, seeing their parents only on weekends – which in most cases was seen as unproblematic.

In addition to sharing the experience of housing shortages, socialist states share some features of what Gal and Kligman (2000b, p. 5) call 'socialist gender orders'. The German Democratic Republic and Yugoslavia, including Croatia, shared a commitment to female emancipation in terms of legal equality for women and full-time female participation in wage-work. Due to this commitment to female labor participation and first childbirth at a comparatively young age, placing children in the care of grandparents was a common feature of kinship support in many socialist countries.

Despite the emphasis on female labour market participation, the significance of the role of women in reproduction and as caretakers within the family has frequently been highlighted in socialist states (Einhorn, 1993; Gal, 1994; Gal; Kligman 2000a, 2000b; Haney, 1999; Haukanes, 2001; Huseby-Darvas, 1996; Lapidus, 1978; Pine, 2002; Read, 2005, 2007). This caretaking role was reinforced when birth rates in Europe began to decline in the 1960s and 1970s and socialist governments reacted with pro-natal policies. Similar intentions, however, resulted in policies of quite a different nature, with the GDR and Croatia adopting pro-natal policies that could be viewed as being at opposite poles of a continuous policy spectrum.

In order to encourage women to enter the workforce and to have children, the decisive element adopted in the GDR was the massive development of an

all-embracing system of childcare. However, public childcare was inadequate until its peak in the 1970s. This development is mirrored in the Mrs. Becker's life course. Her son Stefan was born in 1959 and her two daughters, Susanne and Hilde, in 1963 and 1966, respectively. Mrs. Becker was unable to obtain a place in the nursery school for her third child, and, due to lack of time, she had to abandon her doctoral studies. At the time, she was chiefly responsible for childcare, as her husband traveled a great deal, her own mother had died, and her relationship with her mother-in-law was tense. When Mrs. Becker's first granddaughter was born in 1977, her son was only eighteen years old and in the army, and his wife was finishing her studies. For the first three years, the little girl was taken care of most of the time by her maternal grandmother and only saw her parents on weekends. Her parents took her back after three years, a process described as unproblematic by Mrs. Becker.

Later generations were to have less difficulty in finding public childcare, as is reflected in the extremely high nursery school attendance rate in the GDR.¹³ Public and private childcare, at least in the cities, permitted most children to be looked after between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. so that the majority of parents who worked the so-called normal shift from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. could manage without extra help. In extreme cases, children were accommodated in weekly nurseries where they stayed all week including nights. It was only in the late 1970s that policy changed in favor of more "conservative" measures thought to facilitate combining worker's and mother's duties. In this instance, the GDR followed the example of other socialist countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia and introduced the so-called "baby year" allowing mothers to stay at home for a year after the birth of a child. This did not affect the principle that men and women should work and be given the opportunity to do so.¹⁴ Consequently, nearly all women worked and, more importantly, all mothers. This development stood in stark contrast to family policies in West Germany where public childcare was generally scarce and full-time motherhood was preferred. After unification, the West German laws were

¹³ In 1989, 80.2 percent of all children in the GDR in the respective age group were cared for in so-called crèches, compared, for example, to 4.4 percent in Poland and 8.6 percent in Hungary (Einhorn, 1993, p. 262).

¹⁴ These developments have mostly been studied regarding their impact on women. For more details about the influence of changing social policies and models of female life courses in the GDR, see, for example, Merkel (1994), Gerhard (1994), and Tippach-Schneider (1999).

imported to the new federal states in the eastern part of the country. Given the still existing economic inequality between the two parts of Germany and the parallel public devaluation of eastern biographies, former gender policies and especially the former state care system remain amongst the few positive points of reference (Thelen, 2006a, 2006b). Thus to a great extent, current child care practices are still experienced in this context of divergent gender roles in East and West Germany.

The life courses of Mrs. Becker and her children as well as Mrs. Becker's interpretation thereof display the contrast between eastern and western Germany with regards to motherly employment and public childcare. Like many young East German parents, Mrs. Becker's younger daughter – a trained physiotherapist – moved to western areas after unification when her husband received a lucrative job offer. As already indicated, based on her socialist experiences, Mrs. Becker commiserated with her daughter: "My poor Heike!" Referring to the differences in Germany she stated: "Alas, whoever lived here [i.e., in eastern Germany] does not know that [i.e., being a housewife]." In our conversations, Mrs. Becker repeatedly construed her daughter's situation not as coming about as a result of her own decisions but rather due to poor employment opportunities for mothers and the scarcity of public childcare in western Germany. She specified once more what was lacking in her daughter's life: "And she had such a nice profession. It is a tragic. She is as miserable as sin. Only because of child care." She blames the state for not creating enough childcare and thus being responsible for her daughter being a full-time mother without the satisfaction of simultaneously pursuing a professional life.

Like in the former GDR, in Croatia socialist ideology promoted the inclusion of women in wage-work, and by the late 1980s, women constituted 45 percent of the workforce (Kerovec, 1990). In this regard, Mrs. Dukić's life course is not very representative. In fact, her children were in their teens or older by the time she had completed five years of employment, from which she resigned after the birth of her first grandchild. As in other socialist countries, kindergartens and nurseries in Croatia were a fixed element of urban city plans. However, in reality, public child-care facilities were crowded, and many parents were obliged to look for alternatives (Puljiz; Zrinščak, 2004). In 1989, the kindergarten enrolment rate in Croatia was 29.4 percent, which means that even during socialism the percentage of pre-school aged children in public institutions was very small (Stropnik, 2003). Enrolment rates for

children up to three years of age were lower than 15 percent (Bouillet; Bračić-Ružić; Zrinščak, 2002). This indicates that pre-school children from urban areas were also taken care of by family members. Some interpret this as one reason for the extremely low birth rate in Croatia.¹⁵

As in the GDR, in the 1970s in Croatia, women were granted a one-year maternity leave period during which they would receive the majority of their salary. Before this point and also later, after the end of maternity leave, it was normal to bring children of pre-school age to their grandmother's home in the countryside. At the same time, today's grandmothers grew up with the idea that women should work despite having children – and one way of realizing this was to rely on grandparents.

In sum, during the socialist period, eastern Germany and Croatia shared some general features regarding state policy towards family and female employment. Grandmaternal care as such is not unique to the post-socialist period but already existed in the socialist period. Equally important, however, is that in both countries this care was linked to a positive assessment of female employment, which finds its traces in the current acceptance by grandmothers of their daughters'/daughters-in-laws' decision to work. Even if these grandmothers at times dislike their obligations, they do not blame the younger generation but rather the state and the economic situation.

However, public childcare attendance rates differed in the two countries. In eastern Germany, inclusion into public institutions, especially of children under the age of three, was more extensive than in Croatia. By positively evaluating female employment and public childcare in eastern Germany, one could distance oneself from West German family policies. Mrs. Becker's constant reiterations of these differences show their importance for her post-socialist interpretation of grandmaternal care. She believes that her grandmaternal duties have arisen due to the failure of state support for female employment through public childcare. Such an interpretation is absent from Mrs. Dukić account. Both grandmothers attributed their role as caretaker to post-socialist developments but based their judgments on different aspects of state responsibility.

¹⁵ During the socialist period, birth rates dropped from 2.9 per woman in the decade after 1945 to 1.6 at the end of the 1980s (cf. Grandits, 2010).

Grandmaternal care: post-socialist pathways

There are two main ways in which post-socialist restructuring is reflected in the described accounts of grandmaternal care. In both cases, the grandmothers blamed state failure for the need for intensive care. However, the Croatian and eastern German discourses differ in their divergent accounts of the retreat of the state.

Mrs. Dukić emphasizes how the state has retreated from providing adequate income and employment regulation. She stated that under socialism it was possible for a family to get by on one salary, which would be impossible today. Therefore, she fully understands why her daughter and daughter-in-law have to work. Like Mrs. Dukić, many elderly people in both countries feel that they benefited from the high degree of social security provided to them by the socialist state. They highlight housing via the workplace, (more or less) life-long job security, and, compared to the younger generation today, relatively low demands in terms of work. They juxtapose these socialist era benefits with the conditions facing the younger generation in the new market economy, which in their view is linked to a high degree of uncertainty, long working hours, and ultimately exploitation.

East German discourses further contrast “good” socialist family and gender policies with the new western ones. Mrs. Becker blames new West German policies that favor full-time motherhood, and the retreat of the state from public childcare for the extensive role of grandparents in caring for grandchildren in contemporary Germany. Both Mrs. Dukić’s and Mrs. Becker’s accounts can be linked to the economic restructuring that transpired after socialism and that resulted in an insecure labour market and greatly altered child-rearing conditions. Unemployment, particularly amongst females and youth, has become a constant threat.¹⁶ This has made middle-aged and elderly parents concerned

¹⁶ While the general unemployment rate was 14.8 percent in 2002 according to International Labour Organisation standards (the official unemployment rate by the Croatian employment Service was even 22.3 percent in the same year), this was gendered. Male unemployment in Croatia reached only 13.2 percent in 2002, while female unemployment rates rose to 16.5 percent in the same year, although women had constituted 45.5 percent of the total work force in 2001 (cf. Državni zavod za statistiku, 2003; Kerovec, 2003, p. 342). Furthermore, young people in particular have been affected by unemployment, as youth unemployment rose from 26.9 percent to 33.7 percent between November 1996 and the first half of 1999 (World Bank, 2001).

about the future of their grown-up children (Raboteg-Šarić, 2004, p. 541). At the same time, the position of the grandmaternal generation in the labor market became insecure, as numerous women from this generation lost their jobs. Sometimes early retirement policies facilitated a comparatively safe exit from the labor market, as in the case of Mrs. Becker. The (unwanted) end of her career had the side effect of facilitating her extensive grandmaternal care.

According to our interlocutors, another reason for stronger engagement of grandparents in childcare is the growing demands of the labor market, which make it difficult to reconcile wage labor and childcare. In the post-socialist era, working hours became much more flexible and, oftentimes, longer.¹⁷ This made it difficult to reconcile working hours with the opening hours of childcare facilities.¹⁸ But public childcare has in the meantime been diversified and supplemented with new private forms of childcare for more hours each day. While kindergarten opening hours were often reduced in eastern Germany, the Croatian state attempted to respond to the new demands of the market economy by introducing flexible working hours and extending the hours of operation of state (and private) kindergartens.

Conclusion: grandmaternal care and its embedment in life course experiences

In this article, we have described and compared practices and notions of grandmaternal care in two European capitals, Zagreb and Berlin. In both cases, we found a variety of forms of support for the younger generations, with care of pre-school children being the most prominent. In contrast to the

¹⁷ As previously mentioned, in the GDR the normal shift lasted from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. In socialist Croatia, most workers worked from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and thus had “free” afternoons with their children. In contrast, post-socialist era working hours often last from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or later. Taking into account that parents have to commute to work, which in the traffic-laden cities of Zagreb and Berlin may take up to one hour each way, little time is left for the children. In addition, in Croatia part-time work for women is not widespread: 67 percent of fathers and 39 percent of mothers work more than eight hours per day, while only 8 percent of fathers and 28 percent of mothers work less than eight hours. The remainder works between seven and eight hours a day (Raboteg-Šarić, 2004, p. 548). In eastern Germany, part-time employment for women is yet another West German innovation.

¹⁸ In Croatia, at least in the first years after the end of socialism, state childcare institutions often still kept to socialist working hours, closing at 3 p.m., and only remaining open later when individual daycare providers agreed to stay on to accommodate parents who could pick up their children before 3 p.m.

preference for full-time grandmotherly care we found in Travno (Croatia), our interviewees in Marzahn-Hellersdorf (eastern Germany) showed a preference for institutional care with supplementary grandmotherly care. We explored this contrast through two cases of intensive full-time grandmotherly care. This led to the striking observation that intensive grandmaternal care was interpreted as “self-sacrifice” in Marzahn-Hellersdorf (eastern Germany) and as a “natural donation” in Travno (Croatia).

In order to understand variations in practices and understandings, one must take into account the national and local demographic paths that form the background of individual experience. While it might be tempting to interpret these differences in terms of simple dichotomies like more “traditional” values in Croatia versus more “modern” ones in Germany, we have shown how grandmotherhood is embedded in individual life courses framed by socialist experiences and transitions.

In both field sites and in the individual accounts presented herein, the experience of transition from socialism to post-socialism figures prominently in explaining the described forms of extended grandmaternal care. This, however, is not an entirely “true” conviction, as during socialism grandmaternal care was a solution to certain caring needs as well. But it shows the importance of the political changes as a point of reference in individual lives. While both Mrs. Becker and Mrs. Dukić generally are in agreement in blaming state failure for the present demand for extensive grandmaternal care, their accounts exhibit subtle differences. In both countries, state policy is blamed, but while our interview partners in Travno held the state responsible for not being able to create a better economic situation in which families with small children could get by on one source of income, our eastern German interlocutors held the state responsible for not creating enough public care institutions to enable mothers to work full time. These different interpretations of state failure are firmly rooted in experiences of the socialist past as well as post-socialist experiences.

Socialist policies generally supported low ages for mothers at first childbirth, which accounts for the comparatively young and able-bodied grandparents found today in post-socialist Europe. In addition, state policies in both GDR and Yugoslavia brought women into the workforce. There were, however, also differences between the two settings. In contrast with Yugoslavia, socialist East Germany’s policies emphasized building an

encompassing system of public childcare as a means of including women in the work force. After unification, the eastern German population faced the introduction of western German policies that favored full-time motherhood, part-time work for mothers, and reduced support for public childcare. Based on these experiences, grandmothers in eastern Germany tend to interpret their involvement in childcare since unification as a sacrifice they have had to make due to the failure of the state to provide public child-care facilities and adequate employment opportunities for mothers. Besides being an economic resource, female employment is also interpreted as a source of self-fulfillment. In contrast, grandmaternal care in Croatia is discursively “naturalized” as a donation for the sake of the family. Motherly employment is here only discussed as an economic resource necessary because of the failure of the state to provide for other possibilities. While public childcare is universally estimated to be a good thing in eastern Germany, public facilities for children under the age of three are heavily criticized and avoided in the Croatian context – with grandmothers as the best solution at hand. Thus while demographic developments might create similar opportunities for childcare, national and local contexts vary and local actors attribute different meanings to their action.

In the younger generation however, we see in both countries new trends emerging that replace the old socialist emphasis on double earner families in favor of full-time motherhood. While in Croatia the influence of the Catholic Church and conservative parties (such as the HDZ under Tudjman) with regard to the “mother ideology” is evident (Rubić; Leutloff-Grandits, in preparation), in eastern Germany it is the small welfare and pedagogical institutions that further the notion of the importance of motherly care in the first three years of life (Thelen; Baerwolf, 2008). Due to shifts in policy and public discourse in both Croatia and eastern Germany, we witnessed a willingness of young mothers to work fewer hours or to first return to work when their children are one-year-old or older. Thus, intensive grandmaternal care of infants may turn out to be a “transitional phenomenon”.

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