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**CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN ROMANINA
FAMILIES**

PhD thesis abstract

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KEY-WORDS:

abuse, neglect, children, family, urban space, social disorganization theory, ecological-transactional theory

THESIS ABSTRACT:

The current paper deals with a theme that has been on the research agenda on child protection for a long time: child maltreatment by parents or caregivers in the family. Seen as a public health problem by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹, it is estimated that approximately 40 million children below 14 are subject to abuse and neglect every year (WHO, 2006). This means 1.8% out of 2.213.456.000 children below 18 from the globe (UNICEF, 2009). Studies from USA and other industrialized countries estimate that 1:5 girls and 1:12 boys will experience one form of abuse/neglect (Finkelhor, 2008), while studies from less developed countries estimate a much higher rate (Mulinge, 2002; Sague-Castillo, 2009). A conservative estimation will talk about a child maltreatment rate of 1:15 children, so nearly 150 million children are abused or neglected every year, so more than 4 times the WHO figures (Svevo-Cianci, Hart, Rubinson, 2010). In these conditions, more than 20 years after the UN Convention on Children Rights (CRC)², the idea of child protection is more than ever onto the political and research agenda. A study conducted in 42 countries regarding the progresses of Child Protection systems from 1989 shows that only one third has taken serious measures in the following areas: public policies, coherent systems for reporting and monitoring cases and services available. Top countries are Australia, Canada și USA (Svevo-Cianci, Hart, Rubinson, 2010). In Romania, after 1989, the Government and the Parliament have adopted a series of laws assuring the child welfare. Because of the deep changes that our country had to go through, the child still is one of the most vulnerable groups (Ursa, 2000). The current socio-economical context is also a vulnerable one because the period of economic crisis are usually associated to a raise of violence against children (Harper, Jones, McKay, Espey, 2009).

Therefore, the current paper tries to characterize the urban space as a space of child abuse and neglect and tries to construct a valid sociological explanation for the occurrence of the phenomenon. As secondary objectives we aim:

- To identify interdisciplinary research topics in the sociology of children, urban sociology, sociology of family, sociology of abuse;

¹ PR-99-20/WHO

² On November 20, 1989 by the UN General Assembly resolution no. 44/25. The only states that did not ratify it are Somalia (because of some legal issues regarding its government) and USA (although it had ratified the associated Optional protocols)

- Designing evidence-based preventing and intervention measures for child abuse and neglect cases that are efficient from a cost perspective. Without disregarding the psychological costs, now more than ever, every measure that is taken has to be firstly efficient from an economical point of view (in order that authorities to feel comfortable sustaining them). There is little information available about the economical costs of child maltreatment world wide. Still the variety of short and long time effects suggests that there are important financial costs for the entire society. In 2007, the US, the cost of child maltreatment was around 103.8 billion USD. (Wang, Holton, 2007). Both direct costs concerning primary intervention, medical and psychological treatment and indirect costs were summed. For Romania there is no such analysis, but by identifying the variables with the greatest explanatory power, then the resources can be focused in controlling them.

Our research has two goals: a descriptive one and an explanatory one. From a descriptive perspective, starting from the data dealing with Romanian space we want to identify the current incidence of child maltreatment in the family. We will be using an instrument designed by the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) and used in the FP7 research project Balkan Epidemiological study on Child Abuse and Neglect³. Child maltreatment will be analyzed on its basic components: abuse (physical and psychological) and neglect. The unit of analysis is a well determined geographic area (Vâlcea County – chosen both from subjective, but mostly objective reasons) and a well determined social space (urban areas). Taking also into account the multicausality of the phenomenon we also try to answer the basic question of every research “why?” In trying to answer that we will base our explanation on two sociological theories that previously have been proven of great help: socio disorganization theory and ecological-transactional theory. In the end we will present the theoretical model for Vâlcea’s urban space regarding child maltreatment. At the moment most prevention efforts to reduce child maltreatment rely on the preliminary task of identifying at-risk children or families, with a focus on changing parental behavior or immediate circumstances that may

³ Project no. 223478, coordinated by Institute of Public Health-Department of Mental Health and Social Welfare, Atena (Grecia). Romania, represented by Babeş-Bolyai University is a partner.

lead to an increased risk of abuse. These types of interventions rely on practitioners' successful identification of at risk families as well as successful, lasting change efforts directed toward individuals. Both are daunting tasks that suffer major limitations. On one hand, identification of at-risk families follows from screening policies that vary from place to place and that are ultimately dependent on scarce resources intended to fund a vast array of social services. On the other hand, efforts to change individuals meet with the same dilemma encountered by all person-centered behavior change strategies; even if the behavior change is successful, the individual remains living under the same set of conditions that helped to produce the problem in the first place, thus making reversion a serious concern. A neighborhood approach allows for primary prevention activities aimed at populations of families living in neighborhoods with characteristics deemed high risk for potential abuse and neglect. Interventions that change neighborhood conditions may have a greater probability of creating and sustaining safer environments for children and they also are financial effective (Freisthler, Merritt, LaScala, 2006).

The theoretical and methodological discourse is revealed in five chapters. First chapter, **Child maltreatment in family. Conceptual framework. Incidence and distributin of child abuse and neglect cases** is divided into four subchapters and is focused on the definition of the main concepts: "family", "child" and "maltreatment, abuse, neglect". The discursive strategy id deductive: from general (international perspective) to particular (Romanian perspective). The focus is on defining the concepts as they appear in the social and political used literature (international documents, reports, legislation, professional organizations, working papers or empirical studies). A special space is dedicated to presenting available statistical data from a comparative perspective. The general conclusion is that in spite of the existing documents child had always been subject to violence from adults. More than that, it seems that the trend is ascending, at least for the Romanian space. So, if we have a lack of data for the period 2000-2007, starting from 2007 there is a raise in the official number reported by the National Authority for the Protection of Family and Child. Their data are consistent with the database from Telefonului Copilului which reports a raise of 74.8% of total calls in 2009 compared to 2008.more recently the study "The needs of communication and interaction of children" conducted on January 2010 by Gallup and Romtelecom shows that 49% children are spending less than an hour

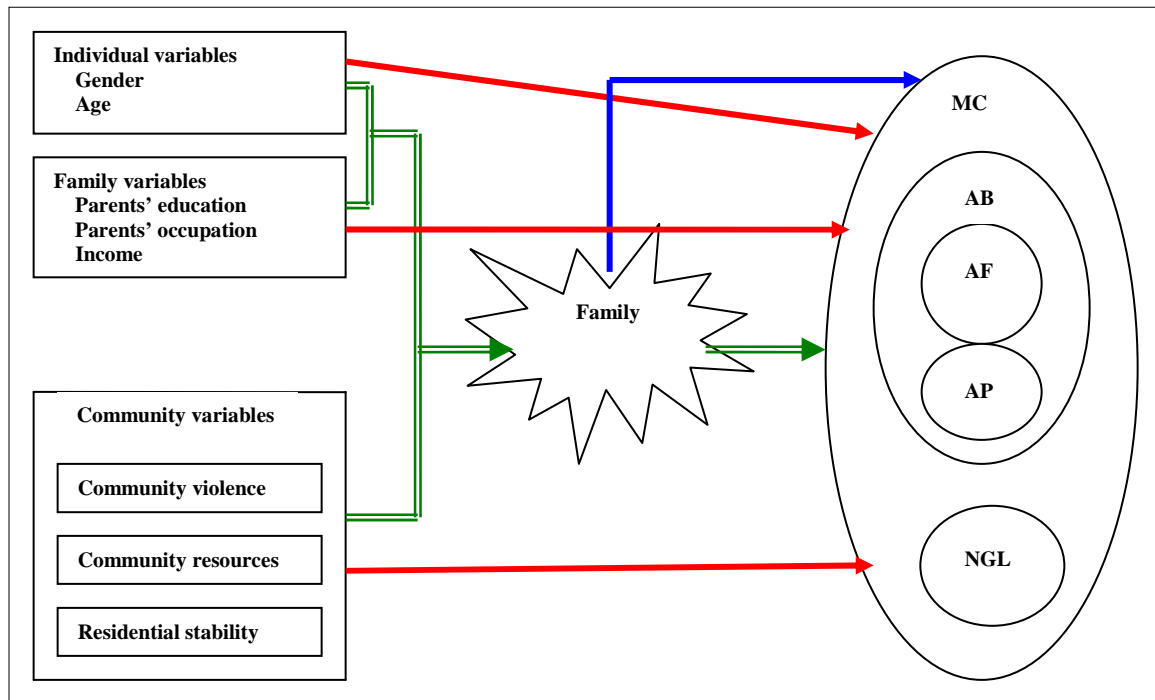
every day with their parents (<http://www.timpimpreuna.ro>). This will pass as neglect in official reports. So, a well debated subject in the literature, is seems not an utopia talking more about child maltreatment by parents. Still te explanatory variables have not benn fully understood.

Second chapter, **Epistemological and theoretic framework of child maltreatment** moves onto an abstract discourse. Starting from previous theories we try to frame the phenomenon into a current trend. As we accept the fact that child maltreatment is a social construction evolving in time and space (Hacking, 1999) we then present social constructionism as a social epistemology. Given its time of appearance, each theory tries to build a specific explanation regarding child maltreatment, and each of them stating that has a plus of knowledge compared to the previous ones. No matter the model taken into account thou, it's obvious that in the last years there has been a tremendous effort to better understand such behaviors (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, 2005; Corby, 2006). Starting from psychological theories in which the focus is on individual factors of the victim or of the perpetrator (medical view, attachment theory, psychodynamic theories, learning theory, cognitive theories), then moving to psychosocial theories that move the focus onto the dynamics between individual and social environment (individualistic-transactional perspective, theory of family dysfunctionality, socio/ecological perspective) and finally to sociological theories that emphasize the social and political factors of child maltreatment (socio-cultural perspective, socio-structural perspective, feminism view, children's rights perspective), we can see the continuous transition from one view to another.

Giving the growth of urbanization, especially in the last years, urban communities are "constructing" themselves as social spaces which pose a certain risk for children in terms of abuse/neglect. Recent studies show that in the cities teenagers are exposed ton higher levels of violence (Aisenberg, Ell, 2005; Salzinger *et al.*, 2006; Shields, Nadasen, Pierce, 2008). This leads to a growth of tobacco and alcohol consumption (Fick, Thomas, 1995), low level of personal safety (Salzinger *et. al.*, 2006), higher rate of intrafamilial violence (Shields, Nadasen, Pierce, 2008), higher rates of child maltreatment (Lynch, Cicchetti, 1998 *apud*. Phelps, McCart, Davis, 2002; Coulton *et al.*, 2007; Guterman et al., 2009). Explanation between characteristics of urban communities and child maltreatment have been focused on several areas (Barnes, Katz, Korbin, O'Brien, 2006), but two are

most important (Coulton *et al.*, 2007): one emphasizes the *social disorganization*, and the other the *ecological-transactional development*. Social disorganization theory stipulates that structural impaired areas lead to a social decaying and ultimately to child maltreatment (Sampson, Morenoff, Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Kingston, Huizinga, Elliot, 2009). The characteristic of social disorganized communities (low economic status, high residential mobility, single parent status) prevents the development of solid social networks and then prevents the access to community. High residential mobility has an adverse effect on social networks as it takes time to form solid and trustful relationships. Single parent status also interferes in a negative manner because the presence of only one parent means less time available to the child, less supervision, less time to be involved in community life. Low economic resources interfere on the level of little support in accessing educational, medical or free-time services. In other words, the same social disorganized structure interferes in social collective efficacy. Areas that are characterized by similar levels of residential mobility, economic resources, poverty, monoparentality are also characterized by a low level of mutual support, trust and accessibility to the same resources. So the cumulative effect of those two factors determines higher rates of child maltreatment. The strength of social disorganization theory is that it describes some of the community structures and processes that can be related to child abuse and neglect. According to it the solution of reducing violence against child are not *individual-centered*, but *place-centered* (improving the economic status, the general living conditions for families living in “bad” areas of the cities). Still the theory gives little explanation regarding the manner in which these structures and processes influence the child and the family belonging to a certain community (defined both as a physical space and as a culture) (Almgren, 2005). A plausible explanation of child maltreatment must contain the connections between structure, processes and effects (Kubrin, Weitzer, 2003). Therefore the ecological transactional theory comes to explain a part of these connections, at least from family environment. By two theories combined we obtained the following theoretical-conceptual scheme

Figure 1 Theoretical-conceptual scheme



The third chapter, **The social disorganization theory – quantitative research** presents the design and the results of testing the hypothesis. Our investigation aimed to collect data regarding abuse and neglect from potential victims / children enrolled in secondary and post-secondary education from urban areas from Vâlcea County.

Hypothesis:

1. Community structures determine the manifestation of child maltreatment, both as abuse (physical and psychological) and neglect.
 - 1.1. Urban communities characterized by a normal level of functionality are communities in which child maltreatment in family is not a problem.
 - 1.2. Urban communities characterized by a low residential stability are related to child maltreatment in family.
 - 1.3. Urban communities with low access to economic and social resources are related to child maltreatment in family.
 - 1.4. Individual and family variables are less related to child maltreatment than community variables.

2. Children with special medical conditions (physical disability, mental health problems) are at a higher risk of being maltreated by their parents than their “healthy” counterparts.

The final sample consisted of 1142 students chosen by stratifying sampling procedure. It is representative for students from urban secondary and post-secondary schools in Vâlcea County, with a maximum error of $\pm .02$ for a $P=95\%$ and of $\pm .03$ for a $P=99\%$ (values generated by the software Java Applets for Power and Sample Size, Lenth, 2006-09).

Table 1 Sample description (N=1142)

Variable	N(%)
Gender	
Male	554 (48.51)
Female	588 (51.49)
Locality	
Municipality	594 (52)
City	548 (48)
Type of urban locality	
Municipality	594 (52)
Agro-touristic	102 (8.9)
Industrial	258 (22.6)
Balnear	188 (16.5)
School level	
Secondary school	633 (55.4)
Post secondary school	509 (44.6)
Family type	
Both parents present	884 (77.7)
Single parent	253 (22.3)
Income	
Below 500 RON	39 (3.6)
501-1000 RON	165 (15.2)
1001-1500 RON	183 (16.9)
1501-2000 RON	265 (24.5)
Over 2000 RON	430 (39.7)
Fathers' education	
Below highschool	98 (8.7)
Highschool	708 (62.8)
University	321 (28.5)
Mothers education	
Below highschool	72 (6.4)
Highschool	715 (63.2)
University	344 (30.4)
Fathers' occupation	
Active	986 (89.6)
Inactive	114 (10.4)
Mothers' occupation	
Active	906 (80.4)
Inactive	221 (19.6.1)

Although our research was focused on typical populations (parents and children), we also considered important focusing on special samples in order to control for the error of underestimating some “vulnerable population”. Therefore we applied the same questionnaire to two group risk: children with physical disabilities and children with mental health problems (clinical diagnosis). The samples were not established *apriori*, basically wanting drawing more like a case-studies.

The instrument is designed and used in the international project BECAN – Balkan Epidemiological Study on Child Abuse and Neglect – ICAST-CH. BECAN is an epidemiological study aiming to identify the child abuse and neglect rate for children aged 11-16 in 8 Balkan countries: Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, FYR Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey. All country partners will use the same instrument so for the first time we will have a comparative perspective of child maltreatment rate in this area.

For the statistical analysis 6 conceptual categories were used, each measured by an index (grouping is revealed in the table below). We mention that the items regarding sexual abuse were eliminated from the initial questionnaire because the School County Inspectorate Vâlcea did not approve them.

Table 2 Indicators of child abuse and neglect from ICAST-CH

Concept	Indicators	Question
Psychological abuse	Depriving the dignity	16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23
	Terrorizing	24, 25, 26, 27, 28
	Isolation	29
Physical abuse	Hit by hand or other objects	36, 37, 38
	Isolation	39
	Grounding	40, 41
	Threatening with objects that produce hurt	42
Neglect	Food neglect	30
	Cloth neglect	31
	Medical neglect	32
	Emotional neglect	33, 34, 35
Community safety	Humiliation, cursing, threatening, victim of robberies while on street	44
Community resources	Economical resources	51, 53, 54
	Social resources	45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50
Housing	Type of residency	58
	Type of housing	59

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 10.5 statistical software. Analysis consisted into three steps. In the first step, simple techniques of descriptive statistics were used in order to present simple variables. The second step aimed to construct the associating profiles for the

dependent variables (physical abuse, psychological abuse and neglect) for individual variables, family variables and community variables. χ^2 test was used. Starting from those data the profiles were drawn using the “relative risk”. A special subchapter was dedicated to measuring the maltreatment risk for children with medical problems and those with no certified such problems (ANOVA). The last stage of analysis used complex techniques of inferential statistics in analyzing the interest variables (AF, AP, NGL, AB, MC). This means running regression analysis in step by step. This strategy is considered more efficient and with a greater explanatory value (Ards, 1989). The regression analysis consisted in four steps. In the first step, individual, family and community variables were regressed. In the second step, residential stability was introduced in the model, community resources in the third step. The fourth step allowed testing the entire model, with all individual, family and functional community variables regressed. For all the models, the VIF (*variance inflation factor*) values are well below 10 and the tolerance statistics are well above .2; therefore we can safely conclude that there is no collinearity within our used data (Field, 2005). The contributions of individual predictors are discussed only in the presentation of the full model. A .05, 0.1 and .001 levels of statistical significance were used to evaluate the results of the regression analysis.

Results show that the urban social space is important risk factors for children and their families. Therefore there is a greater interest from the researchers to analyze the neighborhood as urban areas in their relation to child abuse and neglect (Guterman *et al.*, 2009). The study shows that the communities in which children and their families live constitute an important factor in child maltreatment. Then, child abuse is not an individual or isolated family problem but a community one, most often related to the social and economic situation of the locale. While the roots of the problem are complex, this study has attempted to uncover the social factors required to develop programs of prevention and intervention needed by children and their families.

In terms of proposed hypothesis, community violence indeed correlated with increased child abuse reports (β between .35 and .46). These results are consistent with previous research that shows that high rates of community violence leads to individual violence, in this case toward children (Molnar *et al.*, 2003). Explanation is due to community disorganization regarding the general norms and values. The theory of

differential association (Sutherland, 1939) states that a certain behavior is learnt through direct or indirect exposure. The main concept that Sutherland uses is “differential association”. This refers to the fact that individual is determined to choose between norms that sustain conformist behaviors and norms for deviant behaviors; excessive exposure to definitions and attitudes favorable to breaking the norms leads to acting in a deviant manner. With no measure in this case for the level of attachment for the deviant norms, if more than 90% respondents are exposed to violence, we can then assume that there is a strong attachment relationship. Researches in this area showed a significant relationship between positive attitudes regarding violence and acting violent

Another explanatory path involved residential stability as a variable. Although most of the studies evidentiate positive associations (Coulton, Korbin, Su, 1999; Ernst, 2000), we found none what so ever between residential mobility and child maltreatment (Freistler, Bruce, Needell, 2007). The only significant associations were for physical abuse and neglect. Explanation is due to the fact that the Romanian urban space (and Vâlcea’s in particular) are not characterized by a strong mobility that could lead to weakening the social cohesion of its members and then to acts of violence (as social disorganization theory states).

Last, but not least, community resources are an important structure of the communities. In their review of research on the effects of poor neighborhoods on children and adolescents, Mayer and Jencks (1989) concluded that the evidence is quite mixed. When family and individual characteristics are controlled neighborhood economic status often has weak effects (*apud.* Coulton, Pandey, 1992; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Henry, 2006). On the other hand, Drake and Pandey (1996) explored the association between neighborhood poverty levels and the number of substantiated reports of various forms of child maltreatment. They found that maltreatment was significantly related to the degree of poverty within each identified neighborhood. Of the three forms of abuse examined (neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse), neglect was most closely associated with community-wide poverty. Our findings did not reflect any association between poverty and child abuse. The quality and availability of resources within the community for supporting parents is another important factor. High-risk communities may be less likely to have the medical, mental health, and social service resources needed by parents. Furthermore, the

resources that do exist within their community may already be overburdened. The community resource pathway is supported by previous research showing differences in the availability and utilization of resources by parents in high-risk neighborhoods (Garbarino, Sherman, 1980). Our results showed that the low availability of community resources (medical, educational and recreational) is associated with increased child abuse, and especially to neglect ($\beta = -.08$).

The last hypotheses tried to relate child abuse with some personal characteristics of the victim. The variables that revealed significant associations were 'family type', 'educational status' and 'occupational status'. Certain family structure's characteristics have been associated with child abuse, and especially with physical abuse. Our findings show that in atypical family structures there is a greater risk for child abuse. Actually, current nonmedical literature documents that recent changes in family structure increases the risk of child abuse (Lamb, 2001; Oliver, Kuhns, Pomeranz, 2005). In a two parent home, ideally, there is a sharing of the physical and psychological demands of the child. Usually a greater portion of these needs is met by one parent or the other, maintaining the balance of family functioning. Nowadays, the atypical family structures (e.g. parents divorced, parents living together, but not married, parent that is working outside the country) puts a supplementary child-care-burden over the remaining parent increasing in this way the frequency of maltreatment behaviors.

Although, the parent's education is an important explanatory variable (Coulton *et al.*, 1999), one interesting finding of our study is the role of fathers' education in child abuse. Little father education was associated with increased physical and psychological abuse and the occupational status if the father was related with psychological abuse. Previous research had documented the role of male figure in child abuse rate (Lamb, 2001; Oliver, Kuhns, Pomeranz, 2005), but still how the relation works is not fully understood. Then father occupational status was important in explaining physical and psychological abuse. Previous studies examining a child's "career" in the child welfare system found that male unemployment was highly correlated with physical abuse (Gillham *et al.*, 1998; Freisthler, Merritt, La Scala, 2006). They concluded that living in neighborhoods with high rates of male unemployment places children at a greater risk of being physically abused. In our society, where there is not a fully equalization of the partners' rights within the family,

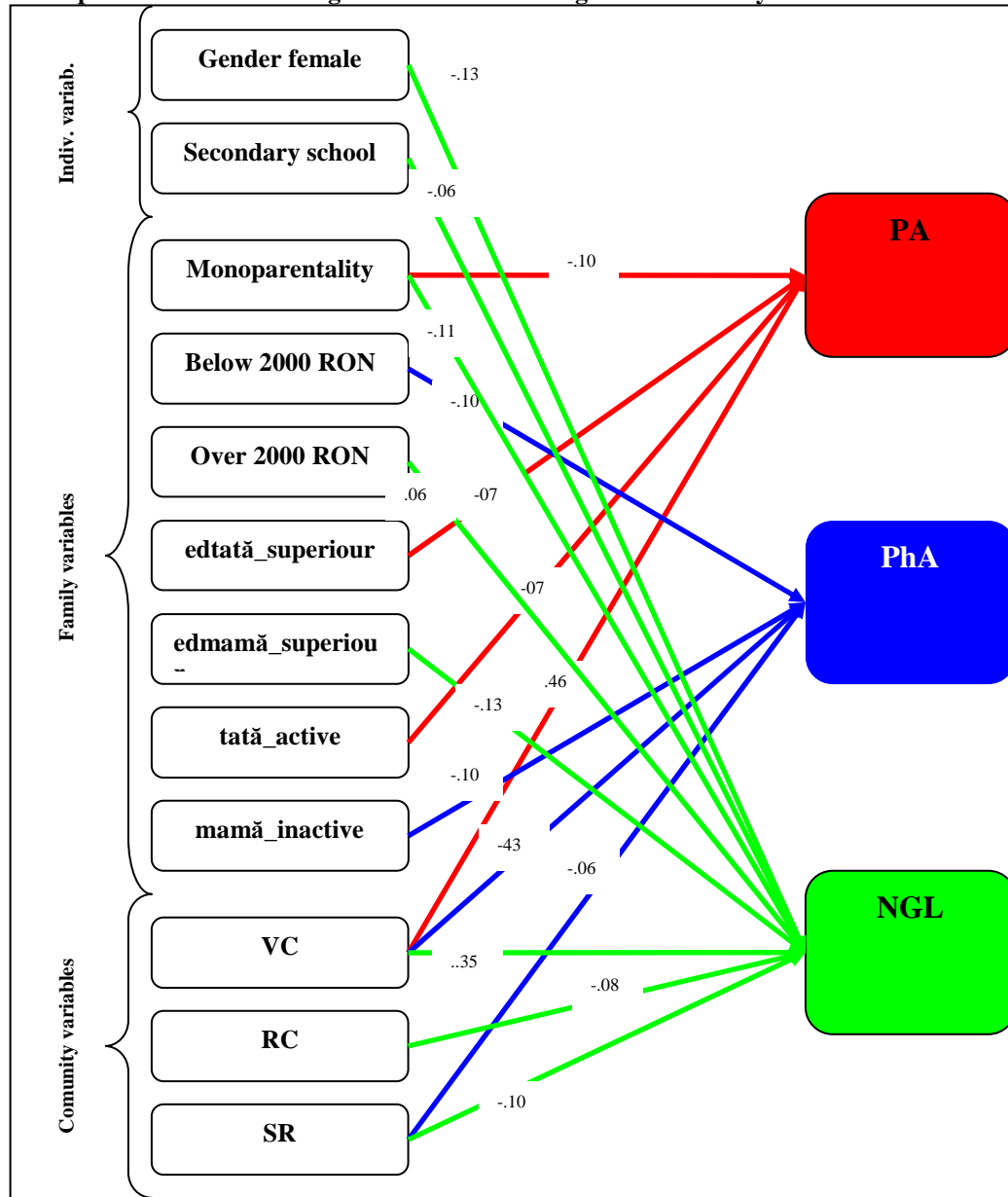
the father figure seems to be more important than the mother's. Mother is still responsible for child education and care, but father is the one that supervises her.

The last hypothesis tried to assess the risk of being maltreated for children with disabilities and with mental health problems, compared to their counterparts. Both medical conditions are constituted as considerable risk situations for child maltreatment. Among those, children with mental health problems are most vulnerable. Data show what previous studies also showed (Sullivan, Knutson, 1998; 2000), but this time for Romanian children. The social universe of children with (physical) disabilities is a direct function of their medical condition (Iovu, 2007). Children with mental health problems and those with physical disability have a greater risk of being abused and/or neglected than children with no certified such medical condition (Iovu, 2010). Unfortunately,

Unfortunately, these children are still invisible to official statistics (Kendall-Tackett, 2005). Our results could have implications in practical field and in public policy. With its methodological restraints in mind (which we assume), this study did not propose to test the causality disability/mental health – maltreatment, but still, it draws the attention onto the specific context in which such maltreatment behavior are more frequent. Future studies should analyze deeper the mental condition of the child, both as a risk factor and as an effect. Similarly, the higher percentage of children who do report abusive behaviors from their parents bring empirical evidence that these children should be also taken into consideration in official reports. The majority of children with disabilities benefit of recuperatory treatment, and employees from these institutions play an important role in identifying, preventing and primary intervention process. Our data are only valid for children with special conditions that are enrolled in educational system. Therefore, educational staff also plays an important role but we should not forget other “invisible” children: those who do not attend school and face multiple maltreatment problems. In conclusion, all professionals working with vulnerable groups of children should become more vigilant (Orelove, Hollahan, Myles, 2000).

Summing up, the theoretical-empirical scheme is as follows:

Figure 2 Empirical scheme resulting from the social disorganization theory



The fourth chapter, **Ecological-transactional theory – qualitative research** aimed to carry on semistructured interviews with children victims of abuse and/or neglect. We wanted to asses the level of family functioning. The main premise was that by quantitative date we obtain some profiles regarding child maltreatment. By selecting some families/children with official records of child maltreatment, if we can show that in those families there is an acceptable level of functioning, then the main explanatory path is the community structure. If we discover that there are some dysfunctionalities in family

function, then there is complex transaction between community and family that mediates acting in an abusive/neglecting way toward the child. We actually trying to verify the second and the third path (see the conceptual framework).

Because children are caught between institutions, groups, social norms, the paper emphasized the manner in which transactions within the family subsystem support an abusive behavior. Starting from the criteria of validity and reliability we focused on the following issues:

Level of family functioning

What is the general level of functionality for families with history of abuse? Which is the perception of children regarding family functionality? In what extent family function can be related to maltreatment behaviors?

Answering these questions is of great importance for social services in identifying risk families. The family climate influences the individual wellbeing of its members and especially that of girls (Shek, 2005).

Family circumstances for children experiencing child abuse and neglect (CAN)

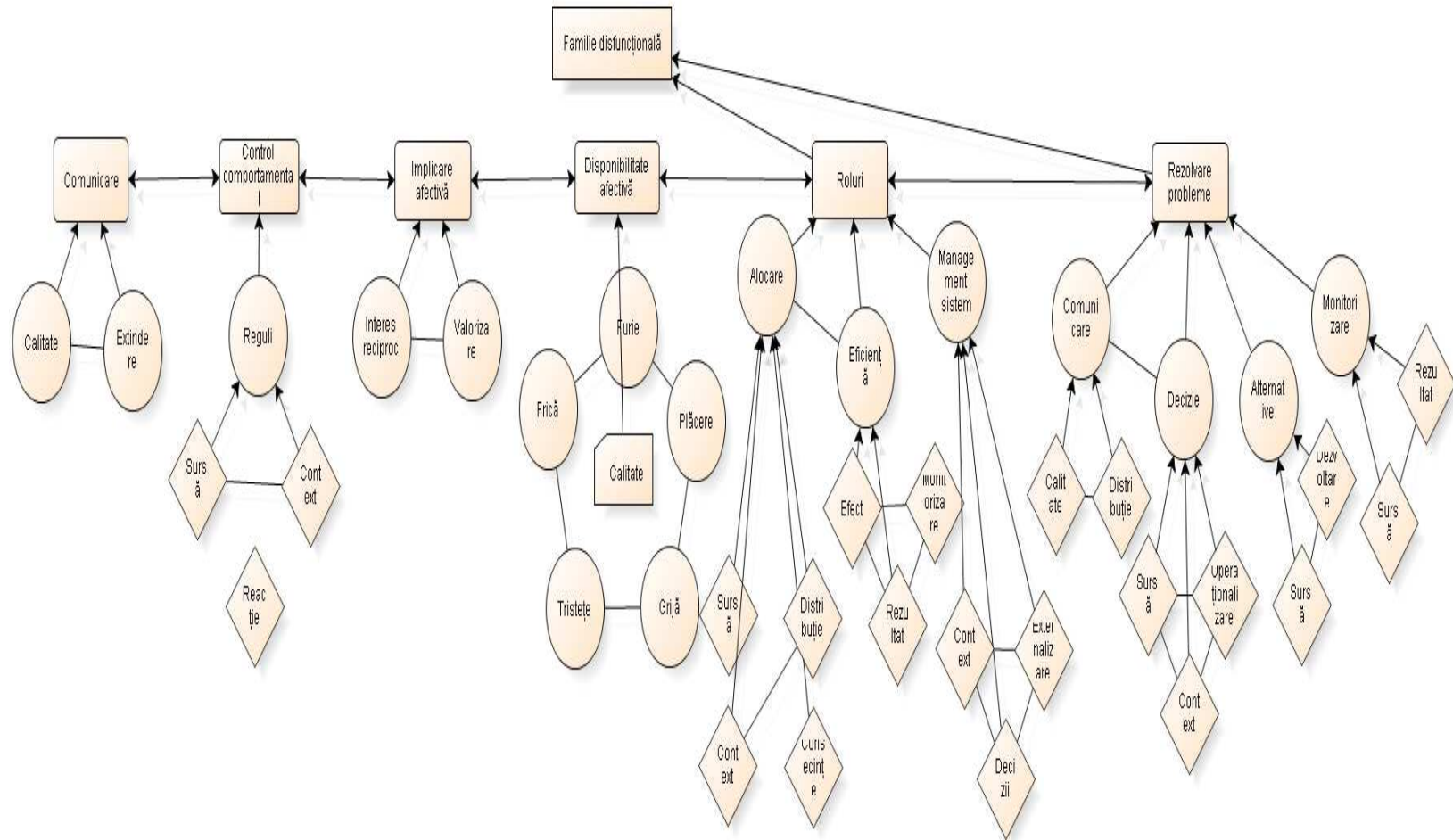
How well the family functions are fulfilled? Who the family tasks are distributed among members? How responsible are the members in their roles? Is there any control? What are the problem-solving strategies that are used? What is the communication patterns used? What kind of messages is mostly used (explicit-implicit/hidden; direct-indirect)? What are the affective relationships within the family members? Is there any emotional regulation? Are the members interested in each other? Is there any mutual availability?

10 interviews were conducted with children with official record of abuse and neglect: 5 boys and 5 girls, 6 of them had an abuse social diagnosis and 4 for neglect. The method was the semistructured interview (McMaster model of family assessment). The average time for conducting an interview was of 90 minutes. In spite of the controversies regarding using statistical software in analyzing qualitative data (CAQDAS – *computer-assisted analysis of qualitative data*) (Bhowmick, 2006), in this case we chose such an analysis. Motivation belongs to the advantages that such procedure has compared to “calsic” analysis (Weitzman, 2003): (1) higher speed of analysis; (2) better internal consistency in coding; (3) better possibilities of graphical representation and (4) the possibility of saving all the field notes in a one-set data base. From all the computer

software that is now available we chose QSR NVivo 7. This facilitates operating with a higher range of materials (texts, photographs, audio-video recordings), allowing the graphical representation between categories (Richards, 1999). The option was more subjective because in spite of the advantages recent studies (Sorensen, 2008; Davis, Mayer, 2009) also point out the fact that, Nvivo has a series of disadvantages like *user-unfriendly*, and, more important, no matter the computer-assisted package used it can not replace the task of interpretation (Ezzy, 2002). Interviews were transcript in Word and then loaded as working documents. We used *open coding and axial coding*. Open coding meant generating codes *free nodes*. These were then organized according to their properties and dimensions into tree *nodes*. Based on the codes we then generated association matrices. Although a qualitative research is not based on quantitative matrices, these models can serve as a starting point for generating our theories and for answering our research questions stated above.

For a better representation of the concepts, relations between categories were then graphically represented in NVivo. This allows visualizing the interaction mechanism among family processes involved in child maltreatment. So, there is a transaction among all 6 dimensions (roles, problem solving, behavioral control, communication, emotional availability and affective involvement), but the only related to family dysfunctionality are the roles and problem solving. It seems that in the families where there is abuse/neglect children perceives a weak role allocation (one of the parent establish the tasks, tasks are concentrated on a single member, tasks are established for a long time and there is no change in those, there are violent reactions when these are not fulfilled), a weak efficiency (members are not satisfied with the way of fulfilling, no one verifies the fulfillment and there is no reaction if there are not well solved) and a poor system management (decisions are taken by one person, poor relations with the extended family and when they do exist there is a great negative emotional consumption). Similarly, difficulties are seen on the problem solving abilities: dysfunctional communication (problem is not adequately communicated to the members), improper decisions (no one takes the responsibility of decision, problem is not actually solved, only the decision is made), little alternatives are offered (no one offers alternatives, the acting is more instinctive) and poor monitoring (the action is not monitorized). These results open new direction in family therapies.

Figure 3 Categorical scheme



The last chapter is dedicated to **general conclusions**. In this part we were focused more on the theoretical and practical relevance of the results, the limits and possible future research topics. Although previous research has focused on features of individual children and caregivers likely to be involved in family violence, in the last years there has been a move away from this traditional fixation on static features (race, socioeconomic status) towards a focus on multilevel influences, including how certain features of neighborhood life bring about change in a given phenomenon of interest. This has led to unique attempts to empirically measure social interactional and institutional dimensions that might explain how neighborhood effects work out in the day-to-day life of communities. Certainly, there is substantial cross-sectional evidence that child maltreatment is related to features of the larger neighborhood environment. The mechanisms that underlie these relationships have not been fully explored and lead one to ask, “What is it about the environment that may affect the prevalence of child maltreatment?” This question must be addressed and the findings translated into effective intervention efforts. For the moment, most of the prevention activities are based on identifying children/families that are in risk and trying to improve parental abilities or modifying the elements that raise the risk of maltreatment. Such activity takes a considerable effort from the practitioners: on one side, identifying families/children in risk is based on the official records (that may not be totally accurate) or on available resources; on the other side, a person-centered method even if successful can not have long term benefits as long as the individual is returning to the same social environment that initially supported his abusive behavior. The interventions that manage to change structural factors have higher chances to create a supportive environment for the children. Then, we can not forget that community intervention practices are financially more efficient than individual ones (Freisthler, Merritt, LaScala, 2006). The current analyses have revealed some features of the community and have some practical implications, at least in the social work field. Communities with higher levels of violence and with little social resources have higher rates of child abuse. It has been suggested that one of the ways to prevent family violence is to meet the needs of families experiencing such community problems (Barnett *et al.*, 1997 *apud*. Molnar *et al.*, 2003). Our research also suggests that individually targeted prevention efforts may not be the sole means to this end. Programs that reduce neighborhood-level disadvantage reduce community violence, and

increase social networks may all prove effective and efficient means of reducing child abuse.

By its theoretical and epistemological approach, by its methodology this paper is important in the study of child maltreatment. The data we obtain are a first step in drawing a comparative table regarding child abuse and neglect in a European context. Results are valuable in the area of sociology (family, child, and abuse), psychology and social work. This gives the paper an interdisciplinary value.

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