

DEFINING ASPECTS OF FAMILIES IN WHICH ONE PARENT IS ABROAD

Tiberiu Dîscă¹

University of Oradea

Abstract: Where should we put the family situation with a parent left abroad? It's not a nuclear family – literally speaking – because the parents don't live together. It might be the type of a single-parent family? From a legal point of view, the situation of a family with one parent left outside the country doesn't fit as a single-parent family. Still, in some studies, through the physical absence of one parent for a larger period of time, we can use the term of single-parent family. In other studies, especially from Russian area and Republic of Moldova, they use the terminology 'temporary disintegration family' or 'temporary abandon' both of them reflecting the temporary aspect of this situation. From a psychological point of view, it seems that those terms describe exactly the reality of what a children feel when he is left home with only one parent. The scientific literature proposes the term of 'non-intact family', as an opposition with an intact family. The term of transnational family describes more accurate the social reality in which the parents are still married, but they are separated one of each other because one is working in another country. Considering certain criteria, there are different types of transnational family. Regardless of this dramatic aspect and without wanting to be political correct in using various terminology, is very important the accuracy and the fairness of using the right term for the right situation.

Keywords: family, migration, transnational, abroad.

Introduction

According to the specialized literature the sense given to the system and the structure notions is that the family as a social unit could be considered as a system (a whole) formed from more elements, amongst which mutual relationships of correlation are established. The assembly of the constituent elements of a family, the way they organize themselves, and the relationships that are set among its

¹ **Author address:** University of Oradea, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Universităţii Street, no.1, 410087, Oradea, Romania. **E-mail:** disca.tiberiu@yahoo.com

elements, constitute the structure of a family. Consequently, the approach of the family structure implies the analysis of its dimensions (Chipea, 2001).

Thus the taxonomy of the family could take a variety of impressive forms, criteria and limitations. Therefore, we should take into account that we can find infinity of criteria (and types), but most of them hardly have any epistemic value (active family, passive family, for instance), and that some of them have a circumstantial function (research on different themes: rural, urban, social layering and so on), as there are types of families that have a scientific general value for the family sociology (Iluț, 2005).

For example, in 1994 Vanier Family Institute, described the following types of families: “nuclear” families consisting of two parents and one or more biological or adopted children who live together; “Extended” families, consisting of parents, children, grandparents and other relatives, who may or may not live together; “blended” or “recombined” families or “reconstituted” families, formed from parents that got divorced, and then married someone else giving birth to a new family, that includes children from the first marriage of one or both partners and/or even from the present marriage; families without children, which just form a couple; “monoparental” families, formed from a parent, usually a mother and one or more children; couples that live together and conventional marriages-family-based arrangements that do not legalize marriage. Since 1972 this Institute has recognized gay couples as families.

Monoparental Families

But where should we frame the families in which one of the parents is abroad? It is not a nuclear family because the parents live in the same house. Could they be framed as monoparental families?

According to the Social Work Law number 292/2011, clause 22, paragraph 5:

“Monoparental family is the family formed from a single person and the children she or he takes care of.” In the next paragraph it is mentioned how the lawgiver should understand the meaning of “a single person”, respectively the person who is in one the following situations:

- a) Unmarried
- b) Widow/er
- c) Divorced
- d) Whose husband or wife, on the basis of judicial decision, is declared as being among the missing
- e) Whose husband or wife is arrested for more than 30 days or they already are imprisoned and cannot take care of their children
- f) He/she is not eighteen years old yet and he/she finds himself/herself framed in one of the situations above (a-e)

- g) He/she is made a tutor and becomes a foster parent for one or more children and he/she finds herself framed in one of the situations above (a-e).

Thence, juridically the families that have one parent working abroad cannot be classified as monoparental families. This issue is treated as such by the social work services as well, offering the pecuniary provisions of the ordinance only to those that can be framed in one of the seven subitems of clause 6.

Sociologically, we can say that the monoparental family is defined as a social group based on relational relationships, between one of the parents and his/her children, a group that can be characterized through common feelings, aspirations and values. In this sociological approach, the monoparental family is a primary group, and its members have direct, informal relations (Mihăilescu, 2006).

However, according to some international well-known Canadian sociologists (Gongola & Thompson, 1985) if we talk about the members' quality and permanence in monoparental families, there could be found cases of: "monoparental families that are cumulated in the legal frame of a nuclear family when one of the parents, while present in the family picture, interacts psychologically on a small scale only; monoparental families in which the relationships are kept only with children, avoiding couple relationships (separated or divorced couples that go on taking care of their children); monoparental families because one of the parents live for a longer period of time in another locality, or he/she is in-patient, or imprisoned; monoparental families because one of the parents passed away; the proper monoparental family as the result of divorce". In this classification of monoparental families it is not clearly specified what "longer period of time" means, if it is measured or not having a bearing on, let's say, the children's age, or on the contact or the lack of it with the family members that are home during this period of "long" migration. The Canadian authors do not specify either what happens with the family after the husband or the wife comes back. Is the assembled family considered a nuclear one any further? How about an intact family?

If there are some limitations in defining a term "sui generis" regarding the monoparentality, which to describe the situation given by the departure of one parent who works abroad, the study of some behaviors and features is required in order to have a better outlook of the given situation.

Gongola and Thompson (apud. Preda, 1999) made up a typology of monoparental and biparental families on the basis of the specific dimensions of a family: structural (concerning the number and the quality of the families in the structure of relational relationships), interactive (concerning the communication and the contact among the members) and psychological (includes the characteristics of each and every member but also the feeling of attachment and common identity). Accordingly to the studied theme, the situation of the families that have a migrant parent can be framed in type B.

In a study funded from European structural funds, it is stipulated that one of the reasons that leads to monoparental families is the migration of one of the spouses and his/her settlement abroad for an undefined period of time. Thus not all the families in which one spouse chooses to migrate are considered to be monoparental, but those in which the migration period is unknown and leads to a total separation from their family. The study, under the specialized literature mentioned above, brings a more complex perspective, analyzing the cases of migration and underlining that in most of the instances their motivation for migration is not represented by the desire to touch some personal objectives, but by the desire to improve the family living conditions. Therefore, even if migration is individual, the motivation, the consequences and the implications of this process, can be found at the level of the family unit (ANOFM, 2013).

Abandonment Issues

Some of the studies use the term of “temporary abandonment”. Abandonment, besides the implied psychosocial aspects and many psychiatric resonances, could be defined as a “long-term” modification of some relationships with a strong affective implication, which had been established by the subject before the abandon (Florescu & Frățiman, 1999). Speaking about abandonment, the children’s adaptation to the new situation should be taken into consideration. The fact that children are separated from their parents because they go working abroad for a period of time awakens a feeling of abandonment, which affects children’s personality. Dependent on the length of the parents’ absence, there could be listed a series of problems related to the needs of their children, and there is as well the risk of developing intellectual deficits or/and some emotional and behavioral disorders (Luca & Gulei, 2007). A study realized by the Social Alternatives Association “Home Alone”, 2007 (a study realized within the project “Home Alone; scientific coordinator Dr. Gabriela Irimiescu) claims that the parents’ departure has negative effects on children: they are experiencing the feeling of abandonment. But can we speak about a real abandonment indeed? If we would try to define more exactly this type of abandonment maybe the best words to do it were “partial abandonment”, which leads to a conflict of terms, to antinomy. Along with Daphe project, funded by EU, there were “officialized” two types of abandonment in the European scientific vocabulary: an open one and a secret one. The open abandonment was defined as the situation in which children are abandoned by their parents on purpose, parents whose identity is known and who reject their responsibility as parents willingly. Furthermore, no other member of the family cannot or do not want to take care of the child. The secret abandonment is the situation where the child is abandoned secretly by his parents, their identity is unknown and so they reject willingly and anonymously their responsibility as parents (DAPHNE, 2011).

One of the UNICEF’s questionnaires (2005) addressed to the Institutions protecting children’s rights in Moldavian Democratic Republic also uses the term of “temporary abandoned children”, but this is linked to the phenomenon of

temporary placing the children in foster care. This could be an option for the parents living in Moldavian Democratic Republic.

Family Disintegration

But in the same Moldavian Republic, like a taking-up from Russian studies, it is used the term “temporary disintegrated family”. This term “temporary disintegrated family” considers the family in which one or both parents are abroad for a long period of time (more than 6 months) (Paladi, 2005).

On the one hand, the definition underlines the temporary aspect of the situation, the minimum limit of migration being readjusted: to 6 months. The author does not mention the studies on the basis of which he fixed this limitation. There are some major shortcomings in establishing such a time limit: a three-month baby will experience its parent’s absence differently from a six- year- old child; major differences could appear if in this minimum period of time the contact with the abroad parent was kept or not (by phone, internet or mail). In a publication of the National Center for Prevention of Child Abuse (see NCPA, 2005), the term “temporary disintegrated family” is cut even wider, considering any divorced or about to divorce family, the family where one of the spouses is imprisoned or dead, any family where one of the spouses is away for a long time. This definition is getting close to that of the monoparental family.

Intact or not so intact family

Another term brought up is that of “non-intact family”. This term brings up through its own definition an antagonistic account to that of “intact family” (nuclear). The specialized literature claims that “the nuclear family or (the simple one) is made of a marital pair (husband and wife) and children who live together” (Gheorghiu et al., 2012). This type of family is called by some scholars, intact family, meaning that the family did not go through a divorce, separation or the death of one of the members (Pescaru, 2004). But the term of “intact family” is questioned as well and its definition is suffering changes. Nowadays reality shows us that there are many couples who live together for a period of time, give birth to children and only after this they get married. On the other hand, the gay rights movements led to the reevaluation of some concepts, including the denial of the word “two” in defining the family concept. For instance, for the first time in the Canadian province British Columbia, a three-month little girl born in Vancouver will have three persons as parents in her birth certificate: the biological father, and a couple of lesbians. On the other hand, from the structural or functional point of view, things could be different: a family can be intact as structure (they are married and live together) but in real, the things do not function properly-each of them having a personal life, they both take care of their children education or not, a parent’s implication in the life of the family could be little or inexistent.

The term “non-intact” is little used in the Romanian specialized literature, but it is more used in the foreign scientific literature, especially in the Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic one (Finlay et al., 2014).

This term of “non-intact” family is used also when referring to families that resulted from migration. For instance, in a study regarding the migration of the Hispanic families from New York City, the homes were classified as intact because all the members left New York City until 1980. A non-intact home is the one where one or more members remained in New York City or went to other places (Mann, Salvo & Banks, 1988). In a study regarding the migration to China, performed on 3354 children, is specified that there were not studied the non-intact families resulted from a divorce, death or other reasons, but just those non-intact families where one or both parents went working abroad (Qiang & Donald, 2013).

Even if the term is committed to migration, the use of the term “non-intact family” has few shortcomings. First, like the study mentioned above claimed, the term “non-intact family” is much wider (an issue mentioned as related to monoparental family as well), the families that got divorced or suffered some loss are part of this classification too. Secondly, this family definition does not mention the time, considering the fact that many migrant parents return, after a while to their families or they get reunited in the country they work. So the term “temporary non-intact family”, would be closer to reality but it is not used in the specialized literature.

Transnationality and Migration

In the end there is brought up the term of “transnational family”. The concept of “Transnationalism” comes from the sociology of migration and it can be defined as “the process through which people establish and keep sociocultural relationships that transcend the sociopolitical borders” (Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992). A family is transnational if the parents are married but the family members are separated because they work abroad.

Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) define the transnational families as families that live a short period of time or the most part of their time separated, but they still keep creating something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare or unity, namely the “family-hood” crossing even national borders. These families through their emotional and financial relationships, on the other hand, through modern means of communication that help them not to lose themselves between two worlds, succeed in building a social space which comforts them to stay in unity, (Herrera, 2010). There are debates taking into consideration the relationship between transnationalism and globalization, and also the way transnationalism is defining the new migration processes which are different from the precedent migrations. The present/actual dynamics of transnational practices are due to the changes that take place in transport and information technology, which make possible the cheap and easy communication and mobility between the countries of destination and the countries of origin (Anghel, 2008).

The term of “transnational family“ (trans=across) is more adequate than having in mind other terms that could be used, like that of “international family”(a term that, besides the fact of being the name of a religious movement started in 1968, in California, could create confusion regarding the family members’ nationality). An aspect that is missing from this terminology is the “time” factor, this is why more correctly would be to name those families where one of the parents left as “temporary transnational families”. But because permanent transnational families exist only as an ideal, their temporary aspect should not be mentioned in the terminology, but quantized, because it is not the same thing whether the father is gone for six month or three years. A second important issue is that the transnational families as products of migration are just a part of a larger family block where the members live in different countries. For instance, the families of the soldiers involved in NATO special operations (like the Romania situations) are also transnational families where grandma takes care of the grandchildren abroad and grandpa remains in the country to take care of the household.

The studies that have as goal the research of direct transnational families delimit other secondary issues as well. There are studies that examine aspects regarding the transnational maternity (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Erel, 2002; Larg, 2005; Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Raijman et al., 2003), others examine transnational childhood (Pribilsky, 2004; Orellana et al., 2001; Dreby, 2007) or transnational paternity (Pribilsky, 2004) or Sorensen (2005) analyzed the relationship of the transnational couple (apud. Foamete-Ducu, 2011).

Regarding the course of life, there could be more types of transnational families, according to the migrants’ age (Baldassar & Merla, 2013). For instance the young couples, that form a transnational family before becoming parents, are different from the single parents, who have a family with no intention of having children or from an after-divorce family, even if all of them are young. The young couples’ motivation of not having children is that of making their dreams come true, and not only to improve their family living conditions but also to make some money for starting a business which could improve their future as parents (Bolzman, Carbajal & Mainardi, 2007). In the case of adult families, who already have grown-up children, the motivation of leaving can take various aspects: the adolescents or youths’ needs, the old parents’ needs or their relation to their grandchildren or future grandchildren.

Another classification of transnational families is given by the factor involved in migration. The studies show that there is an important difference whether we deal with wife or husband’s leaving abroad. Mother’s leaving is more painful for the children than father’s leaving, this could be explained through the special spiritual link between the child and the mother including boy-mother relationship (Cheianu-Andrei, 2011). The collected data show that those children whose mothers are gone abroad, are more open, more nostalgic, they can hardly stop their tears, comparative to the situations where father is gone. This situation is caused by the lack of the emotional poll of the family, but also by the amount of duties that now

should be fulfilled by the children (characteristic especially to girls) after mother leaves.

A different aspect of the problem is given by the spatial break-up and by the relational interaction considering the two primary dimensions of the transnational family (Vatz Laaroussi & Bolzman, 2010). According to these two dimensions there can be made other classifications as well.

This is the reason why I propose adopting in the Romanian specialized literature as well the “transnational family” term having the following typologies:

- According to the gender: female transnational family (is then when mother is gone), male transnational family (is then when father is gone);
- According to the migrants’ age: young transnational families, adult transnational families, old transnational family;
- According to the existence of children: transnational families without children or having one, two or more children;
- According to the geographic distance of the migrant: close or far transnational family;
- According to the existent relationships during the migration of a member: transnational families with a high degree of relationship (those who communicate almost daily on internet or by phone) or those having a medium degree of relationship;
- According to the time when the separation takes place: transnational families for a short period of time (here we could take the six-month term proposed by some sociologists mentioned above), for a medium period of time or for a long period of time;
- According to the reason of the transnational aspect: transnational migrant family (the case presented in the study), working transnational families (the case of NATO soldiers, subsidiary leaders, multinational subsidiaries, sportsmen from different clubs abroad), study transnational family (university, postgraduate courses, qualifications).

Other possible classifications (like: poligam, monogam transnational families, heterosexual and gay families) are not part of today’s Romania frame.

Conclusions

The definition of families having a migrant parent aroused an avalanche of terminologies, according to the studied aspects and the primary considered branch. The psychological studies focus on the abandonment phenomenon, as reality and experience. Even if it is not, at least in the first phase of the migration, a real abandonment, the most children feel it like a real abandonment. These children develop personality disharmony and as a consequence, it is possible that once they

get matured, they could turn into adults having social integration problems (Hudițeanu, 2001).

The education specialists can confirm as well that the effects in the educative sphere are similar to those children suffering from abandonment. For this reason, some specialists entered the terms “temporary abandonment”, “temporary disordered family” and even framed them in the type of monoparental family.

On the other hand, some sociologists that contrast the characteristics of an intact family with those of a family with one parent abroad defined this type of family as being a non-intact one. This term is less used in Romanian literature, but it surprises indeed a relationship which can't be the same after a temporary absence from family.

It seems that the term that best surprises the reality of a family relationship regarding the studied issue is that of “transnational family”. Besides the fact that it is “political correctness”, this term allows the establishment of some subcategories which manifest themselves, according to gender (female or male transnational family), migrants' age (young, adult or old transnational family), the existence of children in that family, the distance between the families and the migrant family member (close or far), the existent relationships during migration (transnational family with a high, medium or low degree of relationship), the transnationality reason (migrant, working or study transnational family).

But the important thing is that each of these terms should be used in the correct context, in the development of a family.

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