CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING WITHIN THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

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SOCIO-HISTORIC AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Romania is located in the southeastern part of Europe and has a population of 21.68 million, with 52% residing in urban areas. Ninety percent of the people identify themselves as Romanian, 7% Hungarian, and 3% belong to other ethnic groups (Census, 2002; Government White Book, 2001). In 100 AD., the Roman Empire conquered the local population, the Geto-Dacians, and established a province covering a large part of the current Romanian territory. Following hundreds of years of foreign influence and organization into smaller principates, present-day Romania took shape in two stages, through the union of Moldavia and Wallachia Provinces in 1859, and with the annexation of Transylvania in 1918. Following World War II, Romania fell under Soviet influence and a communist regime was established.

While Romania was primarily an agrarian society with a traditional social structure at the beginning of the 20th century, the communist development program implemented between the 1950s and the 1970s emphasized urbanization and industrial modernization (Zamfir, 2001; Zamfir et al., 2001). Communism had a negative effect on the state economic infrastructure resulting in an underdeveloped and inefficient economy. An orientation towards self-sufficiency, absolute monopoly over the internal market, rigid and technologically backward

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large enterprises, and economic sectors very dependent on massive subsidies resulted in a weak economic infrastructure (Zamfir, 2001).

The post-communist transition was influenced by the way the communist system was changed. In 1989, a popular revolution with over 1,000 deaths created an explosive situation in the country, which achieved the disintegration of the communist system in just a few days (Măarginean et al., 2001). Romanian politics and society have undergone profound change since 1989. The communist institutions and ideology that dominated the country for four decades have lost their power and legitimacy and different structures and beliefs have emerged. Nostalgia for pre-communist traditions and values immediately surfaced and combined with the assumptions and principles of communist rule that had been imposed over the preceding four decades (Fischer, 1998).

Romania's transformation into a market economy was challenging and relatively slow. Since 1989, successive governments have adopted a cautious approach to market-oriented reforms (OECD, 2000; World Bank, 1997). The relatively greater difficulties in Romania compared with other Eastern European countries lay in a particularly unfavorable set of conditions inherited from previous regimes. Although marketization and privatization have already brought significant hardships, the restructuring of the economy has barely begun. In agriculture, for example, privatization has divided the land into small plots, and the absence of machinery or the capital to purchase it has temporarily reproduced the old hardships of the traditional peasant family, with its strict gender roles and division of labor (OECD, 2000).

As in other post-communist states, Romanians have been faced with the difficulties of economic transition such as high inflation, rising unemployment, declining production, and erosion of the social safety network (pensions, health care, other benefits). Almost unknown until 1989, unemployment became a crude reality for Romanian society, with complex economic and social consequences for the population (Garai, 2001). Unemployment as a normal phenomenon of economic recession represents a difficult experience for families, especially for women, who represent the most vulnerable segment of the population. The urban unemployment rate is generally lower for those with high educational attainments, but some types of education are not very well adapted to current labor market needs (OECD, 2000). Another factor contributing to economic difficulties is the high retirement rate. For example, the percentage of the population actively working decreased from 45.9% in 1992 to 40.7% in 2002 (Census, 2002). Additionally, the income level is low, not allowing people to meet their family's minimum needs. All of these factors left 44% of the population living at or below the poverty line (CIA, 2003). Similarly, more than 35% of national survey respondents considered that their income was not enough to meet their daily minimum needs (see Table 1) (BOP, 2003).

Table 1. Income Level and the Standard of Living.

Family Income Level	%
Not enough even for the minimum living	36.6
Enough only for the minimum living	38.6
Enough for a decent living, but we cannot afford to buy more expensive things	17
We can buy some more expensive things but we need to make restrictions	4.7
We can buy anything we want without any restrictions	0.6

Note: $N = 2,100$. *Source:* Barometru de Opinie Publica (Barometer for Public Opinion) (2003).

The costs of transition have affected especially poor families. Economic inequalities have increased, creating a rising gap between poor and rich people (Haibach et al., 2001). Although the discrepancies between poor and rich increased during the transition period, Romania, like other countries in the region, maintains a high level of egalitarianism. While the Gini Index, the standard measure of inequality, rose from 21 in 1989 to 31.1 in 1998 (the Gini Index has values between 0 = perfect equality and 100 = perfect inequality), it is still lower than in the U.S. (40.8 in 1997) or other Western countries (e.g. U.K. – 36.8 in 1995) (CIA, 2003; Tesliuc et al., 2001).

A series of negative phenomena such as excessive corruption, social polarization, and deepened poverty have left people unhappy and concerned for their welfare. The results of a national survey of participants 18 years and older (BOP, 2003) indicated that 72% were unsatisfied with their life (24% not at all satisfied; 48% not quite satisfied), while only 27% were satisfied (26% quite satisfied; 1% very satisfied). The perceived standard of living declined, with 48% of respondents indicating that they were doing worse than before 1989, 22% were doing the same, and 25% had a higher standard of living (BOP, 2003). Similarly, 39% of individuals reported that their current life was worse than the one they were living the year before, 44% indicated the situation was the same, and only 17% considered their life better now than in the year before (BOP, 2003). The poverty and uncertainty about the future have caused some people to regret the break with communism (Chelcea, 2000).

Research indicates that economic pressure influences the family at multiple levels (Robila & Krishnakumar, in press). A study with 239 women and their adolescent child examining the direct and indirect links between financial strain, social support, depression, and marital conflict indicated that higher levels of financial strain were associated with higher levels of social isolation and higher rates of depression and marital conflict (Robila & Krishnakumar, in press). Additionally, increased maternal depression is associated with a lower quality of parenting (lower levels of parental support and acceptance, harsh

discipline) (Robila & Krishnakumar, 2002). Subsequently, lower quality of parenting is associated with higher levels of internalization (depression, anxiety) and externalization in adolescents (delinquency, violence).

The socio-political factors had significant implications at the family level. During communism, there was an intrusive involvement of political forces in family functioning. For example, in 1966, family planning and abortion became illegal, and those performing and receiving abortion or any other form of family planning were severely punished (Baban, 2000). After 1989, the State was no longer directly involved in family life, the family now regulating itself. Family planning is now widely accessible, allowing people to have more control over their lives.

Romania's political culture remains influenced by prejudices belonging to the previous political regime. During the communist era, party-controlled mass organizations including youth, women, and children's organizations, unions, and professional associations were examples of "form without the content" (Grunberg, 2000, p. 310). Most women, forced to play an active role in politics before 1989 and to be part of the corrupt communist organizations for women, were no longer interested in making policy (Grunberg, 2000); consequently, there was resistance to political forces trying to encourage women's participation in political life. Thus, women constitute only 9% of the Romanian Parliament (Evenimentul, 2001). Women need to increase their visibility in the political sphere in order to participate in developing and implementing social policies designed to support their rights.

FAMILY STRUCTURE

The Romanian Family Code indicates that only marriage at the legal office guarantees rights to spouses. Men can marry at 18 years and women at 16, and they have equal rights in the marriage (Codul Familiei, 1954, 1999). In Romania, there is a high preference for marriage and for the legalization of the relationship. Although the marriage rate is decreasing, in 2000 being 6.1 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants (the lowest level in the last 50 years), it is still relatively higher than in other Eastern European countries (e.g. Bulgaria 4.3; Hungary 4.7) (INS, 2001; UNICEF-TransMONEE, 2001; UNDP, 2000).

The average age at marriage is relatively young, although it has increased in the last decade. In 2000 it was 26.9 years for men and 23.6 years for women (Council of Europe, 2002; NIS, 2001). Eighty percent of marriages are first marriages, and, on average, the duration of marriage is 22 years, indicating a high level of family stability (UNPD, 1996). Cohabitation is still low (6% of all unions) compared with other countries, and transitory (usually until partners are 30–35 years old) (INS, 2001). The divorce rate has remained relatively steady, at around 1.3 divorces

per 1,000 inhabitants (in the European context, this level is below average) (INS, 2001).

Natality is decreasing from 16/1,000 people in 1989 to 10.5/1,000 in 2000 (INS, 2001). The fertility rate is declining from 2.2 children/woman in 1989 to 1.24 in 2001 (Council of Europe, 2002; INS, 2001). The number of children per family depends on the educational background and the part of the country from which the family comes. Individuals with higher educational levels and those living in cities tend to have fewer children (UNDP, 2000). The abortion rate is decreasing from 3.15 in 1990 to 1.09 abortions for every one newborn in 2000 (INS, 2001). Women's age at the first child has increased by 1 year since 1989, from 22.5 to 23.5 in 2000. In terms of family structure, statistics show that 7% are single parent families, 85% of these being single mother families (INS, 2001).

FAMILY RELATIONS

A national survey (Barometrul de Opinie Publica, 2002) of issues related to the importance of family life indicated that the family occupied first place for 57% of people (second place for 26% of people), followed by work (for 27.4% it occupied first place, and for 25.5% it occupied second place). The majority of respondents reported having a partner as being related to happiness. Among the things that make a marriage happy, 90% of people reported love, followed by reciprocal trust, mutual support, and having a place to live. The issue of having a place to live is extremely important within the Romanian context, given the fact that housing is very expensive and frequently out of the reach of young people. This factor is even more significant since the nuclear family is considered the ideal family type and so having a personal place to live is important.

Research on marital conflict (BG, 2000) indicates that the most important factor in generating conflict between spouses is economic hardship (lack of money, impossibility of making ends met). This is more prevalent among younger couples than older ones, since the older generation have been able to acquire resources and have fewer necessities. The scarcity of housing represents one of the major problems in post-communist Romanian society, forcing many young men and women to live with their parents until they marry and often after marriage. The consequences of this include conflict between generations and lack of privacy. However, the survey indicated that the role of the family in people's lives is very important and satisfaction with the family is high, regardless of economic difficulties.

The second factor leading to marital distress was represented by difficulties related to the childrearing process (BG, 2000). This is more prevalent among women, which is to be expected, since, as in the West, the woman is the one

spending most time with the children. For the younger generation, parents-in-law were considered another source of stress (BG, 2000). This result was more prevalent in situations where the new family is residing in the same apartment with the parents, not having the resources to live on their own.

Religion

Among the social institutions that represent stability, the Church has the highest level of credibility (Barometrul de Opinie Publica, 2002). The communism system tried to eliminate religion from society by removing the Church from social life and politics and by forbidding religious education and promoting atheism. This led to a secularization of public space and a decline in religious practice (Voicu, 2001). Nevertheless, religious values remained quite strong among the population, with many family practices and customs having a religious basis.

The majority of the population (87%) is Christian Orthodox (the rest is represented by Roman Catholics (5.6%), Protestants (6.8%), others and unaffiliated (0.6%) (CIA, 2003). Forty-two percent of respondents in a national survey indicated that they attended church at least twice or three times per month, while 37% reported going to church on religious holidays (BOP, 2003). Eighty-eight percent of respondents reported trusting the Church much and very much (BOP, 2003).

Gender Roles

Communist ideology reinforced the value of work outside the home for women, denigrated their unpaid household labor, and denied them the promised public facilities, convenience goods, and appliances to help with family tasks. After communism, women and men have begun to reshape some of their basic assumptions about work, family, and their own personal roles and priorities (Fischer, 1998; Harsanyi,

Table 2. Attitudes toward Relationships and Gender Roles.

Attitudes	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
The best thing for a women is to take care of the household	78	21
A man must have children to feel fulfilled	82.5	15.5
People need a life partner to be happy	92.9	6
What women truly want is to have a family and children	82.5	17

Notes: N = 2,212. The rest of the percentages is represented by the “No Answer.”
Source: Barometru de Opinie (Barometer for Public Opinion) (2002).

Table 3. Gender Roles.

Attitudes	Yes (%)	No (%)
Bringing money home is more men's duty than women's		
Men	71	22
Women	69	24
Household work is more women's duty than men's		
Men	62	32
Women	66	28
Household work should be appreciated as any other work		
Men	52	28
Women	52	29
Household work is the easiest work		
Men	10	80
Women	11	82

Notes: $N = 2,212$. The rest of the percentages are represented by the "No Answer."

Source: Barometru de Gen (Barometer for Gender) (2000).

1993). The need to break with the immediate past produced a "confusion of values" and led men and women to turn once again to traditional institutions such as Church, ethnic group, and family in a search for personal and group identity (Fischer, 1998). Women tended to embrace pre-communist assumptions about their own status in society, most notably the value of their role in the family and the deep differences between men and women. It is still expected, both formally and informally, that women should find their satisfaction primarily in family and motherhood. While parenthood is highly desired by both men and women, household tasks are expected to be performed by women (see Table 2).

Although attitudes that are more egalitarian are emerging, gender roles are still traditional, with men being more preoccupied by providing financial security, and women as the managers of the household (see Table 3). A national survey indicated that 57% of men and 65% of women agreed that the woman is the chief of the house (28% of men and 19% of women disagreed with this statement), while 86% of men and 81% of women agreed that the man is the head of the family (7% of men and 8% of women disagreed) (BG, 2000).

CHILDREARING PRACTICES

In Romania, as in other areas of Eastern Europe, the child is considered the central value of the family (Robila, 2003; Robila & Krishnakumar, 2004). The majority

of the participants in a national survey agreed that a family needed to have a child to consider itself fulfilled (BOP, 2002). Children have a duty to respect and love their parents. On the other hand, parents are expected to do whatever they can for their children, even sacrificing their own happiness. Thus, children represent the highest goal for the parent.

Women are more involved than men in childrearing activities. There are also differences between women and men's perceptions of their involvement in the family. For example, while 10–15% of men consider that they participate in childrearing or the child's education, only 5% of women agree with this (Stanciulescu, 2002). Similarly, while 17% of men indicate that they go to the doctor with the child, only 4% of women agree (Stanciulescu, 2002). Women are considered better at performing housework chores and childrearing tasks. The change in traditional attitudes towards women's double role (in the family and workplace) is only modest among the younger generation. Women's double burden is maintained, not only as a choice, but also as a necessity in order to cope with economic difficulties. During communism (and even now), the lack of economic and social resources requires parents to work in shifts to be able to take care of their children. In this situation, men's contribution to childrearing is sometimes increased (Stanciulescu, 2002).

One of the most important missions for parents is transmitting and teaching their children values, attitudes, and roles. Batar (2000) conducted a study on parental role transmission in contemporary Romanian society. The results indicate that role transmission is dependent on residential environment (rural vs. urban), parents' educational level (lower, medium, higher), and occupation (blue/white collar). In rural families, there is a continuation of the traditional role transmission from one generation to the next for both girls and boys. Batar (2000, p. 169) identified three characteristics of role transmission: (1) the normative-directional character of transmitting and learning of attributions (the child sometimes replaces the parent in performing certain tasks, becoming thus an important work source); (2) performing these roles brings recognition and prestige; (3) the manner the young adult learns the roles, determines the way he/she will be identified with the adult who will replace the parent.

Role transmission and role learning in urban areas is different, given the contextual diversity that affects family functioning (Batar, 2000). Children learn their tasks depending on their age and gender, as well as on their parent's education and occupation. Thus, mothers with higher levels of education will encourage their daughters to acquire more modern gender roles (less household work) compared with mothers with lower levels of education. The identification with the mother's gender role is more prevalent also as daughters increase their educational and occupational status. Unemployed mothers direct their daughters towards activities

other than the domestic in order to compensate for their own lack of professional activity (Batar, 2000). Sons are attracted by the father's activities, especially those outside the home (occupational, relational, friends). Sons' housework activities are reduced, more prevalent being activities of maintenance and shopping. Very few differences were registered based on fathers' education or occupational status. Unemployed fathers have a lower status within the family, their economic role being reduced, while their assistance in domestic work is not significantly different from that of employed men (Batar, 2000). In urban areas, as in rural ones, youth participate in economic activities to help the family (by undertaking other members' responsibilities) while reducing their own free time. In both rural and urban areas, role transmission, as part of the socialization process, is characterized by reciprocity, meaning that there is an awareness of its necessity from both parties (parents and children) (Batar, 2000).

The Importance of Education

In Romania, as in other countries around the globe, the necessity of obtaining an education is strongly emphasized as the only way to achieve social and financial security. During the communist years, the general level of education increased, especially as a result of industrialization, which created a movement of the population from rural to urban areas (Cartana, 2000). After 1989, there was again a tendency towards increasing levels of education. During communism, education was highly politicized, with the state deciding the specializations to be promoted. In this context, social science was deemed to be less relevant and several university departments (e.g. psychology, social work) were closed. After 1989, these departments were reopened and the educational system began aligning itself to the economy's needs.

The main duty of children is to study, and parents do whatever they can to support them. Due to economic difficulties, parents' investment in their child's education is quite significant. In return, the child is expected to perform very well. Although available resources are usually modest, what is important is the parents' sacrifice in obtaining them, and this sacrifice needs to be recompensed by the child's efforts to present good, scholarly results (Stanciulescu, 2002). Education is perceived as a substitute for work and as a protective mechanism against hard work.

Education is also closely related to social mobility. Cartana (2000) conducted a study concerning the educational and socio-occupational dimensions of intergenerational social mobility in Romania (ascendant and descendent mobility) with a national representative sample (CURS Survey; 37,474 respondents). The results indicated high intergenerational mobility, particularly ascendant mobility.

The rates of social mobility show major discrepancies between urban and rural areas due to the persistence of unequal social opportunities. Cartana's study (2000) showed that educational mobility/stability is related to the father's level of education. In 1999, at the national level, only 20% of participants reproduced the educational level of the father, 78% of the population at 25 years of age having an educational status different than their father's (75% of these had a higher educational level). Women's ascendant mobility (70%) was 7% lower than that of men (in rural areas, the difference was 12.6% in men's favor). Ascendant mobility was 5% higher in urban areas (76%) than rural. [Cartana \(2000\)](#) suggests that these differences might be due to traditional cultural models in rural areas that provide more educational opportunities for boys. Educational immobility (the reproduction of the father's educational level) and descendent mobility are more frequent for women and in rural areas, indicating that there are more overall educational opportunities for men than for women, and more opportunities in urban areas than in rural ones ([Cartana, 2000](#)).

FAMILY POLICIES

Family policies are intended to provide benefits to support families in exercising their functions. The transition from communism to democracy brought changes in family and social policies. Policy analysis and development has been necessary with regard to family planning, which was almost non-existent during communism. As Romania attempts to shift from a reliance on abortion to a more widespread use of contraception, in 2000 the government approved policies of providing free contraceptives to target groups (e.g. unemployed, people with low income, students), their sale at affordable prices to non-targeted groups, and by distributing them through family doctors in rural areas without family planning clinics. In this context, an analysis by [Sharma et al. \(2001\)](#) indicates that, since government resources are limited, the effectiveness of the family planning program could be further increased by targeting the free contraceptives to the most vulnerable groups (the ones that cannot afford to pay for them). Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also have an important role in supporting initiatives and campaigns on safe sex and family planning education.

A major restructuring has occurred in the policies related to parental leave. In 1999, the government introduced a 100% paid, 5-day paternal childcare leave option that can be taken up in the first 8 weeks of the child's life. The mother can take 112 days paid maternal leave with full salary. The father and the mother can also take leave for up to 2 years to care for the child, being paid 85% of salary ([Ministry of Labor, Social Solidarization and Family, 2003](#)). However, the low

reimbursement, which barely meets the minimum standard of living, sometimes causes parents to reject this and to work full-time (Baban, 2000). Recently, policies to support low-income families and low-income single parent families financially were introduced. Another important initiative has focused on the prevention and eradication of domestic violence. A law to protect against family violence is in place and a National Agency for Family Protection has been created to support these endeavors. In addition, national advertising campaigns against family violence have been sponsored. In terms of child protection, the introduction of the foster care system was one of the newest interventions, which looks like a promising solution to child institutionalization.

Moving from a planned to a market economy has resulted in high costs for large sections of the Romanian population, one of them being the end of full employment. In the pre-1989 welfare system, there was no unemployment insurance and social assistance because the basic conception of welfare was that everyone had the right and the obligation to work (Haibach et al., 2001). The lack of basic welfare programs required under a capitalist market economy emerged as a social problem during the transformation, with a housing crisis, increased unemployment, deterioration of the social security system, and difficulties in coping with the increased prices for basic consumables (Haibach et al., 2001). The social protection system, introduced in 1991, is based on granting unemployment benefits and supporting allowances as a response to the sharp increase in the unemployment rate (NHDR, 2001–2002). The social insurance and pension situation in Romania remains uncertain, not only because of the lack of a more coherent policy framework, but also because there are more pensioners and fewer contributors (NHDR, 2001–2002).

RESEARCH ON FAMILY

After being closed by the communist forces since the 1970s, several social science academic departments were reopened in the early 1990s. While fields such as psychology, sociology or social work are now widely recognized in Romania, family science is still at the beginning of its development. Due to the prolonged time period without any research on the family, studies need to be conducted on a variety of issues such as marital quality, parenting, intergenerational relationships, domestic violence, etc. Some information on families can be drawn from recent surveys. For example, in 2000, the SOROS Foundation sponsored a national representative survey (“Gender Barometer”) (BG, 2000) carried out by the Gallup Organization, which assessed people’s attitudes on a wide range of issues related to gender socialization (e.g. gender roles in the family and society, equal rights,

violence). While sets of questions regarding attitudes towards family issues have started to be included in other public opinion surveys (e.g. BOP, 2002), there is a need for moving beyond examining attitudes to focusing on family processes.

Several state research institutes have conducted periodical studies on peoples' attitudes and perceptions concerning various topics such as quality of life, social policies, inter-ethnic relations, or changes in the socio-economic and political spheres (e.g. poverty, social marginalization and exclusion). However, research needs to be conducted specifically on family issues. Family Science and Family Counseling departments need to be created within Social Studies Colleges in order to prepare family scholars and practitioners to develop and conduct systematic scholarly work with families. Institutes and/or Centers for Family Studies need to be developed in order to conduct research projects on family relationships and to attract funding. Although several works on families have been published (e.g. Mitrofan & Ciuperca, 2002; Robila & Krishnakumar, 2002), considerably more systematic research on Romanian family processes needs to be conducted.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has provided an overview of the impact of socio-political and economic changes on families in Romania. The transition from communism to democracy, with its appealing civil liberties and decentralized and competitive free markets, has also brought economic insecurities and challenges. Under these conditions, people in Romania have developed survival strategies to cope with the lack of resources. Families in Romania continue to remain the filters of socio-economic transformations for individuals. Family relationships and childrearing are highly valued among Romanians. As societal changes will continue to be associated with difficulties, families need to find effective ways to support both children and adults in their efforts to be successful. In this light, developing programs and policies to support families in their endeavors is of maximum importance. Therefore, systematic research on family processes in Romania needs to be conducted in order to provide basic knowledge of family matters, which would allow the development of strategies and programs to support family members during these times of significant transformations.

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