

Family and Child Education in Communist Romania: Consequences of the Duality of Values and Behaviors

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Abstract

Facing the strict and alienating rules imposed by the totalitarian communist party in all aspects of civil life and having to have their children educated in the communist education system, the Romanian families found innovative ways to keep and pass on the rich cultural and religious traditions together with the ancient beliefs and values. However, this was accomplished with sacrifices and long term consequences on the development of children. This paper introduces the broad political, social and economical context of the communist regime in Romania and presents several sociocultural challenges which the children and families found ways of adapting to and integrate in their daily lives. The article demonstrates that, although the communist system left profound and unmistakable scars on children development, families have succeeded in transmitting their cultural heritage to the next generation. Using the sociocultural theories of learning as an anchoring framework, the author conducted a literature review and several in-depth ethnographic interviews to describe and formulate an explanation of the continuity and change of Romanian transmission of family traditions under duress.

Keywords: communism, child education, sociocultural values, ecological systems, family role.

1. Introduction

How did the communist system change the values and beliefs of the school culture and the communities and families around it? What are the effects of the “double standards” and “duplicity of behavior” culture on the personality formation of children? What influence had the imposed uniformity, conformity, and lack of personal control on the character development of young people? These are only some of the questions I will attempt to answer by linking the sociocultural and political factors during communism to their resulting effects on civil society in general and the education in particular.

2. Background: Setting the Context

The Romanian Communist Party defined the new type of society the country should strive to become as a "multilaterally developed socialist society that will provide affirmation of socialist principles in all sectors of economic and social life, expressing more fully the human personality, a harmonious combination of personal interests with the general aspirations of the whole society. It will mark a higher stage of socialism; will open a phase of transition to the high - communist society." In essence, communism can be viewed as a socioeconomic structure that promotes the establishment of a classless, stateless society based on common ownership of the means of production. All citizens work according to their capacities and abilities and they are getting everything that they need (“from everyone according to capabilities, to everyone according to their needs”)

The principles that had the most profound influence on society at all levels were that collectivism is superior to individualism, that collective possession is superior to private property, that all people are equal, that facts are more important than ideas or feelings, and that physical work is more valuable than intellectual work. The communist ideology was characterized by materialism and determinism; materialism implied that the economic system determined all the other ones: social, cultural, judicial, etc., while determinism asserts that the behaviors of each individual are determined not by the individual’s own thoughts or feelings but by the social class he or she belongs to. That was the reason for which the people belonging to the so-called “unhealthy” social classes which included all educated people such as lawyers, clergy, doctors, and university professors, had to be re-educated in the light of the new communist society. On the other hand, the persons with a “healthy origin” were those whose parents were manual laborers and were promoted into high administrative and political positions regardless of their education or training instituting the practice of total reversal of values at the society level.

Although the party's strongest desire was to have control over the human mind, it was also the most elusive and difficult accomplishment to assess through behaviors. A powerful tool that the government had at its disposal for changing how people think was the public education system. School as an institution is a historical product through its social function and purpose. Through its cultural and social function, the school is an important factor in building the history and civilization of a nation (Popeangă, 1974, p. 129). Therefore, the public education system was drastically changed during the communist government and its lasting effects are experienced to this day, 22 years after the communist regime has fallen. School as an institution was the first link in the training system of staff needed to build socialism. Youth needed to be educated in the spirit of socialist patriotism and proletarian internationalism. In 1918 Soviet communists decided that "we must make the younger generation a generation of Communists. We have to transform children into true communists. We must learn to influence significantly the family. We have to take control and, to say clearly, nationalize them. Since the first days they [the children] will be under the influence of Communist kindergartens and schools" (Heller, 1985, p. 180).

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 The explanation of the process through which the communist system penetrated some layers of the sociocultural environment while others developed protecting mechanisms is anchored in Vygotsky's and Bronfenbrenner's theories of child development. In Vygotsky's view the child can only develop so far without social interactions within his immediate family and community. Vygotsky asserts that cognitive development occurs through the internalization of cultural values acquired during social interactions. Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological) (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasized the relationship between humans and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). In the light of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory the communist ideology that was imposed to all life aspects had an important influence on family dynamics and consequently on children's development.

3.2 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory looks at child development within the context of complex relationships within layered ecosystems. His theory shows how each ecosystem, from family/community to the larger society has a different effect on development, routing it in a specific direction. Bronfenbrenner explains the close interdependence of the family, community and school ecosystems in shaping development and how children are affected by their culture through the communication of beliefs and values and participation in traditional activities within their families and communities interpreted as mesosystem and exosystem influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1990). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can be used to highlight the importance of the relationship between political and economical policies in the exosystem and the family role in child development (Henderson, 1995). The same theory shows how children got conflicting messages depending on the ecosystem they were in and that might have been the origin of specific personality traits.

4. Method

The information for this article was gathered from three main sources: published documents, interviews with persons who lived during the latest stage of Romanian communism (1960's to 1989), and the author's personal experience. The seven persons that were interviewed were between the ages of 52 and 68 years old and they all had postsecondary education diplomas with four of them having doctoral degrees. The interviews focused mainly on elementary school and were unstructured after a few prompts such as "Tell me what do you remember of your years in elementary school?" or "what do you think about the school rules you had growing up?" All the information obtained from the recorded interviews was transcribed and the content was analyzed by dividing it into major themes and subthemes. These were later inserted into the initial article outline at the appropriate subtheme. From the multitude of aspects of the policies through which the communist regime imposed its ideology, this article examines three of the most important for family life: the egalitarian practice, value of feelings over facts, and the disparagement of religion and traditions.

5. Egalitarian practice

5.1 The communist principle that everybody is equal was applied to the differences between sexes so that the women were proffered to have equal rights with men: they could vote, participate in any political, social or economical event, apply for and get any professional position, and they were paid the same. The women's opportunities were drastically increased and they could participate in a wide range of activities outside the home.

Unfortunately, this ideology was superimposed over an old tradition of women being homemakers and child caretakers, thus creating a large disparity between the little time a mother had when at home and her household responsibilities. Women became overwhelmed by multiple responsibilities and this is when the grandparents' role became crucial in most cases (Vrasmas, 2001).

5.2 Grandmother's role. Whether she lived in the country or in the same city as the parents, the grandmother became the main source of support for the nuclear communist family. The grandmothers, who lived in the same city or even the same household, were helping daily by performing the main household chores and by spending many hours standing in line to buy basic food items such as meat, milk, sugar, and cooking oil. The grandmothers ensured that the children were cared for at least until school age and then supervised them during the afterschool hours. When the grandparents lived in the country, the children were usually sent to live with them during the long summer vacations. Because their role in the nuclear family, the grandmother became a learning institution that played a crucial role in children's development, a role that has been recognized as a positive influence across cultures (Aubel, 2005). In the communist culture though, they offered a sociocultural alternative view that may have helped save traditions but also contributed to the development of negative character traits.

5.3 Egalitarian philosophy applied in schools. One noticeable consequence of the "everybody is equal" principle was the uniformization of the public education system. The first step of this process was to name all schools by a number and not a name. As a result, a student of elementary school number 35 was as devoid of identity as a student of elementary school number 140. Children gain part of their identity by belonging to a group or institution whose name is conveying individuality and substance, neither of which was conferred by numbers. The schools were built architecturally unidentifiable from one another; in the newly built "working class" residential neighborhoods, the school architecture was standardized and all schools looked similar to the extent that if somebody would suddenly drop you in the yard or interior of any school, you could not tell them apart without knowing their number or address. It goes without saying that all schools had the same furniture and bare and impersonal walls, with the exception of the omnipresent picture of the communist leader.

5.4 Another step of standardizing the exterior aspect of education was the nationwide introduction of uniforms for all students in the unified public education system. School uniforms were not specific to the communism society since they existed worldwide and in Romania since their introduction in 1897 (Preda G., 2010). However, traditionally, the uniforms were different from school to school and more often than not they were a cause for pride and respect for the students who wore them. During communism, all students had to wear the same standard uniforms no matter what school they were going to and their meaning changed dramatically: wearing the same clothes prevented any differentiation among students and reinforced the assertion that everybody was equal and devoid of any claim to individuality. Additionally, the uniforms were meant to erase any apparent differences in income among families, conveying the concept of a "classless society". When everybody is required to wear the same clothes, you cannot really see who wears the latest fashion, the best brands (sent by relatives from "outside" meaning from Western Europe or USA)", or has the most recent gadget. The schools also required an identification badge to be worn on the outside of the uniform's left sleeve. This badge contained the name of the school (usually in the form of the school number since elementary and middle schools did not have names) and the student's personal identification number. The identification number was reminiscent of a prisoner's number while the uniform felt sometimes like a straightjacket, especially during adolescence, when the rebellious feelings are most exacerbated. Although meant to create a feeling of belonging to a certain group, the students detested the uniforms as much as they detested everything that was obligatory.

5.5 The uniforms have always had a practical value as well as a symbolic one. During communism, this uniformity was perceived as a tool through which the government was maintaining control at the social level, as well as a barrier to the expression of individuality and creativity. The uniforms were not a symbol of the institutional values and prestige but a constraining method that superficially equalized the students and limited obvious individual expression. It is well known that there are subtler and more complex ways to differentiate oneself and as a consequence, the students were able to do so by wearing unique accessories such as hair bands, shoes, or scarves. Nonetheless, the attempt at "equalizing" the pupils had profound effects on the development of their self-esteem and creativity. As a consequence of such uniformity, the children got the message that individuality is not a value and they learned to be most comfortable in the anonymity of the masses. Their chameleonic traits developed while they did not make any effort to discover and pursue their uniqueness. Creativity was hindered and self expression stunted.

One does not strive to be recognized as unique when only uniformity is rewarded. This attitude fitted the government well because it did not want individuals to have initiatives but only to obey orders. This learned helplessness, combined with the collectivist philosophy, led people to believe that they lacked the power to change anything and passively accepted the status quo.

6. Value of feelings over facts

Since the guiding philosophy was the dialectic materialism, thoughts and feeling were not only considered secondary to matter but also unimportant. Jobs that did not “produce” any palpable object were not valued but rather tolerated. For example physicians were a “necessary evil” since no society could function without medical staff. People were encouraged to be proud of only what they physically produced, and because of this, intellectuals including writers, playwrights, actors, poets, were not respected and subjected to a severe censorship. However the Party officials used these same intellectuals to produce works that glorified the regime and its leaders. Philosophy, sociology, pedagogy and psychology were abolished in the 1970s because nobody needed or wanted to use their esoteric theories, statistics, or services. In this ideological climate, there was no popularized information about child development in general and emotional development in particular, on how to deal with disturbing events; the value of personal feelings was disregarded in favor of what one should feel (decided by officials); families had to adapt by ignoring their feelings and, as a consequence, the children learned to not pay attention or explore their emotional states.

The lack of widely mediated information about how children develop and what they need for a healthy life is to a principal factor to blame for the enormous number of children admitted to orphanages. The poor and uneducated families were sending their children to state run orphanages without renouncing their guardianship rights because they intended to bring them home later after the state took care of them for a few years. Unfortunately, these few years were sometimes extended well beyond the critical period during which the child was severely deprived of essential interactions, nutritional components, and educational experiences for his or her optimal development. Confidentiality and protection of sensitive information was unheard of and parent teachers conferences took place with all parents in the same room, all listening to academic and behavioral information about each other’s children. The nurturing of emotional development together with the exploration and expression of feelings are closely linked to the educational and psychological advances and applications to everyday life. Unfortunately such a development did not take place in communist Romania, and as a result, the children growing up at the time were left to find a way to deal with their own emotions. Getting used to being verbally abused (harsh criticism and public insults) was a big part of learning to cope when growing up.

7. Disparagement of religion and ancient traditions

The communist ideology was atheist and explicitly antireligious and as a consequence, religion, which used to have an important role in Romanian culture, was invalidated although worship services continued to be tolerated in the existing churches by the existing clergy. Religion as a cultural dimension can be viewed as consisting of two interrelated facets (Pepitone, 1981, Aibel, 2005). On one hand there is the religious social structure and organization in which individuals participate in relation to family, roles, hierarchies, ceremonies, and communication networks. On the other hand, there is the normative system that includes the values and beliefs promoted within the family and community systems that affect behavior. Few would dispute that the basic concepts of most established religions are similar in the areas of morals and ethics. Once the sectarian details are eliminated the basic virtues of most religions are nearly the same; love, respect, tolerance, and honor, constituting values that we all try to instill in our children and that the families helped to protect and pass on through the practice of holding private ceremonies.

By opposing religion and neglecting its institutional structure as well as its normative system, communism created a huge disruption in the process of transmitting the religious moral values as well as producing a vacuum in the social communication channels and formats. Left without support for the ancient moral normative system based in religious concepts and without forms of participating in the religious community life, the families were forced to either embrace the imposed materialist philosophy or continue offering their children the old one based in religion and common sense. This is where the duality of thinking and behavior developed to sophisticated forms in order to help the old system of values and beliefs survive in the Romanian population. Regular worship in churches and religious ceremonies of baptism, wedding, and death were frowned upon and thoroughly discouraged, especially if one wanted to advance in any profession. Therefore the high dignitaries of the communist party and persons holding important public offices, who wanted to follow their ancestors’ sacred traditions, chose to call their minister to perform the religious services and ceremonies in the privacy of their home.

8. Conclusion: Duplicity as a double edged sword

Any person that lived during the Romanian communist society felt two strong sociocultural forces pulling in opposite directions. One was the need to present a certain public appearance of conformity with the requirements of the communist rules in order to avoid harsh punishment for oneself and ones family; the other was the need to preserve traditional values and beliefs. As a result, an important and omnipresent phenomenon occurred: the duplicity in thinking and behaviors. The majority of people did not believe in the communist principles but were forced to behave as if they did. Therefore they behaved as they were required when in public places such as work, but used to revert to their old ways when among close friends and family. A person could be glorifying the communist party in public, become a party member, and dutifully attend all meetings and celebrations, but follow old traditions, attend religious ceremonies and speak depreciatively about the political leaders when surrounded by family and friends. Since in most situations you could not freely speak up your mind, another interesting phenomenon of the mental duplicity took place in the whole Eastern Communist bloc: an abundance of political jokes appeared and circulated widely. “The Joke became the quintessential form of truth-telling” says Romanian-born American poet, novelist, essayist, and commentator for National Public Radio Andrei Codrescu (1996, p. 159). Codrescu explains that this universality of the political joke united Romanian people through the commonality of having to live in the same harsh conditions.

The political jokes were the only thing that united the citizens by penetrating the ideology and reaching existential truths; the political jokes played the role of a safety valve which relieved the accumulated psychological pressure making life tolerable. In conclusion, since the duplicity of thought and behavior was not only widespread but a necessary sanity protecting mechanism, it can also be viewed as a double edged sword; while it helped families and communities preserve their cultural heritage, it had profound effects on their way of thinking. The influence was especially evident in the way the children’s personality and moral judgment developed. According to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, we could view this process as both continuity and change between the micro and mezosystems on one side and the exosystem on the other; the behaviors in the microsystem were very different from those in the exosystem exerting the pressure to change; under this pressure the microsystem adopted the duplicity of standards structure in order to preserve its cultural heritage. The “double standards” structure however, failed to present children with a consistent and sound system of principles sending the message that it was ok to cheat and behave in ways that do not reflect one’s true values and beliefs. This might have been the most detrimental consequence of the duplicity of standards and the one which left visible effects on the young personalities developing at the time, even if it served well the continuation of cultural traditions and family religious morals. One could argue that the traditions and morals survived with the price of humans’ character sacrifice.

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