Health-related practices as bonding: the narratives of Polish children

*Ewa Maciejewska-Mroczek

University of Warsaw, Poland

This paper shows how every-day health-related practices are used for performing intergenerational relationships, especially child–parent bonding. Parents are often judged by members of a wider society in regards to their ‘permissive’ versus ‘responsible’ practices (Buckingham 2011). This is frequently related to such spheres of everyday life as health management, food, or physical activity. These areas are often analysed as those where negotiations between adult ‘responsible’ and children’s ‘indulgent’ attitudes take place. Children, meanwhile, are regarded as those who would perform their generational status through contesting the official modern requirements of healthy lifestyles. Such strategies are mediated by specific material culture (Diasio 2004, Cook 2005): electronic devices, fast-food, etc. However, these relations are more complex.

My paper is based on the research with children aged 8–11, aimed at studying their opinions about health. This qualitative study was conducted in Poland in the years 2015–18, and 105 children took part in focus groups and individual interviews. The research showed that children frame health-related practices in the broader set of social networks. Their bodily, non-verbal character makes them a good means for building embodied social ties. On the one hand, there were activities reported through which intergenerational bonding is practised. The main areas are preparing food and pursuing physical activities together. Children also defined many other bonding activities as health-related (e.g. singing lullabies). On the other hand, the negotiations about healthy lifestyle, which are common in modern families, may be regarded as rituals through which parent–child relationships are practiced, and the role of the child in this process is active. Many children regard the role of parents in the health-related every-day practices as regulatory. Parents are those who have the responsibility to regulate children’s behaviour. However, children are those who control parents and are in the position not only to ethically judge their health-related practices, but also serve as role models for them.

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