The deprivatization of family and its effects on parenting in Romania

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Abstract

The family is subjected to a variety of increasingly higher prescriptions coming from various institutional contexts, a phenomenon known as the deprivatization of the domestic environment. In this context, the paper presents a qualitative research, based on Grounded Theory, analysing the effects of deprivatization on parenting, on how it is defined, regulated and modelled in terms of respecting the ideology children's rights as promoted by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this approach, our attention is focused on parent education programs in Romania, especially those in the rural areas, bearing in mind the magnitude of the impact of the new ideologies on the traditional Romanian family culture.

Keywords: family deprivatization; parenting; children; parent education.

Introduction

The word "parent" comes from Latin, *parens*, meaning "to give birth", but apart from the biological dimension, which is dominant, the word undoubtedly also has a legal and a moral dimension; as a rule, dictionaries point out the fact that the term "parent is used in order to indicate the biological or the legal status of "mother" or "father" to a person, in relation to a child. The literature in English makes a distinction between the term "parenthood" and "parenting", the former being used in order to indicate the interval of adult life when an individual may acquire the biological or legal status of parent, while the latter is a verb derived from the noun "parent", indicating the process including the care for, protection and supervision of the child during development (Hamner and Turner, 2001, p.9).

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Arendell views parenting as an umbrella term, covering a variety of activities and skills performed and used by the adults that rear a child and care for him/her (Arendell, 1997, p.1). Moreover, parenting involves the skilful and creative use of knowledge, experience and techniques (Horowitz, 1993, p.45).

Parenting is difficult to define, despite the presence in our daily life of practices that are subordinated to this concept; Hamner and Turner (2001) note that, however superfluous it may seem to try to define parenting, the complexity of family life, the multitude and the diversity of family forms – which have generated in their turn a multitude and diversity of parenting arrangements, make it necessary. 'Although in the past parenting meant the fact that somebody was responsible for the children resulting from biological reproduction, nowadays very many types of individuals may be called parents' (Hamner and Turner, p.2).

Parenting – a social construction

In developing the constructionist family thesis upheld by Gubrium and Holstein in their work *What is family* (1990), and in particularising it for the parenting context, Terry Arendell notes that

'*parenting activities are not natural behaviours, deriving from the reproductive capacity, but instead the ways in which children are reared, cared for and socialised (...), dynamic, open and mutable social processes. Multidimensional and complex, parenting involves various behaviours, skills and objectives learned through participation in he social community. Even the ability to care for others and to empathise with them, despite being intrinsic to human nature, are developed through learning. Parent-child relations are formed and maintained through social interaction, and relations and experiences are interpreted and signified' (Arendell, 1997, p.4).*

Parenting is situated in space and time; it does not take place in a social vacuum, being instead 'integrally inter-related and shaped by demographic changes, historical events and patterns, cultural norms and values, systems of social layering, family developments and arrangements, and mutations in the social organisation and structure' (Arendell, 1997, p.4). Referring to the extremely diverse meanings of parenting, almost impossible to quantify in a coherent synthesis, Stacey points out that historical and anthropological studies show the fact that family is 'an ideological concept, a symbolic construction, having its own history and politics' (apud. Arendell, 1997, p.4), and this is also valid for the sphere of parenting, which is probably the most ideologized and politicized area of family experience, aside from that of childhood. In the past two decades, family literature in the United States and Western Europe shows that 'the major

changes in the marital status of the adult population (...), together with other social-demographic changes, have resulted in dramatic mutations in the parenting life arrangements of children and youngsters' (Taylor, 1997, p.69). These mutations overlap with the proliferation of family life arrangements, more simply called "lifestyles" (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) or "non-traditional / alternative family forms".

A number of works in childhood sociology speak about the recent trend in European child welfare policies to shift responsibility fort the child's health, education and welfare from the state to parents and families in general (Mayall, 2005; Bhopal, Brannen, Heptinstall, 2000; Brannen and O'Brien, 1996).

Deprivatization and professionalisation of parenting

This increase in responsibility in private parenting was however accompanied by an intensification of the supervision of parents by experts (Cojocaru, 2008b), and this took the   form of a *pedagogization* of parents, through the definition of parents as partners for the experts in various domains connected to child welfare, and through the promotion of *parent involvement,* of *parent participation*,   of parents' collaboration with various types of specialists in schools, social services, legal services etc. (Bhopal et al., 2000, p.8). This pedagogization of parenting occurred in the circumstances of a 'globalisation of ideologies' (Stănciulescu, 2006, pp.69 - 88) as well as of a promotion of children's rights as stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and their dissemination by child welfare institutions.

In commenting on the extent to which the 20th century has succeeded in being a century of the child for the West – as professed by the title of Ellen Key's book, *The century of the child* – Stafseng (1993) believes that the past century was instead a century of professions aimed at the child, and the child and childhood have become, through these professions, projects of adults. All these new professions (paediatrician, social worker, psychologist, child development specialist, speech therapist, kinesiotherapist etc.), aimed at meeting the child's needs, have established an approach of the child as an entity defined firstly by its needs, featuring a deficit of competencies in relation to the grown-up and requiring protection from the latter (apud. Mayall, 2005, p. 90).

Moreover, in the second half of the past century there was an intense concern shown by psychology and development psychology studies for evaluating the human experience in the area of the interactions between parents and children in terms of parenting skills (Cojocaru, 2008a). The assessment of parenting success or failure   are unanimously constructed – both in the rhetoric of child welfare institutions and in the academic discourse in the area of psychology and social

work – around 'identifying children's needs, establishing whether they have been met, assessing the impact of any shortcoming on the child's functioning and development, describing the nature and probable origins of the difficulties adults have in exercising their parenting roles, and assessing any possible changes' aimed at optimising the satisfaction of children's needs (Reder et al., 2003, p.14).

An important number of parenting assessment studies point to some authors' concern – sometimes considered excessive – for defining a *parenting optimum*, about which it is now known how well it operates in practice, and an appropriate minimum of parenting standard, which would describe the minimum acceptable level of parenting skills (Reder et al., 2003, p.14); however, the general opinion of several authors (Greene and Killi, apud. Reder et al., p.15) about parenting evaluation studies is that 'there are no operational definitions, no quantitative criteria, no standardised tests or established evaluation strategies that would determine to what extent parenting skills comply with, approximate or exceed the [parenting] minimum'. Among the strategies for approaching parenting in professional terms that Romanian social policies in the domain of family and child protection have promoted in the past two decades we find parents education programmes, community-based rehabilitation programmes for children with disabilities, foster care programmes, personal assistance programmes, probation programmes etc. (Cojocaru, 2009). All these forms of professionalisation rely on the transfer of knowledge and skills from specialists towards parents, with the purpose of making the intervention on the child permanent, in compliance with the prescriptions of the ideology of children's rights (Cojocaru, 2011). The education of parents and implicitly this control on parenting practices are a form of promoting children's rights in the domestic environment and of monitoring compliance with them, through education and monitoring means applied by specialised institutions. 'As increasingly more specialised institutions and experts focus on children, an increasingly greater importance is given to the domestic environment and to the responsibility of parents. Indeed, the professional intervention is structured in the ideological discourses of family life and parenting responsibility, designating parents and families as the primary sources of child care' (Brannen and O'Brien, 1995, p.732). We may say that this *Apollonian approach* of child and childhood by social policies, including by Romanian social policies after 1989, have started a massive process of importing vocabularies for signifying the human experience, including the parenting experience, from organisational, institutional contexts to the family environment, resulting in the deprivatization of the latter. In this process, bearing in mind that the social policies in the domain of families in post-1989 Romania have focussed primarily on the child rather than on other social categories (Cojocaru, S, 2009); the child has been the main vector of deprivatization of the family experience, although not the only one, because the child's

welfare justified the interest of various agencies and organisations for the way adults operate in parenting roles. 'As these institutions and agencies assess personal experience, treating the family as a significant or variable explanatory framework, the meaning the family has becomes increasingly an organisational and professional issue' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 905). Nevertheless, the reading of parenting and of family in general through the lens of the concept of deprivatization must not be interpreted as a complaint, but rather as a trait of the Western family in late modernity, where family behaviours, including parenting behaviours, are no longer regulated by tradition or religion, but instead become the object of increasingly specialised institutional attention and prescriptions.

The regulation of parenting behaviours through parent education

The purpose of parent education is to develop the relations between parents and children by encouraging support behaviours from parents and by altering non-productive or harmful behaviours (Small, 1990). Parent education programmes aim on the one hand to develop new, positive, behaviours and to eliminate the behaviours that affect the child's development.

Parenting has become the object of advanced professionalisation and has turned into a public activity, open to the control of professionals and parents, subject to the demands generated by institutional rhetoric (Cojocaru, 2008a; Sandu & Ciuchi, 2010). The empiricist approach of parenting (the trial and error model), so familiar until not long ago, is increasingly seen as amateurish, if not irresponsible (Golding, 2000). Thus, the parent is considered to be the parson who needs to develop his or her parenting skills under the new ideologies, and to undergo various forms of learning these roles. Some parental education programmes explicitly express this, asserting that 'the profession of parent is one of the most demanding, but also one of the most rewarding'. The emergence of parenting as a profession implies important mutations in terms of approach: the parent must be trained, must learn the secrets of this profession, must adapt etc. Thus, the exercise of parents educating and caring for children has become the object of a 'new morality' (Beck Gernsheim, 2003), evaluated from the point of view of the agenda the society develops for the parents; the model of the "reasonably good parent" or of the "good enough parent" promoted by the parent education programmes reflects the different agendas that operate at political, professional and personal level. The parent is not what he/she is, but instead becomes what he/she should become (Cojocaru, 2011).

Methodological framework

Research strategy

Our research follows a research tradition called *grounded theory,* which aims to generate the theory for a process, action or interaction grounded on (or supported by) the subjective points of view of the participants in the research (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008, p.11). The design on the research is qualitative, appropriate for the objectives of our research, that is for learning what is the impact of parent education programmes on parenting. The naturalist type of qualitative research strategy has allowed us to analyse the usefulness of the parenting classes held in the rural environment in the county of Iași. The county of Iași is located in North-East Romania, being one of the poorest counties in Romania and having one of the highest numbers of children included in the welfare system. One of the most important premises of qualitative research is that the social world is neither stable, nor uniform, and therefore there is no single truth in the research field that could be captured in data. Qualitative data is analysed inductively, within flexible methodological schemes, and oftentimes the data analysis stage, in which the researcher looks for shared themes and patterns, takes place at the same time as the data collection stage.

The limits of research

One limit of this research concerns the representativity of the sample. We underline here that the sample is not statistically representative (indeed, we did not set out to have such a sample), as it is an analytical sample built throughout the research in relation to the relevance of the thematic axes taken into consideration. On the other hand, we need to mention that all the subjects that took part in the research had attended the parent education programme "How to become better parents". Only subjects from the rural environment were selected; we do not know how the experience of the parent education programme is perceived by the participants in the urban environment, that is by those who have a higher socioeconomic status, a higher level of education, a better social insertion etc., because the parent education programme was only organised ion the rural environment.

The point of view of the parents was given greater importance than that of professional, whose accounts or statements concerning the programmes, much briefer, were used chiefly in the design of the research strategy.

The effects of the parent education classes on parenting

In the following we shall elaborate exclusively on the topic of the changes in behaviour and in the parents' skills as a result of their participation in parent education classes.

The changes in behaviour are described by parents in terms of their actions in relation to their children. As a rule, in the parents' accounts, undesirable behaviours, penalized by the ideology of children's rights, are recounted in the past tense, while the newly developed behaviours are recounted as actions taking place in the present.

The freedom granted to children

As a rule, parenting is represented in literature (Sellenet, 2007) as taking place on two fundamental axes: *parental control* and *emotional support*, any parenting style being a version of a combination between the two dimensions, in varying proportions. As a result of the parent education classes, the parents describe a change in the way they manage the weight of parental control versus emotional support. Thus, the course seems to have facilitated the increase in weight of the emotional support component, to the disadvantage of the manifestation of parental control. This is accompanied by a greater autonomy and freedom granted to children. The freedom granted to children by the parents who have attended the classes unveils significant changes in the way authority control is managed. As a rule, the strategy of converting the authority relation into an emotional support one, into understanding the child and his/her need for autonomy, freedom and expression, is more common among the parents whose children are between 9 and 16, that is "preteens" and teenagers.

> *'True, I no longer shout at them as much, now they have more freedom, before I used to be on their case constantly, "do this, do that", now they have more freedom; they're no longer exactly the way they used to be; I understand them, sometimes they have a bad day, sometimes a good day; I've changed since I went to this class, I used to be a little too irritable before, I really used to nag them all the time' (S2)*

Communication with the child

Communication with the child (one of the topics discussed during parent education classes, also using video materials presenting certain techniques that adults can use easily in their interaction with the children), is one of the topics frequently brought up by the parents in relation with the changes in behaviour and

skills as a result of their participation in the programme. The participants in the parent education classes have reported a change in behaviours and attitudes concerning communication with their children, as a result of the classes. These changes are focussed mainly on the increase of the parents' *listening skills*, as well as on their *willingness* to listen to their children more. The willingness to listen to the children is manifested both in the *apportionment of domestic time* by the parent, so that it includes a time dedicated exclusively to the child, as well as in the attention given to all the topics the child is interested in.

> *'After I attended the classes, we communicate more, I used to have no patience to listen to him, but now I'm much more flexible, I leave my chores aside șto listenț. I've learned other things, too, such as how to hold back, how to calm yourself, to take a deep breath.' (S8)*

> *'The only thing I'd neglect was the time to spend with them. That's what I used to neglect.' (S12)*

The apportionment of domestic time is associated with the inclusion of a *special time dedicated to the child*, and with approaching the relationship with the child as *a priority for the parent*, who manages his/her daily activities in such a way as to meet the child's communication needs, focussing his/her attention of the child.

> *'Irrespective of whether I have things to do or not, I have time to talk to my child. We sit face to face, we talk. And sometimes she asks me some amazing things... "Why did that thing do this? That other thing, why is it eating that? Why doesn't the crocodile sit in that water?" And if you don't explain to the child why this or that thing... where is its place... For example, she asks me why the dog has such a big tail... Why the pig in the pen doesn't have a tail at all... And things like this... Now I take the time to explain these things.' (S9)*

Another dimension of communication that the parents have reached, apart from the longer time spent with the children (*quantity time*) there are references to the *quality of communication* with the children (*quality time*), which consists in the parent's greater willingness to listen to problems unconditionally, as well as in the parent's concern foe encouraging the child to talk about the experiences that are significant for himself/herself and not only about school experiences. Another interesting aspect of the quality of communication in families is the parents' concern for redistributing the time allotted to each child, so that none of them feels neglected. When the family has a young child, the parent focuses his/her attention and time predominantly on this particular child; the parents' participation in the parenting classes has resulted, according to the parents themselves, in a more homogenous distribution of attention and time allotted to each child,

increasing the parent's availability for responding equally to the needs of the older children.

> *'We talk more, I listen to them more; for example, when they would come home from school, I would not ask them what they had done that day, how they felt, what had happened to them that day; now we talk more and I listen to them more. The girls tell me themselves how their day went, what they have learned new, as well as other things, not only school stuff; I make time to spend time with them, to listen to them as well; since I had the little one, I'd pay more attention to her, and less to the older ones, but now I listen to all of them; before the course I didn't allot them a certain time, just a little, or everything would be on the go, I'd be working around the house and they'd come and tell me things. I didn't really listen to them, not sitting at their level, I'd focus more on my chores, and I also had a job – I would only listen to them on the run.' (S2)*

Parental self-control

One of the significant dimensions of the impact the parent education classes had on the parents in the rural environment with a modest level of education is represented by the application of techniques fore reducing negative emotions and for managing conflict situations. The notion of self-control is associated with individual responsibility: the parent understands that it is up to him/her how a conflict situation is handled, and this empowerment of the parent, achieved during the programme (both by developing his/her reflexive skills, as well as by enriching the range of responses to critical situations), makes the parent more responsible in the family (both in the relationship with the children and in the relationship of the couple).

> *'Before I used to be short-tempered, irritable… I used to slam and bang things all the time... Since I took these classes I realised* I had to control myself *[AN: our highlight]. Things are different. I started being a little more careless... not to may attention to every little thing. Sometimes the little one hits the older one, or the other way around... they're children, they'll make up. Let them be, carry on, what should I do? Go there and smack them? No...' (S5)*

The knowledge acquired during parent education classes are transferable from the parenting area proper into the area of couple relations, where the application of the learned techniques may result in an improvement of communication and in the prevention of conflicts. The techniques acquired during the course, accompanied by the parent's reflexive exercise, may be transferred to various social contexts, interactions and relations; the development of the parent's reflexive

skills is supported by the implicit definitions of the parent education programme, such as the definition of *parent as social agent*, exerting his/her capacity of action *in a family context*. The strategies for controlling situations are used skilfully by the parents in conflict situations within the couple, similar to the contexts of interaction with the children.

> *'I also became calmer and more patient with my husband. I used to yell, I'd get high and mighty and yell, and that was that. No more. I no longer shout, I'm calmer.' (S18)*

> *'Yes, I was in the habit of shouting a lot at the children. No, all the anger... I wouldn't hit them; all my anger... I'd shout. Now, things have changed, and even in the life of our couple something seems to have changed... Things are much calmer... To communicate... Communication matters a lot. If you could communicate with your child and with your husband, with the entire family, everything in life would be OK... in all circumstances.' (S9)*

The accounts given above also show the fact that one of the major sources of stress for women in the family environment is the partner's uncontrolled, aggressive behaviour. Parent education programmes, some mothers say, should take into account the potential for changing the fathers' behaviour as a result of their own participation in the classes. In fact, the literature concerning parent education (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003) often mentions the fathers' evasive behaviour when it comes to such programmes, as well as the fact that parent education programmes often do not have any special offers for the fathers' specific needs. Adapting such programmes for fathers (to their values, their cultural representations etc.) is the more necessary the more traditionalist the cultural model in which parenting is exercised, and the more parenting roles are differentiated according to gender.

> *'I think the methods I've learned have been useful both in my relationship with the children, as well as in my relationship with my husband. I used to have problems with him, and I used to get angry, he would drive me crazy – he used to come home tipsy or he would try to start an argument, and in order to keep the children from seeing such scenes, I'd leave or avoid the situation, I'd calm myself down, anything not to fight. Before I came to this course I'd argue with him, now I leave him alone, I step out, I avoid the fight. In the beginning he wouldn't even let me come to these classes, when I told him about them he said "What do you need them for? What use are they to you?" I really believe that it would be good for some of the fathers to also join at least a few sessions, to see and to learn a few things we don't know and we haven't experienced' (S1)*

Successfully handling critical situations oftentimes involves the change in the parents' representation of those particular situations, so that they do not become a source of conflict in the relationship with the child. In the accounts given below, the parents handle their discontent concerning the child's academic situation by using two strategies: a) *accept the situation* – this is the strategy through which the parent relates to the situation as to a given, outside his/her radius of control, followed by the reconfiguration of expectations towards the child; b) *transfer the conflict from the relationship with the child to the relationship with other social* – meaning the transfer of dissatisfaction from the relationship with the child to that with the teacher. The skills learned during the classes help the parent structure and evaluate the relationship with his/her own child by relation to a larger social context, including in the analysis actors from outside the family that interact with the child.

The techniques for stress management have been assimilated as recipes: stepping away from the situation, counting silently, breathing technique and personal time. As a rule, the parents apply the learned techniques, but one original element we found in their accounts was the clever transfer of techniques and recipes to contexts other than those they had been taught for.

> *'For example, when I get angry, to avoid smacking them I go outside, I go into the garden, I check on things, then I come back and my anger has settled; if I come back before I calm down, then it's big trouble... Before the course I'd smack them from time to time, but now I'm more understanding; this is me, I'm very irritable by nature, and this is what I do, I get out and I leave, to get them out of my sight, or else I take a deep breath and I say "Oh, my God!", and we're past it.' (S2)*

Disciplining children

Of all the undesirable behaviours of the parents that were improved by their participation in the parent education classes, the most often mentioned were corporal punishment (smacking) and shouting/yelling. One significant thing in this context is the rewarding capacity of the new behaviours. Relating to the model of behaviour change presented at the beginning of this paper, the reward capacity of the new behaviours is a guarantee and a motivating factor for maintaining such behaviours.

> *'I have a* different *relationship with the children*. I'm also content in my heart *[AN our highlight] now that I don't yell anymore... You can imagine, when I shouted, half the village could hear me! And the children are more considerate as well.' (S10)*

For the parents that took part in the classes, the most frequent way of disciplining the children was to physically punish them (smacks on the bottom, grabbing by the hair etc.). Many mothers admitted *they did not know any other methods that could be used for directing the child's behaviour*, although corporal punishment was not always recognised as appropriate.

'I didn't really know how to punish them. I'd yank their hair. In class I learned we should apply other punishments. For example, the child did some-thing wrong and I'd say "Today you're not allowed to go out with your bike. No TV." ' (S5)

'Before the course I'd smack their bottom occasionally, sometimes I'd cry myself if I told them to do something and they said no, I'd start crying, I'd be angry and stop talking to them. In class we learned what we had to do, that we had to do it differently, to trick them, to find other methods. Before I didn't know what to do, what methods to find to bring them around; this generation is a bit difficult, they're really short-tempered, especially the young one.' (S1)

The strategies for disciplining children most frequently used by the parents after the course due to their efficiency are a number of *interdictions*, of *restrictions imposed on the child's freedom* by restricting access to things that are important or pleasurable for him/her.

'Sometimes I'd smack them, but mostly I'd tell them off, I'd shout... Now I've tried punishments: no TV, no computer games if they upset me...' (S2)

'If they don't listen they don't get anything, if they won't understand, this is what I apply, punishment; I don't mean beatings, punishment is just a way of saying, it's actually forbidding things they really, really like.' (S2)

Another possible alternative for disciplining is explanation combined with the open expression of the parents' feelings of dissatisfaction towards the child's behaviour. This disciplining strategy is seen by parents as effective in controlling children's behaviour, and at the same time as a resource for avoiding the child's tress in the relationship with the parent.

'I'd beat them sometimes. I'd use the switch or I'd put them in the corner for 5-10 minutes. After I took part in the course I realised this wasn't that good, and I replaced hitting with explanations. I always explain to them why it is wrong, what could have happened. I always explain, but before I didn't have time to explain all these to the children. I'd tell them it was wrong, they wouldn't understand, I'd grab the switch, hoping they wouldn't do it next time. I noticed that they understand better when you talk nicely to them. When I

explain everything patiently they understand and they don't do it again. Now I realise how they feel. Now I understand how much the child suffers.' (S3)

Conclusions

The parents' participation in parent education programmes has a complex effect on them, combining the acquisition of recipe-type behaviours with the development of new skills and abilities. In order to optimise the impact, the curriculum must include *recipe-type prescriptions*, as well as elements that would allow the parents to develop reflexive skills in their relation with the children. Also, the learning activities are better facilitated when they take place in an environment that allows to capitalize on the clinical effect of group sessions and when they have a practical dimension instead of just an informative one.

Fathers are more reluctant to taking part in such programmes due to the dominant cultural model, especially in the rural environment, in the population that has a low level of education; promoting a component of the parent education programme aimed specifically at fathers, with a curriculum adapted to the specificities of the paternal exercise, to the fathers' specific roles and needs, would probably improve their attitude concerning such programmes.

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