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### **AWARENESS OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHILDREN IN ROMANIAN LONG-TERM RESIDENTIAL CENTERS**

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# Awareness of Same-Sex Relationships between Children in Romanian Long-Term Residential Centers

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the prevalence of awareness of same-sex relationships among school-aged children living in Romanian orphanages in late 90s in a sample consisting of 1,353 children (703 boys and 650 girls), ages 7 - 20 years old who were residing in 48 institutions. The results showed that 59% had heard about sexual relations between children of the same-sex. When asked about peer same-sex relationships in their current institutional setting, only 23% responded affirmatively. This 21% decrease in children's responses could indicate underreporting of this phenomenon due to fear of negative consequences and, therefore, reluctance to disclose such sensitive information about these behaviors within the institutions where they were placed. These results provide insight into a topic of children's institutionalization that is insufficiently studied and may be informative for practitioners working with institutionalized children, and policy-makers tasked with improving children's quality of care.

*Keywords:* same-sex relationships, sexuality, long-term residential centers, orphanages, Romania.

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## Introduction

After the collapse of the communist regime in Romania in 1989, there was a dramatic increase in research activity focused on children in long-term residential institutions in Romania. This body of research has provided a wealth of knowledge about children's living conditions in these institutions through several stages of reforms throughout the 1990's and early 2000s. We should note that there are many different terms used for the settings where separated or orphaned children reside: orphanages, care institutions, institutional care facilities, residential care facilities, or long-term residential centers (institutions and long-term residential centers are terms used most often in this study).

Children's living conditions in long-term residential centers have been documented mainly through published accounts that are qualitative in nature, such as eye-witness and incidental reports, stories, and descriptions of the living conditions (witnesses were typically adoptive parents and volunteers working temporarily with children in these institutions, and sometimes researchers) (e.g., Castle *et al.*, 1999; Children's Health Care Collaborative Study Group, 1992; Johnson *et al.*, 1992; Misca, 2003; Rutter *et al.*, 2007; Stephenson *et al.*, 1993). Especially in the early 1990s, children in Romania's long-term residential centers often experienced global deprivation (Gunnar 2001; Rutter, 1998) where their entire range of needs were not adequately met (McCall, 2011). Until the late 1990's, institutions often housed 400-500 children in relatively large buildings (NACPA & UNICEF, 2004) with overcrowding (Stativa, Anghelescu, Palicari, Stanescu, & Nanu, 2002); only subsistence levels of clothing, shelter (Johnson *et al.*, 1992), and food (McMullan & Fisher, 1992); sparse access to toys, educational activities (Rutter *et al.*, 2007) and individualized developmental programming (Children's Health Care Collaborative Study Group, 1992; Groze & Ileana, 1996). Additionally, there were high ratios of children to caregivers (Ames & Carter, 1992; McMullan & Fisher, 1992; NACPA & UNICEF, 2004; Rosenberg, Pajer, & Rancurello, 1992), inconsistency in caregivers due to work schedules with rotating shifts, little interaction between children and caregivers during meals and playtime (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, & Nelson, 2009; Zeanah *et al.*, 2003), and caregivers had little psychological investment in the children due to their lack of communication (McMullan & Fisher, 1992; Rutter *et al.*, 2007). There was also little interaction between children and their peers, with toilet training and mealtime severely restricted (Johnson *et al.*, 1992). Until 1997, medical personnel led the management of these institutions (Castle *et al.*, 1999), particularly in nurseries (cradles) that housed children 0-3 years of age, and there was a lack of non-medical specialists (psychologists, physical therapists, and social workers) (Rosenberg, Pajer, & Rancurello, 1992; Stephenson *et al.*, 1993; Williams, 1990), as well as a lack of teachers in institutions for school-aged children. Among studies of institutionalized children, there is strong evidence that these types of experiences are associated with social, thought, and attention problems (Gunnar & van Dulmen,

2007), externalizing (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005) and psychiatric disorders (Zeanah *et al.*, 2009), among many other health related issues.

In addition to institutional structural neglect (van IJzendoorn *et al.*, 2011), it is important to highlight that, as shown before, many Romanian institutionalized children experienced high levels of physical abuse (Gavrilovici & Groza 2007; Stativa *et al.*, 2002), including severe punishment and beatings by orphanage staff (Rus *et al.*, 2013; Rus *et al.*, 2017c) or peer exploitation (Rus *et al.*, 2017b,c; Stativa *et al.*, 2002). Interviewed alumni of Romanian residential care also showed in their retrospective accounts the existence of a chaotic and frightening institutional environment consisting of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse (Neagu, 2017; Roth, Antal, David-Kacso, Laszlo-Bodrogi, & Mureşan, 2018).

Although we do know that many of these children witnessed or were forced to perform various chores or odd jobs, steal, beg, and/or give away personal belongings (e.g., money, food, clothing, school supplies) for the benefit of older institutionalized peers, and/or they had awareness of or were victims of sexual abuse in institutions (Rus *et al.*, 2017a,b,c; Stativa *et al.*, 2002), less is known about other facets of the interpersonal relationships among institutionalized children in Romania. The present study focused on a topic which has not been addressed in studies of institutionalized children, namely children's awareness of same-sex relationships among peers in long-term residential centers. When we refer to same-sex relationships we define them as sexual in nature.

### *Context for the Present Study and Research Goals*

It has been established that Romanian institutionalized children experienced severe forms of institutional structural neglect and abuse (for a review, see Rus *et al.*, 2017a,b,c). For this study, the authors used data that was collected in 1999 during the period of Romanian child welfare reforms that began in 1990 as the country transitioned from a communist government to a democracy (for a review, see Rus *et al.*, 2011). Through these reforms, the Romanian government sought to comply with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) including (a) informing children of their rights, imposing a ban on all types of physical and emotional abuse by staff or peers; (b) the creation of alternatives to institutional settings (such as family-type centers); (c) regulation of adoptions; (d) support for families to prevent children from being placed in residential care settings; (e) the decentralization or closing of large institutions; (f) and other improvements to caregiving conditions. Consequently, the current Romanian child welfare system includes smaller residential care settings that comply with new standards of care and safety (Bejenaru & Tucker, 2014).

The goal of the current study was to investigate the prevalence of the awareness of same-sex relationships among children placed in Romanian long-term residential centers for school-aged children. Even though the results of our study are based on an outdated reality, the Romanian child protection system has been reformed

since the collection of our data; the topic of this paper might be of interest for practitioners working with institutionalized children, and policy-makers tasked with improving children's quality of care.

## Method

### *Original Study Data Set*

The data for the present study were drawn from the Survey on Child Abuse in Residential Care Institutions in Romania (SCARCIR) which was used in 1999 to aid policy-makers' decisions by providing a database on the forms and dimensions of neglect and abuse in residential care institutions (Stativa *et al.*, 2002). It is a nationally representative sample of 3,164 institutionalized children (1,701 boys and 1,463 girls) 0 – 20 years old ( $M = 9.45$ ;  $SD = 5.39$ ), representing 7.8% of the entire population of institutionalized Romanian children in 1999. The sampling method used a cross-sectional stratified design, with independent samples taken from the eight regions of Romania, with specific institutions chosen by stratified random sampling. Children were selected from 72 *placement centers* (long-term residential centers for normally functioning children) and 8 *cămine spital* (long-term residential centers for children with psychiatric, physical, or sensory problems). Of these, 739 were in temporary centers for infants and babies (cradles), 414 in long-term residential centers for preschool-aged children, 1,703 in long-term residential centers for school-aged children, and 308 in *cămine spital*. More detailed descriptions of the sampling methods, data collection procedure, participants, and the characteristics of the resultant dataset are published elsewhere (see Rus *et al.*, 2013; Stativa *et al.*, 2002).

### *The Current Study*

Written consent to use archival data and to survey institutionalized children for research purposes was obtained from the appropriate Romanian authorities, and a secondary analysis was conducted using SCARCIR data. From the original sample of 3,164 children, data for the present study used a subset consisting of 1,353 children (703 boys and 650 girls) who were 7 – 20 years old ( $M = 12.92$ ;  $SD = 2.80$ ) and who resided in 48 long-term residential centers for school-aged children across Romania in late 90s. These data were selected using three criteria: age, placement location, and complete data. Specifically, children 7 years of age and younger were excluded from the present analysis to increase the reliability of self-report information. In addition, participants in temporary centers for infants and babies (cradles) and those in *cămine spital* were excluded because they were not interviewed in the original data set. Finally, children were excluded if they did not have complete information in their files, institutional records (e.g.,

social files, medical records, institutional records, etc.); and structured interviews regarding neglect and abuse experienced in institutions. The remaining sample contained 43% of the SCARCIR original sample ( $N = 3,164$  children), and 67% of the original sample of children in long-term residential centers for school-aged children.

### *Procedure*

The original study data were collected by 14 investigators with extensive experience in data collection in long-term residential centers and in interviewing children. For the purpose of the SCARCIR survey, the investigators were trained for 4 days.

One of the co-authors of the present study, as one of the experts who worked on reforming the Romanian child protection system in 1990's, formed the idea of measuring the awareness of same-sex relationships after extensive discussions with institutionalized children, teenagers, and their caregivers. These discussions also revealed other abusive experiences (e.g., children being punished by staff or exploited by their peers) that institutionalized children endured. Consequently, a preliminary questionnaire was created and then pilot-tested on 20-25 children from various institutions four times to check whether the questions were accepted by children, the rate of non-responses, and the length of the interview. During this process the researchers found that many children were aware of peer same-sex relationships. This finding encouraged the researchers to include questions in the final questionnaire that would capture this information. Later, in addition to the quantitative data collected by means of the SCARCIR survey, qualitative data was also collected from 18 case studies, 9 focus group discussions with institutional staff (involving 66 educational staff and caregivers), 5 interviews conducted with managers of the Specialized Public Services, and 7 focus group discussions with children in long-term residential centers (involving 48 children). These focus group discussions with children and staff also confirmed the presence of these behaviors in institutions.

### *Measures*

*Same-Sex Relationship Awareness.* The data from structured interviews contained children's answers to two questions related to their same-sex relationship awareness. Children were first asked if they had knowledge of, or were aware of, same-sex relationships in general (within the residential center where they lived or other institutions where they might have resided previously). Specifically, this outcome was captured by the following question: "*Have you ever heard about sexual relations between children of the same sex?*" (Romanian: "*Ai auzit vreodată despre relații sexual între copii cu același sex?*").

*Same-Sex Relationship Awareness in the Current Long-Term Residential Center.* After the question presented above, children were asked if they were personally aware of same-sex relationships among their peers in the long-term residential center where they lived at the time by asking the following question: “Do you know if in this institution there are children of the same sex who have sexual relationships?” (Romanian: “Știi dacă în această instituție sunt copii de același sex care au relații sexuale?”).

Children who answered “yes” to any of these aforementioned questions were coded as having awareness of same-sex relationships in the institution where they lived. Those who responded “no” were coded as not being aware of same-sex relationships. Children who refused to respond to these two questions or stated they don’t know anything about same-sex relationships were dropped from our analyses.

These questions were asked in the context of a larger study (see Stativa *et al.*, 2002) which was designed to reveal the magnitude of abuse and neglect across Romanian residential centers. Thus, our data was not collected with the objective of investigating the same-sex relationships of Romanian institutionalized children, but to describe various abusive relationships experienced by these children.

### *Statistical Analysis*

All analyses, including accuracy of data coding and entry and the statistical assumptions of the tests, were conducted using SPSS version 19.0 (IBM SPSS, 2010) and the R program (R Development Core Team, 2017). As detailed below, for some of the variables data were missing. For the dependent variables and variables regarding children’s characteristics (i.e., age at assessment; gender; time spent by the child in long-term residential centers; presence of parental relationship; presence of siblings in institution; presence of trusted adults in institution; presence of trusted children in institution; severe punishments by staff; and experience of exploitation by peers), the percentage of missing data ranged from 1.1% to 10.5%. In the case of institution-related variables (i.e., ratio of children to caregivers; number of children in dormitory room), the percentage of missing data was 0%. Each analysis was conducted with all available data (pair wise deletion) and no imputation was conducted for the missing cases. After describing all of the variables of interest, a comparison of the proportions of those who were and were not aware of same-sex relationships amongst children in the current setting was conducted using crosstabs with Pearson’s chi square and a Z-test of proportions.

## Results

### *Descriptive Analysis*

*Table 1* displays the characteristics of children in the sample, all of whom resided in a Romanian long-term residential center at the time they were interviewed. Slightly less than half of the sample was female (48%). Nearly one-third (31.2%) of children had never been visited by a parent or guardian or had not been visited by a parent in the past year. Regarding siblings, 45.3% had siblings residing at the same institution. Approximately 21% of the children reported that there were no adults that they trusted at their institution. In addition, 87% said there was at least one other child at the institution that they trusted. When asked if children had ever been severely punished or beaten by the staff, a total of 39% reported that they had been severely punished or beaten by the staff. Additionally, about 30% of children declared that they were exploited by their older peers and forced to do at least one of the following: odd chores, steal, beg, or give away personal belongings.

As shown in *Table 2*, the children's ages ranged from 7 to 20 years with a mean of 12.92 ( $SD = 2.80$ ). The number of months of institutionalization ranged from 0 to 221 with a mean of 77.87 ( $SD = 77$ ). Children reported the mean number of children in their dormitory as 7.99 ( $SD = 4.13$ ) with a range of 2 to 36 children. The ratio of children to caregivers ranged from 4 to 64.0 with a mean of 17.25 ( $SD = 9.29$ ).

*Table 1:* Frequencies and Percentages of Child Characteristics (N = 1,353)

	N	%
Child Gender		
Male	703	52.0
Female	650	48.0
Relationship with parents		
No	422	31.2
Yes	789	58.3
Siblings Enrolled in Same Institution		
No	635	46.9
Yes	613	45.3
Trusted Adult at Institution		
No	280	20.7
Yes	1,036	76.6
Trusted Child at Institution		
No	155	11.5
Yes	1,183	87.4



Child Severely Punished (Beaten) by Staff			
No	768	56.8	
Yes	529	39.1	
Peer Exploitation <sup>1</sup>			
No	887	65.6	
Yes	405	29.9	

Note. Descriptive percents not summing to 100% reflect missing data, children choosing to not respond the question or did not remember.<sup>1</sup>The child forced to do at least one of the following by his older peer in institution: to do odd chores, steal, beg or give away personal belongings.

Table 2: Means, Medians, and Standard Deviations of Child and Institution Characteristics

	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Child Age (Years)	1333	12.92	13.00	2.80	7	20
Months Spent in Institutions	1225	77.87	70.00	53.45	0	221
Number of Children in Dormitory	1353	7.99	7.00	4.13	2	36
Ratio of Children to Caregiver <sup>1</sup>	1353	17.91	15.50	9.36	4	64.0

Note. N not summing to 1353 reflect missing data. <sup>1</sup>It reveals the average of child-caregiver ratio during morning, daytime, and night.

### Child Awareness of Same-Sex Relationships

As seen in Table 3, out of 1,349 children with available data, 59% had heard about sexual relationships between children of the same-sex. This implies that children were aware of such relationships both in the current institutional setting or in long-term residential centers where they previously resided. Additionally, out of 1,349 children with available data, only 22.6% of the children were aware of same-sex relationships in the current institutional setting. As shown in Table 4, there was a significant association between a general awareness of children's same-sex relationships and awareness of these relationships in the current long-term residential center,  $\chi^2(1) = 172.33, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .441$ . The odds of children reporting being aware of peer same-sex relations within the same long-term residential center were 3.68 times higher if they were also aware of same-sex relationships in general (within the residential center where they lived or other institutions where they might have resided previously).

Table 3: Frequencies and Percentages of Children’s General Knowledge of Same Sex Relationships and in the Current Long-Term Residential Centers

	Frequency	%
Have you ever heard about sexual relations between children of the same sex?		
No	427	31.6
Yes	801	59.2
Don’t respond	121	8.9
Do you know if there are children in this institution who engaged in sexual relationships with children of the same sex?		
No	587	43.4
Yes	306	22.6
Don’t know	338	25.0
Don’t respond	105	7.8

Note. Descriptive percentages not summing to 100% reflect missing data.

Table 4: Frequencies and Percentages of Children’s General Knowledge of Same-Sex Relationships and in the Current Long-Term Residential Centers (N = 888)

	Do you know if in this institution there are children of the same-sex who have sexual relationships?				$\chi^2$	p	Cramer’s V
	No		Yes				
	n	%	n	%			
Have you ever heard about sexual relations between children of the same sex (between girls/boys)?					172.33	< .001	.441
No	258	44.3 <sub>a</sub>	6	2.0 <sub>b</sub>			
Yes	324	55.7 <sub>a</sub>	300	98.0 <sub>b</sub>			

Note. Children who refused to respond to these two questions or stated that they do not know anything about same-sex relationships, were dropped from analysis. Differences are tested within item using z-test of proportions with Bonferroni corrections. Across rows, proportions with different superscripts within the same block are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

This study showed that children residing in Romanian long-term residential centers during 1999 were aware of sexual relationships between children of the same sex. Specifically, when asked whether children had heard about sexual relationships between peers of the same sex, 59% responded affirmatively. However, when the same children were asked whether children of the same sex had sexual relationships in their current institutional setting, only 23% responded affirmatively. This 21% decrease in children's responses could indicate underreporting of this phenomenon due to fear of negative consequences and, therefore, reluctance to disclose such sensitive information about these behaviors within the institutions where they were placed. It is important to highlight that at the time of data collection most Romanian long-term residential centers could be described as closed institutions. In other words, these institutions lacked accountability to an extensive and effective external controlling and auditing authority, and children were not able to share their concerns with authorities outside of institutions. This reality created a lack of trust in the institutions' leadership. Consequently, this might exacerbate children's fear to disclose information about their own or peer's sexual behaviors when interviewed by researchers. The assumption of the previous statements takes into account that some of these children experienced same-sex relationships, and not only were aware of them. Additionally, due to the way the survey questions were written, we are aware that children referring to awareness of same-sex relationships might have implied both consensual and abusive relationships.

Even though same-sex relationships of Romanian institutionalized children were not analyzed directly in this study, we could only speculate that such relationships were quite widespread. However, these relationships should be understood in the larger long-term institutional context where children often were forced to have sex or they were aware of their peers being forced to have sex as reported elsewhere (Rus *et al.*, 2017c). Other studies, however, could reveal the magnitude and factors that influence the heterosexual and same-sex relationships among institutionalized children.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

As far as we know, the current study is the only comprehensive investigation that measured the awareness of children's same-sex relationships in a large sample of Romanian institutionalized children.

These results should be considered in view of several limitations. First, self-reported data is subject to bias and responding to the study questions might have been influenced by various factors not covered in this study. The dependent variable is about the awareness of children of relationships of other children and not asking them about their own experiences. Thus, it could not be determined

if these relationships were consensual or abusive in nature. In addition, the characteristics of the data allowed only an examination of lifetime (e.g., “have you ever...”, “have you happened...”, “have you been...”, or “do you know...”) awareness of same-sex relationships or reports of punishments and exploitation and not the frequency or trends over time. Another limitation is that the survey questions left open the possibility that children could report past awareness and experiences rather than current ones. Finally, our cross-sectional design does not allow us to infer causality between the variables that we studied.

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