

PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDCARE AND THE TAKE-UP OF CHILDCARE SERVICES AMONG ROMANIAN HOUSEHOLDS

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Abstract

Family policy changes over the last decade in many European welfare states, Romania included, supported by EU policy discourses, have been driven by an increasing attention paid to “investment” in children, particularly during the early years. Underpinned by competing policy objectives, early years childcare services and policy instruments supporting formal childcare have been expanding Europe-wide. However, the success of such “investments” should be seen at the confluence of high quality service provision and parental decisions around take-up. This paper focuses on a sample of Romanian parents’ understandings of childcare and, in doing so, locates the role that non-familial carers – particularly crèche nurses and kindergarten teachers – are seen to play in children’s upbringing in an attempt to explain differences in these parents’ take-up of formal childcare services.

Keywords: caring, childcare services, child investment, parental narratives, Romania.

Introductio

The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which a sample of Romanian parents thought about their own caring and the ways in which their different conceptualisations of childcare informed their decisions to rely or not on childcare provided by nurses in crèches¹ and by pre-school teachers and carers in kindergartens.² Therefore the article explores how these parents thought about, talked of and gave meaning to caring, influencing

¹ Crèches are early years care institutions for children aged three months to three years. Staffed by nurses and carers, services tend to be void of a pedagogical component (see also Ulrich, 2009).

² Romanian legal provisions have long stipulated three kinds of kindergarten: short-schedule (5 hours tuition, with a meal included), long-schedule (maximum 10 hours tuition with a care component that includes a nap and meals) and weekly-schedule kindergarten (with weekday, round-the-clock tuition and care). Kindergartens are staffed by teachers and carers, the former being in charge of groups of not more than 20 children.

their perceptions about the possibilities of relying on different types of formal childcare services. By outlining parental ideas about “good” caring through their reflections on their own parenting in particular, the article wishes to reveal the diversity of rationales for either making or not making use of formal care services for children under, as well as above age three. The interest in deciphering the basis of parental motives for making or not making use of such services through an account of understandings of caring more generally is rooted in the argument that the take-up of such services is only in part determined by the availability and quality of formal childcare services.

The last decade has seen the emergence of new social policy discourses and a shift in policy provisions at both EU and member state levels that have framed maternal employment and children’s early years development as key policy concerns. There has been a universal shift towards what Lewis (2001) called the adult worker model, albeit to different extents in different countries, cross-cutting social policy domains, making paid work an increasingly universal expectation of *all* citizens (Lewis and Giullari 2005; Lewis et al. 2008) in the broader context of the individualisation of citizenship (Daly 2011). Active labour market policies, welfare-to-work provisions, work-family reconciliation measures have been at the forefront of recent policy reforms across the board (Drobnic and Guillen 2011). At the same time, driven by concerns over population ageing and a contraction of European labour markets, slowed growth and increasing inequalities in younger cohorts, a new policy discourse of child investment has also strengthened (Jenson 2006; Moss 2006). Generically framed by such policy discourses, the last decade especially has been characterised by an expansion of care services for both children and elderly and cash-for-care provisions, even in strong male breadwinner welfare states that have historically not had such service provision (Glendinning and Kemp 2006; Ellingsaeter and Gulbrandsen 2007). Regardless of family policy legacies, influential in shaping the path-dependent changes in childcare policies (Pfau-Effinger 2005), what seems to emerge is a political consensus – both at the EU level and in a majority of member states – around a particular family model in which adults work and children enjoy group-based, formal care services with an educational content (Moss 2006).

In a more lack-lustre fashion, Romanian childcare policies have partly followed a policy trajectory similar to many advanced welfare states. With

the rewriting of the provisions for paid parental leave in 2005³ and the introduction of an educational component into early years childcare provision through the law on “national” education in 2011,⁴ the Romanian welfare state has been making progress towards a child investment agenda that has become increasingly popular in many advanced welfare states. In addition, the late 2000’s have been characterised by a slow, but consistent increase in the number of early *education* institutions – kindergartens – in both urban and rural areas, ensuring close to universal coverage both at national and local levels. In short, recent Romanian policy developments have shyly shifted, in spite of the absence of competing discourses buttressing this shift, towards what has been called the “LEGO® paradigm” in social policy towards families with children⁵ (Jenson 2006).

However, as briefly outlined earlier, the success of welfare states’ attempts at “investing” into their children depends only in part on the particularities and implementation of policies geared towards this particular policy goal. Cross-national studies have revealed path-dependent trends in the take-up of early years care services throughout Europe, as well as within-country variations in reliance on formal, group-based care and educational services among parents from different socio-economic backgrounds (Kremer 2007; Debacker 2008). These variations have been frequently explained, in cross-national analyses especially, by a focus on care regimes and the division of labour – both within families, as well as between families, the welfare state and the markets – that the different types of care regimes encouraged (Daly and Lewis 1998; Ferrarini 2006; Kremer 2007; Bygren et al. 2011). At the same time, a substantial literature focusing on household-level processes to do with decisions around the division of caring labour (Hochschild 1989; Crompton 1999; Himmelweit and Sigala 2004; Larsen 2004) and questions about the delegation of childcare (Duncan and Edwards 1999), particularly by mothers, revealed that parental ideas about parenthood, childhood, the compatibilities and incompatibilities between paid work and care responsibilities – in short, “culture” – were also influential in explaining mothers’ decisions around employment (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Ferrarini 2006) and patterns in care arrangements (Pfau-Effinger 2005; Kremer 2007). In other words, individually held, but more pervasive,

³ Emergency ordinance no. 148/2005 and later modifications.

⁴ Law no. 1/2011 of national education.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that if analysing a much broader set of social policies targeted at *all* members of Romanian households with children over the last decade, this shift towards an investment-driven social policy paradigm may be less decisive (see for instance Rañ 2008).

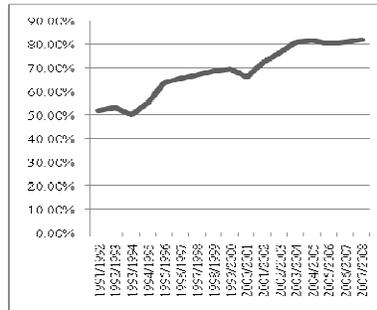
collectively shared normative ideas about childcare have been found to be important in explaining patterns in cross-national and within-country variations in the take-up of different types of non-familial childcare. Beyond policy discourses and family policy designs, individual agency – informed by ideas about childcare, parenthood, childhood and paid work – has been seen to shape household-level decisions about childcare, including the take-up of childcare services, formal or informal.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 provides a discussion on the supply of and demand for childcare services for toddlers and young children, anchoring the discussion in what appears to be a laggard demand for childcare services, especially for children of pre-school age, in spite of close to universal coverage. Section 2 reviews the data on which the analysis is based on and provides a brief account of the analytic approach used. Section 3 explores parents' different conceptualisations of caring and parenting and provides insights about the ways in which different perspectives on childcare were directly related to different degrees of attractiveness of different types of formal childcare (crèche, short-schedule and long-schedule kindergarten, respectively). Section 4 provides a brief discussion of the findings and concludes the article.

The Supply of and Demand for Childcare Services

Childcare policy developments in Romania over the last decade have followed a variety of different routes, shaping the Romanian childcare regime – perhaps closest to the comprehensive support model (Szelewa and Polakowski 2008, 126-127), although this is, in many ways, a misnomer – in often contradictory ways. Firstly, the coverage of publicly subsidised childcare services has slowly expanded, but for children above age three exclusively (European Commission 2010, 14), achieving enrolment levels of around 80% during the early 2000's (see Chart 1.). At the same time, early years care provision – in crèches – declined and remained extremely scarce and lacked a pedagogical component (Ulrich 2009) (see Chart 2.).

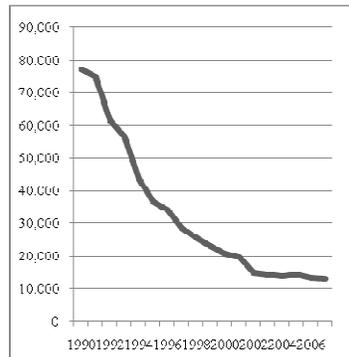
Chart 1. Percentage of children in the 3-6 age group enrolled in kindergarten (short- or long-schedule) between 1991-2008.



Source: Romanian National Statistical Institute.

Not until 2011, with the passing of the new law of education, did early years public childcare in Romania become part of the public education system, with provisions for the employment of pre-school *teachers* rather than that of *nurses* and carers, as has been historically the case (Ulrich, 2009). However, the implications of this new provision on actual supply remain unclear since no policy objectives for the expansion in terms of coverage of what is now called ante-preschool education services have been formulated as yet.

Chart 2. The number of beds in public crèches in Romania between 1990 and 2006.



Source: Romanian National Statistical Institute; Ulrich (2009, 9).

At the same time, the Romanian government has taken no steps to encourage the development of a system of informal, group-based childcare services, in part or fully state-subsidised, as for instance registered childminders in the UK or family day care in Denmark (Kremer 2007). In short, while early years' education has been slowly expanding during the 2000's in ways that permitted the accommodation of over four fifths of

children in the relevant age groups, public or private early childcare services, for children under three, have been stagnating.⁶ In summary, as far as the supply side of Romanian childcare services is concerned, there has been a path-dependent polarisation in the supply of (public and private) childcare services for children older and younger than three, respectively. With the introduction of a pedagogical component into early years' childcare services, whether public or private, Romanian childcare policy may be seen to have shifted focus to an explicit investment paradigm.

Demand for such services, while understudied, seems to suggest a similar polarisation: while demand for early years' childcare remains low, demand for pre-school education services has been high. With a coverage rate of under 2%, it is not surprising that crèche services – whether public or private – have been in high demand, particularly among dual-earning households without informal care networks (Ulrich, 2009), but perhaps still far behind the demand for kindergarten services. The relative stability of overall enrolment rates in kindergartens over the past decade (oscillating around 80%) suggests that pre-school education, whether short- or long-schedule, is widely popular and in high demand, although higher for older children. Still, only around 85% of children aged five and six, for whom the preparatory kindergarten year has long been mandatory, were enrolled throughout the mid 2000's (European Commission 2010). This means that at least 15% of children in recent cohorts were not registered for pre-school education and care services. Ulrich's (2010) study suggests that it is mostly Roma children, from impoverished backgrounds, who remain outside the kindergarten network for reasons to do with the lack of resources and experiences of discrimination. With 59.5% of Romanian respondents indicating that the provision of affordable childcare services for working parents ranged from extremely bad to rather bad, meaning that the availability of these services was perceived as low (ESS 2008), the question remains: how did Romanian parents understand caring during children's early years and in what ways were parental conceptualisation of caring compatible with reliance on part-time or full-time formal childcare for children under and above age three?

⁶ No data exist about the expansion of the *informal* market of early years' childcare. It is likely that in local economies of childcare where the supply of public childcare services has been lower than on average – in large cities in particular – this market may be much more developed than overall. The private pre-school education and care market is certainly most developed in Bucharest, Cluj, Iasi, Oradea, Sibiu and Piatra Neam (see complete list at http://www.edu.ro/index.php/liste_nom_cent_cat/12072, accessed February 9th 2012).

An Outline of the Study and the Analysis

The article draws on a qualitative study carried out in 2010 with 68 mothers, fathers and grandmothers in 37 different households in two rural and one urban setting in one of the Romanian counties in the central development region of the country. In most households two in-depth interviews were carried out about the youngest child's childcare arrangements and more generally daily routines, as well as households' access to benefits in cash, in time and in kind (especially childcare services) by virtue of their children. For the purposes of this article, only interviews with mothers and fathers were analysed. Families sought for participation in the study were recruited through an opt-in strategy and were selected based on the following criteria: (1) households' locality of residence (the three localities were chosen before the commencement of the study), (2) parents' levels of education (*low*, i.e. compulsory education at most; *medium*, i.e. post-secondary non-tertiary education at most; and *high*, i.e. at least university degree) and (3) the age of the youngest child in the household (between one and five).

Of the 37 households in the study, 21 were urban and 16 rural (seven and nine from the two villages, respectively), leading to 41 interviews with urban parents and grandparents and 27 interviews with rural ones. Of the 61 parents in the study, 25 were highly educated, 17 had a post-secondary degree at most and 12 had compulsory education at most (and six of whom were illiterate). In 14 households the youngest child was younger than two at the time of interviewing, in another six the reference child was aged two to three and in the remaining 17 households the reference children were older than 3.

The inductive analysis carried out for the 61 in-depth interviews (as a result of the exclusion of seven interviews with grandmothers) progressed in three stages and was informed by an adapted grounded theory approach (Hennink et al. 2011). As a first step, a code-by-code computer-assisted thematic analysis was completed on the set of codes comprised under the 'childcare: activities' code family by grouping interviews according to parents' gender (mothers versus fathers) and levels of education (little educated, medium educated, highly educated mothers and fathers, respectively). As a result of within-sample comparisons, based on differences in gender and parental levels of education, the second stage of analysis, while maintaining a focus on particular activities (e.g. feeding, napping, hygiene and cleanliness related care activities, disciplining etc.),

comprised a systematic focus on semantics, particularly to do with the locating of parents' and children's agency in parents' narratives and depictions of carer-child interactions in descriptions of routine care activities. This second level of analysis revealed somewhat systematic differences in parental narratives along lines of gender, as well as parental levels of education, in relation to a diversity of childcare activities. The third stage of analysis, a step up from the comparison stage advocated by Hennink et al. (2011, 235-267), focussed on conceptualising the nature of these narrative differences in parental accounts in ways that permitted distinctions to be made between different approaches to childcare among participating parents. The results of this analysis are explored in Section 3.

A focus on the *meanings* parents attached to childcare and the more abstract analysis of semantics used to account for daily, routine childcare activities may be seen as an approach often rooted in constructivist and critical, e.g. feminist, epistemologies (see Ribbens 1994). While the interviewing process, aiming to include women *and* men within the same household, was indeed an attempt to "give voice" to "secondary" carers, i.e. fathers (Ribbens 1994, 37-38; Rapley 2007, 25; Morris 2009, 21), the analysis aimed to expose parental agency, i.e. how parents thought and acted in relation to caring and the care that formal childcare services, especially public, could offer.

Ethoses of Parenting among Romanian Parents

In accounting for the different *meanings* of caring and exploring the variations that existed among the different groups of carers in the sample in relation to these meanings, this section presents four different real-type conceptualisations of childcare derived from the narratives of 61 parents in the study.

Parents in the sample seemed to provide three distinct conceptualisations of childcare based on what they thought to be the most important aspects of childcare, i.e. what they saw as lying at the heart of childcare as a particular set of daily activities and practices: (i) childcare as *looking after children* or tending to children, (ii) childcare as *mindng children* or supervising children and, not least, (iii) childcare as *engaging with children* or "cultivating" (Lareau 2011) children. These different understandings of childcare seemed to be associated with different groups of carers distinguishable according to their levels of education and, more interestingly, ethnicity. Illiterate (Roma) carers tended to speak of childcare as a matter of looking after children and mindng (or supervising) them.

Little educated carers, i.e. with complete or partially completed compulsory education, tended to regard childcare as looking after children and in some cases referred to childcare as educating them – a particular understanding of engaging with children. Similarly, but with a greater stress on educating, Romanian-speaking carers with at least secondary education tended to stress these same two aspects of childcare in their accounts. Interestingly, Hungarian-speaking carers, whether medium- or highly-educated, were more likely to conceptualise the most important element of childcare to be engagement with them: play, togetherness, joint domestic and educational activities, exclusive attention etc. Gender appeared to be less relevant as regards the opinions carers held vis-à-vis caring, but was a more obvious dimension of difference in relation to actual involvement in the different activities subsumed under the concept of childcare. As far as ways of thinking about childcare were concerned, urban and rural carers differed much less than in relation to other issues, particularly care arrangements: ideas about childcare seemed not to have been particularly urban or rural among parents in this study: first language and socio-economic differences, e.g. levels of education, household income, labour market status etc., seemed more influential in this regard.

What emerged from carers' narratives was that childcare was understood and discussed as different sets of activities (physical, emotional and intellectual) to be done *for* children as part of their care and sets of activities to be done *with* them. The entirety of childcare in any individual parent's narrative appeared to be a particular combination of things to be done *for* and things to be done *with* the children, with different parents putting greater or less emphasis on aspects to be done *for* them and those to be done *with* them, respectively. In addition, the same activities were often depicted by different carers in different ways, revealing an implicit approach more centred on 'doing things *for*' children or an approach more focussed on 'doing things *with*' them. Carers' accounts of feeding, a universal aspect of childcare for all carers irrespective of children's ages, illustrates this versatile way of thinking and talking about most childcare-related activities well, whether physical (like feeding, playing, walking etc.), intellectual (for instance teaching, reading, singing etc.) or emotional (worrying, laughing, disciplining etc.). To illustrate such differences, two interview excerpts are reproduced below. Helen, a young, rural, little educated mother of her one-year-old daughter, detailed routine morning feeding thus:

In the morning when we wake up I have to prepare food 'cos if she hasn't eaten by 9 o'clock she cries. She's hungry, of course. Now since I, until recently I breastfed her, when she was around one she didn't eat much only, like, rarely, and since I weaned her off, she eats really well, she drinks water and I have no problems with her.

Miriam, a mature mother of her three-and-a-half-year-old son, described the routine of breakfasts on a kindergarten day in the following way:

He also wants it, he's gotten used to it ... that we eat together. And so he also enjoys his food more sometimes. I mean, yes, there are um ... moments when I say, we say, come, please ... or I take him and bring him here, into the kitchen to eat together, because he ... only wants to play then, but ... but mostly ... when we're together, we have breakfast together.

These two mothers reflected on the same issue - a regular breakfast - in very different ways. Helen's account focussed more on the labouring side of feeding that happened independently from her daughter, i.e. the prep work. Her account favoured herself rather than the nature of her interaction with her toddler during meals. In contrast, Miriam's description highlighted the mother-child exchange that usually took place in preparation for breakfast. In contrast to Helen's account, Miriam described breakfast in terms of the interaction between mother and her son: one can imagine what both of them were doing, what they were saying to each other and how sitting down to the table actually happened. Mother and child in the two descriptions were conferred different degrees of agency: while Helen's daughter remained absent and a docile eater, Miriam's son became a speaking, acting individual with his own desires and moods in preparation for breakfast.

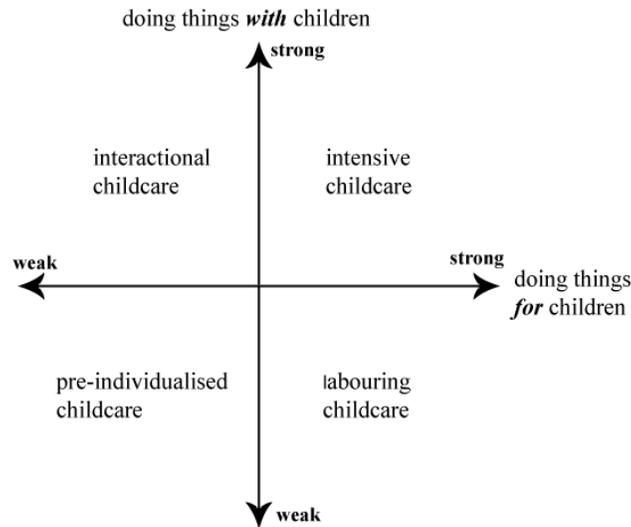
Although talking about having breakfast here, a systematic look at the assignment of agency in accounts of all childcare tasks and an overview of the incidence of interactions in these accounts revealed different ways of thinking about and conceptualising what childcare actually meant for them. For Helen, it was the physical work done *for* the benefit of the child, in this case the preparation of the food, which was seen as important. For Miriam, it was the intellectual exchange done *with* the child, i.e. the mutual negotiation that finally ended in sitting to the kitchen table for the breakfast to be prepared and then eaten together. Although both Helen and Miriam probably went through very similar motions to feed their children every morning, what they found important to describe - presumably an

expression of how they thought about this particular caring activity and others more generally – were different aspects, in different ways.

Similar differences in discussing caring activities were noticeable in all parents' narratives, although most seemed to conceive of childcare as combinations of activities to be done *for* their children and others to be done *with* them in which the stress on activities *for* and activities *with* varied from weak to strong (see Graph 1 below). It is interesting that a vast majority of narratives were consistent as regards the stress that doing things *for* and doing things *with* children received in parents' accounts. In what follows four different types of such combinations are described, revealing four distinct perspectives that were implicit in parents' narratives of childcare in the study.

Intensive childcare (1) was the image of caring that one formed based on the narratives of mothers –although some fathers' narratives also revealed this conceptualisation of childcare – who put great emphasis on both engaging *with* their children in a multitude of ways, e.g. joint play, joint domestic activities, educational activities etc., as well as the labouring aspects of childcare, e.g. cooking *for* them, feeding, bathing, putting them to sleep, comforting them etc. It was frequent that carers who adhered to this conceptualisation of childcare also viewed domestic chores as being done in the benefit of the children especially. They often found their entire days to be taken up by childcare-related activities, rarely spent time doing things away from their children and indeed found the delegation of childcare undesirable and emotionally difficult. For these carers, most frequently mothers with medium levels of education, children were personal projects whom they wished to share with no one, in the early post-partum months not even with their husbands or their own mothers. These carers often had well-defined routines in relation to a variety of childcare-related practices and did not tolerate alterations by others.

Graph 1. Carers' implicit perspectives on childcare.



If childcare was delegated at some point, other carers were expected to learn and adhere to these routines: they exercised license and mandate over all aspects of caring (Morgan 2002). Such carers' narratives conferred agency onto the carers themselves and to a less extent to children: childcare was at least as much about carers themselves as about the children they were raising. Carers revealing this perspective on childcare tended to be reluctant of non-parental (especially non-maternal) childcare and preferred short-schedule kindergarten for their children after age three rather than longer formal childcare. Delegation of caring responsibilities to crèche nurses was not seen as an option.

By contrast, *interactional childcare* (2) was a conceptualisation of childcare that was obvious in those parents' narratives who described most activities related to childcare as having been done *with* the children. These parents valued the interactive elements of caring especially. Although these carers may have found doing things *for* the children equally important in their daily routines, their narratives did not reflect this at all. Parents whose perspectives may be considered interactional – a minority in the sample, many highly educated and many Hungarian ones – put emphasis especially on childcare understood as engagement with children, notably joint play, joint domestic activities, outings and educational play. They also stressed – unlike their counterparts adhering to the intensive childcare perspective – the importance of emotional closeness and tuning in and

being constantly aware of children's moods. These parents derived their satisfaction in caring from the emotional exchanges that their caring relationships entailed rather than from the labour – physical and intellectual – that childcare amounted to, the case of carers discussing childcare in intensive terms. Interactive carers tended to maximise their time with their children and put emphasis on togetherness in family life in general. Parents who adhered to this interactional conceptualisation of childcare conferred most agency to the children in their narratives: their depictions of childcare were full of stories featuring what their children said or did and their feelings associated with those memories. These parents frequently marvelled at, laughed with and at their children and rarely worried or felt anxious about them, an experience much more common among carers with an intensive perspective on childcare. In spite of this difference, parents with an interactional understanding of caring also preferred short-schedule formal childcare after age three and found crèche care highly undesirable.

A *pre-individualised* perspective on *childcare* (3) was most evident in illiterate and some little educated parents' accounts. These carers' narratives tended to be void of a clear conceptualisation of what childcare routinely entailed and even if some aspects of childcare were named, they were hardly elaborated on. Childcare seemed to not form a distinct set of activities – physical, emotional or intellectual –, but was part of the routines of family life, especially for mothers. Childrearing and domestic labour were closely interwoven and seemed to form mothers' *raison d'être*, even if some of them wished to also engage in paid work to improve their families' dismal financial situation. Children, especially in the early years, were seen as passive recipients of their parents' (mostly mothers') caring, in need of being fed, kept clean, taken to the doctor, supervised and disciplined etc. Children in these carers' narratives, apart from infants and toddlers, who were nursed, seemed to be all alike, with the same needs, requiring the same kinds of parental effort: they appeared to be regarded as a bunch rather than different individuals and were cared for as a bunch, especially after they were weaned.

Table 1. The distribution of parents based on their conceptualisation of caring and children's age.

interactive childcare			intensive childcare		
21M-13	04F-27	40M-40	207F-9	30F-20	32F-39
22F-13	06M-29	107M-42	34F-12	36F-20	202F-39
213F-14	07F-29	20F-49	105M-17	23F-26	05F-60
204M-17	43M-38	27F-49	106F-17	15F-35	212F-61
17M-18	44F-38	09F-58	203F-17	31M-39	
18F-18	11M-39	211M-61			
29M-20	110F-39				
03M-27	39F-40				
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13F-10	215F-21	102M-38	35M-20	12F-39	41M-57
113F-15	103F-23	111F-62	24M-26	201M-39	42F-57
114M-15	205M-31		206F-31	108F-42	25M-59
			37M-38	28M-49	26F-59
			38F-38	209M-52	
			101F-38	210F-52	
pre-individualised childcare			labouring childcare		

Note: The first number is the parent code, the letter is his/her gender (M for male, F for female), followed by the age of the reference child (*italics*) at the time of interviewing.

Carers did not seek interaction with their children in general and with very few exceptions did not seem to derive pleasure from such interactions. Indeed, the main form of verbal communication with children, regardless of age, seemed to be disciplining. Shouting and scolding were frequently mentioned by illiterate and some little educated mothers, most living in the countryside, as very frequent occurrences, sometimes as a complaint. Caring was, for many of these carers, hard physical and emotional labour, a constant struggle, and as a result carers whose narratives revealed the pre-individualised perspective on childcare derived satisfaction in childcare from dressing them up in nice clothes, being able to buy them sweets, feeding them until they couldn't eat anymore etc. Carers sharing this perspective on childcare saw no benefit in formal childcare: some saw the services available to them either as poor in quality, difficult to access or, in some cases, likely sites for othering and shaming. Many, therefore,

refrained from making use of formal childcare and early education services altogether.

Labouring childcare (4) was an implicit conceptualisation of childcare that was most obvious among Romanian parents with somewhat older children (above three). These parents put most emphasis on tending to children as a vehicle for a proper upbringing: formal childcare was seen as the ideal place for education, interaction, play etc. Mothers whose narratives revealed this perspective tended to be impeccable housewives in addition to working full-time and spent most of their time at home on domestic chores rather than engaging with the children. Similarly, fathers whose narratives expressed a labouring approach to childcare emphasised children's schedules, the non-negotiable quality of attending long-schedule kindergarten, orderliness etc. and portrayed themselves as hard workers. Childcare for such carers was about making the right decisions to create the most ideal environment for children's proper upbringing and development: their actual education, socialisation and development was seen to take place as if naturally, in the appropriate contexts, e.g. the crèche, the kindergarten, organised sports etc. The focus in such narratives was very much on doing things *for* the children so that they could thrive: joint play or outings were seen as a children's thing rather than occasions for adult-child interactions. In their narratives, such carers laid less emphasis on children's agency, most frequently acknowledging that their children did manage to learn the rules, behave according to the conventions parents wished to inculcate. As already indicated, these carers were greatly in favour of long-schedule formal childcare as early as age two, often describing themselves as avid supporters of the crèche and long-schedule kindergarten, and routinely relied on these services.

Discussion and Conclusions

Parental narratives revealed four distinct ways of thinking about and talking about caring in general, i.e. not specifically about the care of their youngest child. It became clear that parents' ideas about the content of caring and what they valued most in relation to childcare – the labouring aspects of caring, the interactive dimensions of childcare, “everything” about children and their care or little in particular – influenced their perceptions about the care provided by others, especially professionals in formal settings. Perceived compatibilities between parental caring and formal childcare – both in spirit and in deed – informed parental decisions about the take-up of the various services, i.e. full-time crèche care, part-time or full-time pre-school education services. While decisions about take-

up were also shaped by a variety of constraints – and these were most salient in the narratives of poor households with one or no earners, urban and rural alike –, most parents in the study adhered to care arrangements that reinforced or reflected their own care ethos: for a majority of parents, crèche care was a non-option during their children’s first 18 to 24 months because it was seen to have too high child-to-carer ratios, detrimental for caring, and long-schedule kindergarten was, similarly, deemed inappropriate due to what was perceived as too long time away from the comfort – emotional and physical – of home. Similarly, parents who valued education and socialisation, structure and personal responsibility among other things insisted on long-schedule formal childcare, in group settings, with professionals: the crèche and long-schedule kindergarten were favoured above (non-parental) informal caring shortly after age two.

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