

Irena Pufal-Struzik  
Uniwersytet Jana Kochanowskiego w Kielcach; Wydział Pedagogiki  
i Psychologii  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6716-5278>

Barbara Sordyl-Lipnicka  
Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, Instytut Socjologii i Pracy  
Socjalnej  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3893-1359>

Małgorzata Duda  
Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, Wydział Nauk Społecznych  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4986-0795>

## Parents' economic migration and the psychological well-being of their Polish children

### Abstract

*Aim: The aim of the study was to analyze mental well-being, especially anxiety and a sense of loneliness of Polish children temporarily separated from their parent or parents who are migrating for economic reasons, and children who went abroad with their parents. Methods: Explicit Anxiety Scale was used to measure anxiety "Jaki Jesteś?" ("What are you like?" by Skrzypek and Choynowski) (textbook by Zwierzyńska, Matuszewski, 2007) and the Polish versions of the UCLA Loneliness Scale were used to measure loneliness (by Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, adapted by Rembowski, 1992). Test results were supplemented with an interview with children. 320 children from different types of migrant families participated in the study. Results: the highest level of anxiety is felt by children temporarily separated from their mother, and children who, together with their parents, went abroad and find it difficult to adapt to the new environment. The duration of emigration was an important factor. Most children in the sample - regardless of the type of migratory family - feel lonely, do not feel strong ties with close relatives, do not feel understood by them, do not feel associated with*

*a peer group. Conclusion: The results of the research indicate the necessity to take actions in the area of institutional and legal as well as psychological support for families and children both in the situation of going abroad and returning from migration. The most important directions of activities concerning the creation of environmental forms of separation compensation and the environmental assistance system for the migration family are indicated at the stage of prevention related to people planning trips.*

*Keywords: family, economic migration, child's psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness.*

## 1. Introduction

The economic emigration of families is a phenomenon known all over the world, especially in Central Europe and Asia. Emigration experiences of members of Polish families looking for better living conditions outside their own country bear the risk of a heavy price in terms of human costs (Czapiński, Panek, 2015).

Although contemporary emigration is becoming an important factor affecting balance in the family system, it is a change that can restore balance to an outgoing family member and at the same time disturb it in other family members (Kornacka-Skwara, 2016). Researchers present various most often negative consequences of economic migration travels of family members around the world (e.g. Gianelli and Mangiavacchi 2010; Greco, 2018; Liu, Sun, Zhang, Wang, Guo, 2010).

The purpose of the study was to analyze the psychological well-being of Polish children temporarily separated from their parent or parents who are migrating for economic reasons, and those who left with their parents for the Netherlands. Particular attention has been paid to anxiety and loneliness in children.

### 1.1. Labour emigration of Polish families and its social effects

The tradition of Poles' labour migration to Western Europe is very long. The settlement of Poles in Western Europe was favoured not only by differences in the level of family well-being, but also by some political events (e.g. wars, displacement). The key moment in the history of Polish emigration was the year 2004 (Poland's accession to the structures of the European Union), when, with the opening of many foreign labour markets, massive economic migrations of Poles to the EU countries took place (most often: Germany, Great Britain, Norway and

the Netherlands). The migrants either decided to leave Poland with their whole family or they left their family members at home and took up employment outside their own homeland. In May 2018, the scale of Polish emigration comprised about 8% of the entire adult population of Poland (about 2.6 million people). Most often they were men who went away for work and the main reason for migration was a negative assessment of the situation on the labour market in Poland and greater education opportunities for children outside their own country (*Economic migrations of Polish people*, 2018).

Labour emigration as a social phenomenon has specific consequences for the functioning of families. On the one hand, there is a visible increase in the quality of life of the family in the economic area, on the other hand, the negative risk for family ties and family stability increases (Kozak, 2010; Moskal and Tyrrell, 2016).

According to the most commonly adopted approach rooted in systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1984), a properly functioning family ensures optimal functioning for its members, which results from the interaction of bio-psycho-social factors in the family system. If the family system is dysfunctional, family members may experience symptoms of distress (Walsh, 2012). In place of stability, there is disorganization caused by the absence of some family members. There is a change not only in the division of responsibilities, but also negative emotions (anxiety and uncertainty) occur in people staying at home, especially children (Gromadzka, 2009). In this situation, it is important to have empathic commitment expressed by the family's ability to meet the emotional needs and security of its members, and provide support for their autonomy (Skinner, Steinhauer, Sitarenios, 2000). In addition, a number of factors are needed, such as a positive relationship between spouses, a high quality of time spent together, and a system of shared beliefs, coherence and flexibility of family relationships (Lachowska, 2018). Economic emigration can affect the functioning of the family as a system. The absence of any family member is a change that can result in disturbances in the functioning of the entire system and create anxiety for its members.

## 1.2. Labour emigration of parents and the functioning of a child

Separation from a parent threatens most acutely the child, although it also happens that the parent's departure is a challenge for the child and forces him or her to demonstrate greater social maturity (Miłkowska, 2009). The most severe consequences of the temporary separation of children and parents are negative emotions: longing, loneliness, a sense of emptiness, lack of sense of security and closeness with the absent parent, and even withdrawal of the child into

the internal mental world, loss of trust in the parent, reduction of self-esteem or attempt to escape from unpleasant emotions in alcohol, runaways from home or from school (Jia, Tian, 2010; Kozak, 2010). Absent parents do not directly participate in the child's everyday life, sometimes they lose close contact with him or her. They do not know his or her problems, which aggravates a sense of abandonment and lack of a significant person as a role model in the left-behind children (He *et al.*, 2012; Zhong *et al.*, 2015). Negative feelings can destroy family ties, inhibit the development of a child's personality, promote the formation of antisocial forms of behaviour (Durkalevych, 2012). For most children, labour emigration, especially of mother, is a difficult situation (Adhikari *et al.*, 2014). Labour emigration can also have positive consequences, e.g. improvement of the family's material situation, as well as non-material benefits, e.g. increase in children's independence, acquisition of new skills by a migrant, a higher social position of the family, shaping the professional aspirations of family members, learning about the culture of a migration country (Gizicka, Gorbaniuk, Szyszka, 2010). Sometimes, the long-term separation of family members alleviates some misunderstandings and conflicts, making family members aware of the importance of relationships and the presence of close relatives, and even deepens relationships (Kawczyńska-Butrym, 2009). Some children from migrant families, despite some difficulties, are able to cope with the situation of emigration separation and adapt well to the changes it brings (Danilewicz, 2010).

## 2. Methods and material

Differences in mental well-being of children experiencing separation from their loved ones were analyzed in a sample of 320 Polish children ( $N = 320$ ). From the sample, a "Polish" sample ( $n = 200$ ) was distinguished. It comprised children from the area of southern Poland (a high trend of foreign labour emigration) who stayed in the home country, but temporarily were separated from the parent or parents. The other group, called the "Dutch" sample ( $n = 120$ ) comprised children who went with their family to the Netherlands. The study was conducted in schools. Permission to conduct research was obtained from school heads. Students were invited to participate in the study voluntarily and anonymously. The researcher explained the research objectives and procedures. Teachers were not present in classes during the study to give students freedom to complete their tests.

The research used: 1) E. Skrzypek and M. Choynowski's Explicit Anxiety Scale "Jaki Jesteś?" (What Are You Like?) to describe an anxiety disorder; 2) UCLA Lone-

liness Scale) of D. Russell, L. Peplau, C. Cutron. Scale items form three subscales: 1) a sense of lack of contact with others (Intimate others); 2) breaking of social bonds; 3) belonging to and affiliation with a social group. A low overall score on the first subscale and a high score on the other two indicate an increased general sense of loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness scale has been found to have a high internal consistency (coefficient alpha .96 and high test-retest reliability of .94);

3) the author's questionnaire of an interview with a child, developed by B. Sordyl-Lipnicka, enabling the acquisition of information on emotions felt by children in connection with the emigration of a parent, parents or the whole family to another country.

The whole research group is differentiated by three variables: 1) the type of emigrant family, 2) the age of the child and 3) the length of stay of the emigrant (family) outside the country. Due to the fact who emigrated in the Polish group, three smaller groups were distinguished: children from families where the mother emigrated ( $n = 72$ ), or father ( $n = 73$ ), or both parents ( $n = 55$ ). In the group of children remaining in Poland, the majority included 14-year-olds (24%), while the group of children aged 10 and 16 was the least numerous (average age = 13.16 years). However, in the "Dutch" group there were mostly 15-year-olds (30%) and the least numerous were 13-year-olds (16.7%) (average age = 14.7 years). The results of one-factor ANOVA analysis of variance indicate significant differences between the two groups in terms of children's age ( $F = 32.648$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Due to the time of absence of the parent or parents or the entire family's stay abroad, the following groups were distinguished: from 1 month to 6 months, from 6 months to 1 year, from 1 to 3 years and permanent stay abroad. The chi square test ( $\chi^2 = 98.5$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) found a significant relationship between the time of emigration and the child's whereabouts. Children residing in Poland most often experience the absence of migrant parents from 1 to 3 years (54%) and from 6 months to 1 year (30%), while the percentage of children whose parents left for a permanent stay (3%) is negligible. Most families who went to the Netherlands declare permanent residence.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Anxiety

Average scores on the Scale of Explicit Anxiety point to the dominance of moderate and high scores in children. A comparison of average values showed that the level of anxiety in the child varied significantly depending on the type

of migratory family ( $M = 16.6$  in the case of separation of the child from father;  $M = 16.9$ ; with both parents as well as with other relatives when the child left with family;  $M = 19.6$  in the case of separation of the child from mother). Children temporarily separated from their mother felt the strongest anxiety.

The ANOVA analysis showed that there are differences in the level of anxiety in children due to the duration of emigration ( $F = 3.98004$ ;  $\rho = 0.0083$ ): from 1 to 6 months, from 6 months to 1 year, from 1 year to 3 years, and permanent residence). Post-hoc comparisons (using the Scheffe procedure) indicated that children experiencing separation from an emigrating parent or parents lasting from 6 months to 1 year experience a significantly higher level of anxiety ( $\rho = 0.0104$ ) than children from families who went to the Netherlands for permanent residence ( $\rho = 0.0104$ ).

It was also observed that after taking into account both the type of family and the period of stay of the parent / parents, or the whole family in emigration, and the duration of emigration, fear and anxiety were more often felt by children of absent mothers, when their stay abroad lasted from six months to three years, and in the first period after departure (from 6 months to 1 year), as well as children who found themselves in a foreign culture, especially in the first period of stay (from 6 months to 1 year). As the length of stay in a foreign country extended, children slowly adapted to the new conditions, and their anxiety eased, especially when the decision to stay permanently in emigration was made in the family.

It was also verified how the child's age affects his or her level of anxiety. It turned out that only in relation to the families where father left, there was a significant but weak correlation between these variables (Spearman's  $\rho = 0.265$ ,  $p = 0.024$ ). Although the level of anxiety increased with the age of children, because older children were more aware of changes taking place in the family due to the absence of one or both parents, it turned out that only about 4% of the variability of this trait could be explained by the age of the child.

### 3.2. Feeling of loneliness

In order to find out how strongly children experiencing labour emigration of parents felt lonely, three areas were analyzed: a sense of lack of contact with loved ones, a sense of broken social ties testifying to the level of loneliness in contacts with loved ones, and the degree of belonging to a social group. In the whole population of children, a moderate intensity of a sense of lack of close contact prevailed ( $M = 3.3$ ;  $SD = 0.5$ ), particularly in the group of families where the father emigrated and families staying with children in the Netherlands. The differences between the mean values were significant ( $F = 3.42$ ;  $\rho = 0.0176$ ). Scheffe's post-

hoc test results also confirmed significant differences in the sense of lack of contact between children from families where mother emigrates ( $\rho = 0.2456$ ), or both parents ( $\rho = 0.4590$ ) and children from families where father left ( $\rho = 0.4590$ ) or the whole family emigrated ( $\rho = 0.1871$ ). There were no significant differences in the results depending on the length of stay of the family or its members in emigration. Also, the child's age was not a variable that significantly correlated with a sense of lack of close contact with other people.

However, as regards the sense of broken social ties, it was found that in children dominated the results indicating strong loneliness ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ). The ANOVA analysis did not show significant differences in loneliness between children from individual types of emigrant families ( $F = 0.179$ ;  $\rho = 0.9107$ ), as well as depending on the duration of separation from the parent or parents ( $F = 2.503$ ;  $\rho = 0.0593$ ). In the whole population, the child's age did not correlate with the sense of broken bonds. However, after taking into account the family type in statistical analyzes (R-Spearman, Tau-Kendall, R-Pearson), there was a weak negative relationship between the child's age and the sense of broken bonds, but only in the families in which father emigrated ( $r_{ho} = -0.243$ ,  $\rho = 0.038$ ). In contrast, the lack of intimacy was experienced most strongly by younger children, while older children more strongly experienced the absence of both parents ( $r_{ho} = 0.318$ ,  $\rho = 0.018$ ).

In addition, it was observed that children strongly felt belonging to a social group ( $M = 2.4$   $SD = 0.4$ ) and there were no significant differences when considering the type of migratory family (ANOVA:  $F = 0.672$ ,  $p = 0.5698$ ). Also the duration of the parent's / parents' or the entire family's labour emigration was not a variable that significantly differentiated this feeling ( $F = 0.334$ ;  $\rho = 0.801$ ). After including age in the analysis, it turned out that the younger the child was, the more strongly he or she felt and coped with the loneliness resulting from the feeling of weak belonging to the group (family, peers, friends) (R-Pearson =  $-0.239$ ,  $\rho = 0.041$ ), but this only concerned children separated from their absent father. Test results supplemented some statements of children during the interview with the examiner. The children said that they felt much less lonely (39%) when they remained in the care of the mother and the father left, than in the case of temporary separation from the mother, as well as when both parents have left and those caring for the children do it well. Quite strong loneliness teases nearly half of the children (53%) who went abroad with their family and are just adjusting to new circumstances. The children felt strongly associated with the mother and 61% of children participating in the study expected support from her. Also with the absent mother, children most often consulted various difficult cases (63%) via the media (telephone, Internet).

It was observed that more than half of the children (53%) in the “Polish” sample very much appreciate the fact that they remain in their home country despite the parent’s or parents’ labour emigration. As much as 73% of children from families temporarily separated from both parents expressed great satisfaction (63% from families where father emigrated; 74% from families where mother emigrated). It appears that the least numerous (26%) was the group of children satisfied with the stay of the whole family in the Netherlands.

#### 4. Discussion

Our findings suggest that not only the type of migratory family, but also the duration of the absence of a parent, parents or the child’s stay with the family in emigration, as well as the age of the child are variables differentiating the strength of anxiety, the feeling of loneliness and the bond of children with people from their immediate surroundings.

It turned out that children react anxiously to temporary separation from outgoing parents, which is also confirmed by other researchers, who mention further manifestations of emotional tension in children from migrant families: sadness, nervousness, emotional closure, depression, aggressive or self-destructive behaviour (Fellmeth *et al.*, 2018; Fidelus, 2008; Graham *et al.*, 2012; Liu, Li, and Ge, 2009; Parreñas, 2008; Smeekens, Stroebe and Abakoumkin, 2012; Zhao, Yu, 2016). The literature also indicates that the separation of children from parents before the age of 17 poses a significant risk of major depression and anxiety (e.g. Bifulco, Harris, and Brown, 1992). On this basis, it can be assumed that the lack of direct contact of the children examined by us with parents is a significant threat to their mental health now and in the future.

The results of our research indicate that children endured in a most difficult way breaking of contact with the migrating mother and reacted with the strongest anxiety, which is also confirmed by other Polish studies (e.g. Danilewicz, 2006). In addition, it turned out that the children got used to father’s absence much more easily than to mother’s. Researchers suggest that the child’s experience of separation depends to a large extent on his or her relationship with foster carers in the absence of parents (Liu *et al.*, 2010). Carers can compensate for the emotional effects of separation if they have a good contact with children, or can aggravate the child’s psychological discomfort when they fail to deal with their responsibilities; they are impatient, aggressive and do not provide sufficient care, and they lack social support (e.g. Man *et al.*, 2017).



In our analyzes, the important factors were the duration of the absence of the migrating parent or parents and the child's age. Children in the first period of separation from their parents or parents (up to 1 year) experience more anxiety compared to children who went abroad with their family and the decision to stay permanently was made. It can therefore be assumed that the stabilization of the family situation is less disturbing for children than no decision about the fate of the family. The age of the child turned out to be important, since older children became more anxious, perhaps because they understand more and are able to critically assess the balance of benefits and losses that labour migration brings to the family.

The second analyzed variable related to children's mental well-being was loneliness. It is a very stressful, painful experience and causes risk of emotional and behavioural problems (Lau, Kong, 1999). The results at UCLA showed that children temporarily separated from their mother or parents felt less loneliness due to the lack of contact with people significant for them than children from the families where the father left or from families who went abroad jointly. The explanation for this somewhat surprising result can be found in the quality of communication between the child and mother (or guardian). It turned out that spatial and temporal separation from the child stimulated mothers to carry out distance upbringing, to care for children remaining in their country of origin. Mothers maintained regular contact with children via telephone and video calls (Skype). Also in the literature, the importance of good communication between parents and children is shown to contribute to minimizing the risk of behavioural disorders (e.g. Riesch, Anderson, Krueger, 2006).

Parents' labour emigration has a negative impact on the development of children experiencing separation; parent-child relationships are disturbed, and a feeling of loneliness arises (Jia, Tian, 2010; Kukułowicz, 2001; Liu *et al.*, 2010). Although at the beginning a child may even idealize an absent parent (particularly the father), then the situation reverses. A greater chance of consolidating a family and dealing with the longing for an absent mother appears when the mother cares for a good relationship with the child and the child is well looked after by his father, grandparents or guardian (Stańkowski, 2006).

Our findings indicate that the absence of the father associated with the decision to stay permanently abroad stimulates the child to establish a close relationship with the mother and builds relationships with other adult family members or carers. Perhaps this explains why relationships between family members have not weakened. However, as the time of separation lengthened simultaneously with the mother and father (up to 3 years), the children felt a sense of lack of closeness between them and family members and/or carers. Lack of closeness was also

strongly felt by children staying in the Netherlands with their families experiencing adaptation problems. Children's statements testify to the painful loss of direct contact with their friends in Poland. On the other hand, along with the increase in the time spent in emigration and the decision that it will be a permanent stay, children slowly adapted to the new social environment. The conducted analysis indicates that the stay abroad was for nearly half of the surveyed children a difficult situation, evoking a quite strong feeling of loneliness and isolation from others. The chance to regain balance in the family system depends on the willingness of family members to adapt to the new situation in many dimensions, to support each other and to use effective remedial strategies.

As can be seen, many of our findings are confirmed in other studies and lead to the conclusion that migration of parents is often harmful to the mental well-being of left-behind children.

Our study has several limitations. First of all, it was a cross-sectional study, so it is difficult to unequivocally conclude about causality. Secondly, the chosen research sample was not fully representative, which forces caution in formulating conclusions. Thirdly, the test samples were not large and therefore caution is needed to generalize the results. Fourth, we had limited possibilities to compare the results of our research with other psychological well-being studies in similar groups: children temporarily separated from their parents and children traveling with their family to a foreign country. Fifth, because most of the research on children from migrant families was conducted in China, i.e. in a different cultural context, comparisons with our findings were difficult.

We believe that further research is needed on the mental well-being of children from migrant families using a multi-faceted approach, including clinical, epidemiological and intervention studies.

In summary, despite the limitations, the results of this study have some important implications for preventive measures and interventions aimed at promoting mental health among children in immigrant families.

## 5. Conclusion

The first direction of activities in the area of institutional and legal support for families and children in both the situation of departure and return should be the creation of environmental forms of compensation for separation, including:

- clubs, workshops for children and parents with elements of family therapy, aimed at solving problems arising from disturbed family relationships;

- specialized psychological consultations for children who react with anxiety and a sense of loneliness to temporary separation from their parents, or who are in emigration with their families;
- activities supporting carers of children from migrant families, e.g. older grandparents;
- raising awareness of helpers regarding the risk of mental health disorders in children from migrant families. It is necessary to undertake global initiatives in the field of mental health of these children, e.g. to create an environmental system of assistance to the migrant family;
- which is important – already at the stage of prevention aimed at persons planning migration;
- creating by schools conditions for active and full participation in social life of children who experience adaptation difficulties related to cultural differences or the change of the educational environment as a result of migration experiences.

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