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Rhetoric about Vulnerabilities of Childhood in Family Migration.
Ad hoc Research and Methodological Errors

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of ad hoc research carried out by organisations in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, approaching the effects of parent migration abroad on the children staying behind in the country. Apart from the fact that the topic is approached as a means of increasing awareness and putting the issue on the public agenda, the knowledge in this domain is currently fragmentary and hampered by methodological errors as far as the research carried out so far is concerned. The identification of such errors has the role of questioning the way this issue has been researched, and of highlighting the important role as a social actor the child plays in the migrating family. This study presents an analysis of the errors found in the analysed research and highlights their role in the intensification of moral panic regarding the situation of children in migrating families.

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1. Introduction

The issue of migration in Romania and the Republic of Moldova started being studied after 2005. A number of studies focus on the rationalisation 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, Munteanu, and Bleahu, 2008). The issue of the effects parent migration has is approached through association

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with the following aspects: 1) the individualisation 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 rigour and lacking a rigorous and credible basis of analysis.

The invoked studies have the merit of rationalising the need for intervention and of proposing and experimenting with new services that provide interventions, chiefly individualised ones, on two axes: affective and emotional on the one hand, and academic failure (dropout) on the other.

2. 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 rigour or even based on no analyses at all; moral panic contributes to the development of forecasts with an emotional charge, that treat as a pending catastrophe the various possible effects of the problem, 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 (Asociația 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 favour of appropriate public policies for increased social control (Altheide, 2009: 80; Cojocaru, 2011). Moral panic enhances the tendency to label negatively both the parents (irresponsible, lacking morality, negligent etc., that is their behaviour 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) (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). The rhetoric promoted by the media, using the voices of practitioners and specialists, is founded on a discourse about the moral crisis, constructed through an induction process, starting from individual cases presented by the media (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011a); this strategy of increasing moral panic has also been identified by Lundström in the British media (David, Rohloff, Petley, & Hughes, 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 (Asociația Alternative Sociale, 2006, 2009b; CIDDC, 2007; MMFPS, 2009; Save the Children Romania, 2008, 2009). This, 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 Modovan central and local authorities. Although the report published by Save the Children Romania highlights chiefly the negative effects of migration on children, thus fitting in 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).
3. Craft research

There is an important cluster of studies aiming to estimate the effects on children left at home alone, that carry out questionnaire inquiries on more or less representative samples and attribute to migration a number of consequences: affective and emotional deprivation, decreased academic performance, absenteeism, school dropout, increased juvenile delinquency, possible effects on the children's health status, risk of exposure to abuse and neglect, the need for supervision by the child welfare/child protection authorities (Asociația Alternative Sociale, 2006, 2009b; CIDDC, 2007; MMFPS, 2009; Save the Children Romania, 2008, 2009). In order to amplify moral panic, the studies use in their analyses arguments of moral nature, and in their conclusions they focus predominantly on risks. But the language of risk, as stated by Beck (1992), is combined with the normative side of familial cultures. Thus, the language of risk is compatible with moral panic (David et al., 2011), and the ad hoc research in the domain of migration do not use it in order to generate fear, but in order to argue in favour of state intervention through the development of specific social services. An analysis of the information campaigns carried out in Romania in the interval 2001-2010 highlights the predominance of campaigns focused on children in difficulty, and among them on those affected by migration to other countries for work. In order to sensitise the public opinion, aside from the information campaign there have been meetings with judges and lawyers, and with journalists, in order to increase their awareness concerning the "complex and difficult growing-up context of the young offenders whose parents are abroad for work" (MMFPS, 2009: 19); there has been even an award gala organised by the representatives of the civil society, and such campaigns have featured prominently. The research carried out recommends "organising information campaigns for the parents, regarding the risks associated to migrating abroad for work, for the children staying behind" (Save the Children Romania, 2008: 19)

4. Errors found in ad hoc research focusing on migration and its effects on children

In the ad hoc research carried out by various nongovernmental organisations in Romania and the Republic of Moldova we find a number of errors that result in interpretations that cast doubts on the credibility of said research:

a) Completeness errors that is the tendency to identify only emotional effects, and omitting the importance of analysing 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 behaviours 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 behaviour; 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, Toth, Voicu, and Ștefănescu, 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" (A. 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, Karacsony, Lăcustă, and Pascaru, 2007: 9) or of overloading with chores; they are vulnerable to physical, mental and sexual abuse, to exploitation through labour, 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 (Azoiei et al., 2007: 10). The deficiency paradigm promoted by ad hoc studies (Asociația 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 behaviour, 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 adjustment difficulties, of deficient care, of overload with chores etc." (Azoiei et al., 2007: 16).

b) The attribution process concerns the fact that a number of behaviour in children (delinquency, troubled sleep, dropout, behaviour 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) (Cojocaru, 2010; Sandu, Ponea, Unguru, 2010); 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; Asociația Alternative Sociale, 2009: 11). 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 Salvăci Copiiii 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).

c) Generalisation 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 (Asociația Alternative Sociale, 2009; Luca, Pascaru, and Foca, 2009; Save the Children Romania, 2009; Azoiei et al., 2007).

d) The construct errors that cast doubt on validity: a) the theoretical tools used are obsolete (terms such as attachment, loss, socialisation 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 operationalisation models (there is no interrogation of adjustment/coping strategies, of resilience, of resource mobilisation 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 behaviours in relation to what a family should be, the future adults will have a behaviour 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 behaviour problems, requiring counselling, they will not be able to have a satisfactory income and thus they will become dependent on social services (Asociația Alternative 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 organisations, 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, Iași, 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 appetite 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-generalise the conclusions; f) interpretations of test results starting from *unfounded assumptions made by specialists* and the projection of possible scenarios without using consistent data.

**Conclusions**

*Moral panic* brings into the public eye, through the voice of experts, the debate over social problems from *a moral angle*, the result being the *amplification of the negative effects* of the phenomenon, based on analyses that lack rigour or even based on no analyses at all. In order to bring arguments in favour of the need and importance for the State and the local authorities to intervene in solving this problem, a number of studies made by nongovernmental organisations highlight, predominantly, the negative effects that parent migration abroad for work has on the children that stay behind in Romania. In order to shore up the definitions outlined by a deficit language, the proponents bring in the results of ad hoc research, based on ad hoc theories, accompanied by theoretical, epistemological and methodological errors.

**References**


