

Grasping Parental Behaviours through the Eyes of Romanian Adolescents Affected by Parental or Family Migration

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Abstract

Romanian labour migration determined changes in family structure and life, whether one looks on temporary or permanent migration patterns. Within this larger framework, we introduce results of an empirical study exploring the influence of parental or family migration, but also of family residence (urban or rural), on views about parental behaviours and family support in two groups of Romanian adolescents, namely left behind in the home country and migrants with their families. Results highlight some variations of adolescents' views about parental behaviours and family support, according to parental/family migration and family residence, but they mainly account for tendencies and may not be interpreted categorically. Nevertheless, the present study suggests that parents' migration associated with the decision of leaving the children behind in the home country can potentially disrupt parent-child relationships, and determine more negative perceptions of parenting behaviours than in the case of whole family migration.

Keywords: parental or family migration; parental behaviours; family support; Romanian migrants; adolescents.

Abstract

Se si osservano i modelli di migrazione temporanea o permanente, la migrazione della manodopera rumena ha determinato cambiamenti nella struttura della famiglia e della vita. In questo quadro più ampio, introduciamo i risultati di uno studio empirico condotto su due gruppi di adolescenti romeni, gli uni lasciati nel paese di origine e gli altri migranti con le loro famiglie. Lo studio esplora l'influenza della migrazione di madre e padre oppure familiare, ma anche della residenza della famiglia (urbana o rurale), sulle opinioni di questi adolescenti, circa i comportamenti dei genitori ed il sostegno della famiglia. I risultati mettono in evidenza alcune variazioni rispetto alle opinioni degli adolescenti, ma rappresentano soprattutto tendenze e non possono essere interpretati categoricamente. Tuttavia, il presente studio suggerisce che la migrazione dei genitori associata alla decisione di lasciare i figli nel paese di origine possono potenzialmente distruggere le

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relazioni genitore-figlio e determinare percezioni in merito ai comportamenti genitoriali peggiori rispetto al caso in cui la migrazione coinvolga l'intera famiglia.

Parole chiave: migrazione familiare o dei genitori; comportamenti genitoriali; sostegno alla famiglia; migranti rumeni; adolescenti.

1. *Introduction*

The background of this contribution follows two theoretical paths: the first covers issues associated with Romanian recent migration flows, which determined changes in family structure and life, whether one looks on temporary or permanent migration patterns; and the second briefly reviews studies focusing on the role of parental behaviour and family support for children and youth in relation to school and life success. As the present study specifically approaches parental behaviour and family support among Romanian adolescents left behind, but also among Romanian migrant adolescents in Italy and Spain, the review relies mainly on specific research and reports.

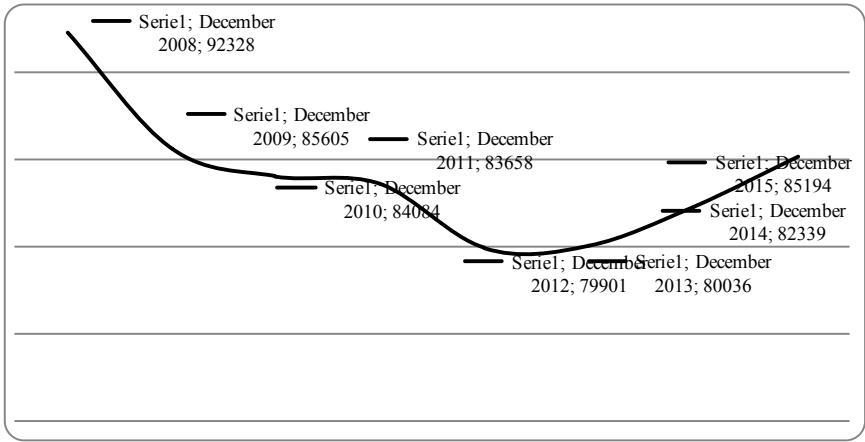
According to sociological studies (*e.g.*, Sandu, 2006; 2009; 2010), Romanian migration can be analysed as a series of several flows, which have different characteristics and motivational mechanisms: the first flow consisted in permanent emigration, had strong ethnic dimension (*e.g.*, Germans' emigration from Transylvania), and covered the nineties; the following flow started after 2001, consisted mainly in temporary and circular migration, but also included a rather large number of individuals who chose migration as a life strategy; the period 2001-2006 represented the peak of Romanian migration, but the phenomenon continued after EU accession in 2007. However, according to EUROSTAT and national statistical data, Romanian migration outflows within European Union stabilised and even diminished from 2008 to 2012. Romanian emigrants' preference for Italy and Spain as main countries of destination remained relatively stable. An important number of Romanian emigrants from the first and the second outflow waves described above decided to settle in destinations countries, but some adopted circular or temporary migration patterns. Regardless the type of migration decision, most Romanian migrants may be considered transnational migrants (Faist, 2000; Pries, 2004 for more complex descriptions of migration types, including transnationalism), as they develop life-strategies that consider the intention of returning to home country, changing migration patterns, reunification of families by including those left behind into their migration plans. There-

fore, they would rather preserve cultural differences although having the aim of social inclusion into the host society and would also keep close ties with the social space of their home country.

One of the effects of Romanian migration flows – often described in the media, but less covered in social research – is the large number of children left behind in the home country by their migrant parents. The scope of the phenomenon is still considerable in Romania: official statistics of Romanian National Authority for Children’s Rights Protection and Adoption show that the number decreased slowly in the last years, but the figures remain high (see also Figure 1). Data collected by non-governmental associations estimate even higher numbers of children left behind, and consider that parents do not inform responsible local authorities when they decide to leave the country and place the children in the care of extended family (*e.g.*, Toth *et al.*, 2008, reported a total number of 350,000 children left behind by migrant parents, aged between 0 and 18 years; according to the report, one-third of these children had both parents involved in labour migration at the time).

Several reports and research studies (*e.g.*, Toth *et al.*, 2008; Hatos, 2011; Robila, 2011; Popa, 2011; 2012) indicate a rather mixed picture of social, family and educational effects determined by parental migration: more specifically, the economic situation of the family improves and

Figure 1. The number of Romanian children left behind by migrant parents: December 2008 – September 2015 *Source of data: National Authority for Children’s Rights Protection and Adoption, Romania, <http://www.copii.ro/statistici/> (author’s graphic)*



therefore children have better access to resources (including educational means), but on the other hand, they experience higher levels of depression and weaker social contacts than their peers, being at risk in terms of psychological health. Children left behind also tend to underachieve in school or even to dropout. However, it seems that underachievement is rather overestimated among this group, as if controlling confounding variables, the difference between students left behind and their peers tends to be non-significant.

Although some Romanian migrant parents leave their children in the home country, an important number of children migrate with their families, but their migration experiences within and outside the family environments is scarcely reflected in the literature. The situation of Romanian migrant children in Italy and Spain, for example, is still to be researched in detail, as few comprehensive reports are available. In a recent edited book, G.G. Valtolina and his colleagues (2013) present the findings of a large research study on Romanian migrant children in Italy and Spain, focusing not only on school performance, but also on personal identity struggles and issues related to social inclusion. They report strong attachment of Romanian migrant families to education and school, seen as a mean to increase self-esteem and facilitate social inclusion for their children. Authors also emphasize migrant parents' role in mediating the relationship between children and teens and the host society, although they also mention the pressure for autonomy in decision-making of migrant youth, which challenges parental authority. In addition to the group of Romanian migrant students, the book also includes information on remigration of Romanian children together with their family, after a failed migration episode, and reflects on different social and educational challenges that must be overcome in these specific cases. This particular group of Romanian students also deserves more attention in future studies, as they are confronted to specific difficulties after the return in the home country, especially because of the differences among educational systems across European countries.

Familial environment and parental behaviours are consistently related to children's psychosocial adjustment (Schoon & Parsons, 2002), determining school attainment even among adolescents (Feinstein & Symons, 1999). Some parenting practices, such as over-controlling, may affect academic success and competence (Lakshmi & Arora, 2006), while other discipline strategies, such as autonomy-granting, predict higher levels of self-esteem and, therefore, determine better school adjustment (Lansford *et al.*, 2010; Bush *et al.*, 2002). Family-related variables are certainly rel-

evant in explaining students’ academic outcomes and progress, and as a consequence parental engagement and support constitute important research interests in educational literature (Brock & Edmunds, 2010).

This contribution stresses the idea that family-related variables may be even more relevant for understanding school and life choices of adolescents affected by parental or family migration, as well as for explaining the level of their educational and social inclusion. Accordingly, the study attempts to answer two research questions: how does parental, respectively family migration affect Romanian adolescents’ perceptions of parental behaviours and overall family support; and whether family residence plays a role in determining variations in adolescents’ views. Data on adolescents’ perceptions about parental behaviours used for the present study have been partially reported elsewhere (Popa, 2012), but relevant information on overall family support is newly added.

2. *Methods*

2.1. *Participants*

The study included Romanian adolescents attending high-schools (N= 316), who were either left behind by their migrant parents (N= 144) or migrated with their families in Italy and Spain (N= 172). Participants’ age ranges from 15 to 18 years ($M= 16.62$; $SD= .76$), and sample’s structure according to family residence is rather balanced (see Table 1 below). At the time of data collection, Romanian students left behind in the home country by their migrant parents attended upper-secondary educational institutions in two North-Eastern counties, and Romanian migrant students were enrolled in mainstream Italian and Spanish schools. All migrant students participating in the present study also attended elective classes of Romanian language, culture and civilization,

Table 1. Participants: family migration status and family residence

Family residence	Family migration status		Total
	Children left behind	Migrant children	
Urban	66	69	135
Rural	78	103	181

supported by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, and they have been contacted within that specific program.

2.2. Instruments

Perceptions of parental behaviours were explored with an adapted version of *Parent Perception Inventory* (PPI; Hazzard *et al.*, 1983), which consists in eighteen items grouped in two subscales, describing positive (*i.e.* positive reinforcement, comfort, talk time, involvement in decision-making, time together, positive evaluation, allowing independence, assistance, and nonverbal affection) and negative (*i.e.*, are privilege removal, criticism, command, physical punishment, yelling, threatening, time-out, nagging, and ignoring) parenting practices. Participants are asked to rate the frequency of each parental behaviour on a 5-point scale (1= never to 5= always), and subscales' scores are computed by summing responses to individual items. For the version used within the present study, reliability coefficients have high values for both subscales: .79 for the subscale of positive parental behaviours, respectively .71 for subscale of negative parental behaviours.

Perceptions of family support were captured with the subscale devoted to family issues (PSS-Fa) included by Procidano and Heller (1983) in their *Perceived Social Support of Friends Family Scale*. The subscale includes twenty dual items (possible answers "yes" or "not", coded with 1, respectively 0), and the score is computed by summing answers to individual items. The reliability coefficient for the version used within our study was .83.

2.3. Procedure

Both measures have been self-administered in collective sessions, with the assistance of the classroom teachers. All participants have been informed about the purpose of the study and on respecting privacy and anonymity when reporting on.

Data analysis was performed through parametric statistical tests: univariate analysis of variance for uncovering interaction and main effects of independent variables, and *t* tests for additional information on significant main effects. For significant effects, estimators of effect size are also reported (η^2 and Cohen's *d*). Some participants did not properly

complete the *Parent Perception Inventory* forms, and their scores have been removed from the analysis of perceptions about positive and negative parental behaviours. However, their results for the second measure were used for corresponding analyses.

3. Results and discussion

The interaction effect of parental/family migration and family residence on adolescents' perceptions about positive parental behaviours is non-significant, $F_{(3, 308)} = .61$, $p > .05$, as well as the main effect of family residence, $F_{(1, 308)} = 1.11$, $p > .05$. By contrast, the main effect of family migration history is significant, $F_{(1, 308)} = 5.98$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Further investigation of this main effect, led to the identification of higher scores for migrant adolescents ($M = 33.67$; $SD = 5.60$) than for adolescents left behind ($M = 31.77$; $SD = 7.32$), $t_{(264.54)} = 2.55$, $p < .05$, $d = .31$.

For perceptions of negative parental behaviours, the interaction and main effects are non-significant: $F_{(3, 308)} = .81$, $p > .05$ (combined); $F_{(3, 308)} = .05$, $p > .05$ (family migration history); respectively, $F_{(3, 308)} = 1.46$, $p > .05$ (family residence). However, one can notice the tendency of adolescents from urban environments to express more critical views on negative parental behaviours.

As reported in some previous Romanian studies on children left behind by their migrant students (*e.g.*, Toth et al., 2008; Popa, 2012), parents-children relationship tend to be affected. In the present study, the group of adolescents left behind from urban areas reported the lowest scores for positive parental behaviours. This effect was also mentioned for other national groups of migrants, and it is mainly associated with the series of departures, returns and short-time reunifications of migrant parents with their children left behind (Smith et al., 2004).

By contrasts, negative parental behaviours are not reported as more frequent by adolescents left behind. However, both migrant and left behind adolescents from urban areas seem to perceive negative parental behaviours as more frequent than peers from rural areas. As suggested in literature (*e.g.*, Creasey & Jarvis, 2013), this may due to substantial changes in autonomy during adolescence and the challenge of parental authority, but also to variation in family relations determined by the close environment; urban families, especially those additionally challenged by minority or migration status, may experience more difficulties in balancing parents-adolescents relationships.

Overall, average scores for perceived family support are rather high for all categories of adolescents included in the study: thus, for adolescents left behind residing in urban areas $M= 16.43$; $SD= 4.71$, while for those residing in rural areas $M= 17.48$; $SD= 4.03$; for migrant adolescents from urban areas $M= 17.55$; $SD= 3.89$, while for those from rural areas $M= 16.63$; $SD= 4.61$. The interaction effect of the independent variables included in the study on perceived family support is significant $F_{(3,315)}= 3.92$, $p< .05$, $\eta^2= .01$, but main effects are non-significant – $F_{(3,315)}= .06$, $p> .05$ for history of family migration, while $F_{(3,315)}= .06$, $p> .05$ for family residence. The group of adolescents left behind by their migrant parents from urban areas has the lowest average score for perceived family support, and these findings may be explained by physical and associated psychological distance, effects which are diminished in rural areas with the support of a smaller, but more cohesive community.

4. *Conclusions*

The findings of the present study offer some insights about effects of parental or family migration on adolescents' perception about parental behaviours and overall family support, but also on differences between urban and rural groups. As previously mentioned, adolescents left behind in the home country from urban areas express less favourable perceptions on family-related variables covered in the study. These perceptions may be equally explained through age and environment-related processes and characteristics, but it is certainly linked to the lack of direct contact between parents and their adolescent children.

Results have to be interpreted rather cautiously, due to study limitations (convenience sampling, self-administered research measures etc.); however, they may provide the ground for larger-scale surveys with Romanian adolescents affected by parental and family migration, and may be used in encouraging balanced decisions about family migration.

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