

# Parental Identity, Governmentality and Retroactive Empowerment: Towards a Democratic School Space

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In the paper I present a way of theorizing parent identity work using the analytic lens of governmentality. Among the revisited biographical narratives of the parents, many contain unifications directly pertaining to the governmental character of their learning experiences. Based on the contents of these texts, one could say that governmental learning leads the subject to the internalization of externally executed formative practices. In other words, the conduct of conduct (one of the dimensions of Foucauldian governmentality) appears to be the condition of the internalization of the external, and, thus, of personal identity. In light of this study, on the one hand, parental identity can be perceived as a product of permanent governing by various pacts/partnerships in the “pedagogised society” but, on the other, the governmental character of educational experiences empower parents. I argue that parents need empowerment and to know themselves as parents. Thus, they can become active partners in the democratically governed space of the school. The study discovers the significance of retroactivity in the construction of parental identity and shows the ways through which schools and teachers can use it in their democratic co-operation with parents.

*Keywords:* parental identity, learning, governmentality, retroactive empowerment, democracy.

## Introduction

While addressing the problem regarding the role of governmentality in parental identity work, the focus is on both educational and democratic issues in the context of identity formation. To study this problem, I concentrate on the results of my previous empirical material concerning the construction of parental identity (Mendel, 2013; Mendel, 2016). The research took place in Poland and the historical context in which the data was collected was after the 1989 political upheaval that initiated the post-socialist, democratic order.

I am using this material in a new perspective that engages Foucauldian notions of power. Power is understood here as government, which concerns political issues, but also as self-control and the guidance of children (Foucault, 1991). These aspects of power, play significant roles in parents’ self-creation (Dahlstedt, 2009; Popkewitz, 2002), and, therefore, parental identity is analysed here

through the lenses of the educational and political contexts of their self-governance.

Thus, the following text joins the engagement of educational and school issues in democracy and governmentality studies today (e.g., Biesta, 2010; Christie, 2006; Peters et al. 2009), especially with regard to the phenomenon of “the totally pedagogised society,” in which education, especially learning processes and directives such as “Lifelong Learning,” influences every dimension of social life and is able to secure the *status quo* or to establish and productively maintain new socio-economic formats, etc. (Ball, 2009). The significant context here is that of governing parents, through which they become involved in the schools’ exercise of disciplinary power. The political directive of Lifelong Learning is one of the tools serving this area (Ball, 2009; Borg & Mayo, 2004; Mendel, 2016; Simons & Masschelein, 2008).

The ways of governing parents, for instance, are explicitly represented in studies of parent involvement and other “pacts/partnerships” (Popkewitz, 2002). The school space “speaks” and indicates parents’ spots (Mendel, 2003). The

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typical space that schools establish for parental involvement structures parents allowing them to do or not to do something, limiting their activities and giving or not giving them some advantages in accordance with class distinctions (Ranson, Martin, and Vincent, 2004, p. 272) and other dimensions of difference, such as race, ethnicity, gender, immigrant status, etc. (Dahlstedt, 2009; Vincent, 2000).

There are also models such as "good parent(s)" and "good parenting" that strongly influence the governing of the parents by the society in which they act, including schools (Crozier, 1998). Teachers, educated as professional experts on family-school-community partnerships, more or less consciously implant their systems of norms and values in parents and expect to represent them collectively according to their vision of the ideal parent (see also Mendel, 2001).

The forms of control and parental governmentality are explicitly articulated in teacher-parent cooperation, especially when the involvement of immigrant parents means cultural transformation and adaptation to an "imagined" norm, such as the "Swedish norm" in the case described by Magnus Dahlstedt (2009, p. 201). Thus, parental governmentality is usually meant as being distant from a democratic sense of social life. However, while taking the work of parent identity into consideration and using it as an analytic perspective, one can see parental governmentality as shaping more democratic landscapes, including in the life of schools and teacher-parent cooperation. This is the general argument of my study discussed below.

### Theoretical Framework

It is apparent that, while speaking of their lives, people "unify" their memories and images of the past and make them coherent (see also Demetrio, 2000). On the one hand, biographical narrators can thus govern their lives while "keeping them in hand," within the realm of a life-story. On the other hand, their narratives tell stories of the external government of their narrators. Such interdependencies can be perceived in the perspective of Foucauldian governmentality, especially of the notion of "the conduct of conduct" (Foucault 1983; 1988). Studies of governmentality often comment "on the ways in which governing through the conduct of conduct implies a certain relationship between the government of others and the government of self in the continuous practice in which subject

becomes governable" (Bang Lindegaard, 2016, p. 99). This is what I am interested in in the study, with regards parental learning as a way of identity formation.

Thomas Lemke rightly notes that "government" (a term discussed not only in political tracts, but also in philosophical, religious, medical, and pedagogical texts), in addition to management by the state or administration, also signifies problems of self-control, guidance for the family and children, management of the household, directing the soul, etc. (2000, p. 2). As he says, "For this reason, Foucault defines government as conduct, or, more precisely, as 'the conduct of conduct' and thus as a term which ranges from 'governing the self' to 'governing others'" (Lemke, 2000, p. 2).

"Conduct of conduct" practices are the part of governmental technologies about which Foucault writes:

we must distinguish the relationships of power as strategic games between liberties – strategic games that result in the fact that some people try to determine the conduct of others – and the states of domination, which are what we ordinarily call power. And, between the two, between the games of power and the states of domination, you have governmental technologies. (Foucault, 1988, p. 19)

In the essay "How is Power Exercised?" Foucault explicitly describes the "conduct of conduct" as "a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action" (1983, p. 220). As Magnus Dahlstedt clearly demonstrates in his study on "immigrant parents" involved in Swedish schools via parental governmentality, because of this Foucauldian notion we are able to grasp the ongoing shifts in power in external and internal politics, e.g., from a state-centered regime to a more individual-centered regime in Sweden (2009, p. 202). Thus, the position of the subject in conduct of conduct practices is changeable and oscillating, rather than in binary oppositions.

There are two other notions that permit Foucault to describe such a composed position of the subject in the conduct of conduct practices, namely "subjectification" and "subjectivation." The first refers to the ways that others are governed, whereas the second pertains to the relation of the person to him/herself – "to the multiple ways in which a self can be fashioned or constructed on the basis of what one takes to be the truth" (Bang Lindegaard, 2016, p. 99).

Based on the results of research work engaged in the conduct of conduct with the notions of subjectification and subjectivation, one could say that the active conduct of conduct appears to be the condition of the internalization of external forces, and, thus, of personal identity (see e.g. McIlvenny et al., 2016; Bang Lindegaard, 2016). This is my key theoretical assumption. As I will present below more precisely in some of the methodological points, this study focuses on the educational experiences of parents, and, thus, this assumption is understood in the light of parental learning. To analyze how, in their life-based narratives about educational experiences, parents internalize external forces, such as management by transforming state governments or schools and teachers in their transition to a democratic future, is a fascinating task, the realization of which can be productive for contemporary studies of parental identity. Undoubtedly, it is such in my country (Poland), because arguably, collective identity described in individual narratives is always local, contextually political, social, and cultural.

### **Methodological points**

In my analysis, I focus on educational experiences that can be observed in biographical narratives about parents' individual learning. For this purpose, I revisit empirical material gathered in two previous projects (Mendel, 2013; Mendel, 2016). One set of material regards parental identity constructed in the transition from being a pupil in the former political system to being the parent of a pupil in the new reality following the 1989 Polish upheaval (Mendel, 2013). The other set refers to parental identity formations created by parents' life-long learning and not only those organized by their children's schools (Mendel, 2016).

What does it mean to revisit qualitative research? As Michael Burawoy argues, especially with regard to a focused revisit—which is still rare in sociology, but common in anthropology—it is an ethnographic technique such as the "biographically-based revisit," the "place-based revisit," or the "institution-based revisit" (Burawoy, 2003, p. 674). In this study, I am not an ethnographer, but rather a biographical researcher who revisits people's narratives that were gathered in other research work done before the current research started. Thus, this is revisiting qualitative data. Thanks to existing open archives, this approach is being used more frequently in contemporary social sciences

(Mauthner et al., 1998; Bishop, 2009; Filipkowski, 2015).

The data re-used in this study were collected in order to ground empirically the notion of parental identity. Its various formations and representations were examined as formatted by intersected contexts through which parents are recognized as parents in the discursive reality in which they live. There is an echo of James Paul Gee's perception of identity, which he defines, in his conception of discourse analysis in accordance with Foucault, as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context (...)" (1999, p. 99). There are notions of space/place and time involved in it, as—in my understanding—parental identity stretches between past and present experiences, and the process of its shaping is marked with changes in the world surrounding the parents. These changes involve political transformation, re-configurations of social, temporal, and spatial conditions, and other contexts of individual biographies and life trajectories.

The first research topic (Mendel, 2013) — regarding parental and political transition in Poland — required sifting the material and ultimately 15 written narratives (11 female and four male) were selected from among 43 since these contained excerpts that emphasized the importance of particular memories in shaping parental identity. Formational memories were expressed with longer or shorter versions of statements that indicated their strength and clarity, such as "I remember it like it was yesterday."

The second research project (Mendel, 2016) focused on parental identity as a life-long educational experience. The research material was composed of e-mails written by six mothers during a long-term written interview (a six-month-long research correspondence served as the basis for expressing biographical information related to projected, educated, and confronted identity).

While revisiting this research material and reading the 21 collected narratives (the 15 were coded as N1-1, female/male, N1-2, female/male, etc.; and the six as N2-1, female, N2-2, female, etc.), I concentrated on the parts of them in which the narrators mentioned their own educational experiences. The research problem posed at the center of the analysis was a question about parental learning in the context of parental identity: 1) which parts of the parents' narratives show that they learned something significant for

their lives (thus, for their identity formation)?; 2) how is governmentality present in these educational experiences?; 3) how do they result in identity work?

### Analysis and findings

The former reality of the political and social system in Poland before 1989 clearly taught and governed parents by shaping their concrete views about school education. From the perspective of today everything looks worse. One of the mothers talking about her experience as a student stated:

*I cannot say a bad word about the school... Believe me that there was more discipline than today (...). Honestly, when you don't pose problems, you behave well, and you are always prepared then life couldn't have been any better. The teachers are glad to have you (laugh). I was like that, and I have never had any troubles with teachers (N1-2, female).*

*In my school education everything was imposed. [Now] the lack of discipline scares me the most. Now pupils are not afraid of teachers, but it's the other way round, and it's wrong, because teachers should be respected (...) There is chaos in the classroom (...) There are many aggressive students (...) In the past, it was certain that this book and nothing else, I mean it wasn't good, because it is not sure that the book tells the truth, but now the choice is too big and you don't know (...). We learned that some event took place there and then. And now (...) one historian thinks one way, another thinks differently (...) one believes that this was what happened, and the other questions that, and it's acceptable, and in the past it was unthinkable to have one challenging the other... (N1-1, male).*

"There was more discipline than today," but female narrator N1-2 cannot say a bad word about the old school. Another interviewee (N1-1, male) said that the current lack of discipline scares him the most, but, although in his school education in the past everything was imposed and there was one book that was not exactly telling the truth, the past was good. Now he knows that he knew the facts and could think independently. That ability to distance himself from the former discipline and knowledge impositions — as one can see in his retroactive statements in the story —

made him a strong individual subject. What seems to be significant is that it did not matter for him that his description regarded a totalitarian system, which radically limited individual freedom, including the choice of school education content.

In these narratives the only truth belongs to the past although the narrators consciously estimate its totalitarian frame, and, thus, govern themselves. The conduct of conduct here becomes the intersection of subjectification and subjectivation through which the subject expresses both governing the self and governing others.

The excerpt below presents another way in which educational experience from the political past of Poland endowed the narrator with a power that positioned him above the oppressive system. It points to a strategic game in which he tries to determine the conduct of others (e.g., communist school teachers):

*We listened to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty at home (...) when the official news program was on the air, my father used to say 'sure, sure, sure, you know best.' (...) so I was aware that the citizenship education at school or what was on TV (...) – all of it was garbage (N1-3, male).*

In the next narrative, the narrator describes his educational experience through the lens of social class distinctions. As a student, he understood that in the relationship with the teacher, it is not knowledge but the state of possessions that counts:

*I WAS AFRAID of school (...) Teachers ignored those who knew something and favored those who had something (...) It was harmful that I was always ME (...) I was like 'OOH, you again,' no matter what... and that one with a sailor<sup>1</sup> father was a champion. I hate it even today (...) I am a leftist. I think that the state should provide for citizens. We pay taxes (N1-4, male).*

He hates social inequalities "even today." Like others, this parent retroactively constructed his knowledge and himself, and now he continuously, and successfully, knows what his identity is ("I am a leftist"). He also knows how to make a state governed by citizens, and, thus, he expresses his way of conduct of conduct, which is a governing of others based clearly on subjectification.

<sup>1</sup> Sailors used to have a relatively high economic status in that time in Poland.

The parental orientation toward such a formative perception of the educational experience as successful learning is also present in many narratives telling stories of how, where, and when exactly parents felt that they learned to be parents:

*I felt I was learning to be a parent when I was talking about it with my mom—knowing that she was dying, she would give me specific instructions on how to care for children and how to raise them. Every time I recall conversations with my dad, I know that was the time when I learned to be a parent. I learned to be a parent when I admired my mom because she loved her children more than anything, that she would always hear me out, would always think about my happiness and the happiness of my brothers (...). During conversations with other parents, at my son's school during classroom events, during talks with educators or psychologists during parent-teacher meetings and teacher's office hours (...); (w)hen I read texts recommended by pedagogues (N2-3, female).*

And another parent explained her learning experiences...

*(...) in the first class of primary school, during an individual session with a school psychologist (N2-1, female). During each piano lesson (for the first six months I was there with my daughter), during musical workshops that I went to with my daughter during the holidays (N2-2, female).*

Parents who send their children to school learn simultaneously to govern themselves while being governed by others. Parental identity—in the interviews below—is grounded explicitly in past educational experiences that are connected with the continuing practices of the conduct of conduct (as the intersection of subjectification and subjectivation):

*The fact that I've been sending my child to school has taught me not to trust people who work there, because, for them, it's only their work and nobody cares about my child, only statistics matter (...). By sending my child to school I learned to participate in the course of education, to be interested in what happens at school, to inquire and question things, to suggest solutions other than the stereotypical ones used by teachers. I am my child's advocate and*

*nobody else at school is going to defend him (N2-4, female).*

*Sending a child to school has taught me how important it was to have prepared them better for confrontation with aggression, violence, and other negative emotions manifested by others. People don't always behave amicably, difficult situations occur, too (N2-5, female).*

*For a parent, sending a child to school is like a test in organizational skills and time planning management. The parent must plan out all the activities—his duties and those of the child—so that they don't clash with each other. This is a big challenge... (N2-3, female). My daughter's school teaches me to gain more self-control and sense of responsibility. The school staff puts emphasis on obeying rules and deadlines (N2-2, female).*

In these statements one can see the conduct of conduct, the subjectification and the subjectivation, in its oscillating agency. The subjectification occurs when the narrators are governed by the school ("the parent must plan out all the activities", etc.), and there is also the subjectivation when they are governed but also govern the school by conscious observation of school reality ("difficult situations occur, too"), changing their relation to themselves in the school context ("I am my child's advocate"). The second – the subjectivation – seems to be most interesting in the perspective of parents' self-creation in democratic partnerships at school.

In general, the conduct of conduct and subjectivation is expressed in the narratives as various ways in which parents are constructed by "the undertaken" truth, such as:

a – "school is for me" [*The school teaches me to be close to the child, to be with the child, and to display an interest in him, sometimes more subtly and sometimes more directly. I learned that you can even win a struggle with a ticket control agency<sup>2</sup> when a teacher is willing to cooperate with you (N2-6, female)*].

b – "school is not for me" [*Recently the school has taught me that it is not a place for parents (...). The message it sends is:*

<sup>2</sup> This refers to an episode when the informant's child was fined for riding a bus with an allegedly invalid ticket.

*we're doing our job, please do not interfere (N2-2, female)].*

Besides the option yes or no, both of these truths fashion the parental self as institutionally governed (in a more "subtle" or "direct" way). Thus, the internalized parents' state of being governed by the school seems to render them rather unwilling to establish true (rather than false) partnerships<sup>3</sup>.

### **Retroactivity and Empowerment**

Schools, and especially teachers who strive to build true partnership with parents, in the light of this study, which discovers the significance of retroactivity in the construction of identity, seem to have appropriate tools in their hands. One of them is the arrangement of parental story telling. Retroactivity does not have to play its role in the narratives of one's long foregone past. It could concern reflection on yesterday's experiences, on the daily routines of upbringing where the process of becoming a parent is hardly visible behind the density of, often reactive, experience. Through narratives told today, not from a long-ago perspective, they are able to experience the formative and subject-creative role of retroactivity presently, without waiting for time free from the current pressures on their parenting activities. The teacher's role here is fundamental. Usually, we have difficulties distancing ourselves from things we are engaged in, and parenting is one of the social roles that involves an immense degree of daily pressures. Creating a space free of such pressures, for instance during parents' meetings at school and initializing a reflective debate on how one experiences one's parental roles, can inspire retroactive reflection that is indispensable for the parental self and for their subjectivation.

Why is the retroactivity seen in the narratives so important? The parental practices of the conduct of conduct described allow us to perceive the process of subjectivation as a relation of the parent to him- or herself that fashions them by their own truths. In the narratives analyzed, this was obtained retroactively, and it explicitly empowered the parents—the authors of their own stories.

### **Final remarks**

Answering my research questions about parental learning one could say that the parts of parents' narratives in which they stated that they learned something significant for their lives (and, thus, for their identity formations) were reflections focused on outer and inner issues such as dominant politics and a disciplinary, authoritarian society, school as an institution of control (external factors), and personal features linked to the child and to other family members (internal factors).

Governmentality, especially practices of the conduct of conduct, were present in the narratives in parts regarding parental learning as indicated. What can these educational experiences explain?

Based on my study, one could say that—somewhat paradoxically—the governmental character of the educational experiences of parents empower them. The narratives show explicitly how parents govern being governed and how they conduct being conducted. Governmentality, therefore, leads them to subjectivation by which they govern the governing while always retaining their own truth.

The educational experiences of parents proved to influence their identity strongly ("I am a leftist," "I am my child's advocate"), and the narratives often referred to the intersection of the government of others and the government of the self. Subjectivation regarded both external and internal factors, and it became a practice through which parental identity seemed to gain more explicit strength. It is important to note here, again, that this identity work was represented in the narratives in retroactive forms. This finding could provide the basis for prospective solutions of some of the problems in parent-teacher co-operation and their partnerships. It points to the powerful role of auto-creative self-storytelling, in which retroactive reflection can play a fundamental role in the construction of identity.

Finally, I interpret my research as showing that parental learning through governmental practices, especially the conduct of conduct, leads subjects to the internalization of externally executed formative practices, and, thus, it can become a source of parental empowerment. In other words, the active conduct of being conducted appears to be a condition of the internalization of external forces, and, thus, of retroactively empowering personal identity. Without such empowerment and without knowing themselves "as parents," parents cannot become active partners in the

<sup>3</sup> There are researchers — such as Joyce L. Epstein — who signal the existence of false and authentic parent-teacher partnerships (see, for example, Epstein, 1995). It is also argued that, in partnerships between the school and parents, the rules of the partnership are most often dictated by one of the partners, i.e. the teacher or the school (see: Dahlsted, 2009).

democratically governed space of the school. The active role of teachers who—according to the suggestion expressed in this paper—arrange for the possibility of retroactive reflection on parenting, is itself an important element of the democratic, deliberative practice of the school.

Teachers are able to offer thousands of school - and after-school - activities through which parents can retroactively build their awareness and thus become real partners of the teachers and the school.

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