

The Effects of Parent Migration on the Children Left at Home: The Use of Ad-Hoc Research for Raising Moral Panic in Romania and the Republic of Moldova

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KEYWORDS Critical Reflection. Deficiency Paradigm. Errors in Research. Moral Panic. Secondary Analysis. Transnational Migration

ABSTRACT The study aims to achieve a critical reflection on research carried out in Romania and the Republic of Moldova focusing on the effects on childhood in migrating families, the main points being the epistemological aspects and the manner in which the rhetoric of migration is used in order to raise moral panic. Even though the analyzed research does not provide enough data for a rigorous investigation of the phenomenon, these studies have managed to put on to the public agenda, the issue of migration and its effect on childhood, from a moral angle. The method the researchers used was the secondary analysis of the data present in the studied research, through which we managed to analyze the errors found in such studies. A large number of ad hoc studies about migration show certain errors related to the effects it has on children left at home, which amplify moral panic regarding this phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of migration came to the forefront of current events after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, as a migration movement started at the time from the East to the West (Sandu 2005: 555). In the first stage of migration, most migrants came from the rural environment, because the economic changes in the former communist countries were not accompanied by a change in the economic mechanisms that would support agriculture and the development of infrastructure in the rural environment (Sandu 2005). Beyond the economic and demographic effects of migration, some studies underscore its effects on family relationships such as couple relationships, and the relationship between parents and children (Sandu et al. 2006).

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Whereas in the 1990s the main studies concerning the migration from Eastern Europe to western countries approached the issue mainly from the perspective of origin countries, starting with the early 2000s the studies shifted focus to the destination countries (Fernandez-Borrero et al. 2013). The issue of migration in Romania and the Republic of Moldova started being the spotlight of studies after 2000. A number of studies focused on the rationalization of grounds for emigration: "The motivations that drives the Romanian emigrant are to a great extent financial in nature" (Miftode 2006: 11; CBS-AXA 2009), and on the estimation of the number of migrants or of children affected by migration; in 2008, Romania had an estimated 350,000 children affected by the migration of parents abroad for work, of which 126,000 had both parents abroad (Toth et al. 2008). The issue of the effects parent migration has is approached through association with the following aspects (Cojocaru 2013): 1) *the individualization of social problems* – the identification of individual causes while ignoring public policies and macrosocial and economic factors; 2) the transfer of responsibility from macrosocial structures to families and individuals; 3) the issue of

migration is dealt with in terms that challenge *family moral values* (the responsibility parents have for rearing their children, responsibilities in the couple relationship, the “normal” operation of a family).

There are studies made by NGOs that can be considered *ad hoc research*, insofar as they bring to the attention of the public *social problems* and make efforts to include on the *public agenda* potential solutions for these social problems, researched without sufficient scientific rigor and lacking a rigorous and credible basis of analysis. The invoked studies have the merit of *rationalizing the need for intervention* and of proposing and *experimenting with new services* that provide interventions, chiefly individualized ones, on two axes: affective and emotional on the one hand, and academic failure (dropout) on the other.

Moral Panic and the Rhetoric of Migration

Moral panic brings to the public attention, through the voice of experts, the debate on social problems from a *moral point of view*, thus *amplifying the negative effects of the phenomenon*, based on analyses that lack rigor or even based on no analyses at all (see Hier 2002, 2008; Hier et al. 2011); moral panic contributes to *the development of forecasts with an emotional charge* (Pearce and Charman 2011), that treat as a pending catastrophe the various possible effects of the problem (Ungar 2001; David et al. 2011), all this in the absence of credible empirical data: “The media have presented several cases of suicide among children, many of these belonging to the category of children *left at home alone*, following their parents’ departure abroad for work. Currently there are no statistics concerning the number of suicides among children” (Save the Children Romania 2008: 3). One of the goals of moral panic is to stimulate reactions starting from moral grounds (Critcher 2009) and the results of research carried out in Romania and in the Republic of Moldova are presented through a morality filter (Asociatia Alternative Sociale 2006, 2009b; CIDDC 2007; MMFPS 2009; Save the Children Romania 2008, 2009). The ad hoc research carried out by NGOs and disseminated by the media contributes to the rise of moral panic in the context of a paradox identified by Altheide: on the one hand, the media promote moral panic, amplifying public fears, on the other hand,

they argue in favor of appropriate public policies for increased social control (Altheide 2009: 80; Cojocaru 2011; Islam and Cojocaru 2015; Yeung and Fan 2013). Moral panic enhances the tendency to *label negatively* both the parents (irresponsible, lacking morality, negligent etc., that is their behavior is measured against traditional norms) and the children (home alone, semi-abandoned, euro-abandoned, migrant children etc., that is they are given definitions focused on the deficiency paradigm) (Rohloff and Wright 2010; Cojocaru and Cojocaru 2011). The rhetoric promoted by the media, using the voices of practitioners and specialists, is founded on a discourse about the moral crisis (Critcher 2011), constructed through an induction process, starting from individual cases presented by the media; this strategy of increasing moral panic has also been identified by Lundström in the British media (David et al. 2011; Hier et al. 2011). In order to uphold the need for state intervention, the media present – using a moral angle – research that stresses predominantly the negative, sometimes catastrophic effects the parents’ migration for work has on the children left behind at home (Asociatia Alternative Sociale 2006, 2009b; CIDDC 2007; MMFPS 2009; Save the Children Romania 2008, 2009). Together with other social problems, the topic of parent migration and its effects on the family environment has become a focus of moral panic, so that it may arrive on the public agenda of the Romanian and Moldovan central and local authorities. Although the report published by Save the Children Romania highlights chiefly the negative effects of migration on children, thus fitting into a rhetoric of the “deficiency paradigm”, the data supplied by the subjects taking part in the research show that “within the society and in the media the accent is placed primarily on the suffering and the disadvantageous situation these children have to cope with and less on the way these children’s rights are respected or on the solutions to their problems, on the actual services they can use. In this context, the children feel they are victims of social exclusion, fact that enhances the negative effects of the parents’ departure” (Save the Children Romania 2009: 8).

METHODOLOGY

The method used focuses on the secondary analysis of the data presented in various studies

concerning the effects of migration on children, in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The study is a critical reflection on the Romanian research of the phenomenon of childhood in migration families, focusing on epistemological aspects. The role of secondary analysis is to answer questions, to verify hypotheses or to generate new theories (Rubin 2008) using the existing data; in the case of secondary analysis, the data collected during previous evaluations cannot be used with the same original purpose, as this is a re-analysis and a re-interpretation of said data starting from other theoretical and epistemological assumptions (Camfield and Palmer-Jones 2013). Secondary analysis does not mean the verification of the data obtained or of the analysis carried out by the evaluator in order to write the evaluation report (Irwin et al. 2012); instead it involves using the data contained by the evaluation for further, complementary analysis, using epistemological and theoretical perspectives that are different from those originally used in the process of program evaluation. Secondary analysis provides new perspectives for interpreting and understanding the same data that was originally collected and interpreted (Powell 1978; Zientek and Thompson 2009). The secondary analysis of data does not involve the resumption of the data collection process, the data is just reanalyzed in order to identify systematic errors (biases) and to reduce them as much as possible (Boruch and Wortman 1978: 90); therefore, secondary analysis focuses on the interpretation instead of on the collection of new data (Rubin 2008); secondary analysis is not a form of verifying the already performed evaluation. Ridskopf uses secondary analysis of data obtained through quasi-experimental designs in order to: (1) identify problems related to the causal inference operated during the evaluation; (2) estimate any possible biases; (3) strengthen the validity of causal inferences through the use of multiple approaches (Ridskopf 1978: 76). One important feature of secondary analysis stems from the fact that it can provide new interpretations of the data and helps us analyze alternative plausible models, starting from different theoretical assumptions. Keesling believes that formulating counter-arguments for the conclusions of an evaluation and resuming the data analysis process, starting from rival theoretical perspectives is a form of developing an understanding and an explanation of the effects of the program's

interventions (Keesling 1978). The researchers have used the secondary analysis of data in order to examine the theoretical and methodological set of tools used by the research concerning migration, as well as to develop a reflection of an epistemological nature (validity, errors that may contaminate results etc.).

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Deficiency Paradigm in the Rhetoric Used by the Specialists from Romania and the Republic of Moldova

The analysis of the research carried out in Romania and the Republic of Moldova by various organizations highlight rhetoric based on deficiencies, problems, dysfunctions etc. Such statements, made by specialists, are highlighted in these studies (Asociatia Alternative Sociale 2006, 2009b; CIDDC 2007; MMFPS 2009; Save the Children Romania 2008, 2009) despite the fact that the collected data do not confirm them; they are based solely on the statements made during focus-group interviews or during individual interviews with specialists.

Multiple negative effects on children have also been found by the specialists from Iasi (Romania): (1) the children do not perceive the authority of the person they live with, who is not their parent. This issue could be resolved by explaining before the parents' departure the authority position of the person the child is going to be living with; (2) the children come to see their mothers as persons who merely gave birth to them but are devoid of any other qualities; (3) the children do not see the person they are living with as a good dialogue partner; (4) a lack of family models required for the normal development of any child; (5) although the parents emigrate in order to earn money for improving the family's material situation, there are circumstances in which the children do not have the comfort the parents would wish for them because the individuals that care for them do not give them the material support they should receive; (6) for entertainment or while seeking the attention of adults, children sometimes break the law, for instance engage in shoplifting; (7) aggressiveness, vulgar language and dysfunctional relations with the family are ways in which children express their frustration; (8) the children are the victims of their own parents, who take them abroad and, if the children do not adapt, they are brought

back into the country, thus generating changes in living patterns that are not helpful for the mental development of children; (9) decreased self-esteem, confidence and trust in one's value as a person; (10) the overburdening of girls, as they take on the mother's role(s) when the latter goes abroad to work; (11) estrangement between children and parents; (12) children are physically abused by those who are supposed to look after them; (13) frequent cases of disturbed behavior, depression problems, suicide attempts; (14) rebellious behavior such as running away from home, making friends with people of dubious character, entering groups with questionable behavior in order to convince one's parents to return home; (15) the development of aberrant sexual behavior in the case of girls; (16) the development of incestuous relationships, as the father feels frustrated at no longer having sexual relations with the mother and therefore demanding this "right" from his own daughter; (17) transformations in the children's behavior after the parents' departure, (18) the adoption as role-models of individuals who, despite not having an education, have done well in life, and therefore a decrease in the children's school performance; (19) changes in nutrition and weight loss.

These aspects of the negative effects on children have been the most delicate topic approached in the discussion with specialists from both countries. The specialists from Chisinau (Republic of Moldova) mentioned the following negative aspects that occur after one parent or both go abroad to work: (1) the children become mere consumers, because they have become used to receiving without giving anything in return; (2) children spend time in bars and clubs without adult supervision; (3) children drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes; (4) the overburdening of older girls, as they take on the mother's role and must cope with both family and school; (5) the children have manifestations of anxiety and depression after the parents leave and they become uncommunicative and feel abandoned; (6) rapid mood changes: now they are cheerful, now they are about to cry or to become aggressive apparently without reason; (7) the children become arrogant due to the fact that they have enough money to afford to buy anything they please, to invite their classmates out or to go to places that other children cannot afford; (8) the children steal from home, seeking attention or trying to determine their parents to return home;

(9) the children cannot manage money properly and end up paying exorbitant amounts for useless items; (10) children whose parents are abroad become the victims of robbers, this being one of the main reasons most children hide the fact that their parents are abroad for work; (11) the lack of parental affection leads to states of anxiety and dread; (12) the children desire to leave the country as soon as possible in order to go to work abroad; (13) due to the freedom they have, the children no longer submit to parental authority and engage in behaviors that are unsuitable for their age; (14) the replacement of the role of sister with that of mother causes the girls who undergo it to grow up before their time, which specialists agree it is not desirable; (15) exhaustion caused partly by the overburdening with family roles and partly by staying up late in bars and clubs; (16) health problems caused by unhealthy eating; (17) the occurrence of a large number of cases of STIs and of abortions; (18) some of the girls staying home with their fathers risk becoming the victims of sexual abuse; (19) school performance is lower in some children whose parents are abroad, because they don't feel they must study when asked to do so by individuals who are not their parents.

Errors Found in Ad Hoc Research Focusing on Migration and Its Effects on Children

In the ad hoc research carried out by various non governmental organizations in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, the researchers find a number of errors that result in interpretations that cast doubts on the credibility of said research:

Completeness errors that is the tendency to identify only emotional effects, and omitting the importance of analyzing the economic, personal development, social adjustment or resilience effects. In the ad hoc studies made by NGOs, there is a tendency towards underlining predominantly the negative effects. "The absence of a relationship with the parents proved to have as effects isolation, decrease of self-esteem, absenteeism and even dropout, the lack of involvement and participation in extracurricular activities turning sometimes into socially undesirable behaviors and attitudes (such as crime, violence etc.)" (Save the Children Romania 2009: 4). On the other hand, the studies that make comparative analyses between children whose parents

are working abroad and children who have both parents at home do not identify relevant differences between the two categories of children: "in terms of verbal abuse, humiliations, threats, physical aggression or neglect, the differences between those whose parents are abroad and those with non-migrant parents are not significant...; the difference between the children of migrants and the children of non-migrants are relatively small in terms of deviant behavior; nevertheless, the parents' migration is a risk factor... The children whose parents are working abroad have a similar profile to that of children living in single-parent families following a separation or the demise of one of the parents" (Toth et al. 2007: 10). "The main consequences on the child are visible in terms of emotional and psychological suffering (as stated by both the parents and the children). This leads us to the hypothesis that, probably, the situation of children with migrant parents is similar to that of children with separated (divorced) parents or with extremely busy parents" (Toth et al. 2008: V). The absence of one or both parents is associated in some studies with a number of problems or with the lack of provision for certain of the child's needs: nutritional, sartorial, hygienic, medical, housing, educational neglect (Asociatia Alternative Sociale 2006). The children who stay behind "may also become the victims of various forms of abuse and exploitation" (Azoitei et al. 2007: 9) or of overloading with chores; they are vulnerable to physical, mental and sexual abuse, to exploitation through labor, child trafficking and prostitution; they suffer from an insufficient development of independent life skills, so that they may come with difficulties in their future adult lives, from a defective acquisition of ethical and moral norms, from an early onset of sexual activity (Azoitei et al. 2007: 10). The deficiency paradigm promoted by ad hoc studies (Asociatia Alternative Sociale 2006) is used in the migration rhetoric as a rationale for the work methodologies proposed in order to mitigate the negative effects parent migration has on children: "*the conclusions of the study are clear: the parents' departure for long periods of time is a cause of deviant behavior, of decreased levels of performance (academic and otherwise), of a degradation of the child's physical and mental state caused by a lack of control, of education, of positive role models, of communication problems, of adjust-*

ment difficulties, of deficient care, of overload with chores etc."

 (Azoitei et al. 2007: 16).

The attribution process concerns the fact that a number of behavior in children (delinquency, troubled sleep, dropout, behavior disorders, suicide etc.) are attributed to the migration of parents, but the methodology used does not back up such correlations (the need for quasi-experimental and experimental methods); the research strategies used in order to attribute negative effects rely on studying only the children whose parents are working abroad (operating comparisons between the urban and the rural environment, or between genders), without considering for analysis the category of children living together with their parents: "oftentimes, the child left behind has trouble sleeping, becomes aggressive or very sad, is unwilling to communicate, and all he wants is for his family to be reunited" (CIDDC 2007: 12; Asociatia Alternative Sociale 2006: 11; Adumitroaie and Dafinoiu 2013). When research takes into consideration both categories of children, the conclusions are opposed to those yielded by the first ad hoc researches. "The phenomenon of parent migration abroad, simultaneous to the children staying behind in the country, is reflected in an increasingly visible manner in the children's participation in education. The research carried out by Save the Children as well as by other NGOs point to the fact that this phenomenon can lead to absenteeism and even to dropout, because the children are not supervised appropriately or because they lack the motivation to study" (Save the Children Romania 2008: 18).

Generalization of the effects of migration on children in a *homogenous manner*, as if all the children were affected in the same way, irrespective of age, child gender, the gender of the migrating parent, of the configuration of care in the absence of the parent, of the support networks of the family that stay behind, of the type and nature of the relationships between the migrating parent and the family in the country, as even children from the same family are affected differently (Asociatia Alternative Sociale 2009b; Luca et al. 2009; Save the Children Romania 2009; Azoitei et al. 2007). *The construct errors* that cast doubt on validity: a) *the theoretical tools used are obsolete* (terms such as attachment, loss, socialization are used with the accepted meanings of the '60s and '70s) in the circumstances where the social reality has changed (Save the

Children Romania 2009); b) the instruments *are not valid* (they do not measure what they are supposed to measure), are constructed based on simplistic operationalization models (there is no interrogation of adjustment/coping strategies, of resilience, of resource mobilization etc.); c) *the instruments contain directive items* (they seek out problems, the difficult situations that the subjects may have faced, and are strongly contaminated by the thinking of those who carried out the research (migration as a negative phenomenon); d) *inconsistency in analysis*, which leads either to conclusions that have no connection to the collected empirical data, or that are opposed to the empirical data supplied by the subjects. Such conclusions of studies without empirical support highlight long-term effects caused on children by their parents' migration, such as: the lack of the representation of a united family, lack of confidence in one's own forces, parents that will not know what it means to be a parent, inappropriate behaviors in relation to what a family should be, the future adults will have a behavior that is the result of frustrations accumulated in the period when the parents were abroad for work (they will lie or boast etc.); they will assign exaggerated value to material aspects, they will become adults with behavior problems, requiring counselling, they will not be able to have a satisfactory income and thus they will become dependent on social services (Asociatia Alternativa Sociale, 2009a: 66-67). Although the studies carried out by NGOs point out the negative effects on the children's participation in school activities (this is one of the effects mentioned most often), the data collected by the same organizations, during the same studies, present statements from children that go against the conclusions of this research: "I felt I needed someone to motivate me, to push me, in a way, to do certain things; *although I have no problems in school, I get good grades*, I do feel the need to have the parents motivate me; for instance, there are mornings when I don't feel like going to school... *I haven't had any problems with missing classes*... I just felt the need to have someone tell me I needed to get up... sometimes you feel the need for advice from a grown-up" (girl, 17, Iasi, with both parents abroad at work)... "I miss my parents most *when the end-of-year awards are handed out*, that's where all the children come with their mum and dad... and I don't see mine there, and this makes me *lose my appe-*

tite for studying... (girl, 10, Suceava, both parents abroad at work)" (Save the Children Romania 2008: 19); e) these studies use ad hoc methodologies, without a critical apparatus, and tend to over-generalize the conclusions); f) interpretations of test results starting from *unfounded assumptions made by specialists* and the projection of possible scenarios without using consistent data.

CONCLUSION

This type of rhetoric focused solely on the deficiency paradigm can produce more unwanted effects than migration does, due to the promotion of a catastrophic discourse concerning the effects migration has on children. The researchers' analysis shows that a number of ad-hoc research studies carried out by various NGOs that run intervention programs in the domain of migration underscore mainly the negative aspects of the parents' migration abroad for work. More often than not, such researches maintain and develop moral panic, and the very rhetoric concerning the parents takes a moral angle. Even when some of the data collected by said ad-hoc research do not confirm the catastrophic discourses, public opinion is influenced however, and the lack of data is no impediment for designing public policies under the pressure of the media or of non-governmental organizations. The analysis of the errors found in research is a critical reflection on epistemological and methodological aspects, with the obvious purpose of increasing the awareness of researchers as to becoming more engaged in the construction of rigorous, pertinent and valid research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Using ad-hoc researches for the identification of some social problems, accompanied by errors, increase the moral panic regarding those problems. Therefore, it is benefic the approach of certain events, respecting scientific research criteria. Maybe it is useful the verification of the conclusions, using the participatory evaluation, so that the conclusions to be validated not only by the experts, but also by the evaluation participants. Strengthening the research in the field of the effects of migration can lead to avoid the catastrophic discourse and can lead to a beneficial guidance to find specific solutions for the

families involved. There is necessary the State investments in capable researches available to provide relevant information for the public policy, and the research team to be trained not only but the practitioners, but also by the researchers. This implies the State responsibility to manage the problem of the migration, and to reduce the social cost paid by the families and children, and also to strengthen a system of reporting and detailed monitoring of the phenomenon, the operation of valid data concerning the migration and its effects.

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