Mediation Practices in Socially Disadvantaged Families

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Abstract

The chapter at hand presents a long-term panel study on the role of media within socialisation of socially disadvantaged families in Austria and sheds light on how the parents of the study dealt with mediation practices. Firstly, the chapter introduces the study and briefly defines its theoretical and methodological basis. Secondly, it presents selected results with respect to parents' mediation practices. The central question is how they changed over time with respect to both children's age and changing media use over nearly twelve years of research. Against this background, different practices of mediation will be discussed and observed in the longitudinal study. Finally, the chapter reflects on and summarises the insights and outcomes relating to parents' mediation practices.

Keywords: socialisation research, children and media, mediation practices, socially disadvantaged families

Introduction

Europe has been exhibiting increasing rates of poverty and social exclusion since the mid-1980s. Due to rising unemployment rates, changing ways of living together and reductions in social benefits (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016; Palentien, 2003; Toczydlowska & Bruck, 2017), even wealthier countries like Austria have been experiencing an increasing rate of poverty and social exclusion. The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities affects the circumstances for family life (Jokinen & Kuronen, 2011). Socially disadvantaged families have to face and cope with particular challenges in their everyday lives, such as unemployment, often interlinked with health problems, and challenging socio-emotional problems (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014). Against the background of a rapidly changing media landscape, characterised by a meta-process known as "mediatization" (Krotz & Hepp, 2013; Lunt & Livingstone, 2015), these fami-

lies – like families in general – are confronted with an enormous amount of media and the charging task of being ready to support their children in acquiring media literacy. Keeping in mind the relevance of a "second level digital divide" (Hargittai 2002; see also Helsper, 2012; Livingstone & Byrne, 2015; LSE, 2017), these parents and their children may be seen as experiencing a lack of options to participate in contemporary mediatised society in an appropriate and beneficial way.

The chapter at hand presents a long-term panel study on the role of media within socialisation of socially disadvantaged families in Austria from 2005 until 2017 (Paus-Hasebrink, 2017; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer & Sinner, 2019) and focuses especially on how the parents of the study approach parenting and the mediation of media literacy. I decided to use the term mediation practices as they are part of parents' overall parenting practices. In the first step I will introduce the study and briefly define its theoretical and methodological basis. Secondly, I present selected results on parents' mediation practices with respect to both children's age and changing media. Against this background I discuss different practices of mediation observed in the longitudinal study. Finally, I will discuss and summarise relevant insights and outcomes relating to parents' mediation practices.

Theoretical and methodological implications of the long-term panel study

The analytical approach underlying this research is based on three concepts that may help to understand the interplay between socio-economic and socio-emotional aspects within everyday life. In this chapter I will focus on the aspect of mediation practices – how parents are able to interact within children's socialisation and bring up their children and within this context what parents' mediation practices look like. Table 1 provides an overview of these concepts.

Based on the concepts *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action* (see Paus-Hasebrink, 2018), a qualitative panel study was conducted. 20 (reduced to 18 since the second wave) socially disadvantaged families with children (boys and girls) who were five years old in 2005; up to the end of the study, when they were almost 17 to 18 years old, have been selected. In these twelve years, six waves of data collection and analysis were conducted. In doing so, the research covered relevant phases of development from kindergarten, mid-childhood to youth. The families have been selected according to relevant criteria for their social conditions (formal education, job, and income) and specific living situations (e.g. single-parent families, large families). Beyond these criteria I considered the area of living: urban and rural areas and areas with a poor infrastructure (e.g. mountain areas, bad bus connections, no railway stations around).

In order to operationalise the above mentioned analytic concepts, several reactive and non-reactive methods have been used, such as a standardised questionnaire for the parents, asking for details of income, formal education, constellation of the family etc. Observational methods served as an additional tool to investigate how the child

Table 1.   Conceptual framework

Options for action	• Related to the individual's specific socio-structural conditions and to the socio-structural aspects of society as a whole (political, economic, cultural and media contexts)
	• Describe the objective characteristics of an individual's social conditions, which are shaped by the rules of the social field(s) in which he/she operates
	• Represent an ordered arrangement of possible (and impossible) actions
Outlines for action	• Related to subjective perceptions of social conditions
	• Represent the ways in which the subject transforms the objective characteristics of his/her life situation into a subjective action guide
	• Reflect what makes sense to the subject and indicate the viewpoints from which he/she structures perceptions and interpretations of the world
Competences for action	• Related to the resources which are at the individual's disposal
	• Reflect the competences characterised by an individual's material, cultural and social resources
	• Represent cognitive or motivational prerequisites for an individual's actions, including the use of media
	• Reflect competences in the realisation of the individual's outlines for action

and the parents conduct their everyday life and how they deal with the conditions of their specific social situation in *doing family* (e.g. cope with conflicts, proximity etc.) (see Morgan, 2011). The ways in which family members interact with each other is connected to "family climate, family paradigms, family coordinated practices, and family myths and rituals" (Maccoby, 2015: 24). It includes specific communication practices and media-based practices of sense-making and, in this context, practices of mediation. As core of the study these observations have been combined with guided, in-depth interviews separately with the child and the parents – mostly the mother, in some cases both parents. The aim was to grasp different aspects of their everyday life, such as their usage of media and the mediation practices parents applied.

Against the background of the interlinkage of socio-economic and socio-emotional factors and parents' coping practices – which served as indicators for the three mentioned analytic concepts – we present selected findings. The focus will be on parents' mediation practices and how they changed over time; on the one hand with respect to both the children's age and their media usage and, on the other hand, due to changing conditions in the families' conduct of everyday life.

Selected findings

From kindergarten to youth

At the beginning of the longitudinal study, when children went to kindergarten, television was the main media activity of children whereas picture books, reading to children and listening to radio plays was quite rare. In this time, the parents had rather vague ideas about mediation practices; most of them remarked that children should not see

violent content in general, but later on it became obvious that this aspect had to be seen as an indication of social desirability. Very rarely parents picked up media related topics and talked to their children. Only when children themselves wanted to talk about something they saw on television parents answered to the best of their knowledge. All in all, we observed a lack in parents' media literacy to support their children. Only few of them were able to deal with media topics and to communicate with their children to give them background information about media contexts.

When children came to school a striking result was observed; by far all parents of the panel improved their media equipment. Independent of financial resources they bought computers and monitors, because they did not want that their children to stand back in school. Beyond that, they were afraid to lose teachers' and other parents' respect if their children were badly equipped. Almost all parents of the panel assigned the task of media education to teachers because they did not feel competent enough, or fooled themselves that these tasks definitively belong to school.

The families in the longitudinal panel were equipped with a lot of media devices; in the third and especially the fourth wave most households had a computer with internet (Livingstone et al., 2015). As the parents displayed very little knowledge of and skills concerning internet use, there was an impalpable anxiety about risks and dangers on the internet, especially concerning high costs and virus infections. Many parents still had a negative attitude towards electronic media and preferred not to have a closer look at the content their children used. In some families issues related to privacy protection were mentioned but most of the parents showed a lack of knowledge and literacy to give their children advice and to support their internet usage. Instead some of them revealed a careless usage of social media themselves; for instance, they put photos of their children on social networking sites like Facebook, which their children felt embarrassed about. At the same time some parents recognised that nowadays the competent use of computers and the internet has become a key qualification for the future career of their children. In these cases the parents again largely relied on schools to teach media literacy, especially when it came to the internet (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2012; Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2013). Beyond that, most parents assured themselves that their children are grown up now; therefore they felt even less responsible than in the years before.

Practices of parental mediation

The parents of the panel mostly showed incompetence when it came to issues of mediation, often due to their own deficient *options for action*, their deprived social situation due to unemployment etc. which often led to them being occupied with a lot of problems while coping with challenges on multiple levels of everyday life, such as a lack of time for their children, a lack of leisure time for themselves, worries about the future, etc. These factors tightly interacted with parents' *outlines for action*. The parents were often severely limited in building and arranging *outlines for action* as they

often were not able to define goals for coping with problems in everyday life. Many of them had difficulties to make up their own plans and to fulfil their wishes and desires, both as couple and as parents and as families as well. All panel families had an ideal image of themselves and of family in general – for most of them this included to care for their children. But the interplay between deficits in *options for action* and *outlines for actions* often induced developing or blocking adequate *competences for action* to manage the challenges of everyday life – all in all they did not have resources to support their children's upbringing and with this their media usage in general and even less their internet usage. Against this background one has to have in mind that the parents of the panel were less educated and had almost little or no knowledge about handling media, especially the internet.

In the following section I look deeper into the practices of mediation, which will be identified by taking all families into account over the whole time frame of the panel study.[2] Five dominant practices of mediation have been identified: *laissez-faire*, *unmethodical restriction*, *arbitrary control and exploitation of dominance*, *amicability* and *child-centered practices.* These practices worked closely together with parents' specific interplay of *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action*.

Laissez faire[3]

This kind of practice prevailed in the panel. The parents, who showed laissez faire practices, were unable to cope with everyday challenges and therefore they showed either no interest in their children's media usage in general, or they were convinced that children had to learn that bad things can happen, and that they could learn this best by using media. Some of them believed that there is no need for media education or communication about media in the family any longer when children went to school. At that time they should at least be old enough to learn using media in a sort of trial and error approach. Many parents were convinced that if there was any necessity for media education, schools had the responsibility to fulfil this task.

Especially single-parent families and large families showed this practice, i.e. particularly those who lived in severely deprived socio-economic constellations, without any hope that things might improve, and, in connection with this, who were stressed by a difficult socio-emotional situation and excessive demands which seemed to nearly subvert them. These families had substantial problems to cope with everyday life challenges. Single mothers who showed this practice had extreme difficulties in their *doing family*, partly because of their experience of being abandoned. When life situations changed because a new partner came into the family and problems occurred regarding a child from an earlier partnership, this practice could be observed as well. In the cases of large families with more than five – in some cases even up to nine or ten children – parents could not manage all tasks in their everyday life at the same time; within their stressful everyday context they had no resources to support their children's upbringing.

As the children grew older, also other families, who had previously displayed different attitudes, started to display a more *laissez faire* attitude with regard to their children's media usage. They were convinced that their children were old enough to use media without any rules or mediation from their parents.

Unmethodical restriction

The practice of unmethodical restriction includes restrictive proscriptions and limitations in order to control children's – often extensive – media usage. However, parents did not apply these rules in a consistant way, and they did not make sure that their children respected them. To the contrary, parents underwent their own regulations situationally either by using media as gratification or as punishment. For instance, when the children were younger and parents wanted to have time for housework, business work, or just leisure time for themselves, they often used the television as a baby-sitter – often without having a look at the content. This practice of using media unreflectedly as a way to keep their children occupied occurred frequently over extensive periods of time in these families. The overall practice of unmethodical restriction occurred as a reflection of insufficient *options for actions*, with a negative effect on building and performing *outlines for action*; these parents showed problems in coming to terms with their own lives. This practice could be observed particularly in families – same as for the laissez faire practice – in large families and single-mother families, when the children were younger. Similar results were found in the studies from Valkenburg et al. (2013) and Livingstone et al. (2015) as well. In mid childhood or in adolescence this practice became rarer, because parents believed their children would need no mediation anyway.

Arbitrary control or exploitation of dominance

This practice is applied by parents who arbitrarily control and abuse their children, often with a certain degree of violence: on the physical level, for example, with fathers who beat their children, or on the psychological level, by exerting pressure. By these practices parents try to debase their children in order to treat their own crude problems. This kind of practice could be identified in cases of dysfunctional partnerships between parents that also affected the relationships to their children. In some cases massive forms of parents' dissatisfaction regarding their *options for action* and their *outlines for action* led to a lack of self-efficacy in connection with an overestimation of their *competences for action*. This induced negative feelings, which turned aside to their children. By acting in an abusive and dominant way these parents tried to overcome the lack of self-efficacy. For example, a father used violent computer games, which are permitted only for grown-ups, as gratification or as a part of a mediation practice in order to calm his son down. The son was almost bound to them because they gave him an opportunity to cope with his aggressions caused by his father's violent actions.

Amicability

In these cases, parents, especially single mothers, showed a high level of amicability and they used media together with their children. However, they did so first and foremost to spend time with their children without showing either active engagement or any other mediation practices. This practice is quite similar to co-viewing or co-use (Valkenburg et al., 2013). Especially when children, foremost daughters, grew older these mothers valued media usage together with them. They practiced a relationship of amicability, blurring the lines between parent-child-roles. These mothers had massive problems to cope with limited *options for action* and unfulfilled *outlines for action,* especially with loneliness and the lack of a partner who they could share their worries and problems with. So they compensated feelings of being alone by explicitly using media together with their daughters while almost disregarding their children's wishes and interests. In these families, mothers did not apply mediation practices that were directed to supporting media literacy, only talks about interesting content could be observed.

Child-centered mediation practices

This practice could very rarely be observed. Only in some cases of upgraded *options for action* and, in connection with this, settled *outlines for action*, which led to a better scope of performing adequate *competences for action* and in which parents had the resources needed to focus on their children's interests and needs, we observed practices of child-centered mediation. These practices were found almost only in nuclear families who accomplished better financial resources over time through a new place of work, better salaried jobs or double income. A similar result concerning income could be found in the study from Livingstone and colleagues (2015). These families succeeded in creating rather relaxing environments for all family members: A better socio-economic and with this a better socio-emotional situation gave parents the opportunity to an improved coping with everyday challenges. Furthermore, in those cases of mothers' marriage with a new partner, where the partner was financially better situated and able to be a good and caring stepfather, things went better and *doing family* worked well.

Discussion and conclusion

Given the correlation between parents' socio-structural background and their specific ways of interacting and supporting, the study showed that parents' resources shaped their capital of their competence of supporting their children (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2013). Based on the three central analytical concepts *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action*, parents' and children's practices, including parents' mediation practices become understandable and comprehensible as it relates to the interlinkage

of subjective perception, action-driving orientations, and everyday life practices against the backdrop of socio-structural conditions.

With respect to specific forms of interaction between the three concepts, parents had resources for either enhancing or failing in coping with their everyday life. Having parents' specific *options for action* in mind, the longitudinal study emphasises the high relevance of interaction between family members (Goldberg et al., 1999), especially in parent-child relationships, where the degree of proximity, trust, and reciprocity that parents were able to build up with their children had relevant consequences for the ways of parenting and family communication. The parents' mediation practices, which were observable in the specific way parents interacted with and mediated their children in the longitudinal study, were highly relevant to children's socialisation (Paus-Hasebrink, 2017; see also Clark, 2013; Smetana et al., 2015). The qualitative long-term perspective allowed for insights into the interplay of the dynamics of children's age and parents' individual conduct of everyday life and the context of their socio-economic and socio-emotional situation as well as their coping practices with everyday challenges in *doing family*. Further deeper analyses of the longitudinal study will focus on parents' mediation styles and specific effects on their children's media usage: Are there any direct changes? Which role does children's age and gender play in this context and which role can be observed between the interactions of parents and children especially on the focus of parents' mediation practices and both parents' and children's media usage over almost twelve years? Studies show that the parent-child relationship is bidirectional and that children themselves also determine what pedagogical practices their parents will use, often inconsistently (Van den Bulck, Custers & Nelissen, 2016).

Notes

1. Festl & Gniewosz (2017) described that the parents' co-use of ICTs was a significant mediator for the middle- and lower-educated families, precisely for lower-educated fathers'.
2. Knop and colleagues (2015) identified similar mediation practices in their research on children's and adolescent's use of mobile phones and internet.
3. Livingstone et al. (2015) use the term "laissez faire" in order to describe a special mediation strategy, which can be characterised as warm and supportive but non-demanding.

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