

Doing research on families with parents abroad¹: the search for theoretical background and research methods

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Following Lithuania's accession to the EU in May 2004, family sociologists are confronting a new phenomenon: one of the parents or both leave to work abroad while their children stay in Lithuania under the guardianship, alone or in the child care institutions. These families and children are singled out from others and classified as different from others. Stigmatizing terms are employed to name these families and children.

The paper deals with a 4-stage current study on families with parents abroad, carried out by the family research group at Vilnius University since 2004. Each step envisioned a specific goal. Searching for a theoretical background and research methods, these families were analysed within several theoretical approaches and a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Namely, families with parents abroad were examined through the prism of symbolic interaction within diadic structures, as well as social systems coping with change and as interlinked social networks.

Data from each stage of the study, obtained by different methods, are presented; the ways how to analyse families with parents abroad within different theoretical approaches are discussed.

Key words: families, children, emigration, triangulation of theoretical approaches and research methods

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, the ever growing interest in emigrants' families within the public discourse turns into "panicking about the consequences of emigration". Even a few years ago, short-term economic emigration was not deemed to be dangerous. It was perceived as a solution for reducing unemployment, increasing one's income, acquiring useful experience abroad. Following Lithuania's accession to the EU in May 2004, society is facing the "negative" consequences of the free movement of labour.

New phenomena are encountered: one or both parents depart abroad, while their children live in Lithuania alone, looked after by relatives, state institutions. Migration of family mem-

¹ The object of families with parents abroad is a group of individuals, where parent(s) – child(-ren) live in different households in different countries. These individuals perceive themselves to be a family and are considered to be a family by immediate social surrounding. The terms "family with parents abroad" (FPA) and "children with parents abroad" (CPA) were worked out by the author in cooperation with the members of the NFRN in 2004. These terms do not carry a stigmatizing connotation. The Lithuanian terms were suggested in 2006.

bers in itself is not a new phenomenon, yet the extent of this trend poses a challenge to family as an institution².

Families with parents abroad (FPAs) and children with parents abroad (CPAs) are already being singled out as a distinct social group. The tendency is observed to link parents' departures to work abroad with exclusively negative effects – children's suicides, teenager's delinquent behaviour. Similarly, it is unjustified to juxtapose FPAs and "broken homes" and use these terms interchangeably. Emigrants' families are often referred to as "separated" families, while children as "nobody's children", "abandoned", "not needed", "telephone children". The fact is overlooked that the use of stigmatizing terms in the public discourse may cause secondary stigmatization. Besides, one tends to observe a manifestation of the long-standing tradition to speak in the name of children without asking their opinion.

The focus of this article is on the general design of doing sociological research on FPAs and CPAs as well as on the main observations obtained during a four-stage research study carried out at the Department of Sociology of Vilnius University since 2004³.

GENERAL DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Due to the fact that FPAs are encountered as a new phenomenon in family life, the question could be raised whether these transnational family structures, brought about by emigration processes, pose an alternative to a nuclear family as was the case in the past with cohabitation, commuting families, and Living Apart Together. The lack of empirical research data as well as theoretical considerations on these new lived realities forced a search for the theoretical background and research methods. Several *goals* were envisioned.

Firstly, to analyse FPAs as lived realities, experienced by different family members as well as the members of families' social networks. The aim was to disclose different points of view on the new parents–children variations as it is obvious that the phenomenon takes a different shade if we look at it from the point of view of parents, children, guardians, "significant others" (teachers, neighbours, friends, etc.). In addition, we were interested in the way these issues are presented in the Lithuanian mass media.

² Official statistics speaks of emigration on a grand scale. In 2006, 12602 people have emigrated from Lithuania (net migration is -1.4). Alongside with emigrants who declared their departure, there are more than 15 thousand people who have not declared their departure. During the last seventeen years, a total number of more than 346 thousand people have emigrated. The majority of them are Lithuanians. In 2006, the biggest share of Lithuanians emigrated to the United Kingdom, USA, Ireland, Germany, Spain. From a perspective of family issues, the issue that attracts concerns is that in 2006 35.6% of emigrants aged 18 and older were married individuals. The numbers of males and females are much the same. 1891 children aged 0–14 emigrated with their parents (the majority of them aged 10–14). Official emigrants are supposed to leave children in Lithuania under the guardianship. 41.9% of non-official emigrants have children. 13.3% of these emigrants departed with all children, meanwhile 7.8% of non-official emigrants departed without children. The latter group of children is likely to be children with parents abroad (CPAs) (Department of Statistics, 2007). No exact data on the total number of parents who went to work abroad with their children staying in Lithuania is available. Basing on different sources, it is supposed that in 2006 in Lithuania there were around 20,000 children with parents abroad under guardianship or without it.

³ The study is part of two research projects: "Lithuanian Emigrants and their Children: Sociological Research of Families with Parents Abroad", supported by Scientific Council of Vilnius University; "Resources, Locality and Life Course: the Case of the Town", supported by the Lithuanian State Science and Studies Foundation. Research studies were carried out by professors and students of the Department of Sociology of Vilnius University.

Secondly, the multi-method strategy to study FPAs and CPAs was used, namely application of the following research methods: content analysis of articles and comments from newspapers and the Internet portal, headline analysis and article analysis performed with the help of Hamlet II software (author Alan Brier), qualitative semi-structured interviews with teachers, social workers, police officers, Levin's (1989, 1993) three stage family research method (family list, family map, interview), a survey carried out in the Pabrade town in Lithuania (in process), content analysis of the TV programmes (in process), participant observation of children with delinquent behaviour.

Thirdly, we tested several theoretical approaches and models to know which one was suitable to analyse FPAs and CPAs. Each of the approaches allowed analysing FPAs from different perspectives. At different research stages, FPAs were regarded as dyadic structures, as social networks, as social families, as families under stress.

Taking the perspective of FPAs *as dyadic structures*, the analysis of the research data was based on the dyadic approach proposed by Trost (1993, 1999; Juozeliuniene, 2003). The dyadic approach is used as an analytical tool to study families as variations of dyads, such as child-mother, child-father, child-grandparent, etc.

The study of FPAs *as social networks* was carried out within the individual's social networks approach suggested by Milardo & Wellman (2005). The focus was on the role of outsiders on the internal dynamics of relationships. Both "close ties" as well as "weak ties" were examined, and four basic types of personal networks proposed by Milardo (1989, 2005) were employed: the network of significant others, the exchange network, the interactive network, and the global network.

Basing on the concept of social family, proposed by Scanzoni (1993), FPAs were considered *as social families*. Following the departure of one / both parents abroad, guardians, grandparents, friends and other individuals can be perceived as members of one's family. In this case, individuals are not necessarily related by blood relations, yet due to the external and internal mutual exchanges (generalized and dyadic) binding these individuals, a familial feeling of "we-ness" is constructed.

The departure of parent(s) abroad allowed to analyse FPAs as families under stress. Hill's (1949) "Family stress" or the ABC-X model was employed. In this case, FPAs could be treated *as social systems under stress*. The model demonstrates that family stress or crisis marked by the 'X' sign depends on a number of components: A – event entitled stressor, B – family resources or nature of power resources, C – the meanings that the family ascribes to the stressor (McKenry, Price 2005). We were especially interested in two important assumptions included in this model. The first assumption states that the effect of a stressor is mediated by family resources and situational judgments adopted by family members; in the second assumption, the stressor exhibits a potential of spreading. In other words, one stressor (e. g. the departure of parents) can set in motion a chain reaction of family changes, such as changes in interpersonal relations, illness, divorce, delinquent behaviour of children, etc.

STAGES OF THE STUDY

Each step of the four-stage current research envisioned specific goals, research methods and theoretical approaches. The first stage of the study "Representation of FPAs in articles and comments on these articles in Lithuanian dailies and the DELFI Internet portal" was carried out in 2005. The first articles and comments in the media were analysed. We aimed to estab-

lish the key issues and draw the broadest guidelines for the further sociological research. A content analysis was carried out with six selected articles on the topic of FPAs, published in 2004–2005 in a Lithuanian daily, a regional newspaper and a magazine, as well as a content analysis of 120 comments on these publications.

The second stage, entitled “Representation of FPAs in newspapers and magazines in 2004–2006”, was carried out in late 2006. We aspired to establish what semantic field dominates in descriptions of FPAs, how the unique nature of FPAs is reflected in articles’ headlines, what is the structure and specific features of the articles. Articles were selected using an integrated informational system of Lithuanian libraries; 38 articles, published during 2004–2006 were chosen for analysis. Their total word count equalled 38,000. Headline analysis and article analysis was performed with the help of Hamlet II software.

The third stage “Child’s perspective: stigmatization and stigma management” was carried out in 2006. The results of this research has pointed out the fact that experiences of children constitute the main topic in the public debates; at the same time, most of adults’ interpretations are referred to as children’s opinions. That was the reason for interviewing children. Eight children from six different types of FPAs were selected to be interviewed using I. Levin’s three-stage family research method.

During the fourth stage “Child’s social networks: concerned persons, experts, child”, carried in 2006–2007, the way of “doing family” with parents abroad was examined. The points of concerned persons (those who wrote comments in the Internet on the topic of FPAs and CPAs), experts (teachers, social workers, police officers) and children were analysed. Fifteen articles on the topic of FPAs, published in 2005–2007, and 6898 commentaries on these articles were selected for content analysis; four experts were interviewed using semi-structured qualitative interviews; six children were interviewed using Levin’s three-stage family research method.

Presently, three further stages of the research are in progress. The stage entitled “FPAs and local community: the case of Pabradė” was carried out in 2007. It envisioned the goal by means of the representative survey to disclose whether FPAs are conceptualized as families alongside with the nuclear family, cohabitation, commuting families, LATs, or they are labelled as “deviations”. The social reception of FPAs in terms of approval / disapproval of the behaviour strategies employed by parents-emigrants is examined.

The stage entitled “Representation of FPAs and CPAs in Lithuanian national TV programmes” focuses on the way the process of emigration and its consequences for family issues are presented in TV programmes. Special attention is given to the movies of the social documentary “Emigrants”. The daily routines of FPAs are compared with the routines of emigrants’ families.

The stage entitled “CPAs with delinquent behaviour” faces the situation of CPAs in the Vilnius Police Club. The issues of stigmatization and stigma management strategies employed by CPAs with delinquent behaviour are on the agenda.

RESULTS

The results show that although FPAs obtain common structural, behavioral, and emotional features, this group is not homogenous. Thus, it would be inappropriate to refer to FPAs in general. We could distinguish the types of FPAs by using at least three criteria. First, according to which a member of the family had left abroad (mother, father, both parents). Mother-away, father-away, both parents-away families were distinguished. It is important to note that

in many articles and comments father-away families are not labeled as FPAs, and a child who lives with mother in Lithuania is not considered to be “abandoned”. Second, FPAs vary according to parents’ marital status on the day of emigration (spouses, cohabitants, divorced, widowed, single); third, according to the nature of child’s care in Lithuania (children are cared for by mother / father, grandparents, uncles / aunts, brothers / sisters, other relatives, they live in orphan homes or alone). In each case, the structure of FPAs, the experience of “doing families” and the coping strategies are different.

An analysis of the representation of FPAs in newspapers and magazines in 2004–2006 disclosed that the Lithuanian media are used to view FPAs through the prism of the negative consequences of emigration and devote important places to these articles in publications. Attention is focused on the negative aspects of parents’ departure, i. e. on negative emotions experienced by children: sadness, loneliness and feeling of being betrayed, the lack of love and attention. The improvement of material well-being is considered to be the principal motive for emigration. In discussions about emigrants, the economic semantic field remains dominant.

Children with parents abroad are defined as a separate group. CPAs got the names, such as “lost generation”, “the children of runaways’ – unfortunates”, “orphans with living parents”, “nobody’s children”, “abandoned children”, “telephone children”, “not-needed children”. CPAs are compared with children of “broken homes”, children of divorce, seamen’s children, lonely mothers’ children, long-distance drivers’ children. CPAs are described in terms of “otherness” with two types of meaning ascribed to the term: negative and positive. Unique “problems” of CPAs (both emotional and behavioural) are announced.

Several dominant topics of the representation of CPAs’ emotional well-being and the peculiarities of communication in Lithuanian press and the Internet were disclosed, namely, desolation and stigmatization of a child, discussion about the meaning of the term “to love” a child, discussion about the meaning of the term “to abandon” a child.

Analysis of the articles and commentaries has revealed two meanings applied to the term of children’s desolation: desolation as “waiting” (behavioural characteristic) and desolation as “hyper-sensitivity” / “hyper-aggressiveness” (emotional characteristic). Desolation as waiting is defined as a constant waiting for parents’ phone call, presents, parents’ arrival for holidays and final return. Most often the only means of communication with parents is phone talks. The frequency of phone calls splits the life of a child into periods important to him: “from call to call”. Children do not look forward to weekends or holidays, but wait for visiting days of their parents, fixed phone call days or hours. In other words, we can speak about a specific time partition and its sensation.

Desolation as “hyper-sensitivity” / “hyper-aggressiveness” are explained as deviations from “normal sensitivity” / “normal aggressiveness”. “Hyper-sensitivity” is manifested through the search of “significant others” (tutors, teachers from children’s home, other persons, teenage groups, “street teams”, etc.). “Hyper-aggressiveness” implies the use of force, “rejection”, avoidance.

Stigmatization of CPAs holds the image of CPA as being different, not like children from “normal families”. In this case, “non-standard” parent–children relations are emphasised. Usually, negative meanings are attributed to this image, such as “parents leave a child for money”, “a child is not loved” (parents would never leave a child they love). It is shameful to be “abandoned”.

The term “to love” a child holds such meanings as taking care of a child’s material welfare, as well as his psychological health, sacrificing oneself for the benefit of the child, living with a child in one household and a constant communication, after departure calling a child, sending presents, money, feeling guilty, crying at night, being sad.

We came up to the two types of meanings ascribed to the term “abandon” a child: blaming and justifying.

Qualitative interviews with CPAs allowed an analysis of the process of constructing stigma. We distinguished two ways of stigmatizing CPAs: through slander and through consolation and pity. Stigmatization through slander is conveyed by referring to children as “poorly” behaved, low-achieving at school, “unloved”, “abandoned”, simply labeled a “bad” child. A child accepts the stigma and proceeds to calling himself / herself a “bad” child.

We named stigmatization through consolation and pity as a hidden form. In describing children, adults emphasize their “otherness”. These children are depicted as “lacking in warmth”, “cut of parental support”, “in search of related people”. Having defined the “otherness” of CPAs, adults “feel compelled” to chat up, console these children, grant them an exceptional treatment, offer all kinds of assistance. A child accepts “otherness” bestowed on him / her and proceeds to thinking about him / herself in terms of adults’ categories. In other words, they feel lonely, “abandoned”.

On the basis of research data we distinguished three stigma management strategies utilized by CPAs: concealing, slander and demonstration of advantages. Concealing is manifested in concealing the fact that parents left for abroad, unwillingness to talk about this topic by playing down the importance of this event. Slander strategy is detected in recounting the life stories of similar families in an exceptionally negative context, contrasted with the positive experience of one’s own family. The strategy of demonstrating advantages is manifested in listing numerous advantages of “living without parents”: more freedom in decision-making and behaving, less of adult control, new skills, and unrestricted use of one’s home. It is very close to the stigma managing strategies, namely passing, verbal denigration and posturing, suggested by Roschele & Kaufman (2004).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of a four-stage research study disclosed the ways in which triangulation of research methods and theoretical approaches could be placed at the heart of sociological research of FPAs. We propose to employ the dyadic perspective as an analytical tool to study FPAs as lived realities (J. Trost). The starting point of the research is the statement that an individual is “situated” in his / her family and is “doing” his / her family through dyadic interaction. R. Hill’s “the family stress” model enables to analyse FPAs as families coping with stress. The main stressor – departure of parent (-s) abroad – sets in motion a chain of family changes; however, the effect of the stressor is mediated by family resources and situational judgements adopted by family members. The changes of relationships of family members do not function in isolation but as part of social networks (Milardo, Wellman 2005). Social network is an analytically defined phenomenon with measurable properties of size, composition, structure and contents. Networks can vary according to gender, age, the balance of household and social domains. Three basic types of personal networks can be identified: the network of significant others, exchange network and daily routines. The network of an individual’s closest associates and the exchange network provide information about an individual’s sense of community.

The network of daily routines provides a view of day-to-day social experience. FPAs could be examined through the prism of support, companionship and actual daily routines. In addition, sociological research of FPAs could be based on the notion of social family (Scanzoni, Marsiglio 1993). In the situation of economic migration, the social environment prevents individuals from reproducing a culturally approved family, individuals produce social families (not necessarily blood- and law-based) lived as shared behavioral exchanges (generalized and dyadic). Creatively constructing their own families, individuals persist to make their lives better.

Lived realities of FPAs as social constructs with features of family stress, social family, original dyadic structure and transnational networking require articulating various theoretical approaches and research methods as well as combining them in an innovative fashion.

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Atotolio šeimų tyrimas: teorinių priegų ir tyrimo metodų paieška

Santrauka

Aptariama atotolio šeimų tyrimų, atliekamų nuo 2004 metų, organizavimas ir svarbiausi rezultatai. Siekiant formuoti teorinę-metodinę atotolio šeimų tyrimo bazę, nagrinėjamos teorinių priegų ir tyrimo metodų trianguliacijos galimybės. Tyrimo duomenų analizei pasirinktos šios priegos: J. Trosto diadinė šeimų tyrimo priega, R. Hillo „Šeiminio streso“ (ABC-X) modelis, R. M. Milardo ir B. Wellmano socialinių tinklų priega, J. Scanzoni'o socialinės šeimos idėja, A. R. Roschelle ir P. Kaufmano stigos valdymo strategijų klasifikacija.

Taikyti tyrimo metodai: spaudos publikacijų analizė, I. Levin trijų pakopų šeimų tyrimo metodas, kokybiniai interviu su vaikais, mokytojomis, auklėtojomis, socialiniais darbuotojais, policijos pareigūnais. Tyrimų metu buvo siekiama atskleisti įvairius žiūros pjūvius: tėvų, vaikų, vaikui reikšmingų asmenų bei oficialių institucijų atstovų požiūrius. Tyrinėjome, kaip atotolio šeimų problematika pateikiama spaudoje ir internetiniame portale.

Raktažodžiai: šeima, vaikai, emigracija, teorinių priegų ir tyrimo metodų trianguliacija