Euro-orphan-hood in Social Discourse: Is it really a problem for migrant families, especially those in which the parents often lack maturity?

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Abstract

The following paper contains the results of a cross-cultural, qualitative study about perceiving the "euro-orphan-hood" phenomena, which is now-a-days a very significant social problem in Poland. The author's psychotherapeutic background and training experience allows her to discuss it from a psychotherapeutic distance and to focus more on the role of care professionals and solutions.

Officially, and only in Great Britain, there are over 300,000 Polish migrants. However, unofficial sources estimate that the number of Poles living in the UK is much higher, perhaps upto 1 million. What is more, this number increases if other European countries and the United States are taken into consideration. Most of the migrants had left their motherlands because of financial difficulties. "Euro-orphan-hood" is a general term for describing the fact that the emigration of the parents significantly contributes to the social and educational situation of the residual children.

It is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon and the knowledge of this subject is still small. To save children from the negative consequences of migration, we need to examine its causes very carefully.

Keywords: Euro-orphan-hood, narrations, children, teachers, parents, psychologists

Introduction

Increasing the mobility of people in modern Europe has forced a number of societies to face new economic, social and psychological problems. Most of them have been broadly described and discussed in the media. The quality of these analyses can tell us more about common social narrations and the language of the debate in a particular country, than about more general psychological facts. After May 2004 – the date that Poland joined the European Union – European migration significantly increased, as a result of various opportunities for Poles to work abroad legally. Many young adults of working age left their country because of their difficulties in finding a job in Poland, especially in little villages in the eastern part of the country. Many of these people are also young parents. In this situation, there were several media 'scoops' that concerned a significant social problem in Poland – the so-called 'euro-orphan-hood'. Euro-orphan-hood is described as all the relationships between the migration of parents and the life and educational fate of their children. Some sources like Kawecki et al. monograph say that this problem is much stronger and more visible in the case of circular (or repetitive) migrations, connected with the parents' seasonal work, because it exposes children to repeated abandonments (Kawecki *et al.*, 2012). Probably what is typical of the new wave of migrations, and connected mostly with the search for a job, is their uncertain character – parents just

don't know if it's a temporary migration or relatively permanent. This uncertainty is an additional stressor for them and their children.

Most of the press and TV news concerning this issue describe educational and socio-emotional consequences of being left by their parents. From a psychological point of view, euro-orphan-hood is more or less a prolonged situation of separation resulting from a parent's departure to work abroad. Most of the articles and reports refer to the failure to adapt to the situation of separation (Mahler *et al.*, 1975).

Psychological impact and potential problems in social life and school achievements depend on many factors. Also many variables could mitigate this impact on the education and well-being of these children. Narratives presented in the media, like all narratives, tell us only something relatively superficial about the level of subjective meaning of this group of people (Dryll & Cierpka, 2011). Most of these articles seem to be looking for someone to blame: the immaturity of the parents; troublesome features in some of some children; and ultimately the economic and political system in the country.

Somehow, it is obviously understood – the media are always looking for recipients and it's most often directly connected with looking for sensational news. Notwithstanding the media, there are many other people, in many different social roles, who take part in the debate about euro-orphan-hood. Who is mostly talking – and how? What explanations are present in the narrations of the people involved? Why does the narration take such a shape? In case of a significant social problem like euro-orphan-hood, the answers to these questions are more than just theoretical or curious.

According to systemic communication theories and narrative theories, the way that people see this phenomenon, and describe it, actually affects the ways of solving this common and acute social problem in practice (de Barbaro, 1999; Wendland, 2011). Communicational constructivism describes a set of positions present in modern social, natural and formal sciences. The most important feature, common to the different varieties of constructivism, is the assumption that the human being is a "social being", with constructs that produce knowledge (both theoretical and practical) of the world around them. According to this approach, people construct – not only their knowledge of the world – but also the world itself, understood as the socio-cultural reality (Wendland, 2011). In turn, the broadest conception of a "system" indicates that it is a complex of interacting components, together with the relationships among them, that permit the identification of a boundary-maintaining entity or process (Laszlo & Krippner, 1997).

People involved in the care of children, who have (more or less temporarily) stayed in countries different from their parents' country are *soft* systems, characterized by human beings as their principal components. Such systems are difficult to define; they do not have clear-cut and agreed aims or purposes. At the level of the individual psyche, there are multiple processes of perception,

interpretation, representation, explanation, and, what is the most important for this study, a variety of communications that push and pull at our individual and collective cognitive maps, as they shape our subjective image of phenomena and events. At the level of a multi-person organization, there are frequently different and conflicting aims operating simultaneously (Laszlo & Krippner, 1997). It is much more complicated in the case of non-institutional systems, developed around the task and focused on the problem (of looking after the children with absent parents) and this is therefore a much wider and more ambiguously defined system of people. In conclusion, in accordance with communicational approaches and psychotherapeutic perspectives, people who take part in the debate and/or those who don't take part (verbally), but their silence also has a significance (like parents, teachers, psychologists, pedagogues and finally children themselves) all have an influence on the largely understated fate of many children in Poland.

The aim of the research and methodological issues

In the light of all these considerations, the main research question of this project was: "How do different people: teachers, psychologists and parents involved in situations of euro-orphan-hood perceive it?" In order to answer this question, I tried to identify factors and processes that influence the phenomena at different stages presented in the narratives of families and teachers. For this purpose, I first conducted interviews with Polish teachers, travelling all around the country, as a coach and teacher. Then, I continued the project in the United Kingdom, interviewing reunited families. I used semi-structured interviews, containing a few similar, simple and open questions, such as follows: "If you have experienced consequences of the so-called euro-orphan-hood (very rarely did the term need to be explained), how did it influence you or your family's work/life?" "What made it more difficult? What made it easier?" If some issues seemed to be important, the subjects that I had examined were followed by an interviewer. Interviews were based on the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2006). The sample was limited mostly by the accessibility of the particular groups and their readiness to talk about the issue. For example, it was impossible to include into the project, the completely silent group of families, parents and children who are experiencing the situation of separation right now. Finally, the sample consisted of: 16 teachers, working in Poland, in both primary and middle schools; two Polish teachers, working in a middle school in the United Kingdom; four psychologists working with children and families in Poland; and finally seven reunited Polish families living in the United Kingdom.

Discussion

Firstly, I described a tendency, present in several groups of families or teachers, that could be easily explained by a fundamental error of attribution – a general human tendency to underestimate external and situational factors in the behaviour of others (Ross, 1977). Probably a more adequate explanation

is connected to a lack of systemic support within an institution or community, causing a lack of emotional distance to the situation (Ross, 1988). This constant lack of support and deep conviction that it cannot (or even shouldn't be) changed is also causing narrowing attitudes towards all these difficult situations.

The fact that the bonds within the closest child environments are seen as being limited to children-parents relationships could also be seen as 'information' about the current image of a family, common within the Polish society – a Polish family includes first of all the parents and children; then the grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, which are nowadays secondary, additional, and not completely necessary to fulfil a definition of "family". A tendency to omit factors that are connected with peer groups and circles of teaching indicates that the school influences (as an institution) are relatively marginalised, not only by the families who see themselves as much more important, but also by this institution's representatives.

Omitted in this discourse are also various external and institutional factors: like work organisations in Polish schools; the overloading of teachers (with even 40 pupils in one class); and eliminating the bringing-up role of the school (seen only as an educational function). Polish psychologists and teachers working in United Kingdom schools see the children's situation much more multi-dimensionally, probably because they are adequately supported, and not so immediate. This discourse also seems to be connected with the level of vocational training of the teachers in the United Kingdom, or of psychologists.

If migrations are now seen as an inherent part of the functioning of modern society, it will become increasingly necessary to understand – even better – some of the psychological aspects of the phenomena. The children's perception of their parents' situation of a departure is very specific, influenced by their own particular developmental stage (Trempała, 1999). In general, these children seem to be more likely to act out their emotions connected with these situations, than reflect on them, or work through them internally.

Naturally, this is connected with a poor ability to maintain a relationship at a distance and a psychological balance in situations that are very threatening for every child. Children in the difficult separation period might also feel ashamed or guilty and somehow would like to protect their parents and families, as a whole, against outside comments or accusations. Younger children, or just less mature ones, could be unable to talk about any difficulties. The reasons that families who are currently facing this type of problem might give for any reluctance to give any interviews form a broad field of speculation. We can only suspect that parents generally feel very guilty, sometimes ashamed, and that they just don't want to be accused anymore. In conclusion, broader perspectives – including some psychological processes – are visible in the case of those interviewees whose social role and distance in time to the situation allow emotional distance, or who are protected from consequences of

emotional distress by (for example) the educational system, or the broader family and community (Ross, 1988).

Gathering all conclusions and their proposed explanations, the prolonged situation of separation shows all the weaknesses of the system in which the children are functioning: relations; roles and communication; the matching of care and support to the developmental stage of children; and the various borders of sub-systems. Additionally, changes connected with the migrations of parents turn some advantages of the family (or their school system) into problems.

Close and stable bonds within broader family, school workers or neighbourhood do not make children resistant to changes, in general. Borders between sub-systems, which normally allow a protection of children against the family problems, are impairing communications, and can be an obstacle to the children's understanding of reasons for their parents' departure.

For example, Polish cultural patterns often protect children from the knowledge about their family's financial conditions – children are not informed about this, and many other kinds of difficulties. At the same time, any form of separation with the parents results in impaired communication between the sub-systems in the child's environment (de Barbaro, 1999). First of all, working alliance between family and school is impaired – another separation that indirectly influences children.

Systemic working model of euro-orphan-hood for care professionals

As a tool that can make the situation psychologically more understandable, I propose the working model of euro-orphan-hood for care professionals – the fruit of systemic thinking about the situation that is currently so common. Obviously, every family and every situation is different, unique, and needs to be taken care of individually. But, gathering all above mentioned conclusions about many different points of view, we could use some sort of a heuristic model to understand the systemic processes that are engaged in the situation of earning parent's departure abroad; some systemic analysis of typical "euro-orphan-hood situation". It could make us pay attention to some important issues, which are not always obvious, and definitely not for everybody. First of all, prolonged separation in the sub-system that is the most important for the children results in an impaired communication among all the people engaged in the situation, and especially regarding communications between families and official institutions, like with "school failures" (Bowbly, 2005). Facing such troubles, a lot of their guilty feelings (and very often their overwhelming shame) result in silence on the part of the parents: they don't know what to say in this 'foreign' language. Practically speaking, they also have a problem in establishing frequent visits to the school, just because of their being 'absent' – in another country.

Probably the systemic, unconscious function of many of these problems, evoked by the children, is (essentially) to try to bring their parents back home – in order (nominally) to visit the

school, they also need to come back 'home' from 'abroad'. Any which way, open communication (about these issues) gets blocked. The situation is too difficult to handle emotionally within the family, not only for children; it evokes symptoms or, more often, behavioural disorders, as a pathological way of communication. Relationships can become more like a chain of bonds and dependencies – it reminds us of the deaf telephone game, rather than a healthy system.

In this 'chain', children are the most fragile component. Because of poor abilities of understanding the situation, and handling it emotionally, many of them don't hold with the difficult emotions, connected with separation, but (alternatively) they often act them out.

They become troublesome, sometimes aggressive towards the school, but we still cannot forget that they need to be 'protected', as the weakest part of the system. We need to remember that one of the most significant reasons for their fragility is the fact that they are often involved the process of (re-)building their identity (understood as a multi-dimensional and complex structure) in the course of social communication. (Wendland, 2011)

Difficult situations (especially with regards to their children) prompts them to look for a safety-valve – essentially, this means a place (and people) on to which they can safely relieve all their existential frustrations and misery. Very often, this naturally chosen place is the school, neighbourhood, or extended family. Parents (as a potential object of repeating patterns of 'loss') are usually protected (or protect themselves) against difficult emotions and aggressive behaviours. The roles of a parent, which are often exchanged with those who protect, and with the child who is to be protected, are quite confused.

There are obviously disturbing identification issues and often these have prolonged serious consequences for those with emotional development and well-being issues. Sometimes, especially if the children have developed originally bad relations with their role-less parents, they become much more easy-going for other caregivers or teachers. If they have poor relationships with their current caregivers, full of frustration and/or resulting in aggression, they could seem to be very mature when at school. Obviously, just like most of the children who are left behind, aggressive attitudes towards colleagues and teachers is a systemically useful kind of illusion. This illusion could be dangerous if the adults involved don't have an emotional distance and a broader perspective with which to see it.

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Systemic, working model of euro-orphanhood for care professional especially psychotherapists.
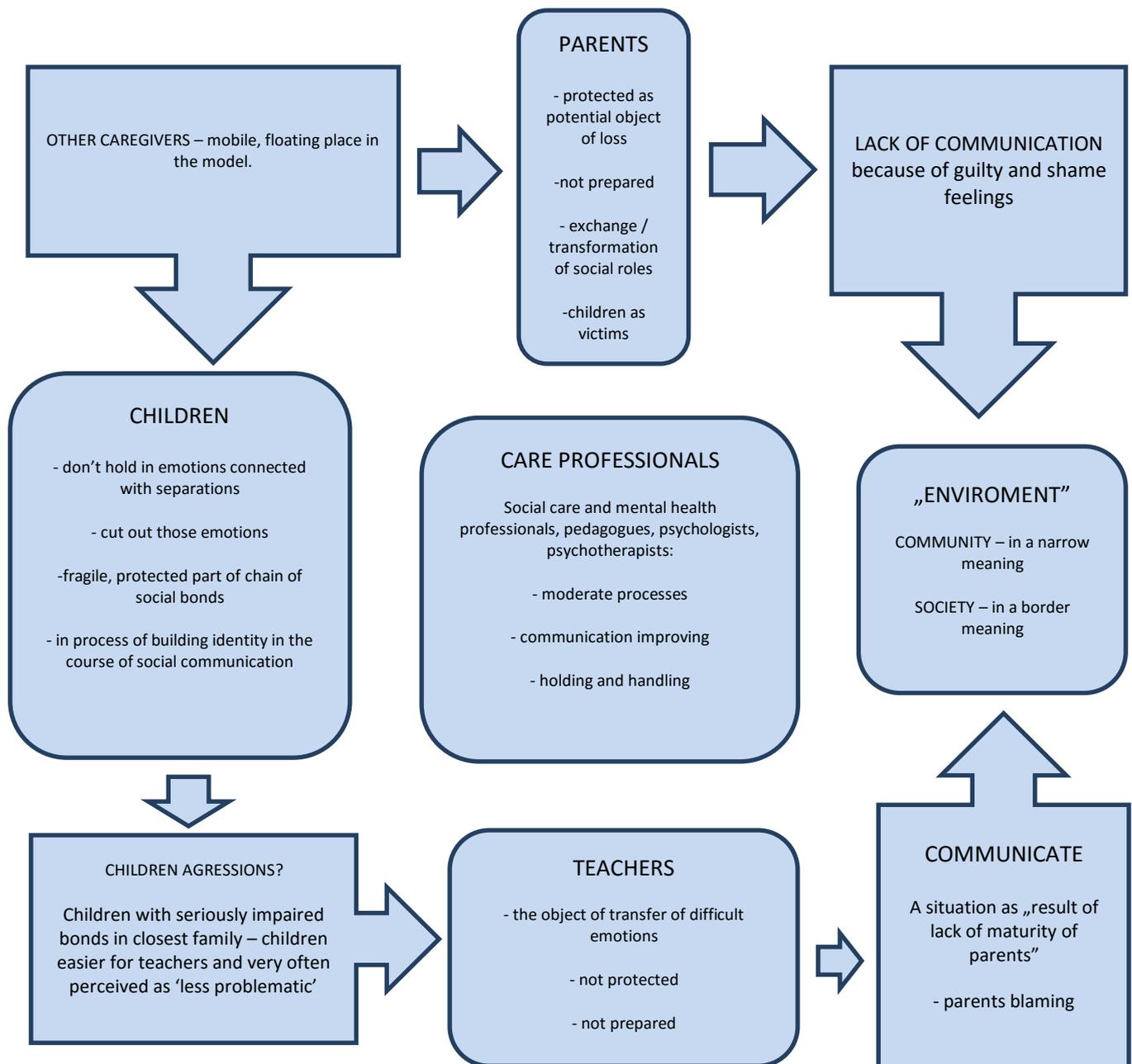
OTHER CAREGIVERS – mobile, floating place in the model.

PARENTS

- protected as potential object of loss

-not prepared

- exchange / transformation of social roles

-children as victims

LACK OF COMMUNICATION because of guilty and shame feelings

CHILDREN

- don't hold in emotions connected with separations

- cut out those emotions

-fragile, protected part of chain of social bonds

- in process of building identity in the course of social communication

CARE PROFESSIONALS

Social care and mental health professionals, pedagogues, psychologists, psychotherapists:

- moderate processes

- communication improving

- holding and handling

„ENVIROMENT"

COMMUNITY – in a narrow meaning

SOCIETY – in a border meaning

CHILDREN AGRESSIONS?

Children with seriously impaired bonds in closest family – children easier for teachers and very often perceived as 'less problematic'

TEACHERS

- the object of transfer of difficult emotions

- not protected

- not prepared

COMMUNICATE

A situation as „result of lack of maturity of parents"

- parents blaming

Diagram 1: Systemic working model of euro-orphan-hood in practice

Typically, young parents aren't properly prepared to handle such a situation. Because of their guilty feelings (even if they eventually resume a reunification of the family, in fact they left their

children, and they left the grandparents – or other caregivers – with the "trouble" and the "shame" (as they could not provide for their family without leaving and working abroad); in fact, parents very often do not communicate their difficult situation in the broader family discourses. As they avoid any real or imagined 'accusations', so they also avoid having their say, or sharing their difficulties in the debate within the family's environment – in the narrow meaning: community and in the broader meaning: society; perhaps through media or, for example, by taking part in scientific projects.

Those who communicate their frustrations are first of all the teachers and other school or social workers. Protecting the parents – who could seem lost – the children choose these other adults as "safety" objects for the transfer of emotions and reactions: very often not the positive ones, but those that need to be relieved – anger, sadness, withdrawal and abandonment. The teachers and other workers are not properly protected against all this transfer of misery – both systemically, and by the children who have been left in the first line of fire.

The Polish school organisational 'system' also overloads them and doesn't provide them with many sources of support. Furthermore, the education of future teachers does not prepare them for handling psychologically difficult children or such untypical situations. And nowadays, when the untypical becomes more typical, they have no tools to deal with many of these situations.

"Euro-orphanhood" is only one of them. Naturally, not feeling responsible for the parents' departure, they communicate the situation to the society and community, painting the picture of (not always) the children and (more likely) themselves as victims and blaming the parents as being immature and avoiding their responsibility for the family. When I was working as a coach who trained teachers across the country, I was just swamped with these kinds of complaints, which prompted me to design this study.

The place of the current caregivers in this model is not defined. Interviews with reunited families suggest that they can play very different and floating roles. Very often, trying to substitute for the parents exposes them to frustration and entangles them into rivalry with the real parents. Sometimes they would be trying to explain the situation to the children or trying to moderate communications with parents and the school. They have a very difficult task, for which they are also not prepared 'professionally'. The final and probably the most important question is what is the place of care professionals? What is the role of social care and mental health professionals – pedagogues, psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers? How can they help children and whole families facing this modern time challenge? Similar to current caregivers, they shouldn't blame, compete with, or try to replace the parents: it is necessary to maintain natural bonds and relationships of problematic children. First of all, care professionals (such as those who have a professional distance to a very difficult situation and yet and see it holistically), should moderate the whole process of those engaged in the situation and support all the people who are involved in it. They should first of all try to improve

communication between them, which is a typical action of systemic psychotherapists (de Barbaro, 1999). They could also provide social and emotional 'holding' and 'handling' for all the people who take care of the temporarily difficult and abandoned children. All the observations and the conclusions that I have made show clearly that without the protection and support for caregivers there won't be adequate care and help for the children.

Conclusions

In the narratives of reunited families and Polish teachers, the psychological and internal factors influencing their situations are what are prevailing. Amongst others, the most frequently factors mentioned are features of the (absent) parents' personalities or behaviours. Sometimes, the features of a particular child, who is seen as difficult or even anti-social, are observed. However, in other groups, there are no similar attitudes. Teachers mostly blame the parents; the parents mostly blame themselves.

Despite all these generally prevailing tendencies, many of the examined subjects also see – as important – those factors that are connected with the quality of the bonds existent within the child's closest environment. First of all, they mention relationships within the closest family members: the parents and the children. Quite often, they speak about the relationships with grandparents and the members of the extended family, but they don't see these as a crucial factor.

Finally, Polish teachers and parents rarely mention their relationships with their colleagues and with the teachers themselves. Respondents from these two groups are less likely to perceive the situational and external factors. Polish psychologists and teachers, working in United Kingdom schools, see children's situations much more multi-dimensionally. They underline more subtle factors, like the manner of the parents' departure, and the extent of cultural differences between the country of origin and the departure of the parents.

In this group, there are also factors that need a deeper and broader way of thinking. For example, the financial and social functioning of family as a whole, in the closest environment before and after the departure of the parents, or the size of and kind of community where they had lived before. Children's narratives are often poor in their descriptions of their emotions and the deeper speculations about the causes. Respondents also noticed some factors that could protect children against the socio-emotional and educational consequences of their parents' departure. The interviewees most often described their way of maintaining their significant relationships. Most of the parents also mentioned the modern (internet) ways of communication as a huge facilitation in protecting their children against their troubles in school and society. Some of the examined subjects, especially psychologists, emphasised the need for deeper understanding of abandoned childrens' feelings and ways of experiencing their situation.

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