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Can single mothers have free time? Do they want to have it?

The article is an attempt to answer the question how single women bringing up children consider their free time. The research and the analysis of the results have been based on the methodology of grounded theory referred to the nature and assumptions of symbolic interactionism theory and they are a part of the project *(Non)independent motherhood. Between reliance on social assistance and becoming independent*. The research was conducted in the group of 17 mothers. It involved partially structured qualitative interview. The results prove the significant diversification of perceiving free time by mothers. Based on the conducted interviews, the following categories were identified: intentional free time, “unconscious” free time – time “passing by”, free time is the time of my children, “non-existing” free time.

Keywords: pedagogics, free time, single parenthood

Czy samotne matki mogą mieć czas wolny? Czy chcą go mieć?

Artykuł jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie, jak samotne kobiety wychowujące dzieci traktują swój czas wolny. Badania i analiza wyników zostały oparte na metodologii teorii ugruntowanej nawiązującej do natury i założeń teorii interakcjonizmu symbolicznego i są częścią projektu *(Nie)niezależne macierzyństwo. Między poleganiem na pomocy społecznej a usamodzielnianiem się*. Badania przeprowadzono w grupie 17 matek. Obejmowały one częściowo ustrukturyzowany wywiad jakościowy. Uzyskane wyniki świadczą o znacznym zróżnicowaniu postrzegania czasu wolnego przez matki. Na podstawie przeprowadzonych wywiadów wyodrębniono następujące kategorie: celowy czas wolny, „nieświadomy” czas wolny – czas „przemijający”, wolny czas to czas moich dzieci, „nieistniejący” czas wolny.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika, czas wolny, samotne rodzicielstwo

Introduction

There are three basic time dimensions in every human being's life – past, presence and future. We leave the stage of the presence, it is the thing of the past but there is future as well, including plans, dreams, intentions (Dzięgielewska, 2007, p. 110).

During a day, each person has certain amount of time – it is the same for all of us – 24 hours. Everyone is responsible to manage their time in a certain way – we do not always have freedom in this regard because our activities are determined by factors which result from professional or family responsibilities concerning fulfilling basic needs of family members. Therefore, we can declare that a human being does not always have influence on the amount of free time he/she has, however the other issue is the way of time management. In such a case we decide how to manage our time, left after we fulfil everyday life family and professional duties – free time – during which we can develop, study, shape own lifestyle, take rest, develop and maintain social relationships.

What is free time for a contemporary human being? So often, we cannot answer this question stating that we do not have such time. We categorically and most certainly admit that we have duties, challenges, family, work, “everyday hustle” and free time becomes fleeting pipe dream and even something we do not think about on a daily basis, declaring that: we do not have time for free time.

Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak (2007, p. 223) pays attention to the free time as subjective category because it is the individual (subject) who declares there are (or there are not) particular attributes of his/her time, such as freedom of content and forms of behaviour, non-commercial nature and satisfaction.

Subjective nature of such perception of free time is expressed in two aspects. First of all, individuals are aware of own situation and they determine these intervals of the whole time amount which, according to them, fulfil the aforementioned criteria. Secondly, individual has the sense of own (subjective) causative power within the scope of time management, and fills it with high-value content and forms, compliant with own preferences and is responsible for decisions, choices and takes consequences. (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2007, p. 223–224).

Undoubtedly, the attitude towards free time has changed over the years and to a large extent it depended on the performed work. Within industrial society, free time means, first of all, “doing nothing”, then it is supplemented with passive reception of contents provided by developing media (Szlendak, 2009, p. 201). Over the years, greater media availability, especially multimedia, resulted in the

fact that the time after work was filled with multimedia activities – very often without control and sense of minutes and hours passing by.

It is typical for contemporary times that we live faster and faster, balancing between career and family, with even deeper feeling of tightening the time loop (Szlendak, 2009, p. 209). All that makes the time, defined as free time, take on another meaning, being freely managed by individuals. Undoubtedly, the situation of single parents is different. They are particularly loaded with educational and care responsibilities of their children. In the event that they have to combine career and family responsibilities, so called “free time” is significantly shorter, and in many cases, according to single mothers – it does not exist at all.

Research method and research group characteristics

Results of the research presented in this article are the part of the research project *(Non)independent motherhood. Between reliance on social assistance and becoming independent*. The research and the analysis thereof was based on the methodology of grounded theory referred to the character and assumptions of symbolic interactionism theory (Konecki, 2000, p. 24, 135). Due to the accepted research methodology, I did not raise the final research problems before I begin the research. I had only general plan what I would like to find out about single mothers world from their point of view, taking into consideration the issue I am particularly interested in, which is single mothers being dependent on social assistance and the opportunity of social activation of this group of women.

Partially structured qualitative interview used during the research allowed me to remain open to free statements of respondents, and at the same time it provided me with an opportunity to ask detailed questions. Obviously, I remembered to conduct the research and focus on the main problem, (Babbie, 2004, p. 141), however the freedom of respondents' statements and the discussed issues allowed me to discover detailed problem, which was not assumed in advance, presented in the form of research question: *How single mothers perceive and arrange their free time?*

Seventeen mothers participated in the research. Despite the fact, that there are many similarities, it is not a homogenous group. Taking into consideration their current life situation, they can be divided into three main groups: women who seek help from social assistance institutions and for many reasons they do not take any actions to change their situation; women who receive variable social benefits but they consider them as support on the way to become independent and display activeness in order to change the current living conditions and women who are independent and, at this stage of their life, they do not need to request

for social assistance. They can rely on support from the immediate environment – family, friends in the event they face more difficult situations.

From the free time arrangement point of view professional activity of women who participated in the research was also significant. The following table provides information regarding this issue.

Table 1.

Professional activity of single mothers

Professional activity	Works	Does not work
Degree of life independence		
Dependence on social assistance	3	5
On the way to become self-reliant	1	3
Independence of social assistance	4	1

Source: own study based on interviews

According to the information included in the aforementioned table, in case of women who depend on social assistance, five of them do not work. Most often, they claim it is related to the childcare and, as they say “maybe one day I will go to work”. Within the group of women who are dependent on social assistance, there are three of them who are employed within the scope of community services. However, they declare that they will have to request for social assistance once they finish performing these services. Within the second group of women who are in between of being dependent on social assistance and independent life – three mothers do not work but in their case it is the temporary situation (the change of work is associated with the change of place of residence after separation from their partner who used violence or the work leave resulting from the necessary surgery and rehabilitation). Within the last group, there are independent women who do not need to request for social assistance. Only one of them does not work, which is caused by serious disease which prevented her from permanent employment and the only source of income is the disability living allowance.

In total, in the whole group, there are nine women who do not work, therefore it would seem that they might have more time “for themselves” than women who, apart from household duties, have also professional commitments. Is this the case indeed? This study is the attempt to answer the aforementioned question.

Free time of single mothers

The presented research allowed to reveal four conceptual categories referring to free time: intentional free time, “unconscious” free time – time “passing by”, free time as some of my children, “non-existing” free time.

Intentional free time

Intentional free time occurred in the course of the research as category which is the most consistent with the scientific understanding of free time. First of all the basic criterion of this time – its voluntary nature – is fulfilled. It is a mother who decides how this time is fulfilled, responding to her needs – regarding taking rest, recreation, self-creation or development of spiritual life (religious practice).

According to the conducted research, women consider social and family contacts significant. In many cases, broad access to Internet and intensive development of social media make it easier to maintain these relationships.

When my son is not with me [he is with his father – A. R], in the evenings, I like surfing the Internet and chatting online with people. (M1.40, works).

When I have free weekends and I do not go to work, I try to spend time with my friend, his daughter and her boyfriend, who also has a daughter of my daughter’s age. Then, we have barbecue at the garden plot or [...] at fish ponds and recently we have been at the lake. (J1.32, works).

Women who took part in the research emphasize that they find it important to “do something for themselves”, so that this time could give satisfaction and was really dedicated for them.

I read books, I turn on TV in the evening, I like listening to music, not necessarily sit in front of the computer, I talk to my sister or my friend on the phone. I try to do something for myself because there used to be the time that I did not do anything. (P1.34, works).

Yes, I have free time about 3 a.m. because I do not sleep, I wake up at night. I read a book and I cannot sleep. (A1.38, works).

I dedicate my free time to school because I completed my secondary school which I stopped attending some time ago. I am proud of myself that I have achieved so much. (A6.46, works).

Recently, I have discovered that I like reading book. Formerly, I was not interested in reading at all. Right now, I have my military service, various online trainings, some study. I have met new people, I have experienced new situations [...] I went to the mountains after longer break. I wish my pension I receive from military service was not only to pay bills and for loan repayment.

I would like to go somewhere once a month. Exploring nature has beneficial influence on me, contact with another person. (A8.40, works).

During free time we can also fulfil ourselves by taking altruistic actions – devoting our time to others, not only do we satisfy their needs but also our own needs, such as the feeling of being a valuable person. Pro-social activities satisfy also the need of social relationships of an individual and the need of being part of local community life.

I work in association, which I have established with my sister-in-law, so we promote actions together. So far, we do it remotely using Internet but we manage somehow. Right now, we would like to create such a place... there is a plot, the mayor of the city has agreed to lease to our association, so we have an idea to create something over there. So far, the first music event took place there. I had to arrive and walk on my crutches for at least one hour, but then I realized that three hours passed, because I like something like that. (M2.44, works – right now rehabilitation).

Free time means also the time which can be spent on participation in religious life, which meets the needs of spiritual and religious nature.

In my free time, I go to church and I pray. The Mother of God has helped me a lot. (B1.35, does not work).

It is important that the free time is the time which provides us with the feeling of satisfaction, relax, recreation or own development – the time which fulfils own needs of mothers. This time allows them to take some rest from duties and also take some distance from challenges concerning independent housekeeping, childcare and child raising.

“Unconscious” time – time “passing by”

Slightly different category of free time is the time which the mothers taking part in the research, are unaware of. This might result from the fact that in this particular group, there are only those mothers who do not work and, according to J. Kargul (1998, p. 123) huge amount of time the unemployed people have, remains unengaged, probably because in their subjective opinion, it is not free in its nature.

Such “unconscious” time is not favourable time promoting development, meeting new people or having fun. It is not the time a mother considers, in a conscious way, as time for her, during which she can fulfil her conscious needs.

Quite often, single mothers are not aware of their free time. They are not engaged in its “flow” so they are unconscious and do not control experiencing this time as the value itself. (Truskowska-Wojtkowiak, 2012, p. 123)

When the question about free time was raised, hesitation and longer reflection occurred after silence.

So... cleaning, laundry, we cook something together and the time passes by somehow. (A5.42, does not work).

Sometimes,... on Friday, Saturday or Sunday, there is some free time. Because when my little one is in the kindergarten, I get bored and I watch TV. (A3.29, does not work).

I am at home, then I go shopping, mostly I visit doctors. From one appointment to another. If not at the doctor's, then I stay at home. (R1.34, does not work).

And now with my son. He is weak. Earlier, with older kids. And the time passed...(B2.40, does not work).

According to the aforementioned statements, a conclusion can be drawn that the time mothers have “runs out”, it passes freely and it is not captured within the frame of everyday life. There are no memories left. It does not provoke any reflections.

Is such time worse than the one completely managed according to intentional activities? Probably, no one will risk such a radical statement. However, according to Lech Witkowski (1998, p. 59),

The increase of free time is often the increase of threat of emptiness, boredom, lack of sense, frustration, unfruitfulness, drowned out by aggression, escape into mass forms and stimulants.

It is worth paying attention to the fact that free time, in case of people who do not work becomes, to some extent, the “imposed” time, the period of expectancy for work and the opportunity of more complete participation in social life. Lack of work results in inability to earn money and the necessity of requesting for social benefits. This is also one of the significant factors which limit the participation of mothers and their children in the broadly defined culture. In such a situation, an important attribute of free time, which is subjectivity is strongly limited. Subjectivity allows an individual to decide independently on the choice of activity taken during that time.

Free time – the time of my children

Significant category of free time, which occurred during the research is the time mothers spend with their children. However, this category is not homoge-

nous category, because the reasons why women spend their time with children are slightly different. Most often, this results from the fact that mothers like spending their time in this way. In their opinion, it is the source of satisfaction, important emotional experience or the chance to develop and strengthen psychic relations with their children.

Oh my God, no! Maybe, when he is older. I am generally this type of mum, that I... do not... even sometimes when he goes for a walk with somebody else. I think „Why didn't I go with him for a walk? I could have gone". There is nothing like that he goes somewhere, even with my mum and I will sit down and do something. Then, I think that I could have gone with him. (A7.34, works). We are very close to each other. I like spending time with my kids. When they come, they fool around. (B3.36, works). I would put it that way, I prefer spending this time, go with my son for a walk, visit his grandma or if he prefers staying at home and playing, so my free time looks like that. (A6.46, works).

However, the amount of time spent with a kid is not always the issue of own choice made by a mother. Sometimes, it is a matter of external circumstances a woman has no influence on, e.g. some illness or staying at the facility for domestic violence victims which temporarily prevents a mother from full professional and social activity and at the same time allows to spend more time for childcare and spending a couple of hours with a kid during a day. On the other hand, a mother pays attention to child's needs, and her own needs are subject to the forms of activity chosen by a child.

But generally, it does not look good. I go out with my son so that he gets some fresh air. So, I go to the backyard, playground, to ride a scooter. Obviously, I can sit somewhere, my kid rides but I cannot wals at that time. But I like spending time with him because he needs me. (M2.44, rehabilitation). I have some free time at nights and I read books then. It is difficult to have some free time because we have some planned therapeutic meetings or something ...and my kids are always with me, so... I have free time but it is more their free time when we spend time together. It is not my free time. Oh, yes...so, in the evenings, when they are in their beds, I can read books. (D1.37, does not work).

Undoubtedly, spending free time with family, having fun together, going for a walk or making excursions, etc. may influence an individual (both a parent and a kid) motivating and stimulating at the same time. It gives an opportunity to share problems and success, provides necessary support and the sense of security. (Vide Hanyga-Janczak, 2011, p. 141)

However, it is important that the time spent with housemates is the time during which none of family members has the feeling of “devoting for family members”. Only then such time has positive value when each individual feels satisfaction of hours spent together and of selected activities.

“Non-existing” free time

According to the conducted research, free time can be defined as “non-existing” time. It seems that such definition is some kind of oxymoron. However, it was important to notify that mothers feel a kind of loss, resulting from the inability to find some time within the whole range of time they have, which could be devoted exclusively to their needs.

I do not have time. There is no one I can go with, so what am I going to do with her [daughter – A. R.], am I to take her with me? Right now, I spend time with her – rehabilitation, speech therapist, there are lots of things. Some time ago, before her birth, I could go out with my friends, now I cannot. (A1.34, does not work).

There is a problem with free time, when kids are young, you know, there are always some responsibilities concerning homework, shopping. When you are alone all duties, housekeeping... So I do not remember, I probably did not have this free time. Now, it is different, when children grow up. (A8.40, works).

Free time might not exist also because it is the time “forbidden” by a partner who completely controlled his wife’s time, and her contacts and relationships with family and friends. Aiming at development of any passions and hobbies or taking particular forms of leisure was not possible in such a relationship.

I do not have free time. I was even afraid that when a friend of mine rings me up, my husband would be angry with me, that I am talking over the phone and I do not take care of my kid or that I do not do something. When I went out with my kid – soon this season will begin – the playground, ball ...when my kid played, then I could talk over the phone. Or when he played with other kids. At home, I was terribly afraid. I talked to my friends but I told them that I would not talk to them in the evenings because I was afraid. I was afraid of those rows, swearing. I think, I got used to them... (A4.34, does not work).

“Non-existing” time is the time we provide other people with – our partner or children. It is not a voluntary decision of a woman but external compulsion resulting from the necessity of taking care of children’s needs, having no support from their father and close relatives. This “caring loneliness” single mothers face,

forced them to believe that needs of their close relatives are more important than theirs. They also want to avoid family conflicts and remain calm.

Summary and conclusions

Free time and recreation of contemporary women, to a large extent, are associated with economic factors but they also result from the necessity of combining the responsibility for family and professional work. Single mothers belong to one of the groups which have difficult access to recreation. (Owsianowska, 2012, p. 272–273).

Therefore, a question can be asked, whether there are opportunities within the area of providing support to mothers so that they have a chance to find, within the whole time they have, such amount of time which would enable them taking some rest, some leisure activities, self-development – so important from the point of view of mental and physical health.

Local environment being the natural environment providing development, education and functioning of an individual can play an important role and support mothers in arranging own free time. However, certain conditions should be fulfilled so that single mothers who do not receive any support in childcare, could have time exclusively for themselves.

The most significant in this case is the fact that mothers themselves believe they have the right to free time, rest from everyday roles – professional, family, domestic etc., the time during which they can take some kind of activities related to their own current needs. This belief is largely associated with the social perception of women-mothers roles, as those who are devoted to their children and family. Therefore, regular actions promoting changes of social awareness and accepting every right of this social group are crucial in this case. According to Axel Honneth (2012, p. 130), if an individual is refused their rights associated with wide and full social participation, then the moral qualification is not equal with other community members.

Another issue is the availability of diversified forms of spending free time. Mentioning the availability we should take into consideration economic aspects, what is offered and the opportunity to provide childcare. Obviously, free time means not only participation in organized activities but also hair appointment, visit to a beautician, going to the cinema or having coffee with a friend. Undoubtedly, to a large extent, voluntary service would solve the aforementioned problems. Then, children would get care and attention while their mother could participate in the selected activities, which would meet her preferences and interests. Such support would be organized by various institutions and local organizations.

Recognizing actual needs of mothers would be of great significance. Such voluntary service could be organized in particular by students of pedagogical studies, which at the same time, would provide them with acquiring practical experience within the scope of childcare and arrangement of their free time. Voluntary service by senior citizens would also be worth considering. They often get engaged in local community actions within activities of senior clubs or the University of the Third Age. This form of voluntary service would promote intergenerational integration.

Activities for mothers organized by cultural, educational, sports institutions and associations have one more, very significant aspect – they allow to meet new people and strengthen friendship bonds.

The conducted research prove that women who work describe and fulfil their free time in the most conscious way. We may assume that it results from the fact that for many years free time was combined with working time because this time has its source in working class struggle for free time which took place at the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century. (Truszkowska-Wojtkowiak, 2012, p. 240)

Analysing mothers' statements regarding their free time one more conclusion can be drawn – not all mothers are aware of time passing, in many cases it “slips through fingers” and becomes the time which we “kill” not to get bored. These statements prove some lack of interests or passions. And maybe lack of knowledge about oneself and inability to search for what I would find interesting?

It seems it is just a matter of lifestyle women accepted. Most probably this style was developed not only during parenthood but definitely earlier – during childhood and adolescence. Meanwhile, according to Aleksander Kamiński (1965, p. 224)

Developing own lifestyle involves, most of all, more consistent qualitative prioritizing various types of own physical, manual, intellectual and social activities and defining own balance while using free time functions – rest, fun, development activities.

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