

Monica MARIN

PARENTAL RESOURCES AND CHILDREN'S EDUCATION:

a

Comparative Perspective for Poland and Romania

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Monica MARIN

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CHILDREN'S EDUCATION:
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Poland and Romania**

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Parental resources and children's education: a Comparative
Perspective for Poland and Romania

Monica MARIN

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**Pagin 1 sat
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Contents

Introduction	7
1. Theoretical Background	11
1.1 Social Mobility.....	20
1.2 Determinants of Social Mobility: Parental Background.....	33
2. Data and Methods.....	43
3. Survey Findings	61
3.1 Description of the Educational Achievement's Indicators for Poland and Romania	62
3.2 Determinants of Educational Achievement for Poland and Romania	69
3.3 Determinants of Education in Communist Times	86
3.4. Summary of the findings	93
Conclusions	103
References.....	105
Appendix.....	115

Pagin 1 sat goal inten ionat

Introduction

Education has been considered as “probably the most frequently used variable in Sociology” (Smith, 1994, p.1) and “one of the most important variables in social science research” in general. In the field of status attainment processes, in which the present study is also included, education represents one of the key variables working both as a dependent and an independent phenomenon. This further relates to the importance of education as a variable affected by the structural context and, at the same time, as a factor intervening in status achievement processes¹. In the present research², in operational terms, education is an explanatory factor in the form of the father’s and mother’s educational capital, and, correspondingly, a dependent variable, by examining the process of the respondent’s educational attainment³. The father’s and mother’s educational capital are part of the variables measuring the influence of parental background on their son’s/daughter’s schooling attainment.

¹ The same idea has been expressed in other studies, including that of Mach and Peschar, 1990, pp. 125-126. Sztompka also points out the “dual existence” of education, in the sense that “both is shaped and is shaping the wider social construction” (1991, p.271).

² This paper is based on the MA thesis submitted to the Central European University, Centre for Social Studies, Society and Politics, Master of Arts, in the year of 2003.

³ Moreover, in this analysis, education intervenes in the occupational achievement of both father and mother, as well as in their family’s economic well-being.

Numerous studies have shown the importance of parents' resources on educational attainment. However, on this issue there has been no comparative study on Poland and Romania up to date (2003). Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the decomposed effect of family background on an individual's educational capital in a comparative perspective for Poland and Romania. Thus, it can be argued that this study's contribution will consist first, in a new comparative analysis regarding this topic; secondly, in refining the perspective on this issue by decomposing the parental background into various types of resources; finally, in considering the differences in the predictors of education for the two countries here mentioned. Moreover, the contrasts will not be analyzed only between countries, but also across time - for younger or older cohorts completing schooling before or after 1989.

The structural context in which the process of educational attainment is taking place has been affected by the changes occurring in both Poland and Romania in the year 1989. Until this year, the countries from Central and Eastern Europe had many similar features⁴. However, after 1989, this region presents "differing levels of progress toward building more viable political and economic systems" (Human Development Report for Romania, 2000, p.19). The differences between the countries are not only related to the political and economic systems, but also in the field of education. One such indicator including the investment in

⁴ See the Human Development Report for Romania, 2000.

education is the human development index⁵. Comparing the two countries included in this study, Poland ranks higher than Romania (0.94 to 0.88); this holds true for the investment in education as well (7.5% to 3.6% of GNP). Nevertheless, discrepancies in the schooling achievement are not only between the countries, but within the same country as well. Being male or female and living in the urban or rural place of residence makes a difference in the individual's educational attainment⁶. Therefore, besides parental background, this study will take into consideration gender and place of residence in predicting one's education.

The structure of the paper will be as follows. The first chapter will present, in addition to gender and place of residence, other relevant explanatory variables from the relevant literature review. The data set and the appropriate methodology will be part of the second chapter. The final sections of the analysis will focus on the results and concluding remarks.

⁵ The components of the human development index are life-expectancy at birth, educational attainment and the standard of living (see the Human Development Report for Romania, 2000, p.21).

⁶ See for Romania, the Human Development Report for Romania, 2000, p.119; for Poland, see the section on education by Wóycicka, Dominiczak in the study on "Polish Women in the '90's". Additionally, further evidence on this topic will be brought forward in the next chapters.

Pagin 1 sat goal inten ionat

1. Theoretical Background

As has been already stated, this study is focused on the research in a comparative perspective of the relationship of parental background and children's level of education.

The principal field of study in which the present research is located is in the field of social stratification¹. Within this field, the present research draws mainly on social mobility studies². The main research question of social mobility studies is centred on “the movement of individuals, families, and groups from one social position to another” (Goldhamer, 1968, p.429).

In the following literature review, a distinction will be made between the two main theoretical trends that the present study is based upon: the one of social mobility, in general (with a particular emphasis on the role of education), and the one of the determinants of social mobility (in particular parental background as an explanatory variable for their children's educational attainment). Nevertheless, there are multiple intersections between these fields of study. To start with, one

¹ Social stratification, “in its most general sense... refers to the fact that both individuals and group of individuals are conceived of as constituting higher and lower differentiated strata or classes, in terms of some specific or generalized characteristics or set of characteristics” (Barber, 1968, p.289).

² As has been stated in the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, the study of social mobility is part of a “more general study of *social selection*, i.e, of how people get distributed into different social positions” (Goldhamer, 1968, p.429).

of the landmark studies that can be integrated in the first category will be presented.

Bourdieu's work employs specific concepts as "thinking tools" in developing his theory of social space. These terms refer mainly to notions such as habitus, capital with its volume and composition, social trajectory, life-styles, etc. In the next section, I will expand more on these and explain the link between them. I will also reveal the significance of these notions for the present study³.

Bourdieu's notion of capital is central to his work as the dimensions of capital are the ones structuring the fields of the social space. At the same time, the notion of capital is the key link with the focus of the present work. As previously stated, this paper addresses the question of the differences in parental background regarded as resources in relation to their children's educational capital. Bourdieu's capital has been viewed as a type of generalized "resource" with both material and non-material forms⁴ (Hayes; Anheier et al, 1995, p.862). To be more precise, Bourdieu constructs a three-dimensional space with the following axes: volume of capital, composition

³ Although in this study, as explained below, I will not use all of these concepts, it is important for understanding Bourdieu's model as being different from other models to have a general perspective on the links between these concepts in the overall theoretical construction.

⁴ Bourdieu uses the notion of a "usable resource and power" when referring to the type and volume of capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p.114); also, the interactions between agents are viewed as "relations between the positions occupied in the distribution of resources...These fundamental social powers are, according to my empirical researches, economic capital, in its different forms, and cultural capital, and also symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.128).

of capital and changes occurring in these two over time (Bourdieu, 1984, p.114). The composition of capital refers to the type of capital acquired by an individual or a collective agent - the economic, cultural and social capital (ibid., p.114). In operational terms, economic capital becomes “total incomes, rural and urban property, shares, industrial and commercial profits, wages and salaries” (ibid., p.127), whereas the cultural one is divided into inherited cultural capital – the father’s educational level - and the scholastic capital – the subject’s educational level (ibid., p.127)⁵. The economic and the cultural capital represent the main types of parental resources included in the present study, and at the same time, Bourdieu also uses them for structuring various social fields (e.g. the food space [Bourdieu, 1984, p.186] and the space of life-styles [ibid., pp.128-129]). In order to completely construct the image of a social field, two other notions must be introduced - that of practice and habitus (See Bourdieu, 1984, p.208). The relationship between these “thinking tools” can be described according to the following formula (ibid., p.101):

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital}) + \text{field}] = \text{practice}$$

Therefore, the relationship between a certain way of acting according to the internal disposition in the form of *habitus* (a mental structure through which the agents can

⁵ The four main kinds of capital referred to by Bourdieu can be classified as: economic capital represented by “money income in form of wages and profits; social capital is the number and intensity of social relationships upon which a person can rely; cultural capital is the degree of education one has reached, which makes one able to demonstrate good taste in one’s style of life” (Munch, 1994, p.147; see also et al, 1995, p.862); and “symbolic capital, a form which is assumed by different kinds of capital when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.128).

apprehend the social world [Bourdieu, 1990, pp.130-131]), together with a certain position regarding the volume and composition of *capital* (that further relates to the conditions of existence), all these situated in a certain field of the social space have as a result a specific *practice* (structured products – *opus operatum* with a structuring structure – *modus operandi* [Bourdieu, 1984, p.170; Bourdieu, 1997, p.52]). To be more explicit, in the social field of life-styles, the above-mentioned schema works as follows: the specific conditions of existence (class of conditions relating to the type and volume of capital) are further translated into the “structured and structuring structure” of the habitus, which generates a system of schemes of appreciation (taste) and “classifiable practices and works” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.171) developed in specific life-styles (see Bourdieu, 1984)⁶. This schema has been criticised for being deterministic (Jenkins, 1994, p.142) or for “lacking the arrow pointing back from life-styles to structures” (Munch, 1994, p.154). Responding to the charge of “determinism” and on the “durability” of habitus, Bourdieu (1990, p.116) points out the fact that a certain habitus and the practices it develops depend on the state of the field in which the habitus becomes active, therefore the same habitus can develop various practices. Moreover, the habitus “as the product of social conditionings, and thus of a history...is endlessly transformed” (ibid., p.116)⁷. As product of social conditions, the habitus has a direct

⁶ A similar way of presenting this schema can be found in Jenkins, 1994, pp.141-145.

⁷ A further argument mentioned by Bourdieu is that the habitus can also be controlled “through awakening of consciousness and socioanalysis” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.116).

reference to the social trajectory. This term has been mainly referred to in relation to the changes over time in the volume and composition of the capital; however, as with other terms from Bourdieu's work, one can find a different operational definition when it comes to analyzing the survey data. In this position, the social trajectory becomes "inherited cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.16).

In the same manner, the concept of cultural capital receives multiple theoretical and empirical distinctions. The main distinction is with regard to the mode of acquisition: the inherited and the acquired cultural capital. The acquired one is represented by the educational capital ("guaranteed cultural capital" or "sanctioned by the education system" [ibid., p.80-81]), and in operational terms this turns into educational qualifications (see Bourdieu, 1984, p.36)⁸. Combining the effects of inherited and acquired cultural capital, academic capital represents "the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and the cultural transmission by the school" (ibid., p.23). Academic capital is measured by the duration of schooling (ibid., p.18). Therefore, one can conclude that from these distinctions the present study will take into consideration the inherited cultural capital (in the form of parental educational capital) and that of their children's acquired cultural capital.

⁸ Another type of cultural capital used by Bourdieu is the scholastic capital measured as a qualification equal or superior to a certain degree, i.e. BEPC (see Bourdieu, 1984, p.132).

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