Adult psychological outcomes of former left behind children in Romania

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In the context of adult labor migration in Europe, Romania is one of the leading work force sending countries, with 93 648 left behind children according to the ANPDCA (2017). The purpose of this empirical study is to investigate the perceived difficulties and outcomes of young adults with a left behind background. The sample size was 193 adults (83% F, mean age 24.93 years). The subjects were tested online with psychological measures assessing anxiety, depression, clarity of Self-Concept, generalized self-efficacy and school difficulties. The study found that contextual factors such as one or both parents left to work abroad, the duration of the separation, the age of separation may partly explain the inter-individual variations in the perceived psychological consequences related to labor migrant parents. The practical importance for educational actors of the results of this study resides in offering information on how to approach students whose parents left the country. Also the findings can inspire the optimization of the support policies for these children.

Keywords: migration, left behind, anxiety, depression, self-concept.

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Introduction

In recent times in Romania migration started with the collapse of industry after the 1989 revolution when men began leaving the country to find work. It then continued with increasingly more women seeking employment abroad, before a series of social and economic factors lead to the spread of circular migration as a way of life for entire communities (Diminescu apud. Mantea, 2012). In this country migration is set against a background of decreasing population and a family model centered on 2 working parents, with the mothers working as well as taking care of children and elderly parents (Mantea, 2012).

According to the National Chldren's Rights Protection Authority in 2017 in Romania there were 93 648 youths under 18 years old registered as having at least one parent living and working abroad and the numbers are rising (Monitorul Oficial-raport de activitate ANDPCA, 2017). Among them 68.53% had one of the parents abroad and 31.45% had both parents abroad. As much as 96% of children were left behind in the care of family members. Furthermore „Save the Children! Romania"(2017) estimates the actual number of left-behind children in Romania to as high as 250 000.

In previous Romanian studies the experience of being left behind has been shown as a risk factor for internalizing and externalizing problems in children (Tomşa, 2015). Internalizing problems are the internal difficulties experienced by a person, such as anxiety, depression or difficulties with the self-concept (self-efficacy, self concept clarity, etc.). Externalizing problems are the ones that occur in the social environment, such as aggression, inappropriate behavior, adaptive difficulties, delinquency and so on (Tomşa, 2015). Another negative outcome experienced by children is low school performance.

A longitudinal study of the trajectories of internalizing and externalizing problems from childhood through early adulthood (Korhonen et al., 2018) suggests that internalizing and externalizing problems tend to manifest in a stable pattern in individuals over time. It also showed that there are many possible outcomes of these difficulties in early adulthood.

The focal point of this study is to investigate the potential internalizing and externalizing problems of young adults with a left behind experience. We are exploring both the perceived outcomes in adolescence and the adult outcomes of individuals with a left behind experience.

Previous international studies have suggested that children's separation from their parents, in the context of labour migration, impacts their mental health and psycho-social wellbeing differently according to their age at separation (Liu, Li, & Ge, 2009; Ling, Fu & Zhang, 2015).

However, there are other factors such as having one of the parents or both parents abroad that could make a difference as well by changing the family dynamics. Therefore we are also exploring the relationship of these contextual factors to the outcomes.

Previous studies on left-behind children

Although there is a scarcity of Romanian studies on left behind children, there are a number of studies on the left behind experience of children of migrant parents in countries such as China.

A 2014 meta-analysis of 15 studies from 2004 to 2014 on 7758 Chinese left behind children shows lower self concept and significantly more psychological problems in left behind children compared to the general population (Wang, Ling, Su, Cheng, Jin & Sun, 2014). The studies included in this analysis made use of the Piers-Harris scale for self concept and showed other factors associated with self concept such as gender, age and the relationship with the caregiver.

The relation between the left-behind experience and the mental health of children has been further explored with resilience as a moderating factor in a 2016 study of Chinese left behind children (Shi, Chen, Yin, Zhao, Zhao & Yao, 2016). The left behind children in this study had lower resilience scores and higher mental health problems than non left-behind children. Also the moderating effect of resilience on the relation of the experience of being left behind for at least a year, and mental health was confirmed.

As far as the long term effect of being left behind in childhood on adults, there is a qualitative retrospective study on 16 Dominican immigrants aged 18-40 who had been separated from one or both parents. The participants were separated for at least six months before the age of 12, prior to moving to the US with their parents (Marte, 2008). The study highlights the impact of being left behind on the emotional health of children, their difficulty in adjusting to the parent-child relationship after reuniting with their parents, adult attachment issues, family cohesion and resilience.

Self-concept, perceived self-efficacy and self concept clarity

Self concept is a complex, dynamic system of opinions, attitudes and feelings about oneself (Mehrad, 2016) developed through the information we receive from the people around us. By the time they are five years old the information from their peers have a significant impact on children's self concept, which in turn impacts school performance and behaviour (Gest, Rulison, Davidson&Welsh, 2008 apud. Mehrad, 2016).

Perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) is a person's belief in their ability to activate their cognitive and motivational resources necessary to successfully complete a task. Thus perceived self-efficacy could be defined as an anticipation of positive outcomes of their actions based on their knowledge and abilities. Perceived self competence changes perceived reduced performance and perceived failure in that failure tends to be assigned more to reduced effort and less to lack of competence in performing the task. Therefore increased self efficacy is linked to self protective assignment of success or failure.

Self concept clarity is a person's awareness of who they are (Campbel, 1996). People with higher self concept clarity are more confident in their self definition and their idea of who they are. People with a lower self efficacy have a difficulty defining themselves or maintaining a consistent self image. For the former, the content of the self concept such as the perception of personal characteristics is clearly defined, consistent, internal and stable and they are less anxious or depressed (Campbell, 1996). Self concept clarity has significant benefits on psychological adaptation and low self concept clarity associates with low self esteem and high levels of neuroticism and depression (Donahue, Roberts, Robins&John, 1993 apud. Lewandowski, 2010).

Self concept clarity and internalizing problems

According to some studies there is a negative correlation between self concept clarity and depression and anxiety (Bigler, Neimeyer & Brown, 2001 apud. Lewandovski et al., 2010). Also, a 2002 longitudinal study suggests a relation between self concept clarity and perfectionism, a trait that reflects lack of flexibility and rigid self-imposed demands (Campbell & Di Paula, 2002 in Lewandovski et al., 2010). At the same time, perfectionism is associated with higher levels of stress, depression, unrealistic self-imposed standards and self-punishment upon incompletion of objectives (Hewitt & Flett, 1993 apud. Lewandovski et al., 2010).

The link between self concept clarity and self esteem has been established throughout several studies (Baumgardner, 1990; Bigler et al., 2001; Campbell, 1990 apud Lewandovski et al., 2010). The positive impact of self concept clarity on psychological well-being could be derived from this association, people with a high self concept clarity might have a positive self attitude due to well defined self traits (Campbell & Lavelle, 1993 apud. Lewandovski et al., 2010).

Lewandowski (Lewandovski et al., 2010) suggests the positive association between self concept clarity and relationship satisfaction and comittment, highlighting the potential impact of self concept clarity on interpersonal relationships. The study also poses the question whether the quality of the relationships has a bearing on self concept clarity, since self concept seems to be socially influenced.

Growing up, children develop a self concept based on the information from their environment, thus family structure and type could have a meaningful impact on left behind children in transnational families (Mantea, 2012).

The current study focuses on the experience and outcomes of former left-behind children, now grown up as well as the way they remember their teenage years. A study that uses methods that stimulate and activate memories of past events, enlisting retrieval of information from the autobiographic or episodic memory (retrospective studies), due to their reconstructive character, can be biased (Conway, 2010). However, we could argue that it is precisely the way in which the participants have structured their experience within their own self narrative, might be relevant to their self concept and self concept clarity.

The present study

There are three objectives to this study. The first objective is to investigate and asses the differences in internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescence reported by adults with left behind experiences versus adults without left behind experiences. It was hypothesized that there are significant differences between left-behind youths and non left-behind youths in school conduct, behavioural problems, aggression, diagnosed mental health issues, substance abuse and school interaction.

The second objective is to analyze the differences in current internalizing problems in adults with left-behind experiences in childhood/adolescence versus adults without left-behind experiences. It was hypothesized that there are significant differences in state anxiety, trait anxiety, depression, self-efficacy, self concept clarity levels in adults with left behind experiences in childhood/ adolescence and adults without left-behind experiences.

The third objective is to analyze the situation specific factors involved in the left-behind experience associated with the adolescent and current outcomes reported by adults with left behind experiences in childhood or adolescence. It was hypothesized that there are significant differences between groups related to the age of separation from the parent and whether one or both parents had left.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 193 young adults (82.9 % women, 17.1 % men), the age range was between 18 and 40 years old (m=24.93). Out of the total number of participants 69.4 % had no left behind experience and 36.6 % had a left behind experience growing up. Most participants (82.4 %) come from a two parent family, some (11.9 %) come from a reconstituted family (the parents remarried, the respondent had a stepparent) and only a few (5.7 %) come from a single parent family.

In the left-behind group there were 52 women (88, 1%) and 7 men (11,8%). In the non left-behind group there were 108 women (80, 5%) and 26 men (19,4%). The age range for the non left behind group was 18 to 40 years old (m= 25, 21) left-behind group was 19 to 39 years old (m=24, 28).

Of the 59 participants with a left-behind experience, 32.2 % were separated from their parent(s) in childhood (0-14 years of age) and 49.2 % were separated from their parent(s) in adolescence (14-18 years of age) and 18.6 % were separated from their parent(s) both in childhood and in adolescence. Most participants (72.9 %) were separated from one parent and only 27.1 % were separated from both parents.

Measures

Demographical data were collected, such as age, gender, family structure, age of separation, whether one or both parents had left abroad. Also participants were asked to report the presence of a series of internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescence regarding school conduct, behavioural problems, aggression, substance abuse, school interaction, mental health, self harm.

Beck Depression Inventory is a self report scale developed by Beck et al. in 1961 to assess the severity of depressive symptoms. It is composed of 21 items, each item represents a depressive symptom and can be assessed on a 4 point scale ranging from 0=the absence of the symptom to 3=a severe manifestation of the symptom. The symptoms were chosen from the psychiatric literature. Symptoms include: depressive disposition, pessimism, sense of failure, lack of satisfaction, guilt, feeling punished, self disgust, self blaming, self punishment, crying, irritability, social withdrawal, indecisiveness, modified self image, difficulty working, trouble sleeping, tiredness, loss of appetite, weight loss, health concerns, lack of sexual desire. A score of 21 and over is between the clinical ranges of depression (Vrași & Eisman, 1993). The reliability for the study was α=.82.

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory was developed by Spielberger et al. in 1970 and is one of the widely used instruments for anxiety assessment in non psychiatric medical facilities. Since 1989, more than 3000 studies have been published about this measure (Kennedy et al., 2001). Spielberger defined state anxiety as a temporary response to a stressful situation. The response implies tension, fear and physiological changes whereas trait anxiety is a stable characteristic of the personality which renders a predisposition to anxiety under stressful conditions. The scale has 40 items on two subscales rated on a 4 point Likert scale. The reliability in the study for S.T.A.I. X1 α=.938 and for S.T.A.I. X2 α=.914.

Self Concept Clarity Scale was derived from a 20 item scale mentioned by Campbell, Katz, Lavallee & Trapnell in 1991. Self-concept clarity "references a structural characteristic of the self-concept; the extent to which an individual's self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (Campbell, Katz, Lavallee & Trapnell, 1991) . It consists of 12 items rated on a 5 point Likert scale. In the study the reliability is α=.915.

Generalized self-efficacy (GSE), is a self report scale wich reflects the individuals' belief in their ability to perform well in different situations. In other words, it is the belief in our capacity to access "the cognitive, motivational, and behavioral resources required to perform in a given situation" (Bandura, 1997). It consists of 10 items rated on a 4 point Likert scale. The global score ranges from 10 to 40, with higher scores reflecting higher self efficacy. The reliability in the study is α=.915.

Procedure

Recruitment of the participants took place online using the snowball technique. Participants were excluded from the study if they left questions unanswered or they were over the age limit, leaving a sample of 193.

Statistical analyses

In order to compare the outcomes in adolescence between the left behind group and the non left behind group of participants we used the chi square test. Due to the use of categorical variables we selected this test in order to identify any significant differences between the frequencies of the observed answers and the expected frequencies of the answers of the two independent groups of subjects.

The reduced number of subjects in the groups according to different situation specific factors of the left behind experience only allowed for a descriptive rendering of the results. Therefore, we used a frequency analyses to examine the differences between the adolescence outcomes of participants with childhood versus adolescence age of separation, with one versus both parents abroad.

As for the adulthood outcomes of the left behind group and non left behind group we used an independent samples *t* test to examine the differences in internalizing problems and self concept clarity and self efficacy. We chose this test due to the numerical variables we used and the characteristics of the sample (size, independent groups).

When looking at situation specific factors and adulthood outcomes we used Mann Withney U test to compare two small independent samples with continuous variables for which we did not assume a normal distribution.

Results

The only notable difference between the left behind group and the non left behind group of participants was on low school performance X^2 (1, N=23) = 5,742, p = .017. As far as the other outcomes in the "school conduct" category there are no significant differences between the groups. Also, contrary to the hypotheses on "behavioural problems", "aggression", "substance abuse", "social interaction in school", "mental health" and "self harm" there are no significant differences between the groups (Table 1).

As far as the internalizing problems in adulthood, contrary to the hypotheses, there were no significant differences between the left behind group and the non left behind group on anxiety, depression, generalized self efficacy or self concept clarity (Table 2).

Table 1. Comparison between left behind and non left behind on perceived adolescent outcomes

Outcomes	NLB n(%)	LB n(%)	χ^2	p	φ
School Conduct					
None	110(82,08%)	44(74,58%)	1.43	.23	-.09
School failure	8(5,97%)	1(1,69%)	1,68*	.19	-.09
Absenteeism	9(6,72%)	4(6,78%)	.00*	.99	.00
Low School Performance	11(8,21%)	12(20,39%)	5.74	.02	.17
Behavioural Problems					
None	113(84,33%)	49(83,05%)	.05	.82	-.02
Destroying things	6(4,48%)	3(5,08%)	.03*	.85	.01
Stealing from home	7(5,22%)	3(5,08%)	.00*	.97	.00
Stealing from outside the home	6(4,48%)	0(0%)	.73*	.10	-.12
Running away from home	5(3,73%)	4(6,78%)	.86*	.36	.07
Substance abuse					
None	91(67,91%)	37(62,71%)	.50	.48	-.05
Smoking	38(28,36%)	19(32,20%)	.29	.59	.04
Drinking	13(9,70%)	4(6,78%)	.44	.51	-.05
Drug abuse	15(11,19%)	7(11,86%)	.02	.89	.01
Prescription medication abuse	4(2,99%)	1(1,70%)	.27*	.60	-.04
Aggression					
None	87(64,93%)	43(72,89%)	1.18	.28	.08
Rule breaking	8(5,97%)	1(1,70%)	1.68*	.19	-.09
Conflict	18(13,43%)	4(6,78%)	.18	.18	-.10
Verbal assault	28(20,90%)	13(22,03%)	.03	.86	.01
Physical assault	9(6,72%)	1(1,70%)	2,10*	.15	-.10
Self harm					
None	98(73,13%)	43(72,89%)	.00	.97	.00
Frequent accidents	4(2,99%)	4(6,78%)	1.49*	.22	.09
Self harm	14(10,45%)	3(5,08%)	1.47	.23	-.09
Suicidal thoughts	28(20,90%)	11(18,64%)	.13	.72	-.03
Suicide Attempts	8(5,97%)	3(5,08%)	.06*	.81	-.02
Mental Health					
None	111(82,84%)	47(79,66%)	.28	.60	-.04
Eating disorders	4(2,99%)	2(3,39%)	.02*	.88	.01
Anxiety	10(7,46%)	7(11,86%)	.99	.32	.07
Depression	11(8,21%)	3(5,08%)	.59*	.44	-.06
School interaction					
None	3(2,24%)	2(3,39%)	.22*	.64	.03
One peer relationship	14(10,45%)	9(15,25%)	.90	.34	.07
Two peer relationships	43(32,09%)	16(27,12%)	.48	.49	-.05
Group of friends	72(53,73%)	31(52,54%)	.02	.88	-.01

Notes: * At least one of the contingency cells is less than 5. NLB="Non left behind", LB=""Left Behind

Table 2. Comparison between the left behind group and the non left behind group in internalizing problems in adulthood

Instruments	LB (N=59) Mean (SD)	NLB (N=134) Mean (SD)	t (df)	p
S.T.A.I.X1	37,22(9,65)	36,77(11,38)	-.283(129,64)	.78
S.T.A.I.X2	40,14(10,29)	39,25(11,67)	-.530(124,84)	.60
BDI-II	0,32(0,24)	0,30 (0,28)	-.452(127,23)	.65
SES	33,58(6,44)	33,31(6,42)	-.269(110,70)	.79
SCC	29,32(12,19)	27,13(10,24)	-1,208(95,65)	.23

Notes: N= number of subjects; SD= standard deviation; df = degrees of freedom; *p*=significance level; LB= left behind; NLB= Non Left Behind; S.T.A.I.X1=State-State Anxiety Inventory Y Form-Trait; S.T.A.I.X2=Stait-Trait Anxiety Inventory Y Form- Trait; BDI-II= Beck Depression Inventory II; SES= Self-efficacy Scale; SCC= Self Concept Clarity.

Table 3. Comparison of childhood age of separation and adolescence age of separation in adulthood outcomes

Instruments	C(N=19) Mean Rank	A (N=29) Mean Rank	Mann Withney U	p
S.T.A.I.X1	25,29	23,98	260,500	.75
S.T.A.I.X2	24,24	24,67	270,500	.92
BDI-II	23,76	24,98	261,500	.77
SES	28,34	21,98	202,500	.12
SCC	24,21	24,69	270,000	.91

Notes: N= number of subjects; SD= standard deviation; df = degrees of freedom; *p*=significance level; C= childhood age of separation; A= adolescence age of separation; S.T.A.I.X1=Stait-State Anxiety Inventory Y Form-Trait; S.T.A.I.X2=Stait-Trait Anxiety Inventory Y Form-Trait; BDI-II= Beck Depression Inventory II; SES= Self-efficacy Scale; SCC= Self Concept Clarity.

Table 4. Comparison between the one parent abroad and both parents abroad groups in adulthood outcomes

Instruments	OPA(N=43) Mean Rank	BPA (N=16) Mean rank	Mann Withney U	p
S.T.A.I.X1	28,55	33,91	281,500	.29
S.T.A.I.X2	28,37	34,38	274,000	.23
BDI-II	29,38	31,66	317,500	.65
SES	29,76	30,66	333,500	.86
SCC	29,08	32,47	304,500	.50

Notes: N= number of subjects; OPA= one arent abroad; BPA= both parents abroad; S.T.A.I.X1=Stait-State Anxiety Inventory Y Form-Trait; S.T.A.I.X2=Stait-Trait Anxiety Inventory Y Form- Trait; BDI-II= Beck Depression Inventory II; SES= Self-efficacy Scale; SCC= Self Concept Clarity.
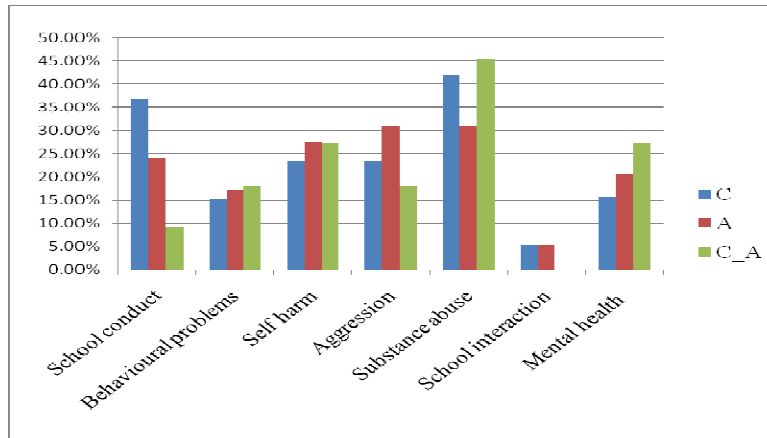

Figure 1. Frequency of adolescent outcomes by age of separation
Notes: C=Childhood separation age; A=Adolescent separation age; C_A=Both childhood and adolescent separation.
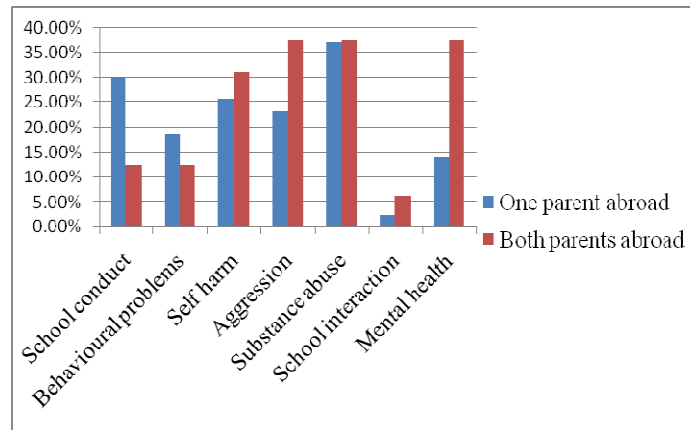

Figure 2. Frequency of adolescence outcomes by number of parents abroad

Next we analyzed the frequency of the adolescent outcomes in the childhood age of separation group versus the adolescence age of separation group and the childhood and adolescence age group (Figure 1). Participants with childhood age of separation have a higher school conduct difficulties frequency. The highest frequency of aggression is reported by participants with adolescence age of separation. Participants with childhood and adolescence age of separation have the highest frequency of substance abuse, mental health and behaviour problems.

Participants with both parents abroad registered a higher frequency of problems on five of the seven outcomes categories in adolescence: aggression, substance abuse, school interaction, mental health, self harm (Figure 2).

In order to examine the potential adulthood differences between the groups of participants with childhood age of separation versus participants with adolescence age of separation we used Mann Withney U test. Contrary to the hypotheses there were no significant differences in anxiety, depression, self-efficacy or self concept clarity between the groups (Table 3).

In order to examine the potential adulthood differences between the groups of participants with one parent abroad versus participants with both parents abroad we used Mann Withney U test. Contrary to the hypotheses there were no significant differences in anxiety, depression, self efficacy or self concept clarity between the groups (Table 4). Therefore, contrary to the hypotheses there are no significant differences in adulthood outcomes between the two groups.

Discussion

We found significant differences in low school performance between left behind and non left behind participants (the higher frequency of low school performance in the left behind group). The results are in contrast to a study from the Philippines (Asis & Luis-Marave, 2013) which suggests no differences between left behind (with one parent abroad) and non left behind children in school performance. Moreover in the Filipino study if the child is left in the mother's care with the father abroad, there is a positive impact on school performance. The contrast between the current study and the above mentioned might be due to cultural differences between our countries and the effect of the socioeconomic changes that migration brings to the family in the Philippines and also differences in the two school systems. A UNICEF (2008) study in Romania about left behind children of migrating parents indicates that they have lower school performance, more absenteeism and school drop out than non left behind children. The lack of control, external monitoring of learning at an age that they lack intrinsic motivation and self regulation of cognitive effort, might explain the lower school performance. Also, we might consider that children are usually left in the care of their extended family, especially grandparents (ANPCA, 2017). A study (Solomon & Marx, 1995) shows that although children raised by their grandparents seem to do well in other areas, as far as school performance, they have significantly lower school performance than their peers that were raised by both their parents.

The current study shows no significant differences in emotional and behavioural problems between left behind and non left behind participants in contrast to several studies outlining the prevalence of anxiety and depression (Tomşa, 2015; Guo et al., 2015; Ling & Fu, 2015), aggression (Ling & Fu, 2015) or behavioural problems (Ling, Fu & Zhang, 2015) in left behind children. On the other hand, the current results support the findings of other studies from different countries. For instance, a 2011 four country study (Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Philippines) shows significant differences in emotional problems between children in transnational families and children with both parents in the household only in Indonesia and differences in behaviour problems only in Thailand, suggesting that the psychological well being of left behind children might be culturally conditioned (Graham & Jordan, 2011).

A previous study (Fan, Su & Birmaher, 2009) had found that the significant differences in psychopathology and prosocial behaviour between left behind and non left behind children diminished with the introduction of mediating factors such as socio-economic status of the family and teacher involvement.

At the same time, investigating for instance the frequency of unintentional self harm (accidents) in this study we found no significant differences between left behind and non left behind participants, although a Chinese study reported a frequency of accidents among left behind children twice as high than non left behind (Shen et al., 2009). This discrepancy could be due to the retrospective nature of our study and the small number of participants reporting frequent accidents across the sample.

Two of our hypotheses are aimed at the number of parents abroad. Previous studies suggest that being separated from both migrating parents is strongly associated with a lower life satisfaction in left behind children (Su, Li, Lin, Xu & Zhu, 2012). Our results indicate that participants separated from both parents report more frequent outcomes such as self harm, aggression, substance abuse, low social interaction, mental health than those separated from only one of the parents.

As for the age of separation from the parent(s), previous studies have shown that early separation has a higher impact on the children's psychological well being (Hai, Fu & Zhang, 2015). The current study indicates a higher frequency of school conduct and performance difficulties in children separated from their migrating parent(s) in childhood. Meanwhile self harm, aggression, substance abuse and mental health difficulties were reported more frequently by participants separated from their migrating parent (s) in adolescence. The lack of direct parental supervision at such a challenging age might account for these negative outcomes. Although a teenager is more likely to spend a lot of time outside the home, the characteristics of the parental environment are still strongly associated with emotional and behavioural problems in youths (Harland, 2002).

Another possible explanation, considering the investigation of adolescence outcomes, could be related to the fact that children whose parents left at an earlier age either had already developed earlier effective coping mechanisms or have benefited from a different form of support in the absence of their parents. If a teenager is more likely to be left alone or with little supervision, for younger children the care that is provided might differ and could potentially become a protective factor. Overall, participants who had been separated both in childhood and in adolescence from their migrating parents, seem to report the most frequent negative outcomes. This finding is supported by previous studies which show that the duration

of the separation between children and their migrating parents is associated with the prevalence of difficulties in left behind children (Hui, Fu & Zhang, 2015).

Although previous studies suggest the prevalence of loneliness in left behind children (Wang, 2014), the current study does not find a lack of school social interaction in left behind children. This contrast could be due to the difference in the way we conceptualize loneliness, the difference between the subjective feeling of loneliness and the number of social relationships.

The current study suggests that, at least as far as anxiety, depression, self efficacy and self concept clarity, any potential effects of the left behind experience are not apparent in adulthood. One possible way of explaining this is by taking into account a previous study from 2016 (Shi, Chen, Zhao & Yao) which indicates that the association between the left behind experience and mental health is moderated by resilience.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the current study is the discrepancy between the number of participants with a left behind experience and participants without a left behind experience. This contrast might be due to the proportion of people with a left behind experience in the general population but also to the method of recruitment. As migration has intensified in Romania after 1989, a further study could benefit from setting a stricter age limit for respondents.

Another limitation would be the retrospective nature of data collection. A future study aimed at participants experiencing separation from their migrating parents during the study might highlight certain aspects of the left behind experience which a retrospective study might have missed. Reports based on memories accessed in adulthood run the risk of being biased by the constructed narrative of the participants.

Furthermore, since previous research indicates age of separation as a major factor in the left behind experience, a future study taking into account the exact age of separation and the exact duration of separation might yield relevant findings. The current study counted as left behind experience, the experience of being left behind by migrating parents for a period greater than three months. Also, we only inquired about the age of separation as childhood separation (0-14 years of age) and adolescence (14-18 years of age).

Moreover, given the lack of significant differences in adulthood outcomes between participants with a left behind experience and participants without a left behind experience, a future study taking into account the role of protective factors in childhood and adolescence might prove very useful.

Conclusions

Contextual factors such as one or both parents left to work abroad, the duration of the separation, the age of separation may partly explain the inter-individual variations in the perceived psychological consequences related to labor migrant parents. An assessment of the difficulties and outcomes of former left-behind children based on retrospective data has certain limitations. Despite its challenges, the study can start a discussion about the way people with left-behind background structure their experience within their own self narrative and its' impact on their mental health and self-concept clarity and self efficacy.

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