



Working together
www.asistentasociala.ro

Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială

Review of research and social intervention

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

Selected by coverage in Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI databases

Biological parenthood in foster caring

Daniela Cojocaru

Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2009, vol. 25, pp. 45-61

The online version of this article can be found at:

www.ceeol.com

www.asistentasociala.ro

www.expertprojects.ro

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,

Department of Sociology and Social Work

and

Holt Romania Foundation

Additional services and information about Social Work in Romania
can be found at:

Virtual Ressources Center in Social Work

www.asistentasociala.ro



Biological parenthood in foster caring

Dr. Daniela COJOCARU¹

Abstract

Foster care is a social work service provided to children in difficulty that are entrusted, for a limited period of time, to substitute families that are employed to provide care to these children in their own homes. This practice was brought and promoted in Romania by child welfare non-governmental organizations (1993-1994), and the foster parent profession was officially acknowledged in 2003, when a series of laws regulating the foster parenting exercise requirements were passed; they also regulated the licensing requirements, the licensing procedures, the job description of a professional foster parent, the vocational training curriculum and the minimum compulsory child protection standards applying to children in substitute family care. This article explores the features of the relation between children in foster care families and their biological parents and the aspects of deprivatization of domestic life in foster care families.

Keywords: parenthood, childhood, foster care, deprivatization, professional parenthood.

Introduction

The phenomenon of *deprivatization of domestic life*, understood as a modeling process undergone by the experience-related structure of private domestic life and triggered by public discourse and public debate (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 897), is the basic social construction mechanism, which applies to the modern domestic phenomenon and which employs various medical, social, legal and education jargons. Professional parenthood is an expression of domestic life deprivatization, the foster family being its dramatic manifestation. This particular

¹ Dr. Daniela Cojocaru is lecturer at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University from Iași, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Blv. Carol I, no. 11, tel/fax: 0040.232201155, Romania. She has experience in child protection and sociology of family, research methodology. Has written the books: *Childhood and construction the parentality. Foster care in Romania* (2008, Polirom, Iași) and with Stefan Cojocaru, *The case management in child protection. Evaluation the services and practices in Romania* (2008, Polirom, Iași). Email: dananacu@gmail.com

family environment (the foster family) is permeable not only to institutional prescriptions, disseminated by professionals, but also to representatives from different institutions and agencies, in charge of supervising and monitoring adult-children interaction compliance with institutional normality standards. Depending on the extent to which institutional prescriptions of institution professionals related to the child's welfare are considered by family life, we could speak of family experience *deprivatization gradients*; therefore, the various intervention forms over the parent dyad, from the viewpoint of the systemic family approach pattern, such as: parent education, parent counseling, various forms of family therapy, community-based rehabilitation, etc., provide definitions of the problems that families face and propose solutions to these problems, also offering family experience interpretation lexicons, without *directly* controlling the family environment; they only influence it indirectly, through the consequences of prescription incorporation in family practice and through the manner in which domestic life order is (re)structured.

The family of a professional foster parent/carer (*our note: „asistent maternal” in Romanian, which could be literally translated by “maternal assistant”*) make available to the children protection institution their own home, they ensure the transparency of the relations between the family members and the child and generally all the elements that may significantly influence the child's physical and emotional comfort (relations between family members, family relations with various institutions, with the neighbors, with the rest of the community, etc.): “a professional foster parent is a licensed individual who provides, in his/her own house, the rearing, care and education required for a harmonious growth and development of the children entrusted to him/her” (HG, 679, 2003, art.1).

Foster care is a social work service provided to children in difficulty that are entrusted, for a limited period of time, to substitute families that are employed to provide care to these children in their own homes. This practice was brought and promoted in Romania by child welfare non-governmental organizations (1993-1994), and the foster parent profession was officially acknowledged in 2003, when a series of laws regulating the foster parenting exercise requirements were passed; they also regulated the licensing requirements, the licensing procedures, the job description of a professional foster parent, the vocational training curriculum and the minimum compulsory child protection standards applying to children in substitute family care. The foster care program has been rapidly evolving and has had an increasingly important influence on the Romanian child protection system. Foster care has become, with time, an alternative to institutionalization, being the only way of reducing the number of children found in child protection institutions (placement centers). This meant a dramatic fall in the number of institutionalized children, and a significant development of the foster care network. Foster care practice implementation in Romania gave rise to numerous debates related to the name of this occupational category. Initially called

“social mothers”, the persons who were entrusted children to raise them in their homes and received a special allowance for it were persons whose occupational identify was unclear, as they had to be good parents against an institutional background. The foster care expression suggests that this is a practice designed to provide the child with care similar to maternal care and this term is likely to have been used also because these services addressed especially newborns and very young children, for whom a mother is vital for their proper development. The “social mother” expression is contradictory in itself, and is also a synthesis of the special situation of these persons:

- they were compared to mothers, and the others’ expectations related to their work had to do with their simulating a mother, especially for younger children;

- *the role of social mother* occupied the interface between the private environment (dominated by their *mother role*) and the public environment (dominated by their *social role*); these persons were considered both mothers to the child they brought up (substituting biological parenthood) and *social agents*, as they represented social parenthood, a creation of the children rights ideology, which is promoted and managed by the protection institution;

- before the occurrence of this form of protection (in 1993, thanks to the *temporary family care program* developed and implemented by the Holt Organization in Bucharest and Constanța, and financed by Unicef Romania), the children considered to be in difficulty (abandoned in maternity hospitals, pediatric wards, orphanages) were only protected in institutions, which was at that time the only form of protection developed and supported by the state; the child protection system reorganization was the consequence of Romania’s ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it also familiarized abandoned children care practice with the term of “social mother”; this referred to bringing up and protecting children in the family environment, without however being regulated by the Romanian law. Nevertheless, it was first used by child protection professionals (social workers, teachers, psychologists, etc.) and referred to individuals who raised, in their own house, children abandoned in institutions, thus creating a charitable representation of this occupation, and becoming more easily understood and accepted by the community;

- since it had no specific name in the profession classification code, which meant that those individuals could not be employed, family care practice enjoyed a low social visibility.

Another stage in the process of naming this profession, which addressed especially older children (school children), was the use of the term *foster family*, due to the American influence, which focuses on care within a family and not only on maternal care. Since it has no Romanian equivalent, this name was considered inadequate for developed social practice, although, according to us, it included in a more adequate manner the acceptance of the importance of the roles of all the

family members (we would have used *foster mother, foster father, foster brother or sister, etc.*).

Hence, as the child protection system within a substitute family evolved, a special law regulating this form of intervention became vital, and the term chosen to designate this social practice is *foster care* (our note: “*asistență maternală*” in Romanian, which could be translated by “*maternal assistance*”). We believe that, when this term was chosen, some meanings were lost and others were added:

- the term no longer focuses on temporary care substitution, but on *assistance*, on support, pointing out the fact that no child raised by a foster parent’s family belongs to them, that the responsibility of the child’s biological parents was not suspended, thus distinguishing *biological parenthood* from *substitute parenthood*;

- this phrase rather emphasizes the *maternal* roles, and the fact that it is women who do this job and are expected to fulfill this roles, although parental care also involves male participation; the term *maternal assistant* is somehow improper, since both in Romania and in other countries there are also men carers;

- in practice, there are licensed “*maternal assistants*” who are men, which means that the name contradicts reality, as those men are expected to play *maternal roles*;

- the use of “*maternal assistant*” also generated incoherent approaches related to the importance of the domestic environment of the “*maternal assistant’s*” family, which consisted of an exclusive emphasis laid on the role of the primary carer, to the detriment of the rest of the domestic sphere, which is actually the daily life background of the child placed into foster care; for instance, the roles of the “*maternal assistant’s*” partner in the child’s care, education and development are completely disregarded;

- the name “*maternal assistance*” casts a shadow on family roles and on the partners’ equal involvement in raising the child placed in foster care, and makes it difficult for the child placed in foster care to connect to the rest of the members of the substitute family.

Place of biological parents in raising children placed in foster care

The children protection institution in Romania defines the need of children placed in foster care to stay in touch with their biological family, it drafts specific prescriptions regulating this aspect in a series of documents (child’s rights protection and promotion strategy at county level, the foster carer’s job description, the social worker’s job description, the contract concluded with the biological family, etc.), designed to encourage professional-mediated visits and meetings. Our empirical data show that, despite these prescriptions, the actual involvement

of the biological family into the raising and care of the child protected by the social services, and their interactions, especially of the biological mother, who is considered the most important person, with the substitute family are very uncommon, sporadic, insignificant for the child, who often has a hostile attitude towards his/her biological parents.

“We were watching TV last year and he [our note: the child placed in foster care] was sitting at that table; we were watching „Iartă-mă” (our note: a popular Romanian TV show), we were a little under the weather... it happens, we can't always be in a good mood, my husband was over there, I was over here and my husband was thinking that one of these days she [our note: the TV show producer] would look for the real mother and I said she could suit herself. And he [our note: the child] said ‘I won't look for her’. We were surprised by his attitude” (S3, foster parent, woman, 51 years old, September 2006).

“The police found me on the street. My step father used to beat me and send to bed for money and I wouldn't do that... and my mother wouldn't say anything... she wouldn't take my side, I think she was scared” (S42, child placed in foster care, boy, 12 years old).

- „I was born in Romania, in ... commune
- Did you forget the commune? In this one or in another?
- In another.
- Forget it, maybe you'll remember later. What do you remember, how were things at home?
- The house was a wreck.
- You were both with your mother and your father?
- Yes, they used to fight all day and they used to beat us too...
- I also have two brothers and two sisters. My brother Victor² would cook polenta on the stove and we used to eat only that for days in a row... it was bad and I don't want to get back to them...” (S15, child placed in foster care, boy, 11 years old).

Fragmented identify references of children placed in foster care

We were astonished, in the interviews we took to the foster parents, by the high occurrence of cases where they had very little information on the child's biological parents or other relatives. The statistical sample shows that 236 of the respondents

² All the names of subjects are fictive.

(49.8%) said that “they knew nothing of the child’s parents”, and the rest of the respondents state having scarce and disparate information, like for instance: their current occupation, the reasons for which they abandoned their child, the precariousness of their economic and/or health status, and their information sources are the children they are fostering in their family and/or the social worker who monitors the child’s current situation. This lack of information on the child’s biological family contributes to the creation of a highly fragmented identity, where the child’s history begins at the time of his/her entering the protection system and is very probably reconstructed each time the child enters a new foster family.

“I know very little about the parents; Tiberiu’s mother is dead and he has no father. Victor’s mother is supposed to have disappeared and was probably suffering from a mental condition... this is as far as I remember, the people at the center didn’t tell me, and Marius’s mother is an alcoholic...” (S1, foster parent, women, 49 years old, rural area).

“They found her [our note: the child’s mother] somewhere near V. [our note: the biological mother’s village], I don’t know where exactly, and she [our note: the social worker] visited her. From what I’ve been told she [our note: the mother] knew nothing about him and he has seven brothers and sisters. The house is a mess, it’s probably impossible to live there, she doesn’t have a husband, but she lives with somebody, I didn’t ask any questions about the other children, it’s none of my business... I was just happy he stayed with us. Somebody from the directorate filed a report, but we were happy they would let him stay with us, we got used to him. Every time the phone rings we get scared thinking they’ll come and take him away...” (S3, foster parent, women, 51 years old).

“She [our note: the mother] once came to visit me when I was living at the orphanage. I remember she came with my brothers and sisters... she was wearing those long skirts women wear down there... I don’t remember what we spoke about or how it felt” (S38, child placed in foster care, girl, 14 years old).

- *“Tell me, what do you remember about your parents?”*
- *I don’t remember anything, well, maybe a little.*
- *But didn’t you say she had black hair?*
- *Dark hair.*
- *Dark hair. OK. What else do you remember about your mother?*
- *She would go to the store and buy us snacks. She would also buy us sweets. My father too.*

- *What do you remember about your father?*
- *He used to go to work ... buy us chocolate, snacks,*
- *Who did you get along with best, with your mother or with your father?*
- *Both.*
- *Do you remember anything about your little brothers?*
- *Yes.*
- *You used to play together, what would you do?*
- *Yes. Viorel once climbed a tree and picked pears. Vasilică too.*
- *And what did you do?*
- *I put the pears into a pear basket... I haven't seen them for a long time (S30, child placed in foster care, 7 years old).*

Evasive behavior of biological parents

When asked to talk about their relation with the child's biological family, foster parents usually give descriptions that share a common pattern and that rely on the following elements: general information about the precarious socio-economic status of the biological parents, information judging the latter's poor parental skills as compared to normal standards and a series of *moral judgments*, which are most often accompanied by the description of a hostile behavior of the natural parents, of their lack of interest for their child and an evasive behavior when it comes to their parental responsibilities. The *evasive behavior of parents* whose children are placed in the state's care system, including in foster families, in their interactions with the community or protection institution social worker, may be said to belong to the kind of reactions to the process of institutional regulation and parental and family life in general deprivatization. The child placed in foster care with a foster family, in his/her capacity of direct beneficiary of all the institutional prescriptions, thus turns into a *domestic life deprivatization agent, including as concerns his/her biological family*. This may account for the very small number (8.0%) of children placed in foster families and included in our statistical sample, who actually went to meet their biological parents in the latter's homes, as the presence of the child is associated with an institutional intrusion and control over the biological family.

"As concerns his family, I don't want to criticize his family, but I have to tell you that he [our note: the child placed in foster care] didn't want to see them very much and he still doesn't want to. They have a very poor financial situation. I'm sorry that when we went to meet his family nobody from the directorate joined us; they don't own a house, they live in the grandparents' house, an old two rooms and one hallway house. His mother knew we were coming, because the social worker had called the local hall, and she left her washing undone and left the house on purpose; her bad luck was that

our car's gearbox had broken down and we were still there at 8 pm when she returned home thinking we would be gone; so Ionel got to see his mother. They hug each other and just before we left I told Ionel to hug his mother again, but he didn't want to. His father wasn't there; he şour note: the childŧ has four brothers and was rather cold to his mother; she didn't even invite us in the house, but we didn't need to, because our purpose was not to inspect her house, but they weren't ready; his brother took Ionel inside because he had no choice..." (S12, foster parent, woman, 53 years old, rural area).

Neutrality of encounter locations

According to the data in our questionnaire, only 32.9 % of the foster parents we questioned were present when the children met their biological parents, at the initiative of the DGASPC (General Directorate of Social Work and Child Protection). 59.0 % of these meetings took place at the Directorate headquarters and 41.0 % at the foster parents' homes or in other locations, as for instance the house of child's biological family. Public locations (such as the directorate headquarters, the child's school, parks, etc.) rank first among the foster parent's preferences related to a location where the child placed in foster care should meet his/her biological parents, which are also accepted by the latter. The attractiveness of these locations consists of their *neutral nature, which surpasses any domestic borders*, both those of the biological family and those of the substitute family, especially as the latter enjoys a special care from the foster parent who wants to preserve the security of the family environment borders. When asked if they would agree to receive visits from the biological parents of the children placed in foster care in their own house, 51.5% of the foster parents questioned said they would not agree to it.

"They never visited them şour note: the children placed in the foster familyŧ and I'd rather they şour note: the biological parentsŧ didn't come see them at my place; I prefer the center... they can meet there..." (S1, foster parent, woman, 49 years old, rural area).

"His parents never bothered me when he şour note: Silviuŧ was younger, I would call his mother and she used to come and see him at school occasionally. Now he şour note: the childŧ doesn't want to go and see his mother so often, because he's a teenager and he acts like one. He gets together with his classmates, boys and girls, and they play football, they go barbecuing, or they come here, they play chess in front of our building, or they play

other games, and... it's not very often that he wants to go see his mother" (S37, foster parent, woman, 42 years old, urban area).

"I told him to ask for permission. He's kind of difficult to get along with... I didn't tell you before, but I don't really trust him... this is the truth, I don't really trust him... but in what sense?! It's about the key to the apartment. I don't leave him the key to the apartment, because I told him once, I told him twice, not to let anybody in the house when I'm away, but he did let people in the house just like that. Fortunately, it was family. But I told him, no matter who rings the bell, family or not family (because he knows all my family), you don't open the door and let them in. You just say to whoever rings the bell that aunt Elena [our note: the child calls the foster mother that] will be back in five minutes, in ten minutes or just tell them to call me, but don't open the door. Because... I thought that maybe someday his real mother will follow him and changes her voice or something and he lets her in the house..." (S43, foster parent, woman, 40 years old, urban area).

Embellishing stories about the biological mother

Only three of our interviews with foster parents had stories about the biological parents that failed to meet the pattern described above. Two of them seem to resemble Goffman's (1961/2004) *sad stories*, designed to embellish and repair the status of the biological parent who abandoned his/her child. These stories focus especially on the high parental quality of the mother, since she is most often than not considered responsible for the welfare and well-being of her child.

"Her mother was 18 years old when she had him, and his father 19. His father joined the army, than his mother's parents died and their house was sold and divided between the heirs. She [our note: his biological mother] didn't have a house, she lived here and there. The father's mother took the boy and raised him as she could; she took him to the weekly care center. His mother used to take him out for walks on Saturdays and Sundays, and they raised him like that until he turned 7 years old; but when he turned 7 or 8 they couldn't afford to take him to school... the weekly care center only receives children up to 7 years of age, after that age they kick you out, I heard, but I really don't know the rules. So when he turned 7, his little sister came into this world, she had a different father, and for a year Silviu lived here and there. His paternal grandmother couldn't keep him any longer because of her fragile health. The maternal grandmother had died... and for a year life was tough on Silviu... he stayed with some relatives who used

to fight, as he told me later, and then his mother decided to place him in foster care so he could go to school. She couldn't raise him, she was too poor. It would have been worse [our note: for the child] if she kept him" (S37, foster parent, woman, 42 years old, urban area).

This favorable attitude of the foster parent towards the biological parent, consisting of finding solid reasons for the latter's abandoning his/her child, is related to the assessment of his/her parental and not professional availability and skills by the natural parent, who is grateful to the one who is raising his/her child.

"She was abandoned in the maternity hospital, she got to an orphanage, then her mother took her back, as she felt ashamed of her gesture before her mother living in the country, she kept him [our note: the child] for a while, but she hardly managed, because she lived in a room in a CFR dorm. So she took him to an orphanage, then he spent some time in a center in the country.

Did the girl ask you anything about her mother?

She did. When the social worker asked me to go meet his mother I had to explain everything to her. I took her to a little park, I bought her a treat and while she was in a swing I told her the story of the little duck [our note: one of the standard stories, which foster parents are taught during their training and which they are advised to tell the children]. I thought she would make a scene, but she didn't. I saw it on her face that something changed in her but she was strong.

Has the girl seen her mother a lot?

*No, just twice since I have her *șin* two and a half yearst, on neutral territory, at the Directorate headquarters. I told her to make her [our note: her mother] a nice drawing and write her name under it, so that her mother would remember her by it and she would also see that she could write. But when she saw her mother standing there by my side, the girl came to me and gave me the drawing saying 'mother, I love you!' It was very painful. Of course her real mother had tears streaming down her cheeks, the blood cry. 'Go hug your real mother, the one who gave you birth; she went right away. I felt embarrassed. The impression that her mother made on me was that she was young *șour* note: 18 years old† and reckless. I saw many very young mothers like her when I went to the Directorate headquarters, mothers who had deserted their children, and who had appalling behaviors towards the social workers and the ones raising their children. They had no shred of common sense, but she's not like them. She's a good talker and she's not like the others" (S49, foster parent, woman, 37 years old, urban area).*

Another story reveals the biological mother's good intentions towards the child placed in foster care and the foster parent's admiration towards the biological parent's motherhood skills in caring and providing for his/her other children:

“Since the child is old enough, he's free to go see his mother whenever he feels like it... on holidays, whenever he has spare time, on Saturdays, on Sundays; as far as I'm concerned, he can go visit his mother, I don't stop him. I know both of them sour note: the child's parents and I trust them. I trust both Silviu and his parents, I know that he'll be fine and that nothing will happen when he goes to see them. His mother [our note: Silviu's mother] has a permanent job, is a good woman, has another son, whom she cares and provides for very much together with her current partner. His father also has a job, he's a good man, he... how should I put it... is not an addict, he's not a fighter, he's not a shady person, he lives with the child's biological grandmother... she loves him very much and raised him the first 3, 4 or 5 years of his life... I don't remember exactly” (S37, foster parent, woman, 42 years old, urban area).

The child's hostility towards his/her biological parent – argument accounting for emotional proximity strengthening

Another recurrent issue in the interviews taken to foster parents and the children placed in foster care is the children's hostile attitude or, in the best of cases, indifference towards the parent who abandoned them, which attitude the foster parent uses to strengthen his/her own privileged position, that of emotional proximity to the child.

“I talked to him [our note: to the child], but he wouldn't accept it. I told him: ‘If you leave, we'll keep in touch... ‘No, mother, I wouldn't dream of it’. I used all the resources I have to set another meeting with his mother... his mother never came to see him. He only knows her from the photos we received, ID photos of her and his two sisters, of whom one is married in her turn, the other not; the mother also has a 9 years old boy with her current partner. But he [our note: the child] refused to see those photos... (S6, foster parent, woman, 50 years old, urban area).

“When I took them, the people at the placement center told me that his grandmother had visited him a few times. But his mother never went to see him. And she agreed to his placement in foster care saying that she can't raise him... She probably has money problems, or maybe she doesn't have

a house of her own, who knows... but the child doesn't want to hear anything about her..." (S6, foster parent, woman, 50 years, urban area).

A constant issue which we noticed during our interviews with the children is that they refuse to see their parents, and do not even want to consider returning for good to their biological family.

- *"Do you remember anything about your parents?"*
- *No. They never visited me. They just called me on the phone here.*
- *And what did you talk about over the phone?*
- *I don't remember now.*
- *How many times did they call?*
- *Twice.*
- *And what did they say on the phone?*
- *They said they would come and see me but they didn't. It's all the same for me if they come or not. I don't care.*
- *Why?*
- *Because I just don't care.*
- *What if you were to return to them?*
- *No.*
- *But if they want to take you back?*
- *I won't go.*
- *But if they come for you, what will you tell them?*
- *That I don't want to go with them. If they left me once they can leave me alone now, because I don't want to go with them" (S38, child in foster care, girl, 14 years old).*

Sometimes, the child's refusal to visit his/her parents is a reaction to the abuses he/she had to endure, therefore they often wish to forget this unpleasant experience and get on with their current normal life in the foster family.

- *"Have you talked to your mother since you've been here?"*
- *No.*
- *Have you ever seen her since?*
- *No.*
- *Would you have wanted to see her?*
- *No.*
- *How about your sister?*
- *No*
- *Don't you miss her?*
- *Not really.*

- *Do you want to go back home, to your real parents?*
- *I'd rather kill myself.*
- *Why do you say that?*
- *So that they can torture me? I'd be better off on the street.*
- *Maybe they've changed.*
- *Impossible, I know them" (S42, child placed in foster care, boy, 12 years old).*

Parent identity competition

Returning to the topic of the relations between the biological and foster families, the foster parents identify themselves as the *real parents* of the child placed in foster care, accounting for this status and supporting it by their involvement in the child's raising and by the fact that the child him/herself invests them with this role.

"I've recently found out more things about his health, I know that Ionel is kind of hard of hearing and we went to see a doctor. He also had to have surgery on a testicle; he spent six years in the placement center, and his surgery should have been performed when he was 5... Nobody cared about that, why? Not even his previous foster parent. I undertook the risk [for the medical procedures performed] that a mother usually takes, because nobody wanted to sign the consent form, not even the directorate, I had to take this risk myself" (S12, foster parent, woman, 53 years old, rural area).

- *"Did your mother use to play with you?*
- *No, never... my father either.*
- *But tell me, would you like to see your mother again?*
- *No.*
- *Do you remember your mother's name?*
- *No.*
- *You don't remember? How about your father.*
- *No.*
- *But would you like to see them?*
- *No. Because they abandoned me in the hospital. I remember how long they left me there, five months. They didn't come to see me at all; they didn't bring me anything... The other children beat me... They would steal my food. It's all I remember: that she left me in the hospital, that she didn't bring me anything, and neither did my dad. They didn't come to see me,*

that's why they're no longer my parents. I have new parents here, where I live now (S30, child placed in foster care, 7 years old).

The child holds a strategic position in this parental identity competition between the parents, the current foster parent and sometimes even other previous foster parents, since he/she is the one who establishes who is the real parent.

“Do you know what she told me? ‘Mother, I think that you gave us birth, then you gave us to that mother and now you took us back’ (...) ‘No, my dear, she gave birth to you, but she didn’t have the means to raise you, so when you grow up we’ll go and visit her” (S14, foster parent, woman, 54 years old, rural area).

“It’s hard. I told that I don’t know what I’m going to do when she sees her papers. I pray to God to have the wisdom to explain everything to her as smooth as possible. I don’t know what will happen after that. She already says to me: ‘That mother [our note: the biological mother], the bad mother [our note: the previous foster mother] and the good mother [our note: the current foster mother]’ (...) ‘Don’t you dare take me to them!’” (S49, foster parent, woman, 37 years old, urban area).

Volatile nature of the significant other

The real parent identity is also associated with the description of the emotion experienced by foster parents when their foster children call them ‘mother’ and ‘father’. We were astonished by the children’s readiness to call their foster parents ‘mother’ and ‘father’ “from the very beginning” and by its occurrence in almost all the interviews we took. We therefore think it deserves special attention; we believe it is a consequence of the volatile nature of the *significant other*, which is the result of a special kind of childhood, when the child has to face a series of different parental commitments and resignations, which fracture the child’s identity.

“She called me mother from the first day. We were very moved when she called me that” (S39, foster parent, woman, 32 years old, rural area).

Management strategies applying to the competition between the foster family and permanent family solutions

The natural parent usually competes against the foster parent as concerns their parental identity, especially when there is money involved, like for instance the personal assistant wages for a seriously disabled child, which one of the child's parents receives, and a higher monthly state allowance for the child. We noticed that one of the strategies the foster parent uses (which is probably not the only one) before the biological family or a possible adopting family, is to discourage a permanent family (either biological, or adopting) for the child by belittling and underestimating the child, who is described using the most unflattering attributes, as the foster family wishes to "correctly inform" the potential permanent family of the possible risks or problems related to the child. This "information" also emphasized the fact that the foster parents care too little whether they keep the child or not, since they will receive another one in foster care anyway.

"You can have him if you want! I'll find another! I have a license, I can take another child whenever I want... it's not a problem for me. And I'm generally very rough; I told her [our note: to the biological mother of the child in foster care], as far as I'm concerned... 'if you want him... he's yours', but you don't have the means to raise him, you don't even have electricity'. She came because she heard there's money involved and... she wants to become his personal assistant for a three million [our note: Romanian lei] salary and a double monthly allowance... I told her, I don't blame you for abandoning him, but you've never come to see him for the three and a half years I've had him..." (S35, woman, foster parent, 50 years old, urban area).

Conclusions

The skills and responsibilities of this profession coincide to a great extent with the ones associated to an adult's parent capacity. There are, however, distinctive features between the two. We refer here especially to the contract-based nature of this type of parenthood, which is pointed out by the following aspects:

- this parenthood is based on a monthly salary;
- foster parents belong to an institutionalized system of parental skills training, assessment and certification;
- high parental practices transparency towards the protection institution, which consists of monitoring and surveillance activities carried out by this institution;

- foster parents have to observe a contract with rights and responsibilities deriving from their capacity of employees of the DGASPC;
- the existence in the substitute parental commitment construction of an essential structural component, which is programmed disengagement and which means that the foster parent will be the child's substitute parent for a limited period of time, decided upon depending on the way the child's situation is handled by the protection institution and by the latter's intervention on the child's biological family.

These particular parenthood characteristics also generate a phenomenon of *deprivatization of the domestic order* within the foster family; this family adjusts the definitions and good parental practice prescriptions provided by the child protection institution, in accordance with the optimal parental standards shaped by the child's rights protection ideology, and child care thus becomes the object of a set of standardized surveillance and monitoring procedures that affect the entire family.

From the data we gathered, we can say that the foster child care system equation enjoys an absolutely sporadic presence of the child's natural family, which enables us to conclude that the foster family thus becomes a *parental substitute* and not a co-parenting tool, sharing child care with the latter's biological family. Moreover, we could say that at macro level foster care in Romania, which was initially designed as a substitute of the child care institution (placement center), has turned into an institution replacing biological parenthood.

References

- Bhopal, K., Brannen, J., Heptinstall, E., 2000, *Connecting children: care and family life in later childhood*, Routledge/ Farmer, Londra.
- Brannen, J., O' Brien, M., 1995, „Childhood and the sociological gaze: paradigms and paradoxes”, *Sociology*, 29 (4), pp. 729-737.
- Brannen, J., O' Brien (coord.), 1996, *Children in families. Research and policy*, Falmer Press, London.
- Cojocaru, D., 2006a, „Evolution of foster care in Romania”, *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 15. pp. 75-83.
- Cojocaru, D., 2006b, „Perspective de abordare a competențelor și practicilor parentale”, *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 14, pp. 156-163.
- Cojocaru, S., Cojocaru, D., 2006, „Serviciile de protecție temporară a copiilor aflați în dificultate și managementul de caz. Studiu național”, *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 14, pp. 5-30.
- Cojocaru, S., Cojocaru, D., 2008, *Managementul de caz în protecția copilului. Evaluarea serviciilor și practicilor din România*, Polirom, Iași.
- Cojocaru, D., 2008, *Copilăria și construcția parentalității*, Polirom, Iași.

- Collins, W.A., Madsen S.D., 2003, „Developmental change in parenting interactions”, în Kuczinsky, L.(coord.), *Handbook of dynamics in parent-child interactions*, Sage Publications, pp. 49-66.
- Davids, L., 1971, „Foster fatherhood: the untapped resource”, *The family coordinator*, vol. 20 (1), pp. 49-54.
- George, S., Van Oudenhoven, N., Wazir, R., 2003, „Foster care beyond the crossroads. Lessons from an international comparative analysis”, *Childhood*, vol. 10 (3), pp. 343-361.
- Helander, E., 1993, *Prejudice and dignity. An introduction to community-based rehabilitation*, second edition, UNPD, New York.
- Helander, E., 2004, „Prevenirea abandonului copiilor. Strategii pentru România”, *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 4, pp. 402-411
- Holstein, J., Gubrium J.A, 1995, „Deprivatization and the construction of domestic life”, în *Journal of marriage and the family*, 57, pp. 894-908.
- Mayall, B., 2002, *Towards a sociology for childhood. Thinking from children's lives*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.
- Mayall, B., 2005, „The social condition of UK childhoods. Children's understandings and their implications”, Mason, J., Fattore, T., (coord.), *Children taken seriously: in theory, policy and practice*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London și Philadelphia, pp.79-90.
- Reder P., Duncan S., Lucey C., „What principles guide parenting assessments?”, Duncan, S., Lucey C., Reder, P.(coord.), *Studies in the assessment of parenting*, New York, Brunner – Routledge.
- Sellenet, C., 2007, *La parentalité décryptée. Pertinence et dérives d'un concept*, L'Harmattan, Paris
- Stănculescu, E., 2006, „Globalisations ideologice et pouvoir d'une categorie vulnerable: les enfants «de la rue»”, *Les Sciences de l'éducation pour l'ère nouvelle*, no.2, pp.69-88.