Children participating in family decisions

Rudolf RICHTER, Ulrike ZARTLER

Children participating in family decisions

*Rudolf RICHTER**, Ulrike ZARTLER***

Abstract

Children are nowadays seen as self-reliant subjects able to articulate their wishes and to participate in family decisions. International studies have shown that children in Austria participate in family affairs only to a moderate extent. National studies just as well indicate that there is much more interest on the part of the children to engage in family affairs than is actually realized in family's everyday lives. We present an Austrian qualitative study which takes a closer look at families and the negotiating procedures within them. The main aim was to find out how participation works within the family, thus discovering the driving forces of consensus and conflict. The study comprises material from children's and parent's points of view. We made photo interviews with 10-year-old children (n = 50) and problem-centered interviews with their parents (n = 71). Results show that children were allowed to participate in different fields from furnishing their room to deciding on changing the home in different ways. Participation processes were usually structured, and mothers and fathers were involved differently. In general, participation was very much influenced by the actual and ascribed competence of the children.

Keywords: participation, family, children, negotiations, communication

Introduction

Participation is a key issue since the nineteen seventies and came along with the process of democratization in Western societies. Though participation was a central topic in the political field, it soon spread out to other fields in society, also to the private sphere of the family. Meanwhile, there is a huge body of literature on children's participation, arguing for greater involvement of children in decisions that affect them (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Hill, Davis, Alan and Prout, 2004;

* Prof. Dr. Rudolf Richter, Institute of Sociology, University of Vienna, Austria, Roosevelt- platz 2, A-1090 Vienna, T+43-1-4277-482 40, F+43-1-4277-9 492, rudolf.richter@univie.ac.at

** Dr. Ulrike Zartler, Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, Rooseveltplatz 2, A1090 Vienna, Austria. Email: ulrike.zartler@univie.ac.at

Percy-Smith and Nigel, 2010; Powell and Smith, 2009). Historically, children in Western societies have been seen as *"objects of concern rather than as persons with voice"* (Prout and Hallett, 2003, p. 1). In contrast to this view, children are now increasingly seen as social agents in their own right, and no longer regarded as passive recipients of adult socialisation or helpless victims of their social surroundings. Children are increasingly regarded as persons who should be heard and taken seriously, who make a valuable contribution to social and political life, and who are capable of shaping their everyday lives (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; James and Prout, 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta and Wintersberger, 1999; Smart, Neale and Wade, 2001). These concepts have also found their way into legal regulations: Children's right to have a say and to be heard are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN-CRC).

This paper concentrates on the participation of children aged about ten within their families. Children's participation has initially begins in the private world of the family. It is during early and middle childhood when children make their first experiences of participation, negotiation and inclusion/exclusion between different family members. This includes connections with adult/child power relationships and different social positions (due to age, gender, experiences, sources of power, etc.). Although this field of participation is often under-estimated, it seems crucial for children to make participatory experiences at home in order to transfer these experiences to other life spheres[1] (e.g. participation in schools or other social settings).

The discussion on the participation of children is led mainly on two levels. First it is a matter of democratization and individualization. The family is considered a social group where decisions have to be negotiated between the family members. Children are increasingly seen as self-reliant subjects, as individuals with their own wishes, goals, perceptions and the right to have a say in their own and in family affairs. On a second level of discussion, children's mental and physical competences to participate are considered. Thus, the discussion about participation of children in the family is built on two pillars: the organization of the family and the personal development of children. Family forms and the perception of children's abilities are, as we will show in the following sections, central issues in children's participation in family affairs.

---

[1] In this paper, we concentrate on the family, excluding children's participation in the civic sphere or at school.

Children's participation in families

Participation of children means that they have mandatory possibilities to influence decision processes in the family (Jaun, 2001). Literature distinguishes between direct and indirect participation. Indirect participation means that institutions advocate the interests; direct participation that children administer their interests immediately (Schleuninger, 1999). Degrees of participation reach from consulting to actively determining the decision. Participation of children within family decision-making processes requires specific abilities from the parents (Knauer and Sturzenhecker, 2005): Firstly, care has to be taken that children are not overburdened with the participation asked from them. Secondly, involving children into decision-making processes might show as a result that children have other opinions than their parents. It is then the parents' task to handle conflicts resulting from this.

The family is one of the most important learning areas for children, where they can – at the best – make their first experiences concerning participation processes, basic principles of negotiation and democratic decision-making. Children develop skills when participating in family decision processes and taking their parents, brothers and sisters as role models. Thus, children's participation in their families is of utmost importance for their ability and willingness to participate in other social spheres, as shown for example in the World Vision Children's Study (Hurrelmann and Andresen, 2010; Schneekloth and Leven, 2007). If participation works within their families, children (and their parents) can develop skills and transfer their participatory knowledge to other areas. In this way, participation can be increasingly established as an efficient model within society.

In Austria, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is discussed in schools and estimated by the government, which shows interest in transferring children's rights to reality and has partly elevated the UNCRC to constitutional status in January 2011. The study which provides the data basis for this paper was conducted from a twofold background. A study initiated by the Austrian government (BMSGK, 2004) indicated that children feel only involved to a very little degree in participation processes. On the contrary, another study ("mobilkom Austria Freizeitstudie", Kromer and Hatwagner, 2005) showed that three quarters of the children aged 10 to 16 felt taken seriously by society, and 56% of the age group 10 to 11 expressed the feeling that they could decide on their life. Two thirds of all the children felt that they could freely decide what they wanted to do, but also half of them said they would be glad for someone to tell what is best for them.

In international comparison, we find a specific profile for Austria. The UNICEF Study "Young Voices" (2002) showed that 66% of the Austrian children found their opinion taken seriously in the family, and 41% wanted no change in the

family organization (which was in international average). But Austrian parents seem to give little praise and devotion to their children's participation: Only 45% of the children compared to 61% internationally claimed that they received enough on that (Kränzl-Nagl, Beham, Bergmair, Bohonnek, and Melvyn, 2006). The study on child poverty done and published by UNICEF (2007) showed problems in Austria concerning intergenerational communication. Less than half of the children below 15 answered that their parents found time to talk to them during the week. Communication problems rose from the age of eleven to fifteen, and especially girls felt more comfortable to talk to their mothers than to their fathers.

This rather ambivalent picture was the initial focus of the presented study and inspired our interest in how participation in Austrian families works. Family is a central area of learning social behavior (Krappmann, 2003). Studies in Germany, a country which is often considered to be at least in the southern part very similar to Austrian culture and language, showed that in the last decades parents continuously involved children in family affairs. This negotiation processes led to a more intense partnership between parents and children (Alt, Teubner and Winkelhofer, 2005). Children were mainly involved in areas where parents did not feel directly concerned (Fatke and Schneider, 2005).

Individual competences have to be taken into account though, as well as the developmental level of children. Children should neither feel overburdened nor under challenged (Krappmann, 2003; Sturzbecher and Hess, 2005) and ideally shall be continuously involved in family affairs, as they grow older. A mixture of approval, suggestions and guidance might lead to the optimum of children's participation in family life and negotiation processes (Hurrelmann and Bründel, 2003).

The modern family is a negotiating family where the social roles are not confirmed once and for all, but are formed and modified in interactions. It seems though that Austrian families have to move forward on this. As Kromer and Schadauer (2004) found, children wish to have more influence in leisure activities as well as the structure of family time than they have now. They often do not succeed with their wishes. The difference between responsibility for the personal field (clothing, furnishing the children's room) and responsibility for others (caring issues, chores) is essential and tends to be an issue within these negotiations (Ecarius, 2007). The well-being and happiness of children correlates with the well-being and happiness in their family life (Bucher, 2001). Thus, participation according to the developmental level of the children, independently of social stratum, gender or region, is essential for the well being of children and of families.

As studies detected some mischief in Austrian families, we wanted to take a closer look on how communication processes work. In this paper, we concentrate on participation processes within families. Children as self-reliant subjects participate on different levels. How they do this, and how children and their parents

perceive participation is our research question. In the following section, we will first describe the empirical and methodical basis and then concentrate on the results. The article ends with conclusions about the meanings of our findings.

Methods

In order to get insight into processes of participation within families and its perception by children and parents, a qualitative research design was developed. The study was based on a child-centred approach that regards children as subjects rather than objects of research and as competent actors within their own life spheres. Children were active collaborators in our research, and their positions were regarded as being as important for the study as those of their adult caretakers (Christensen and James, 2008; Fraser, Lewis, Kellett and Robinson, 2004; Greig, Taylor and MacKay, 2007; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009). Research shows that children and young people do welcome opportunities to participate in research and generally to have a say in matters that affect their lives: Child involvement into research is welcomed and appreciated by most children and young people (Hill, 1997; Edwards and Alldred, 1999; Stafford, Laybourn, Hill and Walker, 2003; Grover, 2004; Hill, 2006).

We used different approaches to involve children. First, 96 children wrote *essays* on different topics concerning children's rights, which gave us a good opportunity to get into contact with the children and to raise their interest in topics of children's rights. We collected 96 essays that were handed directly to the research team. The main focus in this paper though is the interview part of the study. For the *interviews with children* (n=50), we used an interview type that brings together photo interviews and semi-structured interviews based on topic guides. The children were asked to make photos with a disposable camera, according to a specific schedule and covering the following five topics: (1) Who is part of my family?, (2) What I like in my family, (3) What I don't like in my family, (4) How I spend my time during the week, (5) How I spend my time on weekends. The photos built the basis for the interviews. The *interviews with parents* (n=71) were guided in the form of semi-structured interviews based on topic guides (Scheibelhofer, 2008; Witzel, 2000), covering the main topics and research questions of the study. At least one parent was interviewed; in sum 71 parents could be integrated into the sample. All interviews were transcribed and electronically stored with atlas.ti, which was also the software for analysis. The data were analyzed at a single-case level. First, open codes were created out of the data (open coding based on intensive analysis of several interviews); additionally, codes from the theoretical background were added (theoretical coding).

The sampling approach was guided by a comparative design. We conducted the study in an urban and a rural area with substantial differences in several

aspects: Vienna, Austria's capital, and southern Burgenland[2], the most Eastern Austrian province. Both research areas differ with respect to (socio-) economic data[3] and family statistics[4]: Vienna, Austria's capital, has high infrastructural standards, a high divorce rate and high share of single parent families and reconstituted families. On the contrary, Burgenland represents a socioeconomically disadvantaged area with low divorce rates and traditional family structures.

The sample includes a comprehensive data pool with various characteristics: families living in urban and rural regions, in different family forms and with different social backgrounds and living conditions. An overview is shown in table 1.

Table 1: Families and interview partners

		Total	**Vienna**	**Bgld**
Individuals	*Children (m/f)*	**50 (20/30)**	19 (8/11)	31 (12/19)
	Parents (m/f)	**71 (25/46)**	29 (11/18)	42 (14/28)
	Total	**121**	48	73
Families	*Number*	**50**	19	31
Family structure	*Nuclear families*	**28**	9	19
	Single parent families	**9**	4	5
	Reconstituted families	**11**	6	5
	Families of SOS Children's Village	**2**	0	2

Bgld: Burgenland. m/f: male/female.

Results

The representative studies referred to in the previous sections give a good insight into the distribution of participation in families. They do not answer the question though, in which way participation happens and how it is constructed. To

---

[2] The Burgenland was awarded objective 1 status (from 1995 to 2006), which is only applicable for areas with a GDP per capita which is less than 75% of the EU average. At present, the Burgenland is included into the European Union „Phasing out" programme.

[3] The economic backgrounds of both areas differ considerably: While Vienna has high infrastructural standards, high job availability and income levels due to a relatively prosperous labour market situation, the Burgenland represents an economically and infrastructurally disadvantaged area and was therefore awarded objective 1 status by the European Union for two times. A third of the labor force (34.1%) commute to other Austrian provinces, as the chances to find a job near the place of residence is remarkably low.

[4] Both research areas differentiate with regard to family data. While Vienna shares the highest divorce rate in Austria (54%), the Burgenland has one of the lowest (43%) (national average: 46%) (Statistics Austria, 2010a). Single parent families are more common in Vienna than in Burgenland: Their share is highest in Vienna with 14%, and considerably lower in Burgenland with 9% (national average: 12.5%) (Statistics Austria 2010b: 72). Reconstituted families (stepfamilies) have the highest share in Vienna (11%), and the lowest share (Austrian-wide) in Burgenland (9%) (national average: 9.6%) (Statistics Austria 2010b).

put it shortly: they do not answer what participation means for the involved children and their parents and how participation is perceived by them. It is our intention to contribute to an answer to this question. In the following section, we present some results from the study that show how children and their parents perceive and experience participation in families. Data will be presented in a rather descriptive, illustrative style. A second aim of our qualitative procedure is to understand participation of children in the family as a case of general decision structures in small groups where family can be regarded as one example. In this way, the data are generalized and theory is built in the conclusion part of our paper. Children distinguish different areas and forms of participation, and so do their parents. These areas of participation will be described in the following section. We first present the results from the children's perspective and will then concentrate on the parents' points of view.

Participation as perceived by children aged 10

Areas of participation

We will first concentrate on the issues raised by the children. From their point of view, they were allowed and able to participate in private, personal issues, like clothing, hairstyle, nursery furniture as well as leisure and weekend activities, courses they wanted to attend and parent-child activities. Also in fields that are of concern for the whole family, children were asked for their opinion. These included the choice of school or visiting schedules in families with divorced parents.

In contrast to these areas, there were other fields, where the interviewed children described themselves as less competent or interested in. For example, parental separation, its outcomes and consequences was a field they left basically to their parents. A less emotionally strained field is for instance the purchase of large consumer goods like the family car, where children also showed less interest to participate.

Although children appreciate to have a say within their family, some of them feel overburdened with decision-making processes. Some children described situations in everyday life where they felt overstrained on common activities: *"I can not decide. In cases like, mom and dad want to go to the mountains. May I come with them or not? I had time for two days to think about it, but I did not know it till then."* (Girl, Family 14, Burgenland)

One boy explained how he was asked concerning the school he should inscribe: *"So, when we want to decide, when it concerns myself, I meet them and I am in great demand – for instance, which school, then I decide a lot, what and how I want it. As a matter of fact, actually mum and dad only support me."* (Boy, Family 16, Vienna)

Participation in decisions concerning holidays was less important to the children in the rural research area than in the urban area. Looking deeper, it might be less

a regional difference, but rather a matter of experience. If parents made decisions without asking their children and then heard complaints or had to deal with dissatisfaction during the holidays, next time they were more willing to let their children participate. On the other hand, sometimes there was no interest from the children: *"Well, I do not interfere. Mom and dad take the decision, I might leaf through the catalogue and go through it with them, but nothing else. I don't care."* (Girl, Family 14, Burgenland)

In the urban area, the interviewed children underlined their right to have a say regarding weekend activities and holiday activities. Children did not express any financial concerns regarding spare time activities of their families. Children from migrant families represent a special group in this respect, as from their point of view there was not much of a discussion about the holidays: they were usually visiting their extended family abroad, as one boy states: *"We are not going on holiday frequently, I mean, during summer vacation. We in any case go to Bosnia, Germany, Croatia, everywhere family."* (Boy, Family 24, Burgenland)

Concerning leisure activities, children could choose to a large extent in which kind of activity they wanted to take part. The decision was influenced by the wishes of their friends, but also by the interests and hobbies of their parents. Activities requiring that children are brought somewhere or picked up by their parents were subject of a negotiation process. Children perceived that parents appreciated independence of the child.

Participation sometimes worked in a form of choice. As a girl said when buying a school bag and she could only decide about the colour, but not about the model: "*Mom always says three things, and then I can choose which one I like most."* (Girl, Family 25, Burgenland)

From the perspective of a child, the number of siblings is important. The more siblings the interviewed children had, the more difficult the decision process was. Parents sometimes tried to structure it, as a girl complained: *"Mom always says: from the smallest to the tallest – then I always have to wait."* (Girl, Family 15, Burgenland). Financial restrictions in larger families had a negative impact on the participation of children. If there were more children, the parents gave them fewer rights to participate in their personal matters, for instance when buying clothes.

Parental roles as perceived by their children

The children in our study described decision making in their families as somehow ritualized, implemented on existing family structures like common meals or more artificially composed regular family meetings. Families used ranking by points, majority votes or discussion groups to come to decisions. The interviewed children mainly accepted these procedures and found themselves treated as equal partners. But sometimes the roles parents ascribed to their children were not guided by principles of equal participation opportunities; votes could be

weighted, as one boy explained: *"So, it always runs this way: I have half a vote, my mother and my stepfather have an entire vote. Except on my birthday, then I have two votes."* (Boy, Family 7, Vienna).

Children did not express bad feelings in the interview when they had no equal voice or when parents did not feel tied to the results of a decision. There might be an interrelation with the field of negotiation. Children for instance accepted work as an excuse. *"So, we say he is working only a little time more, but then it's getting longer and it is too late to go out."* (Girl, Family 14, Vienna).

There was a remarkable difference between the urban and rural research area with regard to children's perception of parental roles. Children very well perceived who from their parents had more power to decide. Often when there was no decision, children found power equally distributed, but they also realized a difference in different areas. Fathers decided mainly on buying technical equipment, mothers more on the household chores. In migrant families, as well as in the rural research area, fathers had more power of decision making than mothers. In migrant families, the fathers sometimes decided on issues concerning the children hierarchically, by discussing the topic with the mother who then went into further negotiation with the child. In the rural research area, usually fathers finally decided in cases of conflict. In general, the children perceived them as being more authoritarian than in urban areas. This was especially valid for commuting fathers who spend less time with their family than those present during the week. They show impatience, as one girl recognized: *"So, first my brother and I have to be quiet, because if we say something, my father shouts immediately 'be quiet'… well then we are quiet, dad lets mother and us make proposals, what we want to do."* (Girl, Family 18, Burgenland)

But from the views of their children, fathers did not at all have a prominent position within their families in all cases. In both research areas, children perceived their fathers as being to a certain extent marginalized in the decision-making processes. This was especially true for fathers who were commuting or found little time for the family for other reasons (mostly work). Then mothers made all relevant arrangements with the child. But children also noticed that fathers sometimes excluded themselves: *"Yes, our dad, then he always arses around, then he leaves the room and goes outside to the garden. And then, it's always my mom and I who decide, when he leaves."* (Girl, Family 5, Burgenland).

One important issue observed carefully by the interviewed children was their parent's professional life and working hours. Children complained if fathers (mainly them) had long working hours or extended their business in working at home. Fathers on the other hand who were with the children in their leisure time were described as making compromises and being child-centered.

If children were excluded from the decision-making process although they felt competent on the issue raised, they refused communication, retreated to their

room or denied participation on the decision taken. This was often emotional. *"I go to my room, make fancy things, shout loud, turn the radio on highest volume and play Nintendo DS."* (girl, family 30, Burgenland). Their complaints sometimes succeeded: *"So, when dad says something I do not like, then I say 'I don't go with you, then I stay at home.' But then we usually go to a different place."* (Girl, Family 14, Burgenland).

If children were not involved in issues they feel definitely they should be, like clothing, then they reacted with a boycott: they did not wear the clothes. Participating in household chores was something the interviewed children disliked, and this often caused conflict in the family. Cleaning the room and filling the dishwasher was only done when parents forced them or expressed hard wish. *"And what I find corny is when I have to help at home, fill the dishwasher and the like. But she (the mother) does not help me in cleaning up my room."* (Girl, Family 14, Vienna).

We obtained a variety of answers when children were asked what they *disliked* in their families, especially of their parents. Children were annoyed when they thought other children were allowed to participate to a larger extent. They also felt not at all pleased with some habits of their parents, mainly smoking, and especially smoking of mothers. Children usually worried about their parents' health and did not succeed with their trials to motivate parents to stop smoking. The children regarded their worries as general concerns about their parent's health and did feel dismissed and not taken seriously by their parents. Drinking alcohol and having stress were also unhealthy behaviors definitely noticed by the children and seen as a consequence of private or occupational stress. We heard complaints that fathers engaged in television or computer activities too much. Girls (mainly from migrant families) criticized that fathers did not engage at all (or only to a very little extent) with household chores.

Do different family forms matter in the opinion of the children?

One matter of interest was the perception of participation processes in different family forms. The children supposed that different family forms provide

different chances of participation for children. Children living in nuclear families presumed that children in single parent families had less scope in decision-making than those in other families, as there was only one parent present at a time, which might reduce options: *"Sometimes in our family one parent says 'I go shopping' and the other says 'I don't know, I go somewhere else' and that's very comfortable, because if I don't want to go shopping, I can come with the other parent. But when there is only one parent, then I have to go shopping, and this is exactly what I do not like."* (Girl, Family 4, Vienna).

In general, the interviewed children supposed that children who face transition processes in their families were especially endangered of having limited parti-

cipation rights. In contrast to this, the children with divorced parents described their influence on custody and visitation regulations differently, and depending to a large extent on the coparental relationship. If the post-divorce coparental relationship was satisfactory, the children had wide-ranging possibilities of participation. They were involved in the question where they mainly wanted to live, how and in which way they preferred to arrange contacts with the non-custodial parent. Nevertheless, these children sometimes felt stressed, as judgments sometimes influenced their participation rights negatively and were not flexible enough in order to allow for adequate participation of children in everyday-life.

When the divorced parents had a tense relationship, often characterized by severe communication problems and gate-keeping processes, this did not allow for children's participation in decisions. As the parents could in many cases not find a common decision on everyday-life issues like children's leisure or sport activities, and decision processes were long and complex, children's participation seemed difficult. On the other hand, children in such families were often confronted with the necessity to participate in decisions on elementary issues like custody arrangements. In these cases, children felt overburdened to decide with whom of their parents they mainly wanted to live and how often they wanted to meet the non-custodial parent, as this caused loyalty conflicts. A boy who lived with his father described one situation: *"Well, I see her (the mother) relatively seldom, I mean it is too seldom. Sometimes it happens, when I stay with my mum and my dad returns from work earlier, and then I am with mom, then on the other hand I can not be together so long with my dad. Because, then I am with my mom, and during this time, I cannot be with my dad."* (Boy, Family 19, Vienna)

Grandparents played a central role. Especially in the rural area children spent a lot of time with them, and they were considered as being important family members. During the week and also at weekends, children spent long periods of time with their grandparents. The children appreciated that the grandparents responded to their wishes and also satisfied material desires. They experienced a high level of participation and often could decide autonomously on common activities or on the dishes that were prepared.

Children's participation as perceived by parents

Our data showed that the extent of children's participation in their families was mainly dependent on their parents' attitudes. The sample comprised basically two types of parents with regard to children's participation in the family: rather permissive and rather restrictive parents. Both types could be found in both research areas, although there were more permissive parents in the urban region. It has to be considered that transition between both types is smooth; there are no sharp boundaries.

Permissive parents in our study regarded children's participation in family decision processes as a central value and did concede a lot of freedom in decision-making to their children. They regarded children as self-reliant subjects, able to make decisions. *"One says that children can not decide, because they are too small. But I do not hold this opinion; that he (the son) is too small. (…) They (the children) definitely know what they want, and why should parents work against it."* (Mother, Family 19, Vienna). One mother described how her daughter structured decisions on the family's leisure time planning: *"She can do whatever she wants to do. Yes, being a good mom, I do what she wants. And she sets very strict guidelines, I mean, I want this, I want that, I want this, I want that – and it will be done."* (Mother, Family 6, Vienna). Nevertheless, children's participation possibilities were restricted in other areas, for example regarding holidays, *"My husband and I decide about where to go on holidays. Of course, always awfully thinking of her (the daughter), thinking of what she would find good, because otherwise we don't have a good time as well."* (Mother, Family 6, Vienna). Parents of this type were often arguing and trying to put the arguments in a way their child could understand it, as they did not make this experience during their own childhood, but were confronted with their parents' authoritarian decisions.

From the viewpoint of rather restrictive parents, children should be allowed to participate in family decisions, but only in some areas and to a certain extent. We found this type often in the rural research area. Those parents distinguished between children's personal areas, where parents might not interfere, and issues with wide-reaching consequences that were in the parents' responsibility (e.g. post-divorce custodial arrangements or choice of school). They clarified the fields of participation as well as the mode. For instance, these parents accepted full participation in furniture of the nursery, partly in questions of holidays and none in changing of the home. Sometimes they asked children for their opinion, but children could not participate in the sense that they were actively involved in the decision. *"He (the son) sees himself as a partner and not as a child, and then I say sometimes, this is nearly too much of intervention."* (Father, Family 29, Burgenland). Those parents think that too much participation might overburden their child. They therefore set borders and limitations and let the children take their choice within those limits. Regarding money or leisure activity issues, this is a not only a participatory, but also a financial and organizational issue. One mother illustrated how they proceeded pedagogically and let the child take a multiple choice: *"My husband and I, we design the process often in the way that we clarify the issue among us, to make it not too difficult for her (the daughter). We know the factors which are important for her very well, so that she feels happy and this was always in the foreground, for all the years."* (Mother, Family 14, Burgenland).

As these types are situated along a continuum, there are numerous things that the parents in our study had in common. Almost all of them knew the concept of Children's Rights and were aware that their children learned about this topic at

school. Children's rights were also an issue in everyday communication, for example regarding little household tasks parents wanted their children to carry out, and children referred to the interdiction of child labor, as formulated in the UN Convention. This might lead to resignation: *"So many rights, he said. Regarding the duties, no idea, they disappear. Well, sometimes as a parent I have the feeling, that we actually have nothing to say, it's the children who have the say."* (Mother, Family 19, Vienna).

One point of reference is the past, the experiences the parents made during their childhood: *"Children are more responsible and mature nowadays. Today you can contradict your father. What we have faced, well, my father said, 'You do not stand up before you have eaten up'. Now try this today, it does not work any more."* (Father, Family 5, Burgenland.) Parents expressed their wish for a child-adequate communication on children's rights at school. Children should be strengthened in the awareness of possibilities for participation, but this should always be connected to everyday life within the family.

Parents and children faced that decisions were taken in ritualized and institutionalized ways. This took place during common meals, special family meetings or other occasions. Often family decisions were experienced as prone to conflict, time consuming and a complicated power play, where the children were forcing their parents hardly. If a child wanted to accomplish something, parents perceived that children included other family members like older siblings or grandparents: *"And if you say 'no, you don't get it' then she confronts you with 'well, if daddy doesn't buy it, then I ask grandma.'"* (Father, Family 5, Burgenland).

Also from the view of parents there were gender specific fields of decision-making: the father was in most families responsible for technical equipment, the mother for school and household issues. Gender differences appeared also in personal issues like clothing. Girls took responsibility for their clothes much more than boys who were more willing to accept their mother's choice. Migrant families were different in our sample. In most cases, the father had the power of decision in all matters, children had almost no participation power.

Families are embedded in surroundings, and decision-making processes are influenced by the social milieu they are living in. A father reported that his son playing soccer on weekends caused a lot of organizational problems within the family. When he complained to another mother, saying that soccer playing on weekend disturbed him, his needs for recreation and their common family life, he got rebuffed and was told that he simply had to do this for his son.

Families with a commuting parent (mostly the father) were confronted with specific challenges. During the week, when the father was not at home, mother and child decided, on weekends, the father had to be involved, and participation concentrated more on family affairs. This situation might cause conflicts between the parents as well as between father and children. *"Weekend is different und that*

is difficult for me too, because I often think he believes that we make Halli galli during the week. But it works. It's often funny. Well, for the kids it is difficult too. At the weekend, daddy commands too." (Mother, Family 30, Burgenland)

Regarding children's participation in different family forms, parents did not observe differences at first sight, but judged rather the parental educational style as influential. Looking deeper into the texts of the interviews, there are contradictions. Parents from nuclear families attributed different participatory power to children in single parent families or in stepfamilies. In single-parent families, they considered children to have more participatory power, as they partly had to take also the role of the partner. In contrast to that, in stepfamilies it was assumed that decisions were taken without participation of the children due to the more complex family system. Parents from stepfamilies told that they negotiated decisions with the other biological parent if there were friendly relations. In more tense situations of coparental relationship, children's participation was more difficult.

Single parents themselves reported a high degree of participation for their child; they were regarded near to the role of a friend or partner. If single parents had a "living apart together" relation, they did not include their new partner in decisions concerning the child, even if he or she took over parental tasks from time to time. Mirror inverted, single parents saw less participatory power for children in nuclear families. They held the opinion that the father played the most important role in decision making in these families.

Grandparents were regarded as an important intervening factor also by the parents. When they had intense contact with the children, they tended to involve themselves in decision finding processes within the family, which might lead to conflicts between grandparents and parents.

Conclusion: What does this mean?

Summing up the results, we found that children presented themselves at first sight deeply involved into decision finding processes in their families – even if this was limited. They presented themselves as active participants in family negotiations and had a pronounced consciousness of children's rights, especially those concerning participation. The implementation though in everyday family life seemed not so easy. When elaborating on issues of family participation in depth in the interviews, most children reported areas of life and situations where they could hardly participate and gave the impression that they did not share equal positions and participatory power with their parents.

Differences between social strata and rural and urban areas were detected. Specific family forms (single parents, step parents) and situations (migrants) faced specific problems and were perceived in specific ways. In the migrant

families in our sample, fathers had the dominant position. In single parent families the participatory power of the children seemed to be higher than in nuclear or stepfamilies. Much depended on the coparental relationship of the divorced parents, also when one of them was remarried.

In general, children seem to have more or less elaborated possibilities to participate in today's families. Our results show how this works in different contexts and how individual wishes to participate have different chances to materialize in different families. Nearly in all families in our study, children were allowed to decide on personal issues like clothing or furnishing their room (as long as financial boundaries are considered). It stays unclear however, how fields like participation in the choice of school are of concern. Children did not report very much on it, they were concerned mainly with their family life and leisure activities. So what to do besides school, which hobbies, sports and activities children undertake, is a matter of negotiation in most of the families, though not in all.

We can see a deep influence of the social frame in which the family is embedded. The most obvious group were the migrant families with a dominant patriarchal regime. Those families came mostly from the southern part of Europe and showed a traditional role distribution within the family – be it from an orthodox Christian background or Islamic origin.

This indicates that independently from their developmental stage, children can participate in different ways and to different extents. Children's participation seems to be very much a matter of social construction. It depends on the social values and norms the families share. These are not independent from common general societal norms and from the social surroundings of a family.

Although all forms of participation are also a matter of communication, the procedures are different. Participatory communication is often ritualized and structured in family events, meaning that the actors – parents and children – define a communicative situation as a participatory one. Rituals are family events like common meals, but also special meetings with the intention of participation ("family conference" situations). This is on the level of intended, manifest communication. We cannot say from our study how informal chats, communication off stage, little remarks on the hop, phrases in general communication or non-verbal communication works. We would suppose that informal communication might have a special effect. That could be an issue of further studies.

There are different ways of participation: intense discussion and exchange of arguments between children and parents, but also multiple choice possibilities provided by the parents, or direct consultation of children. Participation does not equal participation. Obviously those three patterns show different involvement of the ideas and constructions of the child. This would mean that the general question of children's participation has to be treated carefully. A positive answer could cover a wide range from being consulted to being actively involved. Also children

who are accustomed to active involvement might neglect that they are only consulted in certain issues of participation, while children usually not participating will answer positively on the same issue. Participation means different things to different people.

Furthermore, different degrees of participation with children have to be considered. This is not only a matter of competence, but also a matter of social environment and different sets of norms. Traditional norms concerning the roles of father and mother have an influence. The more democratic and equal they are between men and women, the more they are between parents and children. Secondly, there are also norms which are more influenced by the education, the social strata and the living place of the family. It might be assumed that there are specific visions of family within the different families, which construct a specific climate of participation. And thirdly, the areas of participation are influenced by the outside world (friends, colleagues, neighbors). They react to reported cases of family participation and strengthen or weaken participatory commitment of the parents.

What we can say from our research is that the degree of anticipated competence matters, from the side of the children as well as from the side of parents. There are two dimensions in competence besides a developmental stage: one is knowledge, the other one is relevance to one's life world. In everyday action these two coincide. The concept of life-world would allow us to explain more precisely why children find themselves able to participate or not. They are experts for their life-worlds, and much more so than their parents. Thus they are seen as competent in furnishing their rooms or buying clothes. They are experts of their own interests and thus can decide on issues like which kind of sports and leisure activities they want to do. But life-worlds of children overlap with life-worlds of parents very broadly. Parents have to finance and to a high extent also to coordinate the activities of their children. Our results show that the less the life-worlds of the parents are affected, the higher is the degree of participation that can be allowed for children. Introducing a concept like this would help us to explain why for example furnishing of children's rooms is regarded as a matter of participation in several families and not in others.

References

Alderson, P., and Morrow, V. (2004). *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children and Young People*, Barnardos, Essex.

Alt, C., Teubner, M., and Winkelhofer, U. (2005). Partizipation in Familie und Schule – Übungsfeld der Demokratie*, Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 41, pp. 24-31.

BMSGK (Bundesministerium für Soziale Sicherheit, Generationen und Konsumentenschutz) (2004). *Nichts für uns – ohne uns! Ergebnisse einer Kinder- und Jugendbefragung im Auftrag des Bundesministeriums für Soziale Sicherheit, Generationen und Konsumentenschutz*, BSMGK, Vienna.

Bucher, A. A. (2001). *Was Kinder glücklich macht. Historische, psychologische und empirische Annäherungen an Kindheitsglück*, Juventa, Weinheim and München.

Christensen, P., and James, A. (2008). *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, Falmer Press, London and New York.

Ecarius, J. (2007). Familienerziehung, in Ecarius, J. (coord.), *Handbuch Familie*. VS Verlag, Wiesbaden, pp. 137- 156.

Edwards, R. and Alldred, P. (1999). Children and Young People's Views of Social Research, *Childhood*, vol. 6, pp. 261-281.

Fatke, R., and Schneider, H. (2005). *Kinder und Jugendpartizipation in Deutschland*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh.

Fraser, S., Lewis, V., Kellett, M., and Robinson, C. (2004). *Doing research with children and young people*, Sage, London.

Greig, A., Taylor J., abd MacKay, T. (2007). Doing research with children, Sage, Los Angeles.

Grover, S. (2004). Why won't they listen to us? On giving power and voice to children participating in social research, *Childhood*, vol. 11, pp. 81-93.

Hill, M. (1997). Participatory research with children, *Child and Family Social Work*, vol. 2, pp. 171-183.

Hill, M. (2006). Children's Voices on Ways of Having a Voive: Children's and young people's perspectives on methods used in research and consultation, *Childhood*, vol. 13, pp. 69-89.

Hill, M.; Davis, J., Prout, A., and Tisdall, K. (2004). Moving the Participation Agenda Forward, *Children & Society*, vol. 18, pp. 77-96.

Hurrelmann, K., and Bründel, H. (2003). *Einführung in die Kindheitsforschung*, Beltz, Weinheim, Basel.

Hurrelmann, K., and Andresen, S. (2010). *Kinder in Deutschland 2010. 2. World Vision Kinderstudie*, Fischer, Frankfurt.

James, A. and Prout, A. (1997). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Studiy of Childhood,* Falmer Press, London.

James, A., Jenks, C., and Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Jaun, T. (2001). *Angst vor Kindern? Kinderpartizipation und Wege dazu*, Schulverlag plus, Luzern.

Knauer, R., and Sturzenhecker, B. (2005). Partizipation im Jugendalter, in Hafeneger, B., Jansen, M. M., and Niebling T. (coord.), *Kinder- und Jugendpartizipation. Im Spannungsfeld von Interessen und Akteuren*. Budrich, Opladen, pp. 63-93.

Kränzl-Nagl, R., Beham, M., Bergmair, F., Bohonnek, A., and Melvyn, P. (2006). *Zählen Kinder? Zeitverwendung von Eltern mit Schulkindern. Nationale und internationale Befunde*, Endbericht. Vienna: European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research.

Krappmann, L. (2003). Kompetenzförderung im Kindesalter, Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte, pp. 14-19.

Kromer, I., and Hatwagner, K. (2005). *Mobilkom Austria Freizeitstudie 2005: Netzwerkkids im Spannungsfeld zwischen Schule, Freizeit und Jobs der Eltern. Endbericht der quantitativen Befragung von 10- bis 16-jährigen Kids in Österreich*, Wien: Österreichisches Institut für Jugendforschung (ÖIJ).

Kromer, I.; Schadauer, E. (2004). *Kinder reden mit! Ein qualitatives Forschungsprojekt über Kinder und Partizipation in Südtirol*, Wien: Österreichisches Institut für Jugendforschung (ÖIF).

Percy-Smith, B., and Nigel, T. (coord.) (2010). *A Handbook of Children's and Young People's Participation. Perspectives from Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London.

Powell, M. A., and Smith, A. B. (2009). Children's Participation Rights in Research, *Childhood*, vol. 16, pp. 124-142.

Prout, A., and Hallett, C. (2003). Introduction, in Hallett C., Prout, A. (coord.), *Hearing the Voices of Children: Social Policy for a New Century*, Routledge, London, pp. 1-8.

Qvortrup, J. M., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G., and Wintersberger, H. (1994). *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, Avebury Press, Aldershot.

Qvortrup, J., Corsaro, W. A., and Honig, M.-S. (2009). *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke.

Scheibelhofer, E. (2008). Combining narration-based interviews with topical interviews: Methodological reflections on research practices, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, vol. 11, pp. 403-416.

Schleuninger, S. (1999): Kinder reden mit. 10 Jahre Konvention über die Rechte des Kindes, Magazin der UNICEF Schweiz, 3/1999. http:// URL:http://assets.unicef.ch/downloads/Magazin_9903_horizons_Kinderrechte_1.pdf

Schneekloth, U., and Leven, I. (2007). Familie als Zentrum: nicht für alle gleich verlässlich, in Hurrelmann, K., Andresen, S. (coord.), *Kinder in Deutschland 2007*. 1. World Vision Kinderstudie. Fischer, Frankfurt, pp. 65-109.

Smart, C., Neale, B., and Wade, A. (2001). *The Changing Experience of Childhood. Families and Divorce*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Stafford, A., Laybourn, A., Hill, M., and Walker, M. (2003). 'Having a say': children and young people talk about consultation, *Children & Society*, vol. 17, pp. 361-373.

Sturzbecher, D., and Hess, M. (2005). Partizipation im Kindesalter, in: Hafeneger, B., Jansen, M. M., and Niebling, T. (coord.), *Kinder- und Jugendpartizipation. Im Spannungsfeld von Interessen und Akteuren*. Barbara Budrich Verlad, Opladen, pp. 41-62.

UNICEF (2002). *Young Voices. Opinion Survey of Children and Young People in Europe and Central Asia*, Geneva: UNICEF

UNICEF (2007). *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries. A comprehensive assessment of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations*, Report Card 7. Florence: Innocenti Research Centre.

Witzel, A. (2000). Das problemzentrierte Interview, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 1, (1). Quelle: http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-00/1-00witzel-.d.htm, 17.09.2009.