

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Partner selection mechanisms and family formation
in extreme poverty**

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I. The aim of the thesis, the definition of the subject-matter

Over the past decades, socio-economic changes in developed countries have not left the institution of the family untouched, either. The living conditions of families, the labour market, the possibilities of earning income, the system of institutions and services influencing the operation of families have changed in Hungary as well but the value and behavioral systems prevailing in society have also changed. When examining the period since the change of regime, the decline in the number of marriages and the decline in fertility, the unmarried coexistence and the proliferation of singular lifestyles, the first coexistence and the age of childbearing have all received great attention in family sociology.

Traditions have long been for people to decide what to do and how to live. Nowadays there is no value system or way of life similar to those previously existing that would be valid for all. In each situation there are many options to choose from, each with different options and risks (Giddens 1999). The various alternative lifestyles also encounter less social control, resulting in the development of further lifestyles and forms of relationship and forms of the family (Czibere 2007). In the Hungarian society, the pluralization of family and family forms and the public acceptance of different life forms have become increasingly characteristic (Somlai 2013).

However, social sciences have long discovered that there are different family-setting strategies in different social groups, so the trends observed on the basis of national data are not uniform. Some analyzes (Husz 2011, Kapitány - Spéder 2012) highlight the differences between people with tertiary education and those with primary education when comparing family-starting of people with different levels of education, while others (Fernandez-Kelly 1998, Ladányi – Szelényi 2004, Durst 2006, Virág 2009) emphasize the importance of the type of settlement and the conditions of the place of residence.

When examining the family formation of people living in poverty, generally reproductive behavior is examined, showing differences in the patterns of having children. At the same time, the process of pre-childbirth mate selection and the process of relationship formation have remained less studied in marginalized communities. In Hungary, in the lower segment of society there is a strong relationship homogamy (Bukodi 2004) but there is hardly any information about the preferences of people living in poverty when choosing a partner, what they consider as a resource in partner selection, or how they evaluate their own chances in the marital market. This research also aims to respond to these shortfalls.

Persistent poverty and exclusion also affect people's life-planning potential, thus affecting family planning, the development, spreading and survival of different patterns of partner choice and family formation. This doctoral research examined the factors influencing young people's decisions on life start, partner choice and family start in a disadvantaged sack village with a homogeneous population and closed community in East Hungary, and, in this context, the mechanisms that contribute to the transmission of poverty. The aim of this dissertation is to present, in an impoverished rural society, young people's attitudes and their value-system concerning family and cohabitation, their family planning and life-planning possibilities, the patterns of their relationships and cohabitation, the reasons for the development of these, and also, what rules and expectations apply to women and men in relation to these.

The thesis consists of three main theoretical chapters, one methodological chapter and one chapter presenting the outcomes. The first chapter, besides demonstrating the theoretical family approaches – *family ecology theory* (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Duncan - Brooks 2002); *family development theory* (Hogan - Astone 1986, Aldous 1996); *structural-functional family theory* (Parsons 1955); *interactionalist model* (LaRossa - Reitzes 1993, Fiese és mtsi 2002) ; *exchange theory* (Sabatelli – Shehan 1993, Brehm és mtsi 2002); *system theory model* (O'Brien 2005); *conflict model* (Stacey 1993); *biosocial model* (Booth – Carver – Granger 2000) –, presents the processes that influence the development of relationships and family forms in modern societies. In the present research, the family formation of the young age group is examined, so I considered it important to show the impact of the socio-economic changes, the characteristics of the family of origin and the possibilities of social integration on life starting possibilities, and how these appear in the family forming aspirations.

One part of researches focuses on the development of partner selection mechanisms and family formation habits primarily from an economic-rational point-of-view while the other trend emphasizes the role of values and norms in the first place. The second chapter of the thesis, showing both perspectives and applying, besides sociological theories, results taken from the realms of economics and psychology - *exchange theory* (Thibaut–Kelley 1959, Rusbult 1980, DiMaggio–Mohr 1985); *marital market* (Becker 1974, Murstein 1986, Kalmijn – Flap 2001, Bukodi 2002); *gender roles* (Mead 1973, Buda 1985, Lindsey 1997, Rudman – Glick 2008, Berger – Luckmann 1998); *affection theory* (Festinger 1950, Byrne 1971, Kenrick 1993, Sprecher 1994, Atkinson és mtsi 2001) -, intends to give a comprehensive picture of the factors that influence partner selection decisions, the scenes and mechanisms of partner selection.

Our research seeks answers, in a well-defined social space with special features, to issues of family sociological nature, where poverty and exclusion are the frames of individual decisions and actions. The third theoretical chapter, therefore, presents theories – *functionalist* (Davis és Moore 1997); *conflict-based approach* (Wright 1999); *poverty culture* (Lewis 1988); *underclass* (Wilson 1978), *social exclusion* (Amartya Sen 2003); *connection network* (Granovetter 1991, Coleman 1998, Fernandez-Kelly 1998, Messing 2006, Füzér 2015, Megyesi 2015); *territorial segregation* (Wilson 1999, Wacquant 2004, Váradi – Virág 2015) – related to the interpretation of poverty, which can help to interpret the decisions of people living in impoverished villages about their partner choice and establishment of families.

II. Outlines of the methods used

The research topic justified the conduct of an exploratory study, for which the qualitative method proved to be suitable. In the course of the study, semi-structured interviews were prepared, which, during the interview, gave the opportunity to ask additional questions, besides the previously edited interview outline, according to interviewee's life situation. Furthermore, the method of semi-structured interviews also made it possible for me to adapt the questions to the communication skills of the interviewees, thus helping them to understand the issues and create meaningful interviews, rich in information.

The interviews were made between 2015 and 2017, each of which took place in the settlement researched. Most of the interviews were made in the community centre of the settlement because I considered this venue suitable for talking to the interviewees in private and calm conditions. At the beginning of the research, the staff of the foundation active in the settlement helped me to contact the interviewees, and then in the later phase of the fieldwork, I reached further interviewees through my personal contacts established in the meantime; in many cases they also let me into their homes for the time of the interviews.

In the course of the research, we tried to find young men and women resident in the settlement who have at most primary education, are not doing full-time studies, and are permanently excluded from the open labour market. An important aspect of selection was that the interviewee should already have experience in choosing a partner, that is, should have a relationship at the time of the interview or should be one with no partner at present, but has had a relationship in the past. In the course of the research, young people aged between 18 and 35 were contacted because it was assumed that they were the most active in partner selection or family formation and that their decisions on choices related to partner choice or relationship formation have been made recently enough for them to remember, so they could

tell all about them during the interview. We contacted all available persons who meet the selection criteria in the settlement so we have a comprehensive picture at settlement level by having processed the completed 40 interviews.

The interviews were grouped around four main dimensions, and it was an important aspect to get to know all the factors that could affect the life-starting chances of young people. The first thematic block includes questions about the settlement. These questions assess the features of the settlement, its economic status and the job opportunities available locally. We found it important to learn what the interviewees thought about their own settlement, about the people who live there and about the local community. The facilities, services, leisure programs, everyday activities and the characteristics of the relationships of the population in the settlement determine both the image of the settlement and the organization of the life of the locals.

The second dimension comprises questions about the life course of individuals. Some of them focus on the characteristics of the family of origin because the resources of the family of origin, family socialization, and patterns taken from the family fundamentally influence people's expectations and practices regarding partner choice. Questions related to childhood and school career reveal the past of the interviewees while the aim of the questions about housing and living conditions and income sources, as well as of the questions to assess their mental state, is to address present life situations. This dimension also includes questions about future ideas and plans.

The aim of the third circle of questions is to identify the partner-selection mechanisms of the interviewees' own and also those detected by the interviewees in the settlement, as well as to identify the differences and similarities between these. This dimension comprises questions to address the life course timing of partner choice and cohabitation, the consideration of factors defining and affecting the decision about these, as well as questions to reveal the expectations about partner choice preferences and gender roles. We investigated how family and community rules can influence relationship-related decisions in addition to the individuals' own partner choice preferences.

The fourth dimension aims to reveal the interviewees' own behavior regarding having children and the family formation patterns they found in the settlement, especially with regard to the circumstances and conditions of the first child. We also considered it important to assess the presence of other motivation factors, such as compliance with gender role expectations, their need to become adults, the acquisition of material and symbolic resources for having children beside the individuals' desires and plans for having children. This dimension also includes

questions about the future, specifically related to the family, subsequent childbirths, family plans and to the future of their children.

III. Thesis statement

1. The site of the research is a sack village with a population of 295 (KSH 2018) in one of the most disadvantaged micro-regions of the country. The local economy of the settlement has been completely downgraded over the past decades and there have been no new opportunities that would have created new life strategies for residents. The changed life chances have also amplified the phenomenon of selective migration in the settlement. Families with better, mobilizable resources have moved out of the village, leaving the poorest and most miserable people in the village with specific lifestyle strategies to cope with their daily livelihoods, isolated from the majority society both socially and in space. Our interviewees are not present in the open labour market either, and most of them do not have any work experience apart from public employment. Early school leaving, lack of labour income and low levels of job placement are typical of the entire young generation in the settlement, which also has a strong impact on their daily lives and their vision of future. In this closed and impoverished social space, young people's decisions will be influenced by different factors, which will explain the spread of patterns of partner choice and family formation other than those of contemporary Hungarian society.

2. One focus of our interview research was to explore the characteristics and resources of the families of origin. The family of origin has a multi-dimensional effect on partner choice. The family limits the social environment that people belong to and from which people can choose their potential partners. Most of the resources are inherited from the family of origin, their extent influence partner choice preferences and may also determine how attractive people become in the marital market (Bukodi 2004). While in modern societies it can be observed that young people have family foundation practices different from those of their parents because they are surrounded by a different kind of social environment, different opportunities and obstacles, the young people involved in our research do not have the opportunity for resources management other than that of the parent generation.

The family socialization processes of childhood are of key importance when deciding on alternatives to relationship forms. Assessing the relationship between parents can become a source of expectations for their own later choice (Bagdy 1998). This family socialization effect is particularly significant due to the multi-generational cohabitation pattern typical of

the settlement. Following their partner choice, the interviewees started their cohabitation in every case sharing housing with a relative, most often in the parental house, because they did not have the opportunity to implement separate housing and household management. Regardless of whether they moved to the family of the man or the woman, they could not break away from the rules of the previous generation, as they can only minimize conflict situations resulting from their co-existence by adjusting their behavior to the expectations of their parents. This type of coexistence constraint further strengthens the socialization effects towards traditional gender and family roles.

3. In the lower segment of the Hungarian society, there is strong homogamy (Bukodi 2002) and this was also observed in the settlement examined. Young people growing up in the village and also those moving to the village due to family establishment from other settlements are characterized by their parents having a low level of education and a very limited labour market attachment, as well as by the fact that they formed their families at a young age and took on many children.

Analyzing the attachment of our interviewees to the marital markets, we found that there is no workplace at all in the three local marital markets identified by Kalmijn and Flap (2001). None of our female interviewees has participated in the open labour market. The work experience of most of our male interviewees has been limited to local public employment and some of our interviewees who have had at least a seasonal job most often worked together with men.

The school as a marital market is present only to a limited extent. Moreover, in the cases of some of the young people who met their partner from another settlement at the school, we also found that they were from a similarly poor family, as well as had a low level of education and job opportunities. All the young people from the sack village go to the same school and to the class marked with the same number, where the concentration of disadvantaged children is typical, so even in school, they are in contact with children with similar social status. As a result, the school does not provide an opportunity to expand the network of contacts or the range of potential future partners.

While in modern societies people are connected to a wide variety of environments, they belong to a variety of marital markets, in the case of our interviewees, it is only possible to meet others within the settlement. The dominance of the neighborhood as a local marital market becomes characteristic for these young people who drop out of school early, are not tied to the world of work, are characterized by income and relationship poverty, are trapped in

their sack village and have little chance of getting in touch with other social groups. The composition and social homogeneity of the population of the village do not allow the spread of the heterogamy of relationship. Partner choice thus cannot create paths towards other social groups, nor can it mean status mobility, which could improve the current social situation.

4. The young people involved in the research complete their school studies early, have few chances to integrate into the labour market or to earn enough income or to set aside money, which could make it possible for them to move to a better-situated settlement and get in touch with others as well. They have no reason to wait for a more suitable partner to be found, and there are no individual life goals that would allow a rational decision for postponing family formation. For them, the marital market is a narrow, one-dimensional space, where the number of potential partners decreases with age due to the pattern of juvenile family founding in the settlement. Consequently, it may be a good practice for them to be committed to a relationship at an earlier age, regardless of whether the need for emotional security, the chances for a better life, or the chance of becoming an adult are most likely to increase young people's activity for partner search.

For most of the interviewees, their first partnership turned into a cohabitation, it can also be observed that the formation of cohabitation is typical in the early stages of dating, that is why there is limited scope for reviewing own preferences or for getting to know the partner's value system and long-term plans. Yet the decision to move together is not a test of cohabitation but, rather, a long-term cohabitation, maybe lifelong, is wished for.

5. Deviation from the parent generation was discovered in connection with the institution of marriage. While the interviewees' parents were married, none of our interviewees had got married according to the Hungarian legal system. Failure to get married legally has become a commonplace among young people in the settlement not because of a more liberal approach, or because of their preference for a more open relationship which is easier to dissolve, but because the tasks and expenditure required for a legal marriage have become difficult to implement. Due to the hindering factors, the local community has become accepting of the cohabitation partnership, Cohabitation partnerships functioning as informal marriages are considered as real marriage by most, as they fulfill the same functions. And our interviewees living in cohabitation partnerships all refer to their relationship as a marriage, and they call their partners husbands/wives. Although the expectation of marriage has disappeared in the

local community, the process of selecting partners and that of forming partnerships are still accompanied by strong community control.

6. Among the interviewees, the first cohabitation relationship and the first childbirth are characteristic also at a much younger age than what national tendencies show. Women developed their first cohabitation relationship between the ages of 14 and 18, while their first child was born between the ages of 15 and 20. Men between the ages of 16 and 21 had their first cohabitation relationship, while the start of parenting was between 16 and 23 years of age. The choice of a partner and the existence of a relationship appear as a wished-for milestone leading to adulthood in the interviews, but childbirth for most of them is the result of an unplanned pregnancy, so they typically wanted to become parents later. The need for a relationship is typical at an early age, but the time for the desire to become a parent does not begin parallelly. In the vast majority of cases, the first childbirth was not the result of a conscious decision, but due to the lack of information and/or the inaccessibility of contraceptives prevented family planning. It was emphasized especially in the interviews with young women that it would have been a more appropriate strategy to undertake childbirth after the accumulation of different resources, such as completing their studies, acquisition of a profession or getting employment. This is why in their future plans a great deal of emphasis is given to making it possible for their children to have other life goals besides having a family.

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