



Researching the Impact of Partial Labour Migration on a Child: Failure of Attachment Theory

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The aim of the article is to introduce a research report revealing the peculiarities of children experience when their parents are in the process of partial labour migration. Partial labour migration is a specific form of migration when one or both parents leave to work abroad (for more than 3 months) and the rest of the family stays in Lithuania. In case of departure of both parents, children are looked after by grandparents or other family members (for example, aunt). The article is based on the data of the quantitative survey *Trends and Peculiarities of Labour Migration in Kaunas* undertaken in all kindergartens of Kaunas city (N=88). Parents who had the experience of working abroad were surveyed using questionnaire. A special focus in the article is on the review of the attachment theory drawbacks. With reference to the attachment theory, a hypothesis was put forward that children under 6 should experience separation difficulties when parting with one of parents for a long time since they loose the object of attachment related to safety. According to the theory, this should especially be revealed in cases when children are fostered by grandparents. The research showed that a quarter of children experienced short-term difficulties, whereas 10% of children were negatively influenced by the departure. The hypothesis that children who stayed with their grandparents experienced more problems was rejected for there was no differences between parents' opinion and that of grandparents found. The question is posed in the article: what theories are needed to define in greater detail the experience of children „in the family brake process“ when parents work abroad for a long time.

1 Introduction: Invisible side of labour migration - children in the process of partial labour migration

Child experiences are frequently studied in the sociology, political thought, psychology, social work, literature, oral history, education and health and trauma studies. Social sciences most frequently analyse two spheres of child experiences: various kinds of abuse (sexual, physical, etc.) (Haynes – Seman et al. 1994, 86) or experiences of crises (Webb 1999, 10). The range of analysed child crises is wide: from bereavement to stress situations at school (Pitcher et al. 1992, 63 – 67). Children experiences when their parents are in the process of partial labour migration, however, have received little attention since the phenomenon is new in migration studies (Malinauskas 2006).

The analysis of children experiences when their parents leave to work abroad was influenced by 25 case study¹. When examining case documents of a social worker of the public organization *Institute of family relations*, it was noticed that 25 families sought for help

¹ 25 cases study (2004-2005) was conducted when analysing case documents of a social worker at the public organization *Institute of family relations*.

during 2004–2005, the main reason for which was varied child's behaviour formed by long-term separation with one or both parents². Children from these families had behavioural and emotional difficulties both at home and at school. 8 children out of 25 were of preschool age. Children from eleven of the mentioned families were left under caretaking of grandparents; the rest stayed with their mothers. It should be emphasized that after several meetings it became clear to the social worker that difficulties due to parting were encountered not only by a child but by other family members as well. This fact was noticed in 9 cases out of 25.

In search for further information, how children experience their separation with parents, a pilot survey of those working with children was conducted³. It is worth noticing that the opinion of school staff and that of kindergarten workers diverged. According to those working at school, almost all children experienced difficulties when their parents had left to work abroad. The majority of them responded that “*although at the beginning the teenagers are happy as they have more freedom when at least one of parents depart, in the course of time one can see that it is difficult experience for them*”. However, kindergarten specialists (educators and administration workers) claimed that only a part of children, whose parents had left to work abroad, experienced difficulties; their main remark was “they are too small to understand what's happening”. According to Fraley et al. (1999), a complete development of a child requires both of parents, their love and constant care. They especially emphasize preschool children (under 6–7), for having “lost” one of the parents, they lose the object of attachment. Thompson (1999, 268) maintains that after the bond with the object of attachment is broken, children experience crisis; if the crisis protracts, the outcome may be observed throughout the entire life: they might be closed, care about themselves only (non-emphatic), have behavioural problems. On the other hand, Howes (1999), who has examined the peculiarities of attachment between caregivers and children, claims that a child will not have residual outcome if other people provide safety and adequate warm feelings. Consequently, the article raises the question: how many children under 7 experience crises due to partial labour migration when parents leave to work abroad temporarily? Keeping in mind the cases when children are looked after by grandparents, a supplementary question is posed: whether children experience more difficulties when they stay with grandparents or with one of the parents?

2 Major characteristic features of parents in the process of partial labour migration in Kaunas city

When searching for an answer to the main question, the data of quantitative survey *Trends and Peculiarities of Labour Migration in Kaunas* were analyzed⁴. The survey *Trends and Peculiarities of Labour Migration in Kaunas* was conducted in Kaunas preschool institutions due to two reasons: (a) to survey families that have children under 7 years old: (b) there is a better possibility to receive information about departed parents in preschool institutions. The lists of family members who might be called in case of an accident are made in kindergartens and in this way the information about parents working abroad is collected.

A target way to select the respondents from the whole population was used in the quantitative survey for the aim was to involve all the families children of which attend Kaunas preschool institutions and one or both parents of which was working abroad into the survey. There were

² Public organization *Institute of family relations* provides services for children with emotional and behavioural problems.

³ 30 specialists working at school (N=30) were surveyed.

⁴ The research was undertaken 10/2005–12/2005 by Social Work Institute at Vytautas Magnus University.

two criteria to select families used: (a) at least one of parents is working abroad at the moment; (b) at least one of the parents has just returned from abroad (<3 months). It should be noted that although some respondents agreed to participate in the survey, they experienced fear expressed through questions: “Aren’t you going to report that my husband is working illegally?”, “Both parents are working, aren’t they going to take away my grandson?” [Researchers’ records, October 2005].

SPSS 10 software was used for qualitative data analysis.

In autumn of 2005, 398 children whose parents (caregivers) were working abroad or had just returned (<3 months), attended Kaunas preschool institutions, 88 of them refused to participate in the study outright. 310 families agreed to participate in the study, yet only 236 families returned the questionnaires. Not all the respondents provided the answers about the alternation of relation in the family, emphasizing that “questions are too personal” [researchers’ records, October 2005]

Out of 236 respondents in the survey 81.4 % were women, 18.4% were men. Younger (20-29) and middle-aged (30-39) respondents distributed almost equally: 39% and 40.7%; whereas the age group of 40-49 year-olds constituted 8.1%. The respondent age was emphasized to ascertain the number of families where children were fostered by grandparents after their parents had left abroad. The age scale revealed that 12.2% of children were fostered by 50-59 year-olds, while 2% by people who were more than 60 years old. When analysing who looked after children when at least one of the parents was working abroad, it emerged that 60.0% of children stayed with a partner, 36.4% of children stayed with their grandparents and 3% were looked after by their aunts.

Analysing the period of separation between parents and children, it was noticed that 63% of parents worked abroad up to 6 months, 21.3% up to 1 year, 7.4% up to 2 year and 8.2 % of parents stayed in a foreign country for more than 2 years. When pursuing to learn whether separation of parents and children is onetime, it was revealed that approximately half of children had parted once: 55% of parents had onetime experience of working abroad, 17% left twice, 14% three times and 12% of parents worked abroad five and more times.

In search for the answer what determines frequent departure, it became clear that parents leave since they are not satisfied with low salaries in their country (69.2%). Even if their financial expectations are satisfied (72.2%), 35.9% of respondents are still dissatisfied with their job and life in a foreign country. This might be explained by the fact that it is difficult to find a new job upon returning (64.6%); moreover, 49.1% of respondents expressed an opinion that it was hard to work for lower salary in Lithuania in comparison to that received abroad.

Parents’ level of education and the nature of work were distinguished in socioeconomic characteristics of respondents. The average education of parents is not high: 31.8% had secondary education, 34.8% had vocational training and 33.4% had higher education. The nature of work distributed as follows: the majority of parents worked in trade and service sphere (46.4%); the same number of respondents worked in educational system and industry (13.1%), 11.7% had positions in state service and 12.8% of parents (grandparents) claimed that they were unemployed, bringing up children.

3 Parents and family's attitude to the influence of separation on children: do children experience crisis?

Parents who resolve to work abroad leaving their children in Lithuania may create their psychosocial crisis, i.e. break the attachment to a safe object. With reference to Fraley et al. (1999), who emphasize the importance of parents to preschool children, the hypothesis was formulated that all children had to experience separation crisis after one or both of their parents had left to work abroad.

Webb (1999, 10) asserts that the bond between a child and the object of attachment creates a "safe foundation" which allows the child to explore and "control" his life. Safe attachment is a basis for further development. Through attachment, children learn to love, trust and communicate. In case a stable relation is not maintained, emotional, cognitive and social development of a child is restricted and negatively affected. When analyzing the aspects of child attachment, many researchers emphasize the bond between mother and child; yet later, at the age of 3-6, the role of father becomes especially significant. Attachment to father, imitation of his behaviour help children identify their sex and learn social roles (Draper 2000, 36).

Thompson (1999, 269) observes that a child lives with an internal anxiety not to be left; and therefore, separation with one of parents causes additional stress and trauma. Having investigated the reaction of preschool children (mostly from 3 to 6 years old) to stress, Webb (1999) points out inability of the children to express what they feel, think and experience. They express their state through action, behaviour and emotions. Commonly they "reveal" the feelings they experience in a social group (family, group of other children or other people) through varied behaviour, language or expression of emotions. According to Thompson (1999), the reaction of preschool children to stress may be perceived when "suddenly" a child starts to cry too much, does not want to part with a close person (e.g. to stay in kindergarten), regresses to infantile behaviour, or through incontinence, nightmares, fear of new people, fear to be alone.

In order to examine whether preschool children crisis is caused, a set of questions was formed during the survey *Trends and Peculiarities of Labour Migration in Kaunas*, the aim of which was to reveal family's attitude to the impact of partial labour migration on a child. The answers to the questions were provided by only 188 respondents out of 236.

Having in mind that the reaction of preschool children to stress might be perceived due to varied child's behaviour, i.e. altered behaviour or emotions, the following question was formulated to the family: *Rate the answers that would describe whether or not your and/or your partner's moving to work abroad had influence on your children.* Respondents were given 5 answers, each of which they had to evaluate from 1 to 5 (1 – absolutely no, 5 – absolutely yes). Parents' (caregivers') answers are presented in percentage in Table I.

Table 1: Family opinion about the impact of their departure on children (N=188)

Rate the answers that would describe whether or not your and/or your partner's <i>moving to work abroad had influence on your children?</i>	Scale rating (%)				
	Absolutely no	More no	I don't know	More yes	Absolutely yes
Our child/children encountered emotional problems (were often angry, sad)	44.1	4.3	13.8	15.4	22.3
Upon returning, we had difficulties with our children due to detachment, but soon everything got back to normal.	44.1	4.3	13.8	15.4	22.3
Moving to work abroad didn't have any influence on our child/children.	45.2	5.9	20.7	15.4	12.8
Our child/children encountered various behavioral problems (e.g. didn't listen)	62.8	10.6	12.8	8.5	5.3
Leaving to work abroad had a positive influence on our child/children: they became more self-sufficient, obedient.	62.8	9.6	15.4	5.9	6.4
Leaving to work abroad had a major negative influence on our child/children and they still have behavioral and emotional problems.	73.4	9.6	8.5	4.3	4.3

Having performed the analysis of parents' answers, the hypothesis formed on the basis of attachment theory may be rejected and the conclusion may be drawn that all children had to experience separation crises. Parents indicate that 37.7% of children experience emotional problems, 13.8% of the, face behavioural problems. 37.7% of parents claim that difficulties with children were short-termed and in the course of time everything got back to normal. 12.3% of parents noted that separation was positive experience as children became more self-sufficient, obedient. Nevertheless, one rate of survey coincided with Thompson's (1999) opinion: 8.6% of parents (caregivers) acknowledged that separation with one of parents (or even both parents) had a great negative impact on a child's complete psychosocial development. Moreover, every 11th family in the process of partial labour migration

experiences residual outcome: after parents' return, children still have behavioural and emotional problems.

From the perspective of attachment theory, it seems that in the situations when children are left with grandparents, the object of attachment changes considerably; and therefore a child staying with grandparents should encounter more difficulties and he/she would have to experience a greater crisis. Having performed a Crosstabulation analysis, there were no essential or specific differences found between the answers of grandparents and those of parents. Two answer distributions are presented in the article as similar trends are noticed in all answers concerning the impact of departure on a child. Table 2 shows the examples of Crosstabulation analysis between the answers of parents and those of grandparents proving that not all children left with grandparents experience the crisis due to lost object of attachment.

Table 2: Crosstabs: Opinion distribution according to the status of a caregiver when responding to the question whether separation with parents evoked emotional problems to a child (N=188)

		Relation with children		Total (%)
		Parents (%)	Grandparents (%)	
Our child/children encountered emotional problems (were often angry, sad)	Absolutely no	46.30	4.80	51.10
	Improper answer	6.40	1.10	7.40
	Neither yes, nor no	15.40	1.10	16.50
	Important answer	14.90		14.90
	Very important answer	8.00	2.10	10.10
Total		91.00	9.00	100.00

(Pearson Chi-Square value – 6.850^a, p<0.144)

a. 4 cells (40.0 %) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.27.

Crosstabs: Opinion distribution according to the status of a caregiver when responding to the question whether long separation had a negative influence on a child (N=188)

		Relation with children		Total (%)
		Parents (%)	Grandparents (%)	
Leaving to work abroad had a negative influence on our child/children; they still have behavioral and emotional problems.	Absolutely no	67.00	6.40	73.40
	Improper answer	9.60		9.60
	Neither yes, nor no	8.00	0.50	8.50
	Important answer	4.30		4.30
	Very important answer	2.10	2.10	4.30
Total		91.00	9.00	100.00

(Pearson Chi-Square value – 19.073^a, $p < 0.001$)

a. 4 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 0.72.

A correlation analysis based on calculation of Pearson correlation coefficient r was used to search for reasons, i.e. linear association between variables, that could condition experience of difficulties for some children and not for others (using two-tailed significance test when $p \leq 0.05$ or $p \leq 0.01$). The correlations between dependent variables (parents' sex, age, marital status, education, work status and place) and independent variables (answers about the impact of migration on family) were sought for in the analysis. Nevertheless, no statistically significant correlations were found. The implication is that a child experiences crisis independently of parents' (caregivers') age, education, work status, sphere of activity and whom he/she stays with after parents (or one of parents) leave to work abroad.

4 Conclusion

The data of quantitative research on children, who experience separation with parents, highlights the peculiarities of children experiences and the drawbacks of the attachment theory. The hypothesis that children under 6 years old should experience separation crisis when the object of attachment changes, i.e. one or both of parents leave to work abroad, was rejected. Parents who participated in the study claimed that after their departure, not all children encounter difficulties. A third of children (37.7%) experienced short-term emotional crisis, and 13.8% of children also had behavioural problems. This crisis protracted for every 11th child (8.7%) and caused long-term outcomes, i.e. "serious" behavioural and emotional difficulties.

With reference to the findings, a conclusion may be made that the attachment theory, on the basis of which the questions on the impact of separation on children were formulated, is not suitable to analyse children's experiences when their parents work abroad. In cases when

children were fostered by grandparents and both of parents were working in a foreign country, i.e. when, according to the theory, the object of attachment had changed, children should have experienced more difficulties than those who stayed with their parents. However, the Crosstabulation analysis revealed no differences between parents' and grandparents' answers, i.e. children who were left with their grandparents encounter similar problems as those who stayed with parents.

To summarize, it may be stated that not only one (mother) or several objects of attachment are important to a child, but social space where family provides adequate and safe environment for a child as well. The research indicates that in cases when family members did not manage to create safe and understanding environment, separation had a negative impact on a child.

On the other hand, there are few studies that analyse the maintenance of social parent-child relation via telephone or the Internet, which could explain whether preteen children do not feel having lost "safe object of attachment" when they communicate from a distance. Michael Murray (2003) points out that social relation with a preteen child is not broken (in this case, the object of attachment) if it is maintained via telephone or Internet.

In conclusion it may be stated that the research findings and their contradiction to the attachment theory show the necessity to analyse this miscellaneous phenomenon from new perspectives, i.e. qualitative studies that would thoroughly investigate family experiences in the process of partial labour migration.

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