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FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL-POLITICAL SCIENCES**

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**DOCTORAL THESIS**

**SUMMARY**

**EARLY PARENTING. INDIVIDUALIZATION AND RISK**

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**Key words:** adolescence, public opinion, media field, social frontiers, social risk, individualization, early parenting.

The PhD thesis entitled *Early Parenting. Individualization and Risk* describes and analysis the phenomenon generated by early pregnancy in the life of adolescents, with an emphasis on the process of individualization of a particular type of parenting, as well as on the process of change and adjustment.

The contribution of our research consists in updating knowledge, reorganisation and conceptualisation of thematic content into a unique form of early parenting. By proposing the concept of the early parenting, research examines the fundamentals of a particular type of parenting through the stages of becoming a parent, highlighting the mechanisms, challenges, strategies and practices in relation to the life history of adolescent parents.

The whole problems around early pregnancy and early parenting have as a starting point a series of observations related to the psychological, physiological and social transitions taking place during adolescence, this period being considered „a stage in life which begins within the biological component of development and ends in the society”(Petersen, 1998).

*The first chapter* approaches the early pregnancy phenomenon from a socio – demographic perspective, analyzing a series of statistical, relevant data from the international and national level, about the way in which pregnancy in adolescence has become a problem for the developed countries, in the same time specifying the way in which it has been approached by the public policies of child protection in Romania. It also presents and proposes some preliminary socio – juridical and psychological delimitations, reviewing the current definitions for terms like „child”, „minor”, „adolescent”, and „young person”.

*The second chapter* presents the major characteristics of adolescence, integrating a series of significant standpoints related to early pregnancy. The theoretical approach of parenting appealed to specific concepts like socializing, individualization, habitat, field, frontiers and social risk. The construction of adolescents’ parenting is a permanent and continuous process which can be successively approached from the perspective of sociological theories, the psychology of development and social psychology, by linking the reference systems from family, institutional and media universes.

*The third chapter* widely presents the ethical and methodological steps of the research and in *Chapter 4* are presented the findings of inquiries made within the family, institutional and media fields.

The field research made used complementary methods (semi-structured interview, observation) and appropriate instruments (interview guides, analysis grids, working matrix, and biographical files).

*The first inquiry*, entitled *Early parenting, a social reality in the public space*, was done by consulting the written on-line press during 2005 – 2012, observing the way in which the problem of minor mothers is reflected, in a period when the child protection area in the Romanian society was being marked by the European integration process. Although this problem was relatively poor represented in the journalistic space, it is worth mentioning its coherent approach, especially considering the consequences and risks for early pregnancies' proliferation. During the above mentioned period newspapers offered information about minor mothers, coming from the majority of geographical regions in the country, including conclusive statistical and demographical information, aimed at bringing it to the attention of both large public and political decision - makers.

The thesis thus underlines the perception of public opinion on early pregnancy phenomenon, starting with the examination of how it is presented in the written press.

*The second study*, *Early parenting individualization*, done as a continuation of the first one, consists in a micro – research of the social, family and institutional field, through a series of comprehensive interviews.

The individualization of parental role of adolescents is particularly to exercise parental responsibility. As the findings of field inquiries have shown, the process of construction of early parenting has several progressive stages, closely connected with the formation of self – conscience. The results of the second study show that the three important dimensions of personality construction are unequally proportioned being still in full process of formation and consolidation. We can consider three identity - related, constitutive components of the early parenting process, as follows:

- *Physical*, when the physiological development and sexual maturation is fully done in view of procreation;
- *Psychological*, regarding the parental particularities and attributes, cognitive and emotional capacity, which allows personal development and the capacity to ensure protection to the child;
- *Social*, being the most applied of the identity faces of early parenting, because it is linked to the relational capacity; the social parental identity is the product of a multiple and diverse process which sums up the elements of many positions that the

adolescent parent possesses (parent, partner, husband, pupil, colleague, neighbour, friend, professionally integrated person), and the diversity and particularity of each status generates conflicts depending on the level of development of young person's personality and his/ her capacity to integrate the challenges at which / she is exposed to.

The study proved that in order to understand the way in which adolescents' parenting is fundamental, more stages of the event linked to early pregnancy appearance need to be analyzed. The analysis of the process of parental construction benefited of two temporal plans, „before”and „after” baby's birth. This distinction helped in identifying the event's frames, circumstances and also the changes produced. The disclosure, acceptance and assuming early pregnancy stages influence their involvement in exercising the parental role. The results of the study show that the majority of teen parents are determined in assuming parenting, but their decision depends on the family or the environment they belong to, and their involvement does not have the fundamentals of complete maturation, which is why it is considered that this type of parenting is a process which needs support.

The success in exercising parenting implies parents 'ability to use resources which exist in the family, in the relational, community and institutional systems. Involvement in this process is directly proportional to the personality and social trajectory projected, and the significance offered to the child is multiple and differently valued.

The child's significance theme has been an opportunity to investigate the parental responsibility sense and to evoke own childhood. The finality of this construction was mainly to confront parental attributes with child's needs. Also, juridical paternity appears to be a new form of parenting which goes beyond the exclusive frontiers of paternity, replacing the biological un-assumed component with the socio – juridical one.

Adolescence represents a period of maximum changes in the cycle of an individual's life, but the demands of each maturation stage need to overcome a new stage of development, which outlines the conditions of an intense action field, with natural, identity and socio – educational frontiers and thresholds. The situation generated by early pregnancy for this type of parents represents a frontier between the two dimensions of their development, one being related to the bio-somatic and physiological capacity, and another one to the socio – educational capacity. The occurrence of pregnancy generates a conflict situation for them and the thresholds they overcome depend on the clarification of some personal and family variables or on the rules of social order. The most significant critical situations of teen

parenting are related to the interpersonal and role/ status conflict, which is escalated by the manner in which school and parental careers are managed. The study shows a good timing of the effort in relation with a double role. Teen parents have adjusting mechanisms which demonstrate the capacity to accumulate, responsiveness, availability to physical and psychological effort, school performances registered in a short time and difficult conditions, as well as strong social and educational aspirations. In addition, one of the challenges of early parenting is the confrontation with two identity processes. On one hand is the lack of outlined identity of the teen parent and on the other hand the one of the child born as a result of early pregnancy. One confrontation is also related to the continuation of an unclarified conflict until the child is born, between adolescents and their parents, subject to grievance or to its closing through a collaboration contract and delegation of the parental function. The numerous frontiers of a social hostile field, marked by hostility, conflicts positioned towards the interior and the exterior of the teen parent, are just some of the dimensions of parental identity construction that the study highlighted.

The social stigma is the „red iron” of the trajectory drawn by early pregnancy phenomenon. Early pregnancy phenomenon is like an arena of prejudices at the origins of the stigma with which adolescents are confronted. The results of the two studies show that stigma appears in the group of peers, in school, community and in the public space. The risk of labelling comes out from the fact that the society tends to criticize groups and communities of people, without entering in the individual spaces. The symbolic violence registered in the rural community space (neighbourhood) is more powerful than in the urban environment, considering the increased visibility at the level of private life. A high degree of stigma is much stronger felt by adolescents’ parents than by adolescents themselves, because it is interpreted to be a form of attack to the symbolic capital of the family. Teen parents are more affected by the attitude and behaviour of the peer group and teachers, this type of stigma determining school abandonment and social isolation.

Adolescents’ predisposition in assuming a deliberate risk, doubled by family, collective and social risks leads to outlining a field marked by limitations and constraints, thus producing disillusion and apathy in applying life plans. The delegation of parental functions to the members of the extended family or to other persons or institutions represents a risk because their interest for the parental role is weakening.

The results of the study show that the biggest risk of early parenting is related to the psycho-social immaturity of teen parents in managing the crisis situations, which determines

lack of reaction and readiness, which in turn leads to school and parental abandonment. One of the risks that specialists in the medical area insist upon is the occurrence of successive pregnancies in teen mothers. The study indicated the existence of indirect risks of early parenting at the institutional and professional fields' level. These are closely related with the absence of specialized services and lack of training of the staff with a role in supervising, guiding and educating teen parents, through primary and secondary monitoring.

The results of the study also show that the full age (18 years old) is perceived as a socio-juridical frontier which offers legitimacy to the parental status, confirming parents' maturity through a series of passing rituals which stimulate adolescents' interest for a cohabitation, consensual union or marriage relationship.

In order to build a typology starting from the circumstances which lead to the appearance of early parenting it is necessary to more or less consider the characteristics of „accidental relationships” in which adolescents are engaged, the significances of the events, characteristics of the persons involved, the way in which these are situated in relation with the criteria of a presumed „social normality” that is related to the norms of living or social order. Following the analysis of opinions expressed by interviewees and adolescents' biographies, several categories of teen parents have been identified, ranked depending on their family history, possible experiences of abuse or neglect, existence or non – existence of an institutional care history, most of them coming from a vulnerable social and family environment.

*The novelty of the thesis* consists in the correlation of data gathered from distinct fields – family, social and media – in order to identify multiple mechanisms which contribute to the definition of early parenting concept.

The research does not pretend to have been included all the dimensions of early pregnancy phenomenon but has attempted to thoroughly examine teen parents' experiences compared with the general stereotypes about their assumed parenting.

Social sciences, especially sociology, cannot remain passive in front of the escalation of this phenomenon, without analyzing the context, climate, insecure connections that are present in the family, institutional and socio – political field. The sociological initiative conducted on the family, socio – institutional and media field has underlined the functions and importance of each field, marked by frontiers and social actors directly involved in processes of private and public life, and not only the weak cords of the systemic mechanisms.

The research results draw a series of *action directions* in order to clarify some conceptual and juridical aspects needed for children and young people's intervention and preparation at their debut in the biological, educational and social maturity. The directions of action can continue with the elaboration of early pregnancy prevention strategies, intervention for teen parents with support and guidance services on how to manage their new status – role, development of professional human resources and institutional resources to monitor this particular type of parenting.

At the legislation level, a clarification of concepts like *child, minor, adolescent* and *young person* is much needed within the frames imposed by bio-psycho-social development, social and juridical responsibility frontiers, as well as inter-connecting socio-family, educational, medical and juridical systems with the needs of children and young people.

From the perspective of *socio – demographic data collection* the registration system needs and adaptation of fertility age criteria<sup>1</sup>, because the theories on individual development demonstrated that new elements occurred in the physiological and bio-somatic particularities of children and young people.

The introduction of objectives related to early pregnancy in the strategy of governmental bodies must represent a priority. On the same line, the focus of education and health public policies in order to organize and coordinate all the prevention and intervention programs and projects at the level of young population must be directed on the following components: community mobilization and sustainable development, early pregnancy prevention programs based on a curriculum, which will reduce factors associated to it and ensure preparation, education and capacity building of interested parties (family, school, community).

*The prevention strategy* must be included in the social policies for youth education and health, and these programs must promote values, attitudes, communication and negotiation skills, as well as information about the biological aspects of reproduction for informed choices regarding private life. The ideal partners in the prevention programs are the media institutions and they need to encourage an open dialogue with the education and health institutional systems, to guaranty confidentiality and avoid public contempt, bad image and disapproval of the young generation. The information programs for young people must increase the chances of access to education and prevention services.

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<sup>1</sup>Fertile age is between 15 – 49 years old, according to the National Institute of Statistics

*National intervention programs* should be initiated and be based on family visits and provision of information, education for a harmonious development of the child, using parents as teachers, using a special curriculum. Services must also be available to teen parents under 19 years of age and the assistance program should start 3 months before the child's birth and include education and support group for mothers, based on a program established according to their needs, including child nurturing and transportation expenses coverage. The parental and child well-being assistance program must be available also for teen mothers who don't have custody on their children, its aim being to discover the joy of being a parent.

The development of *community services for young parents at the level of urban and rural localities* becomes a priority and these services should offer:

- Support and parental education;
- Housing and case management programs for pregnant women, teen mothers and parents under the age of 19 years old;
- Support for the development of parental abilities and skills, early education of mothers, support services for teen parents under 19 years old, including in the localities from the proximity of the cities;
- Individual education on domestic violence and reduction of its negative effects, coordination, support and guidance for young mothers under 19 and for those confronted or who experimented domestic violence (including in the weekly support group), and for other pregnant women and young mothers interested;
- *Centre of Resources* for teen parents that should be available and equipped with computer, Internet access, parental education books and other documentation and information resources, including counselling and orientation services for teen parents, in order to easily procure care items for children, food and information on house renting.

The support for this particular kind of parenting demands for the *development of human professional resources* with specialized training on the problems of young parents' life.

Considering that early parenting is a problem with multiple implications in the life of the society, the formation and implementation of a *social services management based on the development of the administrative capacity and of the human, material and financial resources* is a priority. This should be accompanied by the development of policies, the implementation of public – private partnership, civil society development, and linked with

research institutions in the area of socio – humanistic, educational, medical and juridical sciences.

#### Research limitations

*Study no.1:* The reduced volume of the sample might be considered a limitation of the study, but the use of qualitative techniques allowed investigation on topics and themes which can be considered important tracks for further researches. Another limitation of the study is a consequence of the technique of documents analyzing, in the sense that „information haven't been collected to be used by the researcher; they have gaps, are sometimes contradictory or are being deformed by the subjectivity of those who have recorded them” (I. Mihailescu, 2003:42).

*Study no. 2:* The research field was situated in two administrative territories, unequally represented, which does not allow for a comparative analysis of the situation of early parenting, from these territories and at the national level. The information obtained can be used only for the study of relatively small groups and communities. The results can be applied only to the studied groups and communities and can be generalized only to a small extent.

The data from the interviews allow for thorough, comprehensive knowledge of life experiences of the studied population. The application of a standardized questionnaire would have allowed the accumulation of data for a bigger number of subjects and the results obtained would have been representative for this population.

#### ***Proposals for future research studies and directions***

I believe that the early parenting theme is an extremely generous one and can open numerous *new research directions*. School abandonment can be more of a predictive factor and a forerunner of pregnancy in adolescence than a consequence of adolescent parenting. On the other hand, the two studies revealed that parental status can lead to an increased interest and motivation of teen parents for a school career, some of them manifesting increased interest for education or a significantly improved attitude.

Studies based on quantitative analysis can be made to underline the situation of teen parents, family and origin environment, factors, causes, features of this social group, as well as their expectations and perspectives. These studies can offer an X – ray of the phenomenon and allow teen parents' needs analysis in order to elaborate the intervention strategies for this population. Longitudinal studies can also be initiated to monitor social changes that came up as a result of exercising parental role or survey type studies in order to

highlight the age at first birth among adolescents, the results being useful to elaborate the strategy and social educational policies to prevent pregnancy and early parenting.