



'Left behind' but not left alone: Parental migration & the psychosocial health of children in Moldova



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ABSTRACT

In Moldova, large-scale and rapidly feminised migration flows have inspired a wave of qualitative reports on children "left behind". Despite this recent interest, few studies have empirically evaluated the effects of parental migration on the psychosocial health of such children. Using data collected from a nationally-representative household survey conducted in Moldova between September 2011 and February 2012, this paper analyses the psychosocial health outcomes of children of migrant parents by comparing them with children without migrant parents ($n = 1979$). Child psychosocial health is measured through caregiver-reported Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores. Multivariate regression analyses show that parental migration seldom corresponds to worse emotional symptoms outcomes but does correspond to increased conduct problems. Separate analyses for male and female children show significant gendered differences. The results partially contest the negative results that have been the subject of qualitative reports and, in particular, demonstrate that the migration of mothers infrequently results in worse psychosocial outcomes for children—contrary to what has been assumed in the discourse about parental migration in Moldova.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, female migration from Moldova has rapidly increased, raising concerns about the consequences of migration for families "left behind". By 2010 nearly 22 percent of the Moldovan population was estimated to live abroad (Ratha et al., 2010), with women thought to account for nearly half of all new migrants (Salah, 2008). The increased participation of women in international migration has contributed to a public discourse in which migration is inextricably linked with the family, particularly with the abandonment of children (Flamminio, 2011). Past research, primarily based on small-scale studies and consultancy reports, has focused on negative emotional and social repercussions of migration (Gavriliuc et al., 2006; UNICEF/CRIC, 2008) and has sampled children living in extraordinary circumstances of vulnerability (HAI/UNICEF, 2008). This has contributed to a negative and normative discourse on transnational families in Moldova that ignores the inherent complexity of family relations, caregiving regimes, and migration systems. This discourse highlights a need to

better understand the dynamics of the relationship between parental migration and child well-being.

Since the end of the 1990s, Moldova has experienced high, sustained emigration that is thought to disproportionately affect certain population groups, such as children and the elderly. Most migrants leave to find work abroad, with men largely destined for low- and medium-skilled (manual) labour markets in Russia and women increasingly migrating for work in the care and home services sector in countries in the European Union, particularly Italy. The majority of migrants are between 18 and 44 (IASCI/CIVIS, 2010)—precisely the ages in which families are started and sustained, resulting in a large number of children being left in the care of the other parent, grandparents, siblings, or other caregivers. In 2005, it was estimated that 31 percent of all children aged 0–14 had one or both parents abroad (UNICEF/CRIC, 2008), a trend that has likely persisted.

Despite the size of the left behind population, relatively little is known about it. This article empirically measures the influence of parental migration on the psychosocial health of Moldovan children. Using data derived from a large-scale household survey implemented in Moldova in 2011/12, the psychosocial health outcomes of children aged four to 17 with and without migrant parents are compared using multivariate regression methods. The results

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suggest that parental migration does not correspond to universally negative psychosocial outcomes. Rather, male and female children exhibit different outcomes that vary by the specific form of parental migration. This difference underscores the value of engaging an appropriate control group and analysing male and female children separately. These results contest much of the prior research conducted on children left behind in Moldova while suggesting ways forward in elucidating the complex relationship between child psychosocial health and parental migration.

2. Background

A growing body of research within the fields of transnational migration and family and child psychology has focused on the perceived relationship between parental migration and child psychosocial health (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). Studies on family and child psychology have investigated the consequences of parental separation on children using largely quantitative approaches, but few have studied migration as a unique form of separation. Transnational family studies, in contrast, have provided qualitative accounts of child psychosocial health in contexts of family migration. Several recent studies, particularly in Asia, have synthesised theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches from both fields in their evaluation of the psychosocial health of children left behind (Graham and Jordon, 2011; Mazzucato, 2014).

Family and child psychology studies draw on attachment theory to understand the links between child psychological health and parental absence or presence. An attachment is a substantial, enduring, affective bond between individuals. The first type of attachment a child forms is generally to its mother or other habitual caregiver, which is supplemented over time by attachments to other persons (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1982). In very young children, attachments tend to be dependency relationships characterised by a drive to maintain physical proximity to a primary caregiver, which transforms into a drive to maintain symbolic proximity via less direct communication, such as through phone calls, as an individual matures. The actual or threatened disruption of attachments can lead a child to experience depression, anxiety, or anger when proximity cannot be maintained. Interruptions in attachment relationships—or the development of unresponsive or unpredictable attachment relationships—shakes the sense of security an individual derives from attachments (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987). Migration of a caregiver, and the disruption to physical proximity it may bring, may cause significant psychological distress among recipients of care.

Most child and family psychology studies using attachment theory largely focused on the separation of parents from children owing to crisis events such as incarceration, death, or divorce (Mazzucato, 2014). These studies have found strong negative repercussions of parental loss for children's emotional well-being, particularly in cases in which prolonged uncertainty about the permanence of loss or its cause (ambiguous loss) blocked appropriate coping and stress management, resulting in the deterioration of family life when tasks and roles were not reassigned (Carroll et al., 2007; Boss, 2004). Despite its conceptual parallels with other forms of ambiguous loss, migration as a specific separation event has seldom been studied. One exception is Nobles (2011), who compared the experiences of children of divorced and migrant fathers in Mexico. Nobles found that despite some similarities between divorce and migration—such as negotiation of the shift in authority within the household, the reconciliation of family and household roles, and coping with a sense of abandonment—the two forms of absence were not equivalent. Migrant fathers were found to communicate more consistently with their children and to

invest more equally in their children than did divorced fathers, who tended to privilege specific children in the household (Nobles, 2011). This difference importantly suggests that the results of studies on other forms of loss cannot be extrapolated to situations of parental migration because the underlying mechanisms differ.

Literature from transnational family studies has focused more on separation through migration; whereas much of the literature has used qualitative methods to study children in transnational family arrangements (Dreby, 2006; Schmalzbauer, 2004; Åkesson et al., 2012), this section reviews those studies that have combined a transnational approach with more quantitative techniques given their methodological relevance to the present study. Recent research on children left behind has identified important differences in the contexts of parental migration that influence the emergence of negative outcomes (Mazzucato, 2014). Smith et al. (2004), for instance, found that children of Caribbean serial migrants often displayed low self-esteem and behavioural problems. Jones et al. (2004) similarly found that children with parents living abroad were twice as likely to experience emotional problems (such as anxiety and depression) as members of their cohorts without migrant parents. In their study of children who had been separated from their migrant parent(s) prior to reunification in the United States, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2011) found that separation and reunification corresponded to a higher incidence of anxiety and depression symptoms among children. These studies all suggest that the development of problematic behaviours is strongly influenced by factors such as the duration of parental absence, the child's age at separation, and the changing of caregivers.

Other studies have found clear differences in child outcomes by who had migrated. In a review of research on children of migrants in the Philippines, Parreñas (2005) noted that many studies found an increased incidence of psychological disturbance, juvenile delinquency, and social problems among the children of migrants, particularly when the mother had migrated. Jordon and Graham (2012), in a comparison of children living in different forms of transnational families in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, found that children with mothers living abroad were less likely to report feeling happy than were children living in other household types. In contrast, an earlier analysis of the emotional health of children in transnational families using the same dataset found that Indonesian children with migrant fathers were slightly more likely than children with both parents at home to have an emotional problem, and Thai children with a father abroad were slightly more likely to have a conduct problem (Graham and Jordan, 2011). Additional research has suggested that it is the combination of who has migrated and who takes on caregiving roles that shapes how children cope with parental migration. Children of migrants cared for by grandparents were found to be more likely to experience severe loneliness in China (Jia and Tien, 2010) and to feel emotional distress and show delinquent or high-risk behaviour in Moldova (Prohntchi, 2005).

Taken together, these studies provide more richly-textured accounts of the factors that can affect child psychosocial health following parental migration. Importantly, they suggest that parental migration does not automatically imply worse psychosocial outcomes: factors such as the child's age, the child's gender, and characteristics of the migrant and caregiver all affect the consequences parental migration may bear for children. These studies also highlight persistent gaps in the literature. Empirical studies using appropriate analytical methods to assess the consequences of parental migration for children in Eastern Europe are lacking. Studies that have been conducted in this region tend to focus exclusively on children left behind, without comparison to an appropriate control group of children without migrant parents. This limits the degree to which negative psychosocial behaviours can be

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