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Repatriation and the best interests of the child

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Summary in English

Background and aim of the research

The return of rejected asylum seekers has a high priority on the national agendas of European States. To take well-informed decisions with regard to – specifically – the *return of asylum-seeking children*, insight is needed into how children fare after the repatriation to their country of origin.

This dissertation aims to gain insight into how migrant and asylum-seeker children fare after return to their countries of origin, and to identify the risk and protective factors for children's development after return. This knowledge is needed to be able to better consider children's interests in the return decision-making (in line with article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC). In addition, this dissertation provides points of consideration regarding the reintegration support for asylum-seeker children who need to return. The data in this dissertation have been collected in Kosovo and Albania, and are exemplary for the situation of children after repatriation.

In order to study how children fare after return to their country of origin, we used the 'Best Interests of the Child Model' (BIC Model), and the 'Best Interests of the Child-Questionnaire' (BIC-Q). This questionnaire measures the quality of the child-rearing environment through 14 child-rearing conditions in a child's familial and societal upbringing context: 1) adequate physical care; 2) safe direct physical environment; 3) affective atmosphere; 4) supportive, flexible child-rearing structure; 5) adequate examples by parents; 6) interest; 7) continuity in upbringing conditions, future perspective; 8) safe wider physical environment; 9) respect; 10) social network; 11) education; 12) contact with peers; 13) adequate examples in society; 14) stability in life circumstances, future perspective. The sum score of the judgments for these 14 child-rearing conditions determines the *quality of the child-rearing environment*.

As the rearing situation of children is influenced by the cultural context in which they grow up, the meaning and interpretation of child-rearing conditions may differ in countries of origin of migrant children and in Western countries. In addition, also the judgement when a condition is considered to be of a 'good' or 'unsatisfactory' quality can vary across cultural contexts. Before using the BIC-Q (which was developed in the Netherlands) in a non-Western context, the validity of the instrument needs to be examined. In theory, there might be a risk that the BIC-Model conditions and the assessment with the BIC-Q only focus on dimensions that are relevant to children in Western countries, and overlook or

neglect important child-rearing issues in migrant children's countries of origin (such as in Kosovo and Albania).

This dissertation consists of two parts. In the first part we report about research on the content and construct validity of the BIC-Model conditions and the BIC-Q in the cultural context of the Western-Balkans (chapter 2 and 3). The second part of this dissertation focuses on how children fare after the return: which children seem to fare well, which children face social-emotional problems, and which factors seem to be associated with their wellbeing? (chapter 4). In chapter 5, we describe the results of a follow-up study and the wellbeing of a group of children over a longer period of time, and elaborate on the question how children could be supported with their reintegration after return.

Part I: Validity of the BIC-Model child-rearing conditions and assessment with the BIC-Q in the cultural context of the Western-Balkans

Chapter 2 focuses on the question to what extent the BIC-Model conditions have the same meaning, and are interpreted in the same manner in a Western-Balkan and Western-European context (in this case, the Netherlands). Through adopting a multi-method approach (a seminar, an expert's opinion, and a focus-group discussion) and in close collaboration with Kosovar professionals, we studied the content validity of the *Best Interest of the Child* Model (BIC Model) and Questionnaire (BIC-Q). The findings indicated that all conditions were recognised in child-rearing practices in the cultural context of the Western-Balkans. Specific cultural aspects influence the meaning and interpretation of child-rearing conditions, such as the importance of the extended family in child-rearing, authoritarian child-rearing practices, the question whether children grow up in rural or in urban areas, and belong to a specific ethnic group (Albanian or Roma). Furthermore, the stability of the state can be relevant for the meaning and interpretation of specific child-rearing conditions. Additional procedural and research-related factors that could affect the assessment with the BIC-Q in Kosovo and Albania were brought forward during the field study. Therefore, additional attention was given to the training of the Kosovar interviewers.

Chapter 3 focuses on the cultural factors that may influence the judgements of the quality of a child's rearing environment when completing the BIC-Q from a local cultural perspective in the country of origin, and whether the judgments

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from the Kosovar assessors differ from those of the Dutch assessors. In addition, this chapter studies the construct validity of the BIC-Q and the question whether the questionnaire is a strong and reliable scale to assess the quality of the child-rearing environment from a Kosovar perspective. To assess cultural differences in the judgements of the child-rearing conditions, the agreement of the scores in the BIC-Qs when completed from a Kosovar and a Dutch cultural perspective on child-rearing was measured through Cohen's kappa. The research sample consisted of 63 families, who returned to Kosovo and (Northern) Albania. The results show that the Kosovar and Dutch professionals agree with one another with regard to the scores of nearly all child-rearing conditions, except for the conditions 'respect' and 'interest'. The construct validity of the BIC-Q scale was assessed through a Mokken scale analysis, and demonstrates a strong and reliable scale ($H=.73$; $Rho=.97$).

Part II: Children's rearing environment, wellbeing, and support for reintegration after return to the country of origin

Chapter 4 focuses on the quality of the child-rearing environment and the social-emotional wellbeing of migrant children after their return in Kosovo and Albania ($N=106$). Kosovar professionals assessed the quality of the child-rearing environment for each child through the BIC-Q. The social-emotional wellbeing was assessed through a self-report version of the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' (SDQ), which was completed by the children. Using regression analyses, the study investigated the predictive factors for children's social-emotional wellbeing after return. The findings show that procedural characteristics and ethnicity of the child predict the emotional problems and problems with peers. This relationship is mediated by the quality of the child-rearing environment; the higher the quality of the child-rearing environment, the less social-emotional problems a child experiences after return. The most vulnerable children did not have a stable resident status in the host country, belonged to a minority ethnic group and were older adolescents. The findings imply that the wellbeing of returned children is not only dependent on conditions after repatriation, but also on the conditions in the host country.

Chapter 5 focuses on the question how the social-emotional wellbeing of a vulnerable group of children evolved over a longer period of time, and how professionals, parents and children experienced the assistance that was provided in an earlier phase of the research. Of the 32 children who were provided with

assistance, we traced 24 children and interviewed their parents via the telephone. Subsequently, we visited 13 children and their parents for in-depth interviews. In the results section, we distinguished two groups of children: those with and those without problematic outcomes three years later. The children with problematic outcomes faced different types of challenges in their living situation (such as school drop-out, poor wellbeing of parents, language problems, living isolated and having no friends). We could find no indication that a better situation of a child was related to the assistance that they were provided with during the earlier phase of the research. In this light, this study provides suggestions concerning how families and children who must return to their countries of origin could be better supported, such as the need for a systemic approach to the support with reintegration and setting up a return plan before the actual repatriation.

General discussion

Chapter 6 comprises the general discussion of the results in this dissertation. We summarize the most important findings regarding the validity and reliability of the assessment with the BIC-Q in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, we recapitulate our findings with regard to the question how the children fare after their return in Kosovo and Albania, and the role of professional support regarding the return and reintegration. In this chapter we also present the implications of our research for future research and practice. These recommendations concern, among others, the need for further research into the situation of returnee children in various countries of origin. In addition, we recommend that the children who (need to) return to their country of origin are well prepared for their return, with an emphasis on the possibilities for the child to develop in the (new) situation, and on decision-making being in accordance with article 3 of the CRC.

About
the author

Danielle Zevulun was born on August 8 1985 in Afula (Israel) and grew up in a small village in Drenthe, the Netherlands. She holds master degrees in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Utrecht, and Public International Law at the University of Amsterdam. During her studies in Cultural Anthropology, she focused on subjects related to multiculturalism, nationalism and identity. As part of her studies, she conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala on the influence of the civil war in the lives of Maya youth, and in Israel on the sense of belonging and exclusion of an Israeli-Arab minority group (the Bedouins). During her studies International and European Law, she focused on subjects related to international human rights, the European asylum system and refugee law. She conducted internships at the Advisory Council of International Affairs (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and at the Department for Migration Policy (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations). Prior to starting her PhD research at the University of Groningen in 2012, she worked as a legal consultant and volunteer at the Dutch Refugee Council. Since July 2017, Danielle works as a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care at the University of Groningen.

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