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Repatriation and the best interests of the child

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Chapter 6

General Discussion

Outline of the chapter

The central aim of this dissertation was to gain insight into how children are faring after return to their countries of origin and to identify the risk and protective factors for children's development after return. The first part of this dissertation analysed the validity of the BIC-Model child-rearing conditions and of the assessment with the BIC-Q to measure the quality of the childrearing environment of returnee children in the cultural context of the Western-Balkans. The second part of this dissertation focused on the child-rearing environment, social-emotional wellbeing, and support for reintegration of the returnee children in Kosovo and Albania, and the factors that were associated with their situation. In this chapter, we will first summarise and discuss the main findings in this dissertation, which will be followed by the strengths and limitations of the study, and the implications for future research, policy and practice.

Main findings

Part I Validity BIC-Model and BIC-Q assessment in the cultural context of the Western Balkans

Chapter 2 assessed the face and content validity of the BIC-Model conditions and focused on the following research questions: *To what extent do the BIC-Model conditions have the same meaning and are interpreted in the same manner in a Western-European and a Western-Balkan context? Which cultural factors may influence the assessment of the BIC-Model conditions in a Non-Western context using a local, Western-Balkan cultural perspective?*

The findings showed that no additional or different child-rearing conditions were found in the cultural context of the Western-Balkans than the ones provided in the BIC Model. Nevertheless, certain cultural and contextual differences permeated the BIC Model, and the child-rearing conditions were therefore partially interpreted differently in the Western-Balkan cultural context. First of all, the extended family played an important role in the children's upbringing environment, making it necessary to assess the child-rearing practices of these family members as well. In addition, authoritarian child-rearing practices such as the use of disciplinary measures and the need for children to be obedient

might result in a different interpretation of certain upbringing conditions. Third, the within-society heterogeneity showed that there were great differences between children growing up in rural or urban areas, or in families with the Albanian majority or the Roma minority ethnicity. In Roma families, for instance, education was less highly valued and children more often performed child labour, which was also more common for children in rural areas. At last, the variable 'stability of the state' led to certain conditions being more important in the Western-Balkan context, such as the social network, which provides stability and safety when the state is not there to take care. In addition, chapter 2 identified factors that influenced the assessment from a local Western-Balkan perspective, consisting of the cultural values of the family, the within-society heterogeneity, and the situation of returned children specifically. This resulted in the need for continuous reflection by the interviewers. Factors related to the questionnaire resulted in additional on-the-job training during the field study, focusing on the need for detailed clarifications describing the local perspectives on child-rearing, the interrelatedness of some of the BIC-Model conditions and miscomprehensions due to semantics. Therefore, the protocol was adjusted to improve the BIC-Q assessment into the quality of the child-rearing environment after the return.

Chapter 3 analysed the factors that influenced the judgement of the quality of the child-rearing environment through varying cultural perspectives, and analysed the construct validity of the BIC-Q scale when applied in Kosovo and Albania from a local perspective on child-rearing. The following research questions were answered in this chapter: *Which cultural factors may influence the judgement of the BIC-Model conditions in a Non-Western context using a local, Western-Balkan cultural perspective? To what extent is the BIC-Q a reliable and strong scale to measure the quality of the child-rearing environment when completed from a Western-Balkan cultural perspective on child-rearing in countries of origin (i.e., Kosovo and Albania)?*

Following the findings in chapter 2, chapter 3 analysed the (dis)agreement in scores between Western-Balkan and Western-European assessors, and identified factors that influenced the *judgement* of the child-rearing environment from different cultural perspectives. The Western-European assessor seemed to have a broader and more holistic understanding of 'respect' and, for instance, included under this condition whether the child lived isolated from society and peers. In addition, experiences with specific inter-ethnic relations may have affected the judgements regarding this condition. Regarding the condition 'interest' the

Western-European assessors evaluated primarily the caregivers' behaviour and space for the child's wishes, while the Western-Balkan assessors seemed to be more focused on the possibilities to conduct activities of the child's liking, and whether there were resources to do so. It could not be determined, however, whether this disagreement was related to differences in cultural perspective or to the different professional backgrounds of assessors.

The Mokken scale analysis showed a strong and reliable scale to measure the quality of the child-rearing environment in the cultural context of the Western Balkans ($H=.73$; $Rho=.96$). No problematic items were found in the scale. The findings in these chapters indicated that the BIC-Q is a valid instrument to measure the quality of the child-rearing environment from the local cultural perspective on child-rearing in countries of origin in the Western-Balkan region. Whether this assumption also holds for other countries of origin is yet unexplored (Van de Vijver & Poortinga, 1997).

The findings in part one of this dissertation pointed towards the precarious situation of some of the migrant children after return. In general, many movements and transitions in the rearing environment may cause instability and discontinuity in the child's life and therefore form a risk for the child's development (Zijlstra, 2012). In addition, the children in our study may have become accustomed to a different quality of living situation and future prospects in the European host countries, which may contrast with practices in the country of origin, such as corporal punishment of children in schools or differing social rules related to gender (see also De Bree, Davids, & De Haas, 2010; Hasanović, Sinanović, & Pavlović, 2005; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Vathi & Duci, 2016). For some conditions it proved difficult to obtain a good quality after return compared with the host country (such as the condition 'education'). Especially for children who stayed for long periods of time in the host country and became accustomed to the norms and values of the host country, a forced transition to the country of origin can have a great impact in the child's life (Kalverboer, Zijlstra, & Knorth, 2009). The local cultural perspective related to children, and the use of 'local norms' in assessing a child's rearing environment, may not fit these specific children. This should be taken into consideration when assessing a child's scenarios for development with regard to the situation after repatriation.

Part II Children's rearing environment, wellbeing and support for reintegration after return

Chapter 4 assessed which children seem to fare well or seem particularly vulnerable after return, and focused on the following research questions: *What is the quality of the child-rearing environment, as measured with the BIC-Q, and how is the social-emotional wellbeing of migrant children after the return to their countries of origin (Kosovo, Albania)? Which factors predict the social-emotional wellbeing of migrant children after their return to these countries?*

Chapter 4 showed that the *stability of the residence permit* in the host country and children's *belonging to a majority or minority ethnic group* predicted the social-emotional wellbeing through the quality of the child-rearing environment. Children who had a stable residence permit in the host country faced a higher quality of the child-rearing environment and less emotional and peer problems. Children who had a stable residence permit in the host country may have been in a better position to build up their lives in the host country; their parents were employed and the family lived in a house by their own. Research on adult returnees also shows that the migrants, who were integrated and were able to work in host countries, were more resilient and more integrated (Carr, 2014; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

The families who did not have a stable resident permit were reliant on social benefits and more often lived in reception facilities for asylum seekers. Asylum-seeking parents without a residence permit might face prolonged stress and insecurity regarding the right to stay in the host country, while experiencing powerlessness and a lack of autonomy to build their own lives (Gorashi, 2005; Samarasinghe & Arvidsson, 2002). As a result, these parents may be emotionally less available for their children (Van Essen & Bala, 2007), and therefore less equipped to offer good parenting and guidance to their children.

Of the children *without a residence permit*, the Roma children faced the lowest quality of the child-rearing environment after return. Also in other European countries, the Roma are known as a marginalized community. Roma children often grow up under poor social-economic circumstances and live segregated from the rest of society (FRA, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2010). Of the Albanian children without a residence permit, no differences were found for the quality of the child-rearing environment and the social-emotional wellbeing for *voluntarily or forcibly returned children*. This finding confirms other scholars' arguments that the 'degree of voluntariness' to return is generally low for rejected asylum seekers; though they may cooperate with the return, this may not be

based on a free and open choice. Thus, the 'forced-voluntary' return dichotomy is insufficient to explain the return willingness in such cases (Black & Gent, 2006; Van Houte, 2014; Webber, 2011).

At last, the age of the child influenced the peer problems after return. A different effect was found for the children without and with a stable residence permit in the host country. While for the *children without a permit* in the host country the older age was associated with more peer problems, this was not the same for children *with a stable residence permit*. A possible explanation might relate to the fact that children with a stable residence permit may have been better prepared for their return, often having visited their 'home' country before the return and probably being more acquainted with the living situation after return. However, this interaction between age, the procedural characteristics in the host country, and the preparedness for the return is yet unexplored.

In chapter 5, a follow-up study was conducted into the reintegration and wellbeing over a longer period of time of a particularly vulnerable group, and the support for reintegration in the countries of origin. The following research questions were addressed: *How does the wellbeing and reintegration of these returnee children evolve over a longer period of time? What are the experiences of professionals, parents and children with assistance that was provided to alleviate concerns in the child's situation after the return to Kosovo and Albania?*

Chapter 5 found that the reintegration difficulties and social-emotional problems did not diminish with time for all the children who faced problems before. The group of children facing problematic outcomes during the follow-up study experienced an *accumulation* of risk factors in their lives, consisting of, inter alia, illness, safety issues, poverty, having no connection with Kosovo before the return, and poor wellbeing of the parents. As a result, most of these children dropped out of school, had no friends or supportive network, and stayed inside the house mainly. These children were all older adolescents; a period in which children develop their identity in relation to the wider social context, and spend more time with peers than previously (Kalverboer, Zijlstra, & Knorth, 2009). Close relationships with friends seem to be universally valued among adolescents worldwide (Gibbons, 2004). In this respect the BIC-Model societal conditions become more important to the adolescent's development, compared with their importance for younger children (Zijlstra, 2012). The finding that some children still encountered difficulties regarding the societal conditions after a longer period of return – and ended up leading isolated and rather 'invisible' lives – is a

particular point of concern regarding the development opportunities for children after repatriation. While support to alleviate some of these concerns was provided to the children during an earlier phase in the research, it did not seem to address the various struggles that the children encountered on different levels in their lives (*i.e.*, economic, social and psychosocial). Instead, the assistance only filled ‘one gap in their needs’ and was insufficient to alleviate the multiple problems these families were facing after the repatriation. This finding emphasises the need for the careful identification of care objectives and planning the support that is needed for a child to reintegrate successfully after return to the country of origin (cf. Carr, 2014; Tausendfreund & Knot-Dickscheit, 2015).

Strengths and Limitations

Reflecting on our study, we discern some strengths and limitations in the way we studied how children are faring after repatriation to their countries of origin.

Strengths

Comprising a general understudied and ‘invisible’ group in academic research, this study provides further insight into the living situation and wellbeing of repatriated migrant and asylum-seeker children in two highly relevant countries of origin. Many migrants in the EU originate from Kosovo and Albania, and they face low possibilities regarding their right to stay on grounds of asylum. This research substantiated the ‘possible development scenarios’ for children after a return decision through an integrative view of the elements that are essential in a best interests of the child assessment (see Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013; Kalverboer et al., 2017). The knowledge in this study can thus be of added value with regard to decision-making in asylum procedures (Zijlstra, 2012) and for developing appropriate reintegration support for a vulnerable group of children: those who are currently awaiting a final decision regarding their asylum application in host countries or are facing repatriation to their country of origin.

A Western-European understanding of ‘good’ child-rearing practices may oppose the values that asylum seekers are socialised with in their countries of origin. By using local knowledge and interpretations through an ‘emic’ approach (Berry, 1999; Berry & Poortinga, 2006), we aimed to avoid the imposition of a Western understanding of child-rearing. The research was therefore conducted

in close collaboration with Kosovar professionals who assessed the quality of the child-rearing environment from their cultural perspectives.

In addition, to provide a more complete picture of the realities and lives of children after return, we studied the situation of returnee children through various perspectives – those of the local professionals, the parents, and the children. Through our follow-up study we were able to shed light on how the reintegration evolves over a longer period of time for a particularly vulnerable group of children. The mixed methodology that we used enabled us to provide additional context to our findings.

Finally, despite the overall difficulties related to tracing returnees after the repatriation to Western-Balkan countries of origin (see also Black et al., 2004), we managed to include a considerable number of returnee children. Even though the sample was relatively small for the Mokken scale analysis (chapter 3) and did not permit the use of more advanced models to study predictors of the social-emotional wellbeing (chapter 4), we were able to find significant results that were supported by the existing literature and research on child development and migration studies.

Limitations

As it concerned a first study into the situation of returnee children, we were unable to include control groups of non-returnees in Kosovo and Albania, or of Kosovar and Albanian migrant children who were still residing in the host countries. Insights from such control groups could have provided a better interpretation in terms of comparison and evaluation of the specific outcomes for the repatriated children.

A further limitation in this study is that the social-emotional wellbeing was not researched through a thorough clinical investigation, but screened by using a self-report questionnaire. A more complete picture of the nature of children's assets and problems could have been obtained through the consultation of more informants (e.g., caregivers, teachers, or other significant people to the child), or by using a more narrative approach to investigate children's stories (De Haene, Grietens, & Verschueren, 2010; Kohli, 2006).

In addition, due to the cross-sectional design that we used, the results in this study do not give insight into the causal relationship between the repatriation and the wellbeing of the children. Hence, we are unsure whether a child's low social-emotional wellbeing occurred due to adversities experienced before the flight, during the flight, during the stay in the host country, or after the

repatriation, or originated from factors that were not related to the migration. In this respect, a longitudinal design could have provided more insight into the impact of the repatriation in returnee children's lives.

At last, studying the situation after repatriation can be difficult due to incomplete returnee registration (see also Black et al., 2004; Silove, Steel, & Watters, 2000). In Kosovo and Albania there were no central registration or monitoring mechanisms at the time of conducting the study. In addition, we only focused on children (of 11 years and older) who migrated together with their families. Thus, including a random and representative sample of all returnee children in Kosovo and Albania was impossible.

Implications for research

The findings in this dissertation have several implications for research. The context of Kosovo and Albania – as generally considered ‘safe countries of origin’ – influenced the findings. Returnee children in other countries may face different kind of challenges, for instance related to safety, issues of mistrust by the local community, their original flight motives, or the impact of specific child-rearing practices or values (Bowerman, 2017; Carr, 2014; Davids & Van Houte, 2008; De Bree, Davids, & De Haas, 2010; Schuster & Majidi, 2015). Therefore, more insight is needed into the lives and situation of returnee children in other countries where children are repatriated. Certain research topics are particularly relevant to focus on in such studies.

First of all, though the BIC-Model child-rearing conditions and assessment with the BIC-Q proved to be valid within the cultural context of the Western-Balkans, the reliability and validity of the instrument will need to be further assessed before its use in other countries of origin (Van de Vijver & Poortinga, 1997; Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 2004). Through further studying the cultural sensitivity and universality of the BIC-Model child-rearing conditions, a universally-valid monitoring instrument can be developed, which could be used in the return decision-making and monitoring in all European countries (Kalverboer, 2014).

Second, due to the cross-sectional design in our study we were not able to include the variable of ‘quality of the child-rearing environment’ and ‘social-emotional wellbeing’ *before* the repatriation. Future research on the situation of returned children should provide more insight into the influence of the child's

experiences, living situation, and wellbeing during the various phases of the migration cycle (see also De Haene & Grietens, 2005).

Third, a topic that needs to be explored in future studies is the characteristics of children who are faring relatively well after the repatriation, and to gain more insight into the protective factors in their rearing environment or their resiliency to adverse experiences (Daud, af Klinteberg, & Rydelius, 2008; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Rutter, 1999; Sleijpen, Boeije, Kleber & Mooren, 2015). More knowledge is needed on how the resiliency of families and children could be strengthened in order for them to successfully reintegrate and rebuild their lives after return in the country of origin.

At last, this study only focused on adolescent children who migrated together with their families. More evidence is needed about the experiences of younger returnee children, and about what becomes of (former) unaccompanied minors once they are back in their countries of origin, and how they were prepared for their return (Kohli, 2011).

Implications for policy and practice

Migrant children made up 30% of all asylum applicants in the EU in 2016, and their arrival in EU host countries showed a six-fold increase over the years (European Commission, 2017). With their wellbeing and future possibilities often being important reasons for families to seek a better future by migrating abroad (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002), the wellbeing of migrant children should be a point of consideration for policy makers and social workers to focus attention on.

The findings show that the wellbeing and situation of repatriated children starts with the conditions under which they stayed in the host countries: migrant children who did not have a stable residence permit in the host countries had an enlarged chance to meet various challenges related to reintegration and wellbeing after return. In addition, the findings in chapter 5 show that an accumulation of risk factors in children's lives exacerbated their reintegration difficulties, and impacted their social-emotional problems also over a longer period of time. All families in the follow-up study were negative about their return, and some indicated that they would return to the host country if the possibility would arise. Though EU member states strive to enable sustainable return and durable solutions, the return in these cases did not seem to be 'successful'; in

contrast, some people felt betrayed about the situation they encountered after the return. In order to make the return of these families sustainable, their needs should be assessed prior to repatriation, and arrangements should be made for additional care and support with reintegration, tailored to their specific situation (Carr, 2014).

Currently, however, the identification of care objectives for children who are to be repatriated is absent, while most of the risk factors for the children's wellbeing in our study (*i.e.*, poor health, no connection with Kosovo due to a long stay abroad, unsafety because of blood feuds, poor wellbeing of the parents, single-mother households, no social supportive network) might have been identified before the return *if* appropriate assessment of the child's interests would have taken place in line with article 3 CRC. Thus, the best interests of the child should be weighed in return decisions taken in the host countries. If, after assessing and balancing all the elements in light of the child's specific circumstances, it is decided that a child can return safely to the country of origin, the family and child should be prepared for the return. An accompanying *return plan* could focus on ensuring the child's rights and development opportunities after the return (see also Comensha, 2016; Goeman, Vegter, Zijlstra, & Bonhage-Talsma, 2017).

Through the integrative view of the elements that are essential in the best interests of the child assessment, the BIC-Model child-rearing conditions can be used as the specific attention points in such a return plan. Half of the BIC-Model conditions are dependent on the parents' ability to provide for a good quality of the child-rearing environment, namely: 'adequate physical care', 'safety in the direct physical environment', 'affective atmosphere', 'supportive flexible child-rearing structure', 'adequate examples by parents', 'interest', and 'continuity in upbringing conditions'. Therefore, taking into account the needs of all family members could bring up the specific points of attention. For *parents* to be better 'equipped' for offering a good quality of child rearing environment, the three interrelated dimensions of 'embeddedness' could be assessed beforehand (economic, social network, and psychosocial embeddedness; see Ruben, Van Houte, & Davids, 2009; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008; Van Houte, 2014). Any shortcomings could be targeted through concrete actions in a return plan. The return plan could focus, for instance, on questions related to *employment and subsistence* (*e.g.*, how will the family live after return, where could they find employment); *housing* (*e.g.*, where will they live), *social networks* (*e.g.*, which social networks does the family still have in the country of origin, could contacts

be re-established before the return), and whether there are any other factors that may make the family members vulnerable after return (e.g., issues related to health, medical access, safety, discrimination and persecution, single-mother households).

Regarding the *children* in the families, concrete actions in the return plan should focus on 'neutralizing' the child-specific risk factors for development after the return (cf. Rutter, 1999). The findings in this study showed that child-specific risk factors consisted of barriers to enrolling or staying in education, establishing friendships or being bullied with peers, language problems, and feelings of belonging to the society after the return. Therefore, questions in the return plan could focus, for instance, on which school the child will go to after return, and how barriers to enrol in education will be solved before the repatriation; what the child expects or still knows about the situation after return and whether these expectations are in line with reality; whether the child has a social network and contacts with peers in the country of origin – and if not, whether the child could be put in contact with peers beforehand, such as with other repatriated peers and families in the country of origin (for further examples of questions and the counselling process, see Comensha, 2016). In this respect, a more *circular* approach in the phase of return preparation – enabling the family to arrange some of the shortcomings before the final return – might also benefit the sustainability of the repatriation (see also Black & Gent, 2006).

At last, and in line with the child's right in article 12 CRC (see also Grietens, 2011; Kalverboer, 2014), an essential perspective that should always be included in the preparation for the return is the *child's own perspective*.

