Personal Projections of Paraparental Care on Young People

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Abstract

The research interest is the encounter with the current problems considering the worldwide tendency towards an increasing share of labor migrants who leave their children behind to other people. The paraparental care is a new phenomenon in the modern man life, which defines the specific care of children with parents who are labor migrants. In the interim essential are a group of other issues related to the socio-pedagogical peculiarities of this care. The objective of this article is to study the influence on young people of this specific care. The research is based on the qualitative methodology and is realized by means of the semi-structural interview. My expectations are pointed towards the absence of the parent(s) which is the main cause of changes in children's social maturity. In this critical situation, the respondents point out that they have personal qualities that have not yet demonstrated – assertiveness, self-analysis, responsibility, etc. In general, there is a need to support children in a situation of paraparental care with the help of important family members (when possible) and by competent professionals to work in a preventive and corrective plan with children and adolescents within the family and, if necessary, outside.

Keywords: paraparental care, children left behind, transnationalism.

1. Introduction

The processes of globalization and euro integration have led to a substantial growth of the emigration streams. Their impact on the socio-pedagogical practice should be studied in a research plan. These processes are subject to analysis by various experts whom in their researches deal with issues such as transnational partnership (Madziva, 2016: 281-297; Pribilsky, 2004: 313-334; Gamburd, 2000); transnational motherhood (Peng & Wong, 2016: 2021-2044; Erel, 2002: 127-14); transnational childhood (Cebotari, Siegel & Mazzukato, 2016: 96-107; Zheng, 2016: 141-157; Chen et al., 2013: 693-722; Wen & Lin, 2012: 120-136); transnational families (Nazarska & Haidinyak, 2011: 119).

One of the contemporary scientific interpretations of the childcare problem with parents in the context of labor emigration is the concept of transnationalism. In other words, emigration is understood as a bipolar space with an emphasis on the interconnection and the establishing of relationships with people in the home country (Morokvashich, 2012: 63).

The research interest is an encounter with the problems that are slightly explored in Bulgaria, but the issue itself is more than actual and acute. There is a bias towards an increasing share of labor migrants who leave their children with other persons. These problematic issues are...
considered at different levels, both nationally and internationally. In the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2020), the risk of child rights violations is differentiated as possible: in migrants’ children; unaccompanied children and children left behind by migrant parents. Although the problems in the first two cases are widely discussed and find a search for practical solutions to their social development, the problems of children remaining in the sending society have only begun to be considered in recent years, and is determined in different ways.

Euro orphans – children, mostly from Eastern Europe, who grow up without their parents. According to data from non-governmental organizations (Feldman, 2013; Lone Children of Eastern Europe) in Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland, there are between half and one million orphans; in Moldova, more than half of the children grow up under such conditions and in Ukraine, they are more than nine million.

The abandoned children – children are left behind and the care is eventuated by neighbors or other acquaintances and in some cases even complete strangers. Eventually, the children are being accommodated in different social services. There are also cases where children are left behind at birth and their parents emigrate without them (Russia, China, etc.). In this case, children are sheltered in different social services. These children are also the ones left alone and most often the older child takes care of the younger one, while their parents work abroad for a certain period of time to provide subsistence.

Children left behind in the country of origin by parents living and working abroad (Children left Behind) – the concept is of English origin and became relevant in the field of socio-pedagogical work as a result of a 2009 debate at the European Parliament, and according to data from UNICEF presented in 2010 (Garza, 2010: 37) about the negative effects observed in cases of children left behind by parents who live and work abroad. The issue is distinctive not only in the European Union but also in countries like Russia, China, etc.

Children “stars” – it was found that in Bulgaria, especially in small inhabited places, too often children with parents abroad have changed social status and have bigger financial opportunities than their coevals, placing them at a different position. This is particularly noticeable in living areas where there is a high rate of unemployment and poverty.

Children at risk – in Bulgaria governmental (State Agency for Child Protection) and non-governmental organizations (Partners Bulgaria Foundation, UNICEF, etc.) determine this contingent of children ambiguously. State Agency for Child Protection research shows that children with parents living and working abroad are a potential risk group that needs special protection and support (State Agency of Child Protection Activity Report). For the children of labor migrants, there are no planned measures in the National Strategy for the Child 2008-2018 to guarantee their rights. No action is envisaged outside the children’s risk groups specified in the Child Protection Act, although there are other vulnerable groups of children. In this relation, specific precautions are discussed and elaborated on methodological guidelines for working with children left behind by parents who work abroad, as activities for guaranteeing the rights of those children (in the Strategic Plan of SACP for the period 2014-2016). They are differentiated as children at risk who need social services and are raised not by statutory social services but by relatives or close acquaintances. The children are in a “detrimental combination of a practical lack of parental control - on the one hand, and on the other, higher financial resources available” (Kolarova, 2012: 100).

As a counterpoint to this thesis is the findings of conducted researches (Gencheva, 2003). The results conclude of an earlier maturity and empowerment of the children and a denial of the negative effects as a result of the parental absence (Kabakchieva, 2014), along with greater responsibility, self-dependence, and motivation for learning achievements of some children.
The observed dynamics of parenting patterns and their specific manifestations, in cases where one or both parents are abroad for a certain period of time and have entrusted the care of their children to another person in their homeland, reveals a new phenomenon that accompanies the life of the modern man, and it is not yet terminologically specified. Its diversity and the possibilities for a different aspect of the theoretical consideration is related to the introduction of the term “paraparental care” (Kovachka, 2017: 40), which specifies the problems and allows its place in the disciplinary field of the social pedagogy. In the study, the paraparental care is defined as close to the parental, implemented in conjunction with parents, other subjects of upbringing and care but with a different purpose (in terms of rights, the scope of subject interaction, emotional proximity). The conjunction is considered as an opportunity to reconcile parenting with others who take care of the child during the absence of the parent(s). Significant are the socio-pedagogical aspects of this phenomenon.

Invariably the absence of parents in day-to-day child care and young people has a great impact on socialization and their future development. The contingent of children and adolescents in Bulgaria whose parents are abroad has grown dramatically over the last decade. There is no official information on the number, the period of time, and who performs the parental duties while parents are absent.

The only representative study on the issue was conducted by UNICEF in 2013 by the Risk Monitoring Foundation, the Association for Social Research and Applied Research Practices, professors, and students from the Sociology Department of the Sofia University (Haralampiev, 2013). The obtained data shows that 271,782 or 22.8% of the children (0-18 years old) in Bulgaria have a parent who is living abroad for over than 3 months. However, it is not explicit what criteria are used to choose this time range for the absence of the parent. The most affected region is the North-West with 43.8%, followed by the South-West, where a quarter of the children are in the surveyed situation. For both regions, there is a tendency the smaller children (up to 5th grade) to stay in the country. The impression is that a large part of the south-western living areas, for which a high share of labor emigration is characteristic, are not covered as data sources.

Another study on the subject was conducted in 2014 by Partner Bulgaria Foundation in partnership with seven foreign non-governmental organizations in ten municipalities with qualitative research methods with a total of 186 participants, of which 77 children and 107 adults. The objective is to outline specific peculiarities and national tendencies in the problems of children left in the country by their parents who live abroad (Support for children left in Bulgaria by parents living and working abroad). Among these are the following main groups: difficulties related to academic achievements and accomplishments; organizational and administrative difficulties; financial difficulties.

The problems of children with parents abroad are often multiplied and have negative effects on their personal formation, which in the case is manifested in their behavior even at young age. An illustration of this according to research by consulting companies (Beleva, 2016), shows that one out of four young people in small towns refuses to look for a job because they rely on the fact that the parents who work abroad will send money. According to data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Bulgaria is second only in the growth of youth unemployment in the European Union, and young people in the country are among the youngest entering the labor market. In addition, it is very worrying that eight out of every young person is planning to emigrate, and that over a quarter of the young people are interested in temporary labor emigration (National Youth Strategy 2010-2020). This aspect of addressing the issue raises a number of questions about the social inclusion and professional realization of young people with migrant parents and the possibilities of integrating child protection and social services for young people so as to provide prevention and social pedagogical support mechanisms.
2. Research results

The raised problematic issues provoked the choice for a target group – 14 young people to conduct the field or empirical study with. This choice is deliberate, i.e. it is considered that:

- These young people have “taken the path to the future” of their realization and have outlined goals and perspectives for development;
- They have overcome the separation with their parent(s), finding a support from something or someone;
- They have already developed a personality and can cope with the experiences and emotions generated by the absence of one or both parents; they have overcome the effect of the separation trauma on the one hand, and on the other hand have felt the influence of paraparental care during their childhood;
- They experience a peculiar catharsis provoked by the questions of the semi-structured interview, which implies focusing on specific problem situations;
- They are at majority age and have a developed reflection on their family and their forming during the period when their parents were abroad.

Criteria for research contingent inclusion

In the attempt to an in-depth study regarding the problems of raising children, who spent most of their childhood with parents abroad, random students were selected by declaring their willingness to participate. The latter is the “snowball” method, and participants can bring their acquaintance or a friend in the same circumstance and wishes to join the survey.

Criteria for exclusion

The base of those who perform parental functions, in some cases, may experience a number of adjustments as a result of the changing social environment (more than one parent, single parents, etc.) and it is impossible for a researcher to comprise this diversity. Therefore, only data obtained from all-members-families shall be used here for the purposes of the survey, otherwise, other risk factors that may affect the formulated summaries are observed. Under these criteria, two of the interviews further will not be discussed. However, I ought to point out that they contain quite valuable information regarding children’s abilities to overcome risks in cases of domestic violence with one of the respondents, and the use of illegal drugs with the second.

Research method

The interview, as a choice of the research method, is provoked by the need for confidentiality, opportunities, and it gives the focus on important aspects of further analysis. For the purpose of the survey, a questionnaire containing 48 questions has been developed, with the help of which a semi-structured interview was conducted. The average duration (diagram 1) of the interviews is 16 minutes.
Hypothesis: It is expected that the absence of the parent(s) causes changes in children’s social maturity.

Empirically verifiable results:

- In case of older siblings, the absence of a parent generates changes, making them more independent and responsible, they have to play the role of the parent, to take the parenting functions, which is something very unfamiliar to them.

- Students who are materially satisfied by parents working abroad, change their views on labor socialization in negative aspect, and do not want to start work to earn an extra income;

- It will be observed in young people a strong wish and desire for a labor emigration as a result of the parent’s example and a pursuit of higher material standards abroad.

Criteria for analysis:

- Choosing a personal perspective;
- Specifics of socialization.

Characteristics of the sample

From credibility’s point of view, it is important the respondents are reporting that the topic is quite delicate and they try not to think about it because this reflection provokes negative emotions. They also share to know colleagues and friends who grew up with labor emigrant parents, but who most definitely refuse to talk about this period of their lives. The survey meets the requirement of communicative validity (Bijkov & Kraevski, 2007: 129), the information was received personally by the researcher.

As far as the qualitative research methodology (Bijkov & Kraevski, 2007: 147) is not the obliged to conduct a quantitative sample, 14 young people, aged 20 to 24, participate in the empirical part of the present study (Diagram 2).
The parents’ absence duration, which the respondents declare, is up to one year for eight respondents and more than one year for seven of the surveyed.

Respondents from small and large settlements (64.3% of the city and 35.7% from the village), from different ethnic groups (90% Bulgarians, 10% Roma), national (90% Bulgarians, 10% Serbs) and religious (50% Christians, 20% Muslims, 30% others), with different family status (single 85.7%, married 14.3%), of different gender (women 85.7%, males 14.3%).

Two of the respondents report that their parents had already taken a decision on re-emigration, which is often motivated by life events: “because he suffered a severe accident”, and he had been recovering for a long time, also because of “health problems” of close relatives who they had to take care of. Six participants say their parents have made decisions about permanent emigration.

In most cases, the absent parent is the father (Diagram 3). Of particular interest for the study are the three cases in which both parents are absent.

In the role of caregivers for the surveyed are as follows: for six respondents – the grandparents; for two of them the mother is also in Bulgaria, but the surveyed prioritize their grandparents as the ones who give the necessary care; with four, the remaining caregiver is the mother; with two – the father; and one – the aunt. However, there is a case where there are no trusted persons to perform the parental functions.

With regard to the family members: Eight of the respondents report having a brother, three sisters, one of whom tells that the parent role was performed by the older brother. One of the respondents has a twin brother and a sister. One of the participants in the study is an only child in the family, although she has two sisters from the father’s other marriage.
Three of the female students engaged in the research, who have grown under the conditions of paraparental care, are already married and have children – one child is 5 months old, the other 5 years, and the third one is a year old.

One respondent is of Roma origin; one of them is a foreigner; one confides of a drug addiction; one of the observed cases is of an under-aged mother; two of the respondents admit that there is a divorce in the family.

3. Changes in children

The majority of interviewed youths report changes that happened in them, which are determined rather positive:

“I became more earnest, more responsible for the things I do. I had to take care of my younger sister, and pay more attention to her because she is constantly having conflicts at school and I was the one who helped her because my mother worked all day and was not at home, and couldn’t pay enough attention to both, so I had to watch after my sister while growing” (V.Y.).

“Yes, I’ve changed. I am stronger and more independent. As a matter of fact, since we live alone with my grandmother, all responsibility falls on me – for anything. I am responsible for everything at home” (B.V.).

“I now rely more on myself. When I get home, I don’t wait for my dinner, I cook it. I am more responsible and know that if I have duties, I have to do them” (S.M.).

“It is important that you are self-reliant. So I can be able to organize things, and be in charge of my life, and become responsible” (G.D.).

When generalizing these cases, parental absence can be said to accelerate the socialization of adolescents, who have grown “socially” rather early as a consequence of the new functions they had to take. From socialization point of view, the conclusion is: the socialization is an active role and functions implementation.

Others are sharing their observations but for another type of change:

“I have friends whose parents work abroad, and those friends are no longer so friendly, they are incommunicative” (V.A).

It is certain, that in the lives of children with parents – labor migrants we witness both – positive (child growth, adaptation, more self-reliant) and negative changes (to do foolish things, to rebel, to think that the parents will never return, to communicate with the older ones that make him drink, smoke, and to ring the church’s bell in the village as to announce someone’s dead).

“My brother was more attached to them. His behavior changed. Teachers began to complain. He became more closed and aggressive. They even claimed he had tried to jump out of the window” (D.K.).

In the critical situation of absent parents, respondents indicate that they have personal qualities they have not demonstrated so far - assertiveness, self-analysis, responsibility, etc.

4. When the child becomes the parent

“I had to grow up very fast. I had to look after my sister, to guide her at school, to help her dress, for her homework, even what to put in her school bag” (D.Y.).

“He is doing great as a brother and as a parent, and he has a lot of responsibility. Sometimes I make it hard for him, but it’s because after all he isn’t my parent and has no rights to tell me what to do” (G.D.).
“I am responsible for my brother – to look after him, to cook, to laundry. I was like his mother, even though I am not that older than he is. I feel like an adult. He is younger and I feel that I have to protect him, I was looking after him. It was difficult until he got used to my new role. When we are young we don't realize what we are doing. And the life - one day we have money, one day we don’t, there was no one I could complain to, no one to ask for advice. It was really awful. I had no idea what to do. It happened out of the blue” (D.K.).

“I wasn't prepared to be a parent. It was hard. I had to look after my younger sister, so I was the person who was responsible for her and saw her growing up” (V.Y.).

Undoubtedly these words show the absence of parental experience in respondents and the inability of a child to be a parent. We acknowledge the hypothesis that in the case of older siblings the absence of the parents causes changes in them, they become independent and responsible, by having to take the role of their parents. Nevertheless, this is something completely unknown to them. At the same time, the younger children in the family are striving to deny this new role of their sibling by trying to preserve the previous role in the family (brother, sister).

5. Life situation of labor migration ambition

Most participants are definite that they do not want to emigrate. “I am certain not to leave because this is our home. No matter what life is in our country, no matter how much people hate living here, I was born here and will stay here forever” (V.Y.). “I don’t think that I will like an emigrant’s life. Living in Bulgaria is better. But honestly, I don’t know what will do when I have a family one day” (P.G.).

Some of them have been with their parents abroad, and yet they defend strongly their position. “I’ve been abroad already, and I’ve been working. It’s hard, but we earn more money. I want to work what I have studied for, here in Bulgaria, and more specifically in my village” (G.D.), “I do not want to go abroad. Here I look after my grandmother. I have no desire of going abroad” (B.V.).

However, others have heard about life abroad only through the stories of their parents. Despite this beautiful reality that parents describe, the children do not want to follow them. The reason for this is because they have already made friends, they have jobs, and have chosen to go to university, and are motivated to succeed in Bulgaria.

Two of the interviewed males show a desire to work abroad with the perspective “to get a job” (G.P.) and “to earn money” (V.H.), “until things in Bulgaria get better and become a good place to live in” (V.H.).

A desire to live abroad is seen in other three of the interviewed, but they insist that they will not go “without the child” (S.G.), and “if I must leave I will take my child with me” (S.M.). Subsequently, it is a proof for the difficulties they have experienced in parting with their parents and at the same time understanding that life requires difficult decisions, and if they have to, then they will seek opportunities abroad.

Two of the students are already mothers, and this altered living position inevitably leads to differences in their worldview and orientations seen not only in the eyes of the young person but also in the eyes of the parent. One of the people surveyed has a split view: “I want to stay here because I feel much better in my country” and later “I think I have no perspective here after I graduate, not with them” (D.J.).

It is particularly impressive the expression at the end – “not with them” (considering her parents), not with those who have entrusted her and her sister to the care of the grandmother when she was in first grade.
One respondent decides to leave, looking at it as an “adventure” and an opportunity to “make money” even though she has already been with her parents abroad and she did not like. She says, “It’s really bad to see where they work and the conditions they work in. watching where work and what they do. I can honestly say that to live in our country is far better. The conditions there are terrible” (D.K.).

“I was expecting and thinking that my parents would be happier when earning more money. But it turned out they were very angry all the time for not having money” (D.K.).

6. Call for support

Two of the respondents do not feel the necessity of other people or institution support because they have the support of their parents, although they live apart, and they also have many friends to rely on. In contrast, others say they would seek help from close relatives, friends or even a professional:

“I need a person I can confide in, to share stuff, to talk to him. Maybe a psychologist” (S.M).

“Maybe a psychologist or my relatives – my aunt or uncle” (D.Y).

“If your closest people do not support you it’s almost impossible some stranger to do it. My relatives could help. I might talk to a psychologist” (B.V.).

“The people around me can help, my cousins, my boyfriend” (S.K).

“If I was a student I would seek support from a pedagogical counselor at school” (B.V).

“I should ask my parents for support, but I prefer a friend” (P.G).

One of the interviewees whose both parents work abroad said that would not seek support from relatives but from friends. Realizing that this support is different and inadequate, she states that it may be good to be fostered by another “family with a mother and a father” (D.K). No matter how difficult this recognition is, the interview shows the difficulties of the current student in a long period of her childhood, to provide a paraparental care and to support her younger brother. When asked if a part of this support could be provided at school, she said that “we can`t - our teachers don`t care and can`t wait for hours to pass by (D.K.)."

In more general terms, there is a need to support children in a situation of paraparental care, with the help of important family members (when possible). The care could be provided by competent professionals, who can work in a preventive and corrective plan with children and adolescents within the family, and if necessary, outside.

Another respondent says there was: a “period when my brother was abroad, not with my parents, but in France. I had to go to the hospital and there was nobody with me. I was alone and it was very difficult. There was no one to support me” (G.D.). In this particular case, the risk the child was in was too great, and this shared life situation demonstrates the need for protection in such cases and the protection of children’s rights. Further is clear that the support is sought from: “relatives, from my aunt, and maybe I can get support from someone more concerned at school”.

It is evident that in some cases, when young people have felt the concern of their teachers, they would turn to cooperate with them, unlike others who think this is impossible, because of the formal attitude to their out-of-school problems “they were trying to not remind us” (D.K.) – that the parents are abroad.
7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the shared by the interviewed characteristics of paraparental projections on young people should be emphasized:

- **Positive changes:** increased self-dependence; greater responsibility; faster adaptability; developed organizational skills; formed work habits; decision making; internal cohesion.

- **Negative changes:** a desire to communicate with older (more experienced), which sometimes leads to a desire for imitating socially unacceptable patterns; tendency to deviant actions; introversion; oppositional behavior.

- **Young people are already working to be materially independent and not to burden their parents financially, as they have done so far (10 of the 12 analyzed are already working);**

- **Young people eager to start a family; 3 of them already have families of their own, and two of them have children.**

- **The child who took the role of a parent experiences difficulties to implement it and performs care in conditions of inadequate experience, uncertainty, ambiguity/absence of goals.**

- **Rejection of parental care expressed as an ambition of independence and self-dependency by young people.**

The constantly increasing share of labor migrants sets a number of unresolved problems in different societies, considering their geographical, ethnic, religious and socio-economic peculiarities. Concurrent, despite these specifics, they all become sending societies that, by sending human resources, transform many elements in their social system. The effects of this change are becoming visible in the social-learning reality, in which permanent mechanisms should be found for their observation through preventive and corrective action.

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