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## LEVEL OF ADAPTAVITY OF POLISH FAMILIES ON EMIGRATION IN THE NETHERLANDS IN THE PERCEPTION OF CHILDREN

POZIOM ADAPTACYJNOŚCI POLSKICH  
RODZIN DOŚWIADCZAJĄCYCH  
EMIGRACJI W HOLANDII W PERCEPCJI  
DZIECI

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of empirical analyses was to identify the level of the adaptivity of families from a perspective of a child who has found him – or herself in one of the following situations: one parent has migrated, both parents have migrated without taking the child with them, or an entire family has migrated. In total 320 children of Polish descent were subjected to the study. They lived in Poland (N=200) or in the Netherlands (N=120) and experienced economic migration of the members of their family or of their entire families. The results of the research revealed that most migrant families subjected to the study (both in the Polish and the Dutch sample) fall into the structured and flexible systems exhibiting characteristics that are relatively beneficial for a child's social and psychological development.

**STRESZCZENIE**

Z uwagi na powszechne, a zarazem dynamicznie zmieniające się zjawisko migracji Polaków do krajów Unii Europejskiej, ważne wydają się analizy ukierunkowane na skutki tego procesu dla jakości życia współczesnych rodzin, a zwłaszcza wychowujących się w nich dzieci. Celem prezentowanych analiz empirycznych była identyfikacja poziomu adaptacyjności rodziny z perspektywy dziecka w sytuacji emigracji zarobkowej jednego rodzica, obojga rodziców bez dziecka, oraz całej rodziny. Przebadano łącznie 320 dzieci (pochodzenia polskiego), zamieszkujących w Polsce (N=200) oraz w Holandii (N=120), które doświadczają skutków emigracji zarobkowej członków rodziny lub całej rodziny. Wyniki badań wskazały, iż najczęściej badanych rodzin emigracyjnych (zarówno w próbie polskiej jak i holenderskiej) usytuowanych jest w obszarze systemów ustrukturalizowanych i elastycznych, posiadających właściwości relatywnie korzystne dla rozwoju psychospołecznego dziecka.

**KEYWORDS:** *child, emigration, family system*

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** *dziecko, emigracja, system rodzinny.*

## INTRODUCTION

The accession of new countries to the European Union has become a trigger for numerous demographic, economic, and social changes over the entire Europe (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2016). Mass emigration of Polish citizens to the *old* EU member states was one of characteristic phenomena following Poland's accession to the European Union (Gałka, 2012; Melosik, 2004).

From a pedagogical point of view migrations (including selected aspects of family life of persons who work abroad) have become an important subject of analysis in terms of their social and educational implications (Bera, 2010; Chodkowska, 2010). A child experiencing family separation caused by migration or a child living abroad may have to cope with emotional social, educational and/or psychological difficulties (Coe, Reynolds, Boehm, Hess, Rae-Espinoza, 2011; Gianelli and Mangiacacchi, 2010, NíLaoire, Carpena-Mendez, Tyrrell, &White, 2011).

Migration has various repercussions at an individual, local, and national level (Jończy, 2014). When one of the members of the family, the spouse or a parent emigrates, a formally two-parent family becomes a functionally one-parent family. Migration also increases the risk of weakening family bonds and undermining the stability of the family, while its individual members experience the consequences of separation (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2016; Slany et al., 2014). Migrations constitute one of the major causes of marriage breakdowns (Kozak, 2010; Chodkowska, 2010, p. 66).

In this context the optimal adjustment to new living environment of the members of a family experiencing migration seems to be important enough to be the subject of research. Referring to a theoretical analysis of the adaptation model (Piątek, 2000, p. 175), developed on the basis of American publications devoted to immigrants arriving there, one can distinguish between three variants of the model which differ from one another in terms of specific determining factors of adaptation. The assimilation model is the first variant. Time is its characteristic factor. The second variant is defined as the ethnic satisfaction model wherein belonging to an ethnic group is defined as the main factor conducive to adaptation. The third variant is defined as the structural diversity model for which such factors as age, sex, varying levels of education, religious denomination, or the mother tongue affect the adaptation process.

## METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE AUTHORS' OWN RESEARCH

The aim of the presented empirical analyses was to identify the level of the adaptivity of families from a perspective of a child who has found him – or herself in one of the following situations: one parent has migrated, both parents have migrated without taking the child with them, or an entire family has migrated taking the child with them. The concept of adaptability was defined as a child's ability to function in changing family life conditions.

In total 320 children of Polish descent were subjected to the study. They lived in Poland (N=200) or in the Netherlands (N=120) and experienced economic migration of the members of their family or of their entire families. The respondents were classified into two groups – the Polish and the Dutch one. The former consisted of the children staying in Poland while the members of their families emigrated. Those families were the families in which only the has mother emigrated, only the has father emigrated, or the entire family has emigrated. On the other hand, the latter group comprised the children who emigrated with their parents and lived in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is one of the four European Union member states most frequently chosen by emigrating Poles (Gałka, 2012, p. 11-12).

The Polish part of the study was conducted in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship. The characteristics of economic emigration in the selected voivodeship were initially analysed by various institutions that saw changes in the functioning of families, such as the Lesser Poland Voivodeship Board of Education in Cracow and social welfare organizational units, including the Social Welfare Centre in Andrychów. In line with social demand and the objectives set for the activities performed by social welfare centres in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship, current issues were diagnosed, mainly the issue of *euro-orphanhood*. The Social Welfare Centre in Andrychów conducted a pioneering diagnosis in a group of families that reported migration experience. At the time, the results of the study indicated that the families had borne a number of consequences of economic migration of one or both parents, and revealed that the Poles migrated mainly to the Netherlands.

The presented study involved cooperation with all (11) educational and family support institutions in the Gmina Andrychów. Prior to the start of the study, they were informed about the objectives and subject-matter of the study,

and were also assured that the participation was voluntary and anonymous. Principals of the educational institutions asked the families with migration experience if they would consent to conducting surveys among their children. The surveys were conducted individually at school premises. Comfortable conditions and privacy were ensured for the children as was the ability to contact a teacher or the school counsellor.

The children staying in the Netherlands attended a Polish school, so they had no difficulty understanding the content of the survey tool, which was confirmed by the teachers working with the respondents. The argument highlighting the maintenance of the connection to the homeland was that they attended a Polish school and belonged to a Polish parish. The decision was made to conduct surveys in areas densely populated by Poles. To meet this criterion, the School Consultation Point at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague (the Netherlands) and a Polish Roman Catholic parish in Breda (a meeting place for Poles living in the Netherlands) were selected. At the time, the School Consultation Point implemented a supplementary curriculum at the elementary and high school levels, thus continuing the tradition and mission of supporting the education of Polish students living in the Kingdom of Netherlands in accordance with the Core Curriculum for Polish expatriate students attending schools outside the territory of the Republic of Poland.

The organization of the study took two years due to the specific nature of the selection of the study group and the need to obtain the appropriate consent from parents and educational institutions.

The course of the study itself was as follows:

- The study in the Polish sample was conducted over a three-month period, with the participation of one of the co-authors of the article, a school counsellor, and form teachers.
- The research in the Dutch sample was conducted over a two-month period by one of the co-authors of the article and teachers from the School Consultation Point.

A purposive sampling method was applied. The research was conducted among teenage children in Małopolska voivodship, where the migration rate was relatively average compared to the national scale (groups with an equal

gender ratio), ensuring proportional representation of boys and girls in the study sample (GUS, 2023).

The analyses included children's perceptions of their family's level of adaptability, as migration theories increasingly focus on the child, by highlighting the role of age, the life-course, and intergenerational family dynamics as determinants of international migration. Existing migration theory is adult-centric, failing to account for the experiences of children despite their increasingly important participation in migration flows (Galli, Garip, 2024). Research by Ch. Galli and F. Garip (2024) find that adult and child migration is strongly conditioned on migrant networks and family dynamics, including ties to family members in destination and family structure and caretaking arrangements in origin.

The research was conducted among 320 Polish children (including 170 girls and 150 boys). Children living with emigrant families in the Netherlands constituted a group of 120 people, while children living in Poland, coming from families, of whom one or both parents emigrated for business purposes, constituted a group of 200 people. The average age of a child raised in a family who immigrated to the Netherlands in full was 14 years, while the average age of a child staying in a family in Poland (the family of an emigrating father, mother, and both parents) was about 13 years. Children living in Poland most often experienced the absence of parents-emigrants in the period up to 1 year, while those staying in the Netherlands most often remained there permanently.

The main research question was: how can we characterize the families subjected to the study in terms of adaptivity understood as an ability to change in the structure, system of roles, and principles (Gaś, 2004, p. 223) in the situation of economic emigration of one parent, both parents leaving the child in the home country, and the entire family emigrating with their child? (At the same time, the concept of adaptation is defined as the child's ability to function in the changing conditions of family life, when one of his parents leaves the family due to economic emigration or a child emigrates with his parents and loses contact with other relatives living in Poland).

For the purposes of present research, the *Profil Rodziny* inventory by Zbigniew Gaś (*Skala Adaptacyjność*) was used. The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems, developed by David H. Olson and his associates, constitutes the theoretical basis of the inventory. The use of this model

(describing the functioning of the family by means of the three central dimensions: cohesion, flexibility, and communication) made possible an attempt at defining the ability of migrating family to make changes. It seems that the assessment of the ability of the economic migration family to make changes is, undoubtedly, a very important factor determining the adaptation to a new social reality. When posing a question of in what way the process of adaptation in individual migrating families occurs, one must take in to account not only the character of the ties between the members of the family or the dominant forms of communication between the people, but also any changes in family roles or in the family rules. Referring to the model of the adaptation of migrants to a new living environment, analyzed on the basis of the American research, it is important to perform analyses which include such variables as age, sex, level of education, etc, (Kofman, 2018, p. 33-46; Piątek, 2000, p. 175).

The analyses conducted using the diagnostic tool *Family Profile* (in the Polish adaptation by Z. Gaś, 1994, pp. 66–91; Gaś, 2004) aim to determine the individual perception of the functionality level of the family system as perceived by its members. The *Family Profile Inventory* is designed to diagnose the functioning of the family system and consists of 86 statements divided into six scales. Three scales address positive dimensions of family system functioning: family cohesion (SR), family adaptability (A), and mutual understanding (WZ). The other three scales relate to challenges within the family system: family role difficulties (RR), developmental challenges (TR), and family disintegration (DR).

The total score obtained on each scale reflects the intensity of a specific dimension of the family system's functioning as perceived by the respondent. The compilation of scores from the individual scales serves as the basis for calculating the Functionality Perception Index ( $PF = (SR + A + WZ) - (RR + TR + DR)$ ). The reliability indicators for the tool are statistically highly significant ( $\alpha$  Cronbacha – 0,92).

As part of the analysis of the level of the adaptivity of the family, based on the source literature, four types of family system were distinguished in terms of their adaptivity. Those types are: rigid systems – the level of adaptivity is very low; structured systems – the level of adaptivity is high to moderate; flexible systems – the level of adaptivity is from high to moderate; chaotic systems – the level of adaptivity is very high (Olson, 1999; Bajkowski, 2019).

D.H. Olson (1999) points out that the adaptivity of the family, related to the ability to change, may not always mean a proper functioning of that system. Therefore, it was assumed that not all types of emigration families are properly functioning families, i.e. families in which it is important to maintain the balance between the ability to make changes and maintaining the status quo. The authors endeavored to find how the family copes with the adaptation to the changes caused by economic emigration of its individual members or the entire family. The authors, based on the source literature, analyzed the level of adaptivity, taking into account such factors as: authority in the family, styles of negotiation, feedback (both positive and negative), relations connected with the roles, as well as the rules of the relationship (Gaś, 2004; Olson i in., 1986, p. 4) and presented the characteristics of individual family systems.

Researching an emigration family and how it functions, the authors also found that ability to change is affected not only by attitudes, interactions, or the roles of individual members of the family but also by the way in which individual members of the family perceive the emigration itself. The study of the ways in which emigrants interact and perceive one another offers a coherent picture of how the family functions.

Migration families based on rigid systems are typically characterized by autocracy and authoritarian style of management. The family members do not start negotiations, there is the rigidity of roles and rules which are overt and strictly enforced. The atmosphere in the family is lukewarm and feedback is characterized by prevalently negative loops. The family manifests inability to solve problems, while opinions are expressed in a passive or aggressive way.

On the other hand, in structured systems one can notice that opinions are expressed firmly, rules are mostly overt, and family members can foresee the consequences of their actions. A democratic style of control with a permanent leader becomes evident. Negotiation skills are assessed as good, with the prevalence of negative over positive feedback loops.

Flexible system emigration families are able to make some changes relating to the rules (in most cases, covert) but, on the other hand one can notice a lack of consistency in specific behavior. One can notice constant changes in the control and roles. Family members are better at coping with negotiations, which are more effective. The same holds for the ability to solve problems.



One can also notice that feedback contains more positive loops than negative ones, which means that opinions on various subjects are expressed in a firm manner.

Emigration families can also be characterized as belonging to chaotic systems, i.e. the systems which lack leadership and discipline. Family members undertake constant negotiations, make changes of rules and roles. The family manifests poor problem solving skills because opinions are expressed in a passive and aggressive way (Olson, 1999).

### **LEVEL OF ADAPTIVITY OF THE EMIGRATION FAMILIES AND THE TYPE OF THE FAMILY SYSTEM**

The results of the research analyses have shown that the mean value of the results in the Adaptivity scale of "Profil Rodziny (family profile) Inventory by Zbigniew Gaś is 22.5 points (out of 34 possible). This means that, as perceived by the child, the emigration family is characterized by average abilities of making changes. The table 1 presents detailed data regarding the level of adaptivity of specific families as perceived by the children subjected to the research.

The ability of the family to make changes to the authority structure, exchange of roles, and modification of family rules was significantly better rated by the children who stayed in Poland compared to children staying in the Netherlands. Emigration families as a whole manifested significantly more difficulties in this matter.

The results of the analyses of the ANOVA variance have showed a statistical significance of the differences between the mean levels of adaptivity in the four types of emigration families ( $F=11.8$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Additionally, the use of the Scheffe post-hoc test made it possible to conduct a more detailed study of the differences between the mean values in individual groups. Table 2 presents the  $p$  values of the tests comparing the pairs of mean values.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive statistics for the Adaptivity scale of the Profil Rodziny (family profile) inventory by Z. Gaś*

Place of a child's residence	Type of emigrating family	N	M	SD	95% confidence interval for the mean value	
					Lower limit	Upper limit
POLAND	Family in which the mother has emigrated	72	25.4	7.4	23.7	27.1
	Family in which the father has emigrated	73	24.8	7.9	23.0	26.6
	Family in which the parents have emigrated	55	24.0	9.8	21.5	26.6
THE NETHERLANDS	Family whose all members have emigrated	120	18.7	9.9	16.9	20.5
TOTAL		320	22.5	9.4	21.5	23.5

**Source:** authors' own calculations.

**Table 2.** *Significance of the difference in the mean values in the Adaptivity scale between the family types (in the light of the Scheffe test)*

Place of a child's residence	Type of emigrating family	The mother has emigrated	The father has emigrated	The parents have emigrated	The entire family has emigrated
POLAND	The mother has emigrated	-	0.9815	0.8667	0.00002
	The father has emigrated	0.9815	-	0.9747	0.0002
	Both parents have emigrated	0.8667	0.9747	-	0.0045
THE NETHERLANDS	The entire family has emigrated	0.00002	0.0002	0.0045	-

**Source:** authors' own calculations.

Based on the research performed, it was determined that statistically significant differences in the adaptivity occur between the families whose all members have emigrated to the Netherlands and other types of families. This means that the level of adaptivity of the families staying in the Netherlands was significantly lower than in other types of families in which the children stayed in Poland. Thus, the research has proven that the families whose children stay in Poland constitute a relatively heterogeneous group in terms of the level of adaptivity, a group different from the families whose all members stay in the Netherlands.

The authors of the Circumplex model differentiate between four types of systems, differing in terms of the level of adaptivity. These are: rigid, structured, flexible, and chaotic systems. Each type features a different characteristics of functioning. It is assumed that the central levels, i.e. the structured and the flexible systems are more beneficial for the functioning of the migration family than the levels on the extreme ends i.e. the rigid and chaotic systems which are typical of dysfunctional families (Olson, 1999).

**Table 3.** *Types of family system on the Adaptivity scale*

Types of family system:	Level of adaptability (sten score)	Percentage among children staying in Poland		Percentage among children staying in the Netherlands		Total percentage	
Rigid	1	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	4.2%	0.3%	2.2%
	2	1.0%		3.3%		1.9%	
Structured	3	4.5%	37.5%	15.8%	59.2%	8.8%	45.6%
	4	16.0%		25.8%		19.7%	
	5	17.0%		17.5%		17.2%	
Flexible	6	21.5%	38.5%	16.7%	25.8%	19.7%	33.8%
	7	12.0%		4.2%		9.1%	
	8	5.0%		5.0%		5.0%	
Chaotic	9	8.0%	23.0%	4.2%	10.8%	6.6%	18.4%
	10	15.0%		6.7%		11.9%	
TOTAL		100%		100%		100%	

**Source:** authors' own calculations.

The rigid system emigration families subjected to the study achieved a moderately low level of adaptivity and were characterized by a firm manner of expressing opinions as well as by an egalitarian or, in some cases, democratic style of authority. The authority in the family was shared between the parents. In stressful situations, in the face of the changes taking place in the family, the family members wanted to meet the new requirements and undertook family negotiations which led to constructive problem solving. They were also very frequently able to exchange roles or fulfil them jointly. The rules of family life undertook relative changes with overt rules being dominant. However, one could observe that the family members tended to reveal those rules. Family relations were characterized by negative feedback.

Similar characteristics applied to the flexible system emigration families subjected to the study, with the adaptivity values being moderately high.

Families of this type were characterized by an egalitarian style of authority. Those families coped well with problem solving, while their members were able to exchange roles with one another. Not enough covert rules in this family system was a certain limitation that led to the creation of additional standards of behavior which the family members were very frequently made to comply with by force. Intra-family relations were characterized by positive feedback. The mentioned family systems proved to be properly functioning, i.e. the systems which maintain the balance between the ability of making changes and the preservation of the status quo.

The systems on the extreme ends of the adaptivity scale were the least numerous, as the chaotic system comprised 18.4% and rigid system comprised 2.2 per cent of the families subjected to the study. Rigid system emigration families were characterized by a passive and aggressive style of expressing opinions and, frequently, an authoritarian control and leadership. Those families had poor problem solving abilities. Family roles were fulfilled in a stereotypical manner and the rigidity of rules was prevalent. Most families staying abroad with their child (the Dutch sample) exhibited extreme ways of functioning characteristic of the rigid family systems (4.2% compared to 1% in the Polish sample).

On the other hand, chaotic system families were characterized by both passive as well as aggressive styles of expressing opinions and a prominent lack of control. The members of those families were involved in incessant negotiations with one another, which was not conducive to solving problems that frequently resulted from numerous interpersonal conflicts. Family roles and rules were in a state of a constant flux. Numerous rules were covert, with only few being overt. There were more chaotic families in the Polish sample (23.0% compared to 10.8% in the Dutch sample).

## CONCLUSION

Families, especially those emigrating, are frequently forced to undertake various actions aimed at coping with changes caused by the so-called family stressor, i.e. "an event or change in life affecting the family and causing specific change in the psychosocial family system (Radochoński, 1987, p. 59). Therefore, one can also assume that economic emigration of members of the family or of an entire family can also be a family stressor. Separation from an emigration family member or moving to a new, unfamiliar environment abroad causes numerous changes in family life. Economic emigration frequently puts them in a difficult situation that causes specific changes in its functioning as well as in the functioning of its individual members. Therefore, it seems important for the family to have abilities to react to developmental/situational stress by making changes to the structure of control, exchanging roles or modifying family rules, as such actions give the family a chance for a better adaptation to the changing living conditions. On the other hand, research shows that many children of emigrating parents seem to function well despite the periods of separation from the parents and/or other members of the family. However, emotional effects of migration should not be underestimated as they are an important aspect of children's trans-national lives as regards the creation of new friendships as well as being important aspects of their parents' lives (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2016). Interestingly enough, the results of previous research indicate that the vast majority of Polish emigrants feel happy, being pleased first of all with their children, marriage, and the relations with their closest relatives (Krawczyk, 2017, p. 234).

Due to the fact that an increasing number of families has experienced migration, it seems important to draw practical conclusions from empirical analyses, taking into account the diversity of contemporary families (Caselman & Hilli, 2014). The presented research results make it possible to formulate indications regarding institutional and legal support for families and children in case of both emigration and return to the homeland. Initial actions may be directed towards the creation of environmental forms of compensating separation, followed by the creation of the environmental

system of assistance which would be preventive in nature and involve reaching people who plan migration and assist them before they actually move out of Poland (Krawczyk, 2017, p. 238). Due the probability that family migrations and separations in Europe will become more common in the future, there is a need for further research to fully understand how families with children can migrate to other countries with as little detriment as possible to their psychological and social well-being (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2016).

### ***DISCLOSURE OF THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY***

Gender diversity is a strength here, as it allows for some generalisation of the results. However, it is not clear whether the patterns observed here will continue as the migration period continues. Additional studies would also be required to verify whether the trends outlined in the article are also true for children at an early school age. The use of the Family Profile, a tool adjusted to Polish conditions, for the study of children living in the Netherlands may constitute some limitation. Those children may experience the impact of unfamiliar environmental factors, despite the increasing number of Poles emigration to the Netherlands in recent years. (Statistics Poland, 2023). The daily cultural experience of Polish children living in Poland compared to those being raised abroad may differ depending on social values and norms, or perceptions of migration. Poland and the Netherlands differ in terms of values, such as individualism vs. collectivism, which may be related to attitudes toward issues such as independence, autonomy, or interpersonal relationships. In Poland, more emphasis is placed on family and traditions, and migration can be seen as a challenge related to leaving one's family members. By contrast, the Dutch accept migration as part of the reality of globalisation. Those varying attitudes may affect the respondents' migration experiences (den Hartog, at all, 1997; Goodwin, Williams, Snell Herzog, 2020). Therefore, some concepts or cultural references in the survey may be less understandable or less relevant to the respondents. However, the survey of Polish children using the Family Profile tool was well thought out: the children were fluent in Polish, attended a Polish school, and the questions were carefully explained, with each child individually asked if all

the statements were understood. A pilot study was also conducted to verify whether the survey was positively received. The researcher made sure the respondents understood the purpose of the study, the method of data collection, and assured them of anonymity and the possibility of declining to participate, and worked with experts and psychologists in Poland and the Netherlands to help to identify potential difficulties.

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