EDUCATION AND FAMILY PATTERNS IN THE PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS

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Abstract: *In Romania, the society embraced a family conservative model that tends to promote traditional values regarding marriage and parenting. For the past decades, the exposure to the European social universe through massive migration and increased interaction with various cultures and life styles resulted in the acceptance even by the most traditional Romanians of new relationship styles that were not tolerated by our society not long ago. Overall, this study was inspired by the changing characteristics of the modern society in the last few decades, including an older marriage age, celibacy and divorce rates. All these factors influence young people's choices, attitudes and behaviors regarding relationships, family life and professional life.*

Key words: *career, family, values, students' perception.*

1. Introduction

In the past decade, there is a signficant body of research that examined family patterns and their influences on students' motivation, academic achievement, aspirations and their perceptions and attitudes towards finding a balance between work life and personal life. Building on prior research and theory on parental behaviors Urdan, Solek and Schoenfelder (2007) examined students' perceptions regarding the strength and nature of family influences on academic motivation. This comprehensive qualitative analysis highlighted a broad range of types and sources of familial influences on motivation and achivement level and examined how cultural characteristics (e.g. generational status, birth roots etc.) plays into the students' perceptions.

2. Theoretical Considerations

A 2010 Pew Research Center Nationwide Survey Report on Social and Demographic Trends reveals that over the last 50 years in the USA there have been a sharp decline in marriage and a rise of new family forms as a result of attitudes and behaviors that differ by class, age and race (The Decline of Marriage …, 2010). This report notes stronger relationships between marriage rates and education than they have been in the past, with college graduates (64%) much more likely to be married than those who have never attended college (48%). In addition, this study aserts that a marriage gap and a socio-

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economic gap have been growing side by side for the past half century, and assumes that each may be feeding off the other. However, this study reveals that while the family structure have changed, the modern family is still highly valued by the majority of Americans. The findings of this study indicate that the lack of economic security appears to be a key reason people do not get married. Furthermore, about one-third (34%) of 18 to 29-year-old people say it is easier for a single person to get ahead in a career and build a social status.

The Center on Education Policy at the George Washington University (2012) noted in a policy paper that in the USA, for more than a decade, a major goal of the school reform movement has been to close performance and achievement gaps between students from low-income families and their peers and between students of different racial and ethinic backgrounds. The policy paper also points to research that found that family environments are major predictors of cognitive and socio-emotional skills, however, outcomes are not predetermined.

Research by Castiglioni, Hărăguş, Faludi, and Hărăguş (2016) discusses some of the challenges associated with the identification of the specific role of family ties in Romania before and after the end of the Ceau escu dictatorship. In their view, these challenges relate to the following: 1) a shift of paradigm regarding family ties; 2) changes in living arrangements and union formation such as cohabitations and births out of wedlock; 3) the impact of the second demographic transition in Romania (e.g. earlier departure from the nuclear family, atractiveness of the independent living, economic migration, shitfs in the job market, including an increase in the number of working parents in the labour); and 4) the decline of the predictability and standardised paths of life that are increasingly widespread in Romania. Furthermore, Mihai and Butiu (2012) argue that in Romania there is a high preference for marriage and for the legalization of relationships, the Orthodox Church rituals for marriage remain important for the Romanian population and a close relationship continues to exist between the family of origin and the new family created by the marriage of children. The study by Castiglioni et all concludes that a low but increasing level of non-marital cohabitation and non-marital births is more likely to be the result of economic deprivation than a sign of weakening family ties. This research has also indicated that the age at leaving the parental home, lower in Romania than in other Southern European countries, demographic changes in general and an increasing acceptance and tolerance of new behaviors (e.g. cohabitiation, divorce, births out of wedlock, etc.) appears to challenge the more traditional family values and patterns and shape the new ones thus affecting the work life balance efforts.

Work life balance has been studied within the context of business, for-profit and higher education organizations (Blair-Loy, 2003; English, 2003; Stephens, 1994, Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000 as cited in Mukhtar, 2012), but less research examined the experiences regarding work-life balance among students (Martinez, Della Sala, Ordu, & McFarlane, 2013). Starting from the idea that work-life balance means feeling effective and satisfied in both work and personal life domains (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011, as cited in Tan-Wilson & Stamp, 2015), a study examining college students' views of work–life balance was conducted with graduate students studying **S**cience, **T**echnology, **E**ngineering, and **M**athematics (STEM) (Tan-Wilson & Stamp, 2015). This work has been informed by a review of the existing research which recognizes that work and personal life can impact one another in positive and negative ways (Carlson et al., 2000, 2006; Grawitch et al., 2010 cited in Tan-Wilson & Stamp, 2015). Findings from the STEM research emphasize

that the college years are not too early to address work–life balance in the context of career decision through proper information delivered in structured settings exposure to role models.

3. Research Objective

This exploratory-descriptiv study examines through empirical research the perception of students regarding their career in relation to their family life in order to understand how young university students prioritize various stages throughout the course of their educational, explore factors that influence their socio-professional trajectories and document conditions, attitudes, or characteristics of this group of young people.

Through this study we sought to explore how and under which circumstances do full-time students in the last year of studies strive to obtain academic-family-work-life balance? More specifically this reseach sought the following: (1) to highlight students' preferences regarding the ideal marriage age; (2) to identifiy attitudes that have an impact on choice of a partner considering multiple variables such as ethnicity, religion, with/without employment perspectives etc.; (3) identify students' opinion regarding divorce and remarriage; and (4) to examine students' perceptions regarding chances to find a life partner who fits their expectations. To this end, we presumed the following:

Hypothesis 1: Males are more likely to accept a partner without perspective for employment while women consider the existence of a job, or reliable job perspectives as a critical indicator for a life partner that would be a good fit for them.

Hypothesis 2: Graduate students are open to accept life partners who belong to ethnic and/or religious groups other than theirs.

Hypothesis 3: Most of the graduate students exhibit hesitation to assume responsibility for a child born out of matrimony because of the existing preconceptions.

4. Methodology

Data Collection. A questionnaire was designed to identify students' perception regarding the cohabitation between the family and educational values (i.e., Educational and Family Patterns Questionnaire). The questionnaire was structured in four main sections, one including questions to gather general information, and three sections including 25 items each designed to collect information about students' perception of school, family life, self-perception, life in general, and attitudes towards marriage, parenthood, multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in couple.

*Sample.*The research team administered the Educational and Family Patterns Questionnaire on a sample of 201 senior academic years students from Ovidius University, Constanta, Romania. The demographic profile of sample students involved in this survey shows that 125 (62%) of the respondents were females and 76 (38%) were males. Their age varied between 19 and 36 years old. About 157 (78%) respondents indicated that they are originating from the urban areas while the remaining 44 (22%) indicated they are coming from rural areas. About 5% (N=10) of the participants to this survey self-identified their economic status as "low", 18% (N=37) "medium closer to low, 58% (N=117) "medium closer to superior" and 18% (N=37) assessed their economic situation as being "superior".

*Data Analysis.*Data and information gathered through this survey were statistically analyzed from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, and findings presented using different demographic grouppings (e.g. age, gender, rural/urban, marital status etc.) to facilitate meaningful synthesis and comparative analyses.

5. Research Findings and Discussions

Overall, the findings of this study provide with important information about students' behaviours, plans and efforts to balance their academic and family life with their professional life.

5.1. Attitudes towards Marriage: The Modernism and Traditionalism Struggle

Students' attitudes towards marriage seem to align with the current changes in the traditional family structure, patterns and norms that are gradually altered and substituted by modern values. Although in Romania family continues to remain central with official marriage still being a way to start a family (Baetica, 2015), the modern society in Romania as in the United States is increasingly more tolerant of marriage no longer being considered a prerequisite for parenthood. This similarity is not surprising as the contemporary Romanian family patterns are increasingly subjected to transform and adapt to changing times and globalization resulting in pressures that challenge traditional family values, structures and norms.

Out of the total number of respondents (N=201), 56% of students clearly expressed their intention to marry and form a family, 13% are already married, six percent favor celibacy and declined their intention to get married, and 26% answered that they have not yet decided, but they have not declined the possibility of getting married in the future. Hence, it seems that for significant majority of the respondents the importance of having a family has been diminished along the way during their studies. However, one in three students (33%) included those who have not yet decided and those who said that they favor celibacy are both delaying marriage and/or entering into less-traditional arrangements.

According to 2015 data, many Romanian people are getting married at older ages. An analysis of the responses from students who participated in this survey indicated that, in their opinion, the optimum age at first marriage ranges between 21 and 32 years for women and between 25 and 40 for males which appears to be consistent with trends identified by research (Baetica, 2015). This result suggests a preference to start family life after the education process is completed, when people are integrated in the labor market and have the material resources necessary for a decent living standard as a couple.

5.2. Paths Toward Self-Sufficiency and Career Success

In psychology, it is accepted among scholars that maturity is the ability to respond to the environment. For example, according to Pickhardt (as cited in Huston, 2015), a mature 18-years-old is able to identify needs, express beliefs and place importance on self-maintenance). A mature 29-year-old has a well-established identity meaning that has a clearer understanding of what kind of life would like to live and what to expect from a relationship, what direction is going in terms of work, and more self-confidence that

guide all decisions (Arnett, as cited in Huston, 2015). A mature 40-year-old is able to benefit from experience in relationships and life and knows most of the buttons that get pushed easily and how to control those buttons (Krauss, as cited in Huston, 2015).

5.2.1. Academic Experience and Maturity

In Romania of the 19th century, the traditional mean age at the first marriage was 24 years old for men and 20 years old for women. A key theme drawn from the responses from our female students reiterate that, in general, graduate women consider that marriage around 30 years old is an optimal choice as it allows sufficient time to complete studies, find a job and build a career" that will help them achieve autonomy, independence, a certain financial stability and overall satisfaction with their social and financial status (Mardare, 2915).

5.2.2. A Healthy Attitude toward Changing Roles in the Society

The responses from students involved in our study provide with evidence of changing public attitudes towards changing roles of women and men in the Romanian society. Evidently, our students` preference towards delaying marriage to an older age points to the need of our young generation to increase their confidence and get a better understanding of their abilities, skills, potential and opportunities available to them through education and life experience. By delaying marriage to later point in their life, they are in fact prolonging time allocated time for their personal and professional development. In turn, this will likely result in a high degree of fulfillment in career and will provide them with numerous eye-opening situations and life experiences that can only help in selecting a life partner who would be the best fit with their expectations and desired profile. This reality seems to be a profound departure from the traditional norms and perception according to which young mature women who are just entering their maturity period are set to fail their marriage because they are too young and tend to make bad choices.

5.2.3. Student Satisfaction with the Academic Experience

Majority of our respondents indicated that their academic experience provided them with opportunities to develop professional competencies, but also life skills and tips that will help them to be successful in both their careers and family life.

In students' opinions, their learning and experiences throughout the university years helped them in many ways. Most of the students indicated the academic experience not only provided them with opportunities to relate amounts of information and knowledge to their personal experiences to refine their moral values and educate their emotional intelligence, develop technical skills and professional competencies, but had also exposed them to situations that resulted in the development of a strong desire "*to do or to achieve something in life*". The academic experience required perseverance, hard work, students assuming responsibilities and taking risks which equipped them with coping skills and abilities that in their opinion "*will help them deal and overcome challenges, and exceed personal limitations and external boundaries*". In addition, they commented that "*they feel more ready to deal with stress and competitiveness of the labour market*" and "*are better prepared to manage their frustrations*". Students also shared some of the most important wisdom lessons learned throughout their academic experience such as: " *It is important to really wish for something for getting where you want to get*", "*You ca do*

more than you think you can", "*You can never know what your possibilities are*".

Other responses from students, however, suggested a note of pessimism and lack of trust in the educational system. Their input can make one think that these students were either not able to relate to the norms, values or principles promoted by the existing educational system or were not able to understand and/or adapt to the academic requirements and expectations. Interestingly, in their comments these students also identified several benefits for life of their academic experience. Some of the most common themes drawn from students' examples include the: importance of being emotionally balanced and tolerant; embracing a positive thinking; valuing and maximizing the benefits of team work; maintaining proper communication, socialization and openness to experiment new situations. This group of students also shared some of the most important lessons of wisdom such as: "*life is an opportunity for ongoing intellectual and spiritual evolution*"; "*live your life and do not judge others*"; "*I am experiencing continuous transformation*"; "*we can never know everything*"; "*one has to show respect in order to be treated with respect*"; "*patience and endurance are the critical to attain success*".

Some of the students in this group strongly voiced their disappointment and dissatisfaction with the educational system in Romania. They disapproved the classical teaching approaches used by some of their professors without necessarily blaming them. In their views the use of these methods hindered their learning, demotivated them, and limited their potential to contribute to class discussions and triggered resentments and feelings that they were not respected and valued. The comments pertaining to students dissatisfaction with the culture of the education system in Romania are a reflection of their negative experiences during their educational trajectory and include the following: "*I have not learned anything about myself*"; "*No wonder I am a superficial person and I approach everything with superficiality*"; "*I am completely incompetent when it comes to science studies*"; "*Our professors were rigid, not flexible*"; "*One can do more, but one is lazy*"; "*I was not able to cope with the tiredness and boredom in my class*"; "*I was wrong when I told myself that nothing can be worse than my life experience; school was*".

5.3. Divorce and Remarriage in a New Perspective

In Romania, the number of divorces and the divorce rate dropped compared to the 2000-2012 period (Divorces and divorce rate, 2015). The data from the National Institute of Statistics for 2014 show that the national average marriage age was between 28 and 33 years old [11] while the national average age at the time of divorce was between 37 and 42 years old following a long marriage period. An analysis of students' responses regarding their perception of the decision to divorce reveal that 17% perceive it as "*a normal decision if there are real problems between the two partners*", 55% feel that "*is an acceptable decision, but only if relationship is damaged to the extreme*" while 28% indicated that "*the decision to divorce should be avoid by all means*". In other words, five out of six respondents to this survey (about 83%) lean to a more traditional view which sees divorce not a desirable option, unless all eforts to identify and use ways to avoid the divorce have failed. This attitude can be explained by the fact that in Romania, traditionally the divorce is negatively viewed by individuals and communities and strictly monitored by the church (Mardare, 2015). With respect to remarriage following a divorce, responses from about one in three students (35%) show they are not comfortable

with this decision, while about two-thirds (65%) said that this is "a normal or perfect normal decision if one would want to do so and pays careful consideration to relevant factors". Clearly these findings demonstrate that the Romanian young people are struggling hard between modernism and traditionalism regarding the decision to divorce.

5.4. Students' perception regarding out-of-wedlock births

Participants in this study have mixed views about the possibility to have children out of a legal marriage with 22% respondents who are highly critical of this situation and are of the opinion that "*conceiving a child out of wedlock is a shame and disgrace and unacceptable*", while 78% appear to be more tolerant. Out of those who seem to be more tolerant, 62% are saying that "*this can be an acceptable situation, but not desirable*" and about 16% are saying that "*this is a perfectly normal circumstance*". This finding suggests that despite Romanian society's preference for the traditional family model, more than three-quarters of the students involved in this study appear to be willing to accept unconditionally to bearing a child out of wedlock. However, we recommend caution understanding these findings because these are just declarative statements. Further data collection and analysis is required to derive more robust conclusions. In our opinion, these perceptions can be the result of multiple factors, including the amalgamation of the Romanian traditional values strongly dominated by religious beliefs with values from the western cultures as a result to students' exposure to various western cultures through academic requirements and professional and social interactions (e.g. literature review of international scholarly work; internship opportunities, participation in conferences, workshop, seminaries, and exchange programs, etc.) as well as increased mobility (e.g. massive migration, tourism) and increased visibility of the effects of the European integration through media, increased availability of and access to technology in smaller communities and harmonization of the national legislation and policies with the European framework.

5.5. Exploring Students' Perceptions on New Relationship Traits

As a result of the wide open communication and increasingly more interactions of Romanians with multicultural societies through work, study, leisure, settlement in a new country, trade and so on, ad-hoc observations point to the fact that more and more individuals, especially the young people, exhibit openness and preference for a life in a multicultural couple where they are searching for happiness, equality, fairness and hope.

5.5.1. Diversity and Multicultural Couple
This study finds out a wide range of mixed feelings and opinions of respondents around the possibility of partnering with a person who belongs to an ethnic group different from their group. About 15% of students said that this is an "*unacceptable option*", while 27% admitted that "*they would struggle very much to accept*" this option. On the other hand, 15% of students said that "t*hey might accept this type of diversity in a couple only for certain ethnic groups*", while a significant proportion of students (44%) indicated that "*they will accept unconditionally the idea of a mixed marriage with a person who belongs to a different ethnic group than theirs*". Findings from this research indicate that students' perceptions regarding their engagement in a romantic relationship with a partner from a

different ethnic group differ significantly different between two roughly equal divides, one that consists of those who seem to be open to diversity in a couple and one that consists of those who seem to be very reluctant and less willing to allocate time, effort and energy to understand their partner's culture, values, principles, norms and expectations. According to Mardare (2015) the liberalization process tends to discard traditional values and the results of this study suggest that it is very difficult to probe whether or not the graduate students have more favorable perception of interethnic romantic relationships.

5.5.2. Finding a Partner and Socio-Economic Differences in a Couple

   Most of the respondents (63%) said that "*finding a partner is a difficult undertaking*". Only few students (29%) are of the opinion that "*finding a partner is an easy job*", while 18% of the respondents indicated that "*finding a partner is an easy job only if you are not searching for a stable relationship*". The majority of students are in favor of a healthy couple in which both partners have a job or at least some reliable prospects for obtaining one in the immediate future. Students' expectation for a stable socio-economic status for both partners in a couple originates perhaps in response to the day-to-day realities and their constant struggle with financial pressures and distress due to economic decline and instability; lack of opportunities for young generation, unemployment, poverty, and, generally speaking, limited resources available for Romanians to overcome challenges and live a decent life. In fact, students' comments indicate that "*a stable economic and social status is more than an expectation, it is a need*".

   Males are more acceptant than women of a partner without job or work perspectives. About 60% of them said that "*it is unacceptable*" or "*very difficult to accept*" to start a new life in a couple with a partner who does not have employment or at least the perspective of getting one soon. About 27 % of students indicated that they might try to engage in a relationship with a partner who does not have a job, but they emphasized that they hesitate in doing so. Only 13% of these students confirmed that they have no hesitation and can start with confidence a relationship with a partner who either does not have a job or employment perspectives.

5.6. Work-Life-Balance: is it really possible?

5.6.1. Achieving Satisfaction and Success

   A significant portion of the responses capture respondents' disappointment with how the society perceive young people and with the unfair treatments applied to them as they search for self-affirmation, social affirmation and professional stability. Respondents raised several issues that seem to be threatening to how they understand and conceptualize the notions of being successful and achieving satisfaction with work and family life. For example, students put blame on themselves and their lack of skills and experience in solving problems with integrity. They have also indicated that achieving satisfaction is not easy and commented that in their experience achieving success was not a result of knowledge (i.e. "*what an individual knows*"), but "*whom that person knows*" (i.e. connections, bribes). In some instances respondents exhibited a pessimistic view of achieving success and commented that "*life is too difficult to know success*" and "*unfortunately, many people can reach financial success without having high education*".

   Few students appear to have dealt with hardship and failure due to grief and loss (i.e.

„*nothing is worst than death*") or consequences of alcohol and drug abuse (i.e. „*drugs change everything*", „*alcohol consumption does not make you cool*"). These examples reveal not only pessimism, but also psychological barriers to self and social affirmation originating from negative experiences in student's life and development. These students emphasized that despite all their efforts to approach things with maturity and wisdom, the lessons learned throughout their life have a bitter taste. Clearly their perceptions of their life being tough and challenging point to the fact that maturity is a long and difficult journey with many bumps on the way, and often time a painful process that requires understanding, support and a well-developed safety net. In their comments, they highlighted that „*life is not always fair*", "*love is not always filling and basic needs remain unmet*" and "*not all dream come true*", but "*life is too short to be wasted*".

5.6.2. Achieving Work-Life Balance

One of the most powerful view that pictures how students perceive the work-life balance issue articulates the importance of perseverance when one is seeking success and the need to be tolerant and open minded if one wants to be successful and accomplished. Students' comments put forward some of the key perceptions including perceptions of partners, marriage, cohabitation, family model, success, and well-being which can enable them to be successful at work and in their personal life, if these perceptions are positive and coupled with skills and abilities (e.g. ability to prioritize, persistence, ability to make smart choices and decisions, ability to act under pressure) needed to transform perceptions in positive actions. This study identified the following three categories that illustrate how students understand and unfold the concept of work-life balance:

• *Definitely, there is possible to attain work-life balance*

The students who believe that work-life balance can be attained, are those who believe that everything can be obtained with responsibility, persistence, patience, investment of effort, unified forces in the same direction if clear objectives are identified. They also suggested that tolerance, understanding, family support, trusting relationships, mutual respect, good management of time, responsibilities, ability to set priorities, acceptance by family of all important things for them, and willingness to find the middle road so no one gets hurt or is left behind are additional key ingredients that will contribute to a healthy and successful work-life balance.

• *Work-life balance is possible only with huge effort and sacrifices*

The students who belong to this category stressed that long absences from couple and/or family relationships are dangerous because the two partners will stop finding time for each other, which will immediately result in multiple communication issues, different priorities, and different agenda. In order to overcome these challenges and bring back together the two partners significant efforts, time and energy are needed. However, these students are of the opinion that if both partners have their careers in the same field of work and/or share their professional passions and objectives, or they practice jobs that run in the family, and then it takes less effort to work towards ensuring a proper work-life balance.

• *It is impossible to ensure work-life balance*

Most of the students in this category consider that there is not sufficient time to be a higher achiever in both areas, work and family life, and indicated their preference to put family life on the second place. In their opinion, in order to meet expectations, fulfill responsibilities and attain success in one area, immediate sacrifices will be needed in the

other area. On longer terms, however, they believe that family will take priority over the career but "*one can never have both, work and family life in harmony and balanced*".

6. Conclusions

Findings of this research are not surprising. There are small to moderate differences in how male and female perceive and accept diversity in a couple, assuming responsibility for a child born out of matrimony, and starting a couple relationship with a partner without any perspective for employment. Two of the hypothesis of this study (i.e., Hypothesis 1 regarding the acceptance of a partner who does not have a job or reliable employment perspectives, and Hypothesis 2 regarding the acceptance of a life partner who belong to a different ethnic and/or religious group) were probed while Hypothesis 3 regarding hesitation to assume responsibility for raising a child born out of matrimony was invalidated. A more comprehensive qualitative component consisting of targeted focus groups and interviews will support and strengthen the findings of the present research. It will also help identifying strategies to support students being more successful and developing practical skills to attain school-work-life balance while in school as well as upon their graduation.

The students who participated in this survey can be categorized in three distinct groups including *realists, optimists, and pessimists* defined by their attitudinal manifestations regarding the availability of developmental opportunities during their studies and their opinion of the likelihood of attaining positive and tangible employment outcomes after graduation. There is a general agreement that *finding a partner has never been an easy task, but it is a very important one and generates ongoing concerns for students*. This study identified that *finding a partner is a more difficult task for female students than for male students*. Students' attitudes and perceptions of divorce reflect a more traditional standpoint, meaning that *the majority see divorce as the last resort only after careful consideration and analysis of all consequences, but never a happy option*. Most of the participants in this survey view *remarriage as an acceptable option only if an in-depth analysis of pros and cons has been completed before a decision is being made.*

Most of the students indicated that they are open and willing to assume responsibility for bearing a child out of wedlock, a result that was a little bit surprising given the dominance of traditional view of family in the Romanian society, as well as students' declared concerns with attaining financial stability and putting the career on the first place before they move on with their family lives. Clearly, in Romania, *the current young generation perceive and approach marriage, family life and parenting with more flexibility and openness than their parents and grandparents* which is not surprising because both non-empirical data (anecdotes, interviews) and more robust researches (Twenge et al., 2010) have shown that different experiences and events faced by different generations during their development years may produce different expectations and preferences about work and family life as people progress through school and begin to make major decisions about their future careers.

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