



The Impact of the War and Migration Crises on the Functioning of Children and Refugee Families From Ukraine in Poland.

Research Report

Wpływ kryzysów wojennego i migracyjnego na funkcjonowanie dzieci i rodzin uchodźczych z Ukrainy w Polsce. Doniesienie z badań

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: Identification of challenges and preliminary recommendations for working with refugee families in Poland.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The study aims to identify challenges shared by previous and Ukrainian refugee families in Poland and is a part of ongoing qualitative, study where ethnopedagogical method, narrative interviews, critical case sampling and key/purposive case sampling were used. In further studies (triangulation) sensitive cases sample will be used.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The aim of the research is to diagnose challenges common to refugee families and, in further research, specific to Ukrainian families in Poland.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Problems common to both groups of refugee families include: experiencing the disaster curve, acculturation stress, and specific experiences of migrating children and families.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH:

The recommendations suggest selected ways of solving the problems of refugee families by professionals working with them.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **MIGRANT FAMILIES, REFUGEE FAMILIES, CRISIS, WORKING WITH PEOPLE WITH MIGRATION EXPERIENCE, INTERCULTURAL INTEGRATION**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Zidentyfikowanie wyzwań i wstępnych rekomendacji w pracy z rodzinami uchodźczymi w Polsce.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Badania mają na celu zidentyfikowanie wyzwań wspólnych dla dotychczasowych oraz ukraińskich rodzin uchodźczych w Polsce i są częścią jakościowych badań w toku, w których użyto metody etnopedagogicznej, wywiadów narracyjnych, próby przypadków kluczowych i doboru celowego. W dalszych badaniach (triangulacja) zostanie zastosowana próba przypadków obrazowych.

PROCES WYWODU: Celem badań jest zdiagnozowanie wyzwań wspólnych dla rodzin uchodźczych, a w dalszych badaniach specyficznych dla rodzin ukraińskich w Polsce.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Wspólne dla obu grup rodzin uchodźczych problemy to: doświadczanie krzywej katastrofy, stresu akulturacyjnego, specyficzne doświadczenia migrujących dzieci i rodzin.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Rekomendacje sugerują wybrane sposoby rozwiązywania problemów rodzin uchodźczych przez osoby z nimi pracujące.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **RODZINY MIGRACYJNE, RODZINY UCHODŹCZE, KRZYŻYS, PRACA Z LUDŹMI O DOŚWIADCZENIU MIGRACYJNYM, INTEGRACJA MIĘDZYKULTUROWA**

Introduction

Research on migration and refugee families has a long history. This topic, which has also been covered in Polish literature, gained special importance after the war in Ukraine began, when Polish institutions suddenly faced an unprecedented scale of problems brought about by war migration of families mainly, and lacked solutions for the challenges they encountered. The study group consists of professionals working with refugees as they are the ones who are professionally involved in solving their problems. The study was conducted using the ethnopedagogical method and narrative interviews. In this type of research, more emphasis is placed on explaining a specific phenomenon than on verifying hypotheses. However, data collection is subordinated to previously defined analytical categories (Kruger, 2007, p. 24). In the material presented here, the categories were created based on previous research on the challenges of refugee families in Poland. A sample (the criterion of critical cases and typical cases of purposive sampling) of up to 30 narrative interviews was selected with these categories in mind. In the further course of the research, according to the principle of triangulation, sensitive cases will be selected, which will allow us to learn about problem cases that differ from

the previously defined analytical categories and create new ones (Flick, 2010, p. 60). The aim of the study is to identify common problems that previous refugee families in Poland have faced so far and to compare them with the challenges of refugee families from Ukraine. We will draw on the challenges and experiences already collected, which will help create recommendations for better solving the problems of refugee families in Poland in the future. The scope of the paper covers refugee families in Poland and professionals working with them.

The Multidimensionality of the Refugee Crisis

After 24 February, both the fleeing Ukrainian families and Polish institutions experienced the dynamics of the disaster curve, which consists of the initial phase (the day on which the war broke out: disorientation, chaos, shock, fear, and the compulsive need to act vs. to freeze), the heroic phase (first week: heroic acts, taking risks to safeguard life and property, and very strong altruism), the honeymoon phase (from the end of the first week until two months: cooperation, working together with centres providing assistance, and optimism), the disillusionment phase (from the end of the first two months, lasting a year or longer: after receiving assistance provided by institutions and experiencing solidarity, refugees start to feel isolated, abandoned and go through depressive episodes; the host community starts to experience fatigue resulting from altruism), and, finally, the reconstruction phase (lasting several years: looking for ways to function in the new circumstances by trial and error by both refugees and institutions of the host community) (Prot-Klinger, 2021). Other forms of crisis that refugees experience in such circumstances are acculturation stress and culture shock (Kubitsky, 2012, p. 35). It seems that the family should be a guarantee and stability for refugees in such a multidimensional crisis. However, the family can fulfil this function only when its members, often unconsciously, adhere to and pass on cultural traditions and values that imperceptibly regulate family life. A migrating family comes into contact with cultural norms and values different from those it has known before. The ways in which they handled their family issues might now collide with those acceptable in the new culture (Cornille & Brotherton, 1993, pp. 331–333). For this reason, a family in new circumstances also goes through specific forms of crisis, such as a family culture shock and stronger migratory grief, disrupted stability and development cycle of the family, premature adulthood of children and delayed rebellion of adolescents, and other migration-related experiences of the youngest family members.

Children's Migration Experience

The decision to migrate the family is usually taken by the parents, and children are much less independent in this matter and unaware of the reasons for the departure. This is especially true for young children who do not understand the reasons for and consequences

of leaving, but experience anxiety and sadness as much as adults. Children treat their favourite pets, toys, equipment and decorations as living things and their property. They experience being deprived of their surroundings as harm or even violence (Kubitsky, 2012, pp. 30–31). This is supported by the founder of a Ukrainian kindergarten in Szczecin:

People commonly say that young children find it easy to cope with migration, but this is not the case. A 3-year-old child is unable to describe the emotional state they are in. Contrary to popular belief, those children suppress their emotions and very rarely openly admit their frustrations and fears. The truth is that Ukrainian kids have been taken from their safe homes and literally thrown into a completely alien world which they are unable to understand. They miss people who were important to them as well as their pets, toys, and favourite objects, which, according to their perception as children, have been taken away from them. Losing the world they knew in which they felt safe is a big enough change. The practice of placing children of this age in care facilities which house many wards and where most of the wards their age are Polish is yet another change that deprives them of a sense of security, and thus isolates them from the start and prevents them from adapting to the new reality. This prompted us to create a kindergarten with a family atmosphere in which they can learn in their own language and be surrounded by children and teachers from Ukraine. They can also learn Polish here. We follow the Polish and the Ukrainian core curriculums. Nonetheless, we emphasize integration that is adjusted to the needs and possibilities of these young children. They need time and a sense of security to be able to enter the Polish reality. This varies from one child to another (Founder of Ukrainian kindergarten in Szczecin – own research).

This quote shows that the social integration of children in a new country is an individual process which cannot be forced or accelerated. This is consistent with opinions of researchers who noted that young migrants go through the same stages when leaving their country as adults do (Kubitsky, 2012, p. 31). Pollock divides these stages into engagement, leaving, transition, entering, and re-engagement. The first stage finds the child in a well-known and stable environment of which they feel a part and in which they find social support. The stage of leaving the country begins when the child learns about the planned departure. Difficult emotions that come with the anticipation of the departure may cause them to neglect their school duties, abandon their interests, and come into conflict with their peers and friends or other important people. Therefore, their guardians must create opportunities for the child to positively close this stage and say goodbye to places and people important to them. This will facilitate their transition into the stage of transferring, in which the child comes into contact with the new culture, and learns to recognize patterns of behaviour specific to that foreign culture. If the process goes positively, the child will become engaged again: the new environment will become familiar and predictable for the child, allowing for their emotional development (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, pp. 66–75, 138).

Unfortunately, families of war refugees most often experience sudden and forced migration. This deprives children of adequate preparation for their departure and therefore prevents them from positively completing the stage of parting from the country. For this reason, it becomes more difficult to smoothly enter the next stages. Furthermore,

refugee families increasingly experience multiple migrations, which means repeated partings and the need to rebuild ties in successive environments. Each subsequent migration is associated with some kind of loss, and thus with the experience of some sort of grief. Children who frequently migrate are exposed to this grief in a multiplied way: they often develop defence mechanisms consisting in repressing difficult feelings they associate with it (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, pp. 123–124, 159–167). This was also observed, for instance, among Chechen refugee children just before they left Poland for another country (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 1998, pp. 146–147). This is how a teacher who worked with a Chechen child and was interviewed by Edyta Januszewska, described the situation:

My student would come to school very regularly; he followed all instructions, diligently filled his notebook, and his parents often contacted me. This continued from September 2003 to April 2004, when the boy said he was leaving for England. From then on, he became rude, disrespectful towards me and his classmates and played truant. When their departure was postponed, the boy started going to school regularly again and started acting politely. I remember one situation when we went on a trip in April, and the boy began to stagger at one point. I guessed that he was pretending to be drunk. After a while, he pointed his finger at his Polish friends and said that this what their dads were like. This was just before they left (Januszewska, 2010, p. 282).

Now, almost 20 years later, similar behaviour has been observed among children of Ukrainian refugees by students teaching the Polish language. The young pupils' attitudes towards learning Polish and integrating with their Polish peers changed along with their parents' readiness to leave Poland. One of the interviewees described this situation as follows:

It is hard to say with certainty what the attitude of Ukrainian children to learning Polish was. It was definitely influenced by the decisions of their parents who told them that they were here only for a while and would soon return to Ukraine, or that they were planning a further trip to another country. These children would become distracted, lose the motivation to learn, started acting out, and even became rude towards their Polish peers and teachers. Ilyia, 13, was the oldest child in the Ukrainian group, and I had the impression that this was why he felt responsible for them. Also, his dad had gone off to war and supposedly told him that he was now the "head of the family." Maybe this is why Ilyia always tried to participate in class and to discipline other children to learn? Teachers would sometimes ask him to translate or explain something to the more unruly children. However, when his mother started talking about returning to Ukraine, he stopped paying attention in class and started goofing off and distracting the other boys. He became defiant when asked to translate something. When the decision to leave was postponed and it seemed that they would remain in Szczecin, he turned into an "excellent student" once again. But then he stopped coming to Polish lessons. I found out that his family was going to leave for Berlin soon to stay with their relatives. He no longer wanted to go to school as he said goodbye by having an argument with his Polish friends in the cafeteria and breaking a window there.

This story is an example of the immature defence mechanisms a child uses to cope with separation from a place where they had established ties. Reinforcement of such mechanisms and failure to work through the emotions associated with separation can lead to what is known as the unresolved grief syndrome and delayed migratory grief in the future, consequently disrupting emotional life and the building of lasting relationships with new surroundings and people (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, pp. 123–141, 159–167).

Migrant and Refugee Family Dynamics

Migration is often associated with the temporary separation of family members. A separation can disturb the development of the relationship between spouses. Therefore, reuniting with a spouse who lived in another culture for a long time can be like meeting a new person. Since acculturation involves accepting the norms and values of the host country, spouses may face the greatest misunderstandings over discrepancies in the value system. This creates the risk that their new life goals will no longer be consistent with the priorities of their spouse (Kubitsky, 2012, pp. 7, 25). Findings show that this problem often affects, among others, families of military personnel working on contracts with international military organizations. They are relocated together with their families to various countries in which their organization has troops and are often sent on military missions to another region of the world. While they work in the distant country, their wives assume the role of “heads of families” and adjust to life in the host country. Storti explains that

[...] the life led by the two halves of the family during such a separation has substantial consequences for the time when they reunite. [...] As a soldier lives in a new world, trying to adjust, their wife is going through a certain transformation. Whether you like it or not, you are now a single parent, the de facto head of the family, who has to be both father and mother. Even if you may be able to stay in touch with your husband, the real burden of decision-making falls directly on you. At the end of the day, it is you who knows the context, knows what has happened since your husband left, and while his input may be useful; you are unable to explain everything to him sufficiently over the phone or by email, so it is difficult to rely on his advice as much as on your instincts [...]. In addition, there may be times when you are unable to communicate with your husband (Storti, 2006, p. 165).

Similar processes can be observed among the families of NATO soldiers in Poland (Linka, 2011) as well as among the families of Ukrainian soldiers who fled from the war to Poland. In this case, wives and children also found themselves in a foreign country, unable to stay in touch on a daily basis with their husbands, who were fighting on the battlefield. This has important implications for the dynamics of these families in Poland. This is how a psychologist from an NGO working with Ukrainians described this issue:

In some areas of Ukraine, a traditional division of family roles, in which the man works and the woman takes care of the home, is still common. Now that husbands have volunteered for the army, their wives and children have fled from the war to Poland and found work

here. They have begun to learn the Polish language. Some have already been promoted at work! Now they are the ones who decide on matters that previously were their husbands' responsibility. They see that in Poland more depends on their own initiative and work than it would in the still heavily corrupt and impoverished Ukraine. They have become different people here. When they go to Ukraine to meet with their husbands, who are given military passes, their family meetings often end in arguments. The men realize that even though they are heroes on the front fighting for their homeland, no one listens to them anymore in their own families. They try to regain their position by imposing their own opinion. This causes their children to rebel and leads to arguments with their wives. The family does not understand the reality on the front in which the father found himself, and he in turn does not understand the challenges they face in a foreign country.

This shows that the separation of family members can have serious consequences for family integrity and development. The three main stages of family development are as follows: the creation of boundaries and the construction of identity; the construction and accumulation of family rituals, procedures and patterns of conflict resolution; and the selection and transmission of heritage (Steinglass et al., 1987). Migration impacts the first stage, because some family members are left behind in their home country. In this situation, relatives who migrated either live a new life without thinking about the family they left behind, or they live thinking how happy their life will become once the family is reunited and idealize the absent members. This leads to unrealistic expectations for reunions with relatives, e.g., parents who did not stay in touch with their children for a long time might treat them as if they were still the age when they became separated and ignore the developmental changes the children underwent (Leslie, 1993). The parent they missed, idealized and did not see for a long time in everyday life turns out to be an ordinary person with faults and problems. This leads to disappointment (Pollock & Van Raken, 2009). Research shows that this problem affects many Vietnamese (Halik, 2004, pp. 202–212; Majkut, 2011, p. 37) and Armenian (Łotocki, 2008, pp. 121, 136) families in Poland. In the future, it may also happen to Ukrainian families separated by the war.

The second stage of family development, i.e., the construction and accumulation of family rituals, procedures and conflict resolution patterns, can also be disrupted by migration. Old ways of solving problems and conflicts may not work anymore in the new culture. It takes time for family members to develop new solutions. To do so, they need stable family patterns. Thus, in order to achieve this stability, some families begin to stiffen their behavioural patterns and wall themselves off from the new cultural environment. This is particularly true of families that experienced excessive stress (Babtise, 1993). The study conducted by Edyta Januszewska indicates that such behaviour can be found among Chechen families in Poland, in which parents expect their children to wear traditional female clothing and to assume traditional Chechen female and male roles. Keeping national traditions has been a matter of survival for Chechens for centuries, and the traditional family is their "fortress." However, the author is of the opinion that attachment to tradition hinders the integration of Chechen children in Polish schools (Januszewska, 2010). The trend of cultural separation as a reaction to stress can also be observed

among families of war refugees from Ukraine. The principal of one elementary school in Szczecin, which accepted a large number of children from Ukraine, says the following:

Some children attend our school only because their moms had to go to work and did not want to leave them alone at home for remote teaching. These moms keep saying that they will soon return to Ukraine, so it is not important whether their children will learn Polish and pass the subjects in a Polish school. At first, some of them were even unwilling to go to work, because they believed that the war would soon be over and they would be able to return home. When I listen to them, I get the impression that, for them, settling down in Poland feels like a betrayal of their homeland and of their husbands fighting for their country. One mother cried when I asked her why she did not want her son to participate in Polish holiday celebrations. Another mum who sent her child to our kindergarten, would not even let him speak Polish. She justified that by saying that she did not want him to forget his own language.

These mothers were behaving as if the stress caused by the attack on their country “froze” them mentally and they were unable to adjust to changes resulting from their migration to Poland. Although they have been living in Poland for months now, mentally they are still in the Ukraine under attack from the Russian army. From a psychological point of view, this is an understandable mechanism. However, if the family stays in Poland, and this mechanism is strengthened, family members will be unable to acculturate. Thus, the third stage of family development, which involves the transmission of family heritage, will become a source of chronic stress for them. Passing on traditions and rituals to family members raised in the country of immigration means that traditions need to be selected. It needs to be considered which elements of the heritage can be absorbed by the young generation functioning in the new country. Difficulties in that regard were observed among Vietnamese families in Poland (Majkut, 2011, Szymańska-Matusiewicz, 2011). One could predict that, at least to some extent, this problem may affect Ukrainian families who stay in Poland in the future.

Summary and Recommendations

The material presented shows that some problems of the two groups – previous and recent refugees in Poland – are similar. This means that methods already present in the literature can be used in solving them. They provide room for educators, counselors and teachers working with people with migratory experience to take action. They should realize the importance of various factors for the migrating family: the understanding that children and adults experience migration differently and that family members have their own special needs (e.g., perhaps some children require special educational care), the developmental stage of the children, the degree to which each family member wants to leave, how individual family members cope with stress, and the quality of the relationships between them. The stability of existing family ties needs to be supported by maintaining regular contact with family members and creating new family rituals in the new country. It is worth involving mentors in the process of integrating the family

into the new country, i.e., other families of the same nationality who have already gone through the process of cross-cultural integration (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Finally, it is worth noting the positives of migration – working through migratory grief can help in dealing with other life losses, and overcoming traumatic experiences, such as war, fleeing and adapting in a new country, show courage, strength, resourcefulness and perseverance in pursuit of a better life. Even if the problems a migrant or refugee is going through temporarily deplete their resources, with the right support, these experiences can serve as the basis for building their future lives (Kownacka, 2007, pp. 45–46).

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