

Exploring Social Policies as “Potential Space” for New Gender Arrangements: The Case of Boys and Girls Living in French and German Deprived Neighborhoods

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This paper is based on a PhD research project focusing on gender dynamics between boys and girls, descendants of migrants, living in two deprived neighborhoods, one in France and one in Germany. We are going to discuss how certain social policies implemented in those suburbs can be considered as a “potential space” (King, 2002) for the adolescents and parents living there, because they can trigger new perspectives on gender relations which might otherwise remain unquestioned and unresolved.

Presently, gender relations between boys and girls living in deprived neighborhoods have been a main concern in the French and German public discourses. In both countries, that debate has been strongly related to the topics of immigration and integration and a clear tendency towards the “orientalization” (Saïd, 1978, 2003) of the migrants and their children can be identified. Whereas in France it became a debate on “Arabs” (Guenif-Souilamas, 2004), in Germany “the other” has been embedded by migrants from Turkey and their descendants (Lutz, 1991). But that construction of “images of the other” affects differently boys and girls. If the girls are seen as victims of the Muslim tradition carried out by their parents and brothers, the boys are accused of being trapped in an authoritarian patriarchy.

These “images of the other” are based on fixed ideas on gender relations and sexuality between boys and girls with migrant backgrounds and low economic status. And they have concrete effects on these adolescents’ everyday life. Indeed, we can see that it triggers competition between boys and girls, especially concerning social mobility and recognition strategies. And, as we observed, that competition is especially strong in families when brothers and sisters are both adolescents with the approximate same age.

In that context, what resources could be mobilized in order to discuss and prevent conflicts between boys and girls? In the two neighborhoods studied, innovative social policies have been implemented to trigger the inhabitants’ participation in the neighborhood’s everyday life and to make adolescents travel, talk to each other and discover new activities. Observations show that these new spaces of dialogue and activities allow boys and girls for different kinds of relationships, for getting to know oneself and others in new ways, and to challenge the gender order they have been socialized to (Clair, 2005). My impression is that trips abroad, access to social milieus that are different from

what the adolescents know in their everyday life, enable them to encounter new social arrangements and do biographical work (Schutze, 1981). That experience is even more important since the adolescents belong to a social minority and are currently threatened by stereotypes in their own country. Then, new encounters can provide to them a chance for non-stereotypical learning and for being recognized in non-stereotypical ways. Sometimes, transformative processes occur. For instance, after a trip to Canada, a group of boys and girls told me that this trip made it possible for them to finally be seen by others as complex individuals and not only as “problematic youths”. This experience triggered their self-esteem and made them reflexive about their relationships with each other.

To conclude, we can say that under favorable conditions, specific social policies that allow boys and girls to socialize together and make contrastive experiences can be seen as an opportunity for them to try to build new gender arrangements in the intimate sphere.

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