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Restructuring Cultural Practices in Transnational Families

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Abstract: Migration is one of the social processes that have influenced and are still deeply influencing current Romanian society, given that millions of Romanian citizens have relatives who had longer or shorter migration projects. Migration leads to socio-economic and cultural changes, which cause temporary or permanent changes in the human reality, the way of life and the personality of those who leave, but also of those who remain at home. Certainly, migration affects, first of all, the family, changing both its structure and functionality. The temporarily disintegrated family has become one of the forms towards which the evolution of the family is moving, raising a multitude of problems aimed at a new lifestyle and interaction, new demands in the line of adjustment and accommodation both within and outside the family. The phenomenon of emigration in order to find a workplace affects both the family, as a social nucleus, and the individual as part of the family structure. Migration has a major impact on the relationship between spouses, on the parent-child relationship, on parental behavior, on destiny, in general. Although the family remains central to the existence of individuals in a transnational situation, its cohesion is not self-evident; it becomes a problem of community integration. Following the way in which the perspective on the family has changed in the context of migration, the study aims to identify and analyze the most important transnational practices through which family cohesion was maintained in the case of Romanian migration. To better understand this process of maintaining transnational family cohesion, we use an analytical model in four dimensions (social, positional, cultural and identity).

Keywords: *Romanian migration; transnational family integration; structure; role; transnational practices;*

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Introduction

The recent Romanian context in which the phenomenon of external migration takes place is likely to worry: both at macrosocial level (structural, societal) and at mesosocial level (groups, communities) and microsocial (family, individual), migration has serious effects on all levels. In addition to the obvious positive effects (especially caused by remittances sent into the country, but also related to the import of civilization, skills market, etc.), there is also a range of negative consequences, including those related to the family (especially the family structure suffers by weakening husband-wife or parent-child ties). As statistical data and studies in our country show, the effects of international migration of Romanians are complex and correlated with each other, both demographically (negative natural growth associated with the departure of young people has the effect of increasing the dependency rate, depopulation and aging population in certain areas of the country, especially in rural areas) and economically (waste of qualified labor force and people with higher education) and, consequently, also on the socio-cultural and family level.

According to Sandu (2010), migration is a "total social phenomenon" (p. 35), through which opportunities and problems, history, present and future at the level of Romanian society can be highlighted. We are therefore dealing with a very complex phenomenon, with implications and consequences at the level of society, community, family and individual.

Referring to the practice of migration in the case of Romanian society, anthropologist Mihăilescu (2015) noted that it has old roots, before 1989, during the communist period. Then, industrialization and urbanization led to increased internal migration from village to city, and the traditional Romanian family underwent a major change of structure. Vintilă Mihăilescu notes that diffuse households have appeared, where some of the members stay at home and the other part settles in the city. Goods and services continue to be exchanged between the two sides for a redistribution of resources within these domestic networks. In this context, we can talk about a kinship, we could say "pragmatic", in which "it is not so much relatives who help each other, but those who help each other become relatives" (Mihăilescu, 2015). Starting from the theory supported by the Romanian anthropologist, it seems that the diffuse family is the "grandmother" of the transnational family after 1989, which adapted previous family practices to the new context in which it operates. As such, in the situation in which the Romanian family already had a history of

"scattering", which took shape with the massive migration of Romanians abroad, after '89, meant only an expansion of the space in which a family begins to place itself and manage its daily existence. In this context, family practices that have maintained family cohesion over time have only been restructured, not reinvented.

Starting from the idea that migration affects, first of all, the family, changing both its structure and functionality, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the most important transnational practices through which family cohesion has been maintained in the context of Romanian migration. In order to better understand the process of transnational family integration, we use an analytical model in four dimensions: social, positional, cultural and identity. The first dimension starts from the idea that the family is a solidary network of mutual knowledge. However, multilocals are trapped in a system of transnational obligations and interests (Landolt, 2001), with more or less pressing expectations regarding the presence of those in their entourage – couple partners, elderly people – and maintaining family ties. The natural character of the relationships specific to a monolocal situation can become, due to distance, an artifice of logistically prepared contacts, thus complicating the "choreography of coexistence" (Pred, 1977). The second dimension takes into account the fact that the family is a system or social space in which each member must have a position. The distance complicates this position and its recognition by the other members. Sayad (1999:184) insists on the distinction between physical presence/absence and moral presence/absence here and there due to the fact that the migrant is between the two locations. Women's labour migration highlights more clearly the difficulty of remote parenting (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). The third dimension starts from the idea that the family is an information system. The primary family socialization, a privileged moment of learning knowledge and practicing cultural models, shows the importance of this role of the family. But with distance, updating knowledge is no longer automatic and continuous. For this reason, it is necessary to seek information that will subsequently enable tacit agreement to be promoted on social norms, cultural practices, traditions and customs transmitted and learned in the family. Finally, the fourth dimension takes into account the fact that the family is an identity landmark. In other words, it is a set of individuals on whom feelings (including family membership) and moral obligations are fixed. But at the same time, it is also an ensemble of frequented family places, supports of collective memory, forming important territorial anchorages (Bonvalet & Lelièvre, 2005).

Transnational family

The institution of the family is restructured by certain centrifugal forces (professional mobility of family members, breakdown of intergenerational cohabitation, relocation, conjugal separation, spatial separation of siblings), resulting in forms of family archipelagoisation, accompanied by multi-residentiality of members on an intranational and transnational scale (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). However, the family remains the central pillar in the existence of individuals from a material, affective and symbolic point of view (Samuel, 2008, 58). The transnational division of the family becomes a "circuit of transnational obligations and interests" (Landolt, 2001) or a cross-border resource (Dreby, 2006; Reynolds, 2010), thus joining the theme of diaspora solidarity. In all cases, distance and physical absence of family members must be overcome to maintain the institution of the family. According to some researchers, this aspect would now be easier to achieve due to the possibilities of communication continuity through all kinds of channels (mail, telephone, videoconference, e-mail, visits, etc.) (Diminescu, 2005, 2010). But this is unlikely to be enough. Aren't other practices necessary to keep the family in a transnational situation, in the spirit of Urry's (2003) remarks on co-presence?

Certainly, it is now necessary to distinguish what kind of family we are talking about: nuclear family, kinship, consanguinity, etc., within which various relationships are established. Recent family developments show a breakdown of intergenerational cohabitation, but, contrary to popular belief/stereotypes, a continuity of ties across geographical distances is maintained (Bonvalet, 2003). Thus, should the analysis be extended from transnational family to consanguinity/kinship, with the risk of diluting the analysis or meaning of family unit? This difficulty / dilemma can be overcome if we consider the process of *relativizing*, that is to say, choosing and maintaining contacts between relatives and entourage, which family members integrate as part of the family (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 14). Moreover, this transnational situation can be experienced very differently depending on the family configuration in which the transnational members participate. First of all, we can broadly assume that family life requires a more intense coexistence than that of kinship, having a more regular course due to a more or less ritualized or standardized common daily rhythm. Following that first observation, I would point out, secondly, that the transnational movement of a single person from a single-residential household will not have the same impact on coexistence or family unity as the movement of the whole household or of each member thereof. And,

thirdly, the physical absence of some family members will produce expectations of their presence, probably higher within the couple than for other relatives, for example to assume the roles of father or mother in front of children. On the other hand, distance and absence release them from obligations in choosing and maintaining their entourage (*relativizing*).

If traditionally the family is composed of members living together, nowadays its structure is changing through the mobility of parents, and this new form acquires the name of transnational family.) It is introduced into the literature to describe the dispersion of a family between two or more national borders and the active maintenance of contacts between its members, giving rise to a new "geography" of family unit (Lam, et al., 2002). Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) define transnational families as "families that mostly live apart but stay together and create a sense of collectivity and unity, a sense of family, even across national borders" (p. 18). On the contrary, the family group subject to much analysis is, depending on the case, the domestic unit, household, extended family or a combination of all these entities. For example Lima Herrera, in its definition of the transnational family includes members of both the nuclear family and the extended family: "transnational families, both nuclear and extended, are dispersed across international boundaries (...). They are made up of children, parents, brothers, brothers-in-law, uncles, nephews, godparents and godmothers on both sides of the border." (2001: 78). Such imprecision arises from the coexistence of heterogeneity of transnational family types, but also from the difficulty of defining the contemporary family.

Thus, we find that although members of transnational families temporarily live in different territories, they maintain a sense of belonging, a sense of family. However, the departure of one of the members causes the reorganization of roles within the family. In this case, family members take over the roles / functions of the respective migrant, which can lead to loss of well-being within the family and imbalances in the couple relationship. Parental mobility enhances economic well-being, but deprives children of emotional support, parental care and affection (Asis & Ruiz-Marave, 2013: 49).

From Merla's (2014) perspective, the term transnational care is an essential element in maintaining family relationships in the context of distance, and one of the main ways in which people live away from each other is maintained through financial care (in the form of sending certain amounts of money or various objects), practical support (exchange of counseling, daily assistance activities), emotional support and, last but not least, the transfer of care to close people (p. 90).

For Lima (2001), transnational families are, at a symbolic level, an agent through which different habits, practices and forms of consumption circulate and merge. At the same time, through them, the socio-cultural practices of the transnational family are created, recreated and transformed.

Transnational family practices

The theoretical concept of family practices is used in the sociology of the family to explain in particular how a family is "made", theorists emphasizing that more important than being a formal member of a family, is to act, together with other members, as a family. This theoretical differentiation is very important and makes the transition from the definition of what a family means by legal affiliation and social expectations, to the daily reality of its members. This conceptual framework is especially relevant for families who have social expectations of what is supposed to be a good family: either they have family members who are of another ethnicity or nationality, or they have members who live in another country, or even both.

Morgan (2011) summarizes the basic characteristics of family practices: people in everyday life do not frequently talk about what family means, but simply live and experience it; members of a family not only have static roles, they are not just mothers, fathers, brothers, etc., but they practice the family; there are important actions in family life, but also some of which are less talked about; the regularity with which a certain action takes place, be it daily, weekly, yearly, etc.; How someone ends up being part of the family or being excluded is quite flexible. All these characteristics intertwine and structure family practices, forming, in the author's vision, the essence of the concept of family.

With regard to the practices of transnational families, we must especially consider the characteristic mentioned by Morgan (2011) regarding the flexibility of how one ends up being part of the family or being excluded, a characteristic that captures the perpetual restructuring of these practices. In the context of migration, changes occur in the structure of family relationships, changes that can be considered both an opportunity and a challenge (Robila, 2010). In terms of cohesion, for some families the context of migration means an opportunity for closeness, while for others the same experience means a fragmentation of the family.

Transnational families have a diverse composition, a different status, restructuring according to these particularities under the pressure of migration experience. Although these transnational families no longer

belong to a specific territory, most often they were formed in a certain cultural space. This has given them a particular essence and structure because they do not start from scratch in structuring family practices. Morgan (2011) notes that individuals do not start from scratch when starting a family. When they marry or become parents, they already have a set of practices formed in part by legal prescriptions, economic constraints and cultural definitions.

The migration process affects the structure of relationships in a family, the way they are defined or practiced. The relationship between spouses, between parents and children, parental behavior is structured under the impact of migration, and the emphasis is more on communication, given the long-distance relationships between family members. As the members of a family no longer share the same space, no longer have common experiences, and perspectives on countless aspects of family life begin to differentiate, a restructuring of the practices of these families results. This state is due to the fact that transnational families are not mere blood ties, nor fixed entities, but extremely relative (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

Practices of transnational families in the Romanian space

Although the Romanian family has gone through a period of change in recent decades, the changes have been more expressive in nature. Thus, decisions are made more and more jointly, domestic, parental, couple roles are negotiated, so that the family is freer, better connected and integrated into society. The essential transformations that the Romanian family has undergone can be reduced to the model of a family that is more democratic on the inside and more open to the outside.

Family represents the most important value of Romanians and the fundamental support of their lives. However, in the context of the intensification of the migration phenomenon after 1989, the family structure changes considerably, but through transnational practices family cohesion has been maintained. In order to better understand what is at stake in the integration process of transnational families in the Romanian space, we apply an analytical model in four dimensions, frequently used in studies on migrant integration.

The social dimension. The first character trait of the family, and perhaps the most evident in studies of both family and transnational family migration, is that it forms a community that provides social capital, and physical distance between members causes reticularity (Bonvalet, 2003, 10).

It is noticed that the family under the same roof also forms a network, but first the unity of place and action in the case of this type of family is noted. With the distance between members, however, family relationships lose their usual and informal character. Evidence of meeting every evening between members living in the same place no longer exists. In order to keep in touch, on the contrary, it is necessary to form and maintain long-distance relationships, to organize more formally the moments of virtual or proxemic contact (visit, ceremony, etc.). We may wonder if maintaining long-distance relationships is sustainable and to what extent the family needs moments of physical closeness.

In the traditional Romanian society, the cohesion of the nation was maintained through a series of obligations and duties that were often transmitted from one generation to another, without being questioned. After all, they constituted and maintained the channel of communication between the members of a family. These traditional structures have been taken over by members of transnational families, weaving over them new formulas for adapting family practices to the specificity of transnational living. For example, the visit is not a new practice because it was also signaled by ethnologists, and through it the cohesion of the nation was ensured. Migrants have perpetuated this practice, but for them the visit itself is also burdensome – it is not so much a necessity as an obligation that occupies a large part of their holiday time in the country. Not being a new practice for the family picture, it remains one of the most frequent practices underlying the maintenance of cohesion in the case of transnational families in the Romanian space.

Positional dimension. Research on transnational family relationships shows that they are structured in terms of expectations regarding integrative behaviors and that these expectations are asymmetrical between family members because they do not assume the same positions. Dreby (2006) writes, for example, that "when mothers don't send money or gifts home, they don't necessarily feel that their relationship with their children has deteriorated. What matters is the expression of care and not the sending of material goods. For fathers, on the contrary, it matters what they send home" (p. 55). Sayad (1999) insisted on the risks of family and territorial disaffiliation linked to a "moral" absence where migrants live, but also to a moral and physical absence where they should be in the country of origin (with household, family, etc., for whose sake they took the path of expatriation). With the end of the working period, the transnational migrant who has his family in the country of origin loses his only family function, that of giving money, which adds to the social and cognitive disintegration,

which contributes to the precariousness of their living conditions (Gallou, 2005).

The role of partner or parent in the household may suffer due to intermittent absences. Certainly, functional integration is built through position in the family system, accompanied by more or less obvious moral obligations. But the place in the family is not fixed and is also acquired through events, such as certain family rituals: marriage, death, baptism, retirement party, important birthdays, inauguration of the house. On these occasions, roles are redistributed in that the event changes the formal system – for example, the girl also takes on the role of mother – but also informally. In the latter case, in the ritual, the presence and commitment of people in a situation of prolonged estrangement is important.

In the Romanian space, migration imposed a certain fluidity of family relations. They are maintained thanks to the connection between its members, connections that are formed through communication, meetings and visits. Once upon a time, genealogy determined the members of a family and their roles, and custom determined who was included or excluded from this circle. Today, empty seats at family gatherings are often taken over by a neighbor, a person paid to provide support, by another person who was included in the circle following a marriage in old age (a practice rarely encountered until recently in the case of family in Romania). Now, communication in transnational families takes place mostly online.

Cultural dimension. Cohabitation in the family can be put into practice not only through physical presence. It is also about being together, pursuing or restoring a sense of unity, mutual understanding. This quality of presence is possible only by reducing not only the physical distance and intermittency of coexistence, but also differences in the particular information flow of the national and regional cultural space. It is therefore necessary to maintain the updating of information for the mutual understanding of family members beyond national or local cultural areas, a practice that Duchêne-Lacroix (2006) calls "cultural gymnastics".

The choice to emigrate leads to a dissociation of the emigrant from his culture of origin, the only moment of authentic cultural reconnection being related to the preservation of holidays. They promote the specificity of our community, through customs and traditions that represent "the object of a legitimate belief in our past, rationally interpreted by us in the present" (Mihăilescu, 2010).

Clearly, there are important moments in family life from which no migrant could imagine missing. Baptism and wedding are events that have been and have remained in Romanian society, moments that have the power

to bring the family together. Attending the wedding of a family member is an assumed obligation in Romanian society. One of the primary functions of these weddings was and remained that of maintaining, affirming and reaffirming the cohesion of family and nation. Therefore, these are events that also bring together transnational families from the Romanian space.

The identity dimension. The position occupied in the family also marks the individual's belonging to the family, although this membership could be formulated differently, depending on the opinions of the family members. One might think that the sense of family identity and family belonging is self-evident to people who are born into a family. But it is rather conditions that allow this feeling. We know, for example, that social groups play a discriminatory role in terms of sense of belonging and place in the family (Samuel, 2008). Belonging is also built through three other dimensions: a common experience of daily life and important moments (e.g. ceremonies, the joint project of having a child, building a house, etc.), a formal and informal position acquired during certain hardships of life and, finally, the transmission of knowledge that cohabitation can promote more "naturally" and, implicitly, can favor (holidays with grandparents, language immersion, etc.). Family identity and family belonging are also projected onto family places. We can identify several symbolic relationships with places: the central place of the present of home life, places of kinship, those of ancestry and experience. The first place is the simple support of a here and now of family life and, as such, can be located anywhere in the world, provided that the conditions for cohabitation are met.

Finally, the identity dimension of family integration is not detached from cultural affiliations which, in a transnational situation, can quickly become hybrid or multiple. The transnational family relationship is also part of a particular relationship with a national dimension. Family members who go abroad activate a relationship with nationality, not only for themselves, but also in their family relationship.

We see that members of transnational families maintain a sense of belonging, even if they are in different territories. For example, the exchange of gifts ensures the cohesion of the transnational family in the Romanian space, despite the distance between its members. The exchange of gifts is a practice that took place in the past in ritual contexts (birth/baptism, wedding and funeral), and during the communist period it took new forms (food distribution and favors network). As such, this practice has been continued, in an adapted form, by transnational families.

Belonging to a transnational family has diverse consequences for those who stay at home. On the one hand, intergenerational solidarity is

developing between adults who have gone abroad to work and elderly parents who have stayed at home. On the other hand, Romanian grandparents from transnational families develop certain transnational practices to fulfill their role in relation to their grandchildren in the difficult context of distances created by borders, or more, by the fact that these grandchildren belong to another culture, sometimes not even having a common language of communication.

Conclusions

Clearly, family practices have transformed under the impact of migration. As such, new waves of migration, the globalization process, macrosocial dynamics – along with the status, values and behaviors of individuals – have influenced and reformulated family practices. In addition, understanding the multitude of transnational practices involves contextualizing them according to socio-cultural characteristics in Romania. The new constants in which the family is practiced, especially in the context of migration, have led to an increase in the incidence of divorce, in the number of single-parent families, in the reconfiguration of relationships within families, in the reconfiguration of the couple.

In Romania's case, transnational families, through their practices, constantly reformulate the institution of the family, managing to ensure its survival, regardless of the context. Even though online communication makes it possible to maintain contact between family members at a distance and at a previously unattainable level, family cohesion also needs physical co-presence and territoriality to be maintained. Analyzing the process of maintaining transnational family cohesion by using a model in four dimensions (social, positional, cultural and identity), it follows that, on the one hand, visits to families in Romania are rare compared to the frequency and quality of "virtual" contacts, and on the other hand, the presence and investment in important moments of family life ensures a central informal position in the family space, even those who are in a marginal geographical position. A moment of re-cultivating is often necessary after each return to resume a common daily life. Equally important for maintaining family cohesion is physical co-presence and involvement in integrating "projects" such as home, ceremony, grandparent childcare, etc. The role of a family in a transnational situation was not only to activate or maintain a network of resources across borders, but also to transmit a deeper set of social and

symbolic relationships, combining moral values, self-investment and formal or informal positional recognition.

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