

SOCIAL RESEARCH REPORTS

ISSN: 2066-6861 (print), ISSN: 2067-5941 (electronic)

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Social Research Reports, 2013, vol. 25, pp. 50 - 62

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EARLY PARENTING. SOCIAL REALITY IN THE WRITTEN PRESS

Daniela SÎRBU¹

Abstract

Over the last few years we have witnessed an explosion of information and advice for parents on how to raise their children, communicated through books and magazines, television or via Internet. However, less attention has been granted to the quality of those messages and their impact over the public. The journalistic campaign impact, how the media fulfills its important role by providing information and support on parenting, school career and preparation for life, can be seen by analyzing the press articles released. In this study I want to analyze the representation of early parenting topic in the online written press in Romania. The first dimension concerns the evolution of media interest during the legal regulation regarding children's situation in Romania in the European context, while the second one relates to how the press plays an important role in providing information and support to young parents assuming their role as parents, in regards to the school career and preparation for life. The importance of the journalistic field in the social world is determined by the monopoly over large scale broadcasting of information. Through them, the media exerts a strong influence on the audience and the actors portrayed in news articles treat the relationship like any other, experimented or not, the journalist becoming the bridge between the individual life and the large public.

Keywords: parenting; minor mothers; public opinion; media field.

Introduction

Teenage pregnancy is an endemic problem throughout the world and has become a major concern due to both causes and negative effects. The leap of the socio-demographic statistical indicators, the low age of teenage girls that give birth, school dropout, excessive coverage and stigmatization of an age group that is psycho-emotionally vulnerable raised the level of debate and interest regarding the early pregnancy issue and youth parenting. The complexity of early pregnancy

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preoccupies specialists from many fields that involve the group age of teens, and the research of parenting becomes an important topic, of continuing interest for human sciences, of sociology in connection with social psychology, juridical and medical sciences. The study on parenting invites to a foray into the world of fundamental questions about nature, human evolution and its interaction with the environment, requiring an analysis of the factors which come from the sphere of personal and relational characteristic, roles and values, and mostly from the various perspectives on the parental role. Defining parenting becomes increasingly difficult, taking into account the complexity of the daily life, the diverse parenting practices, the multitude and diversity of the family configurations which in turn lead to a diversity of parental arrangements. This regulates “the content of relations and variably influences, over the history and from culture to culture, the social life overall” (Ilut, 2005:89).

Arendell considers parenting is “an umbrella-term that covers a variety of abilities and activities fulfilled by parents that secure nurturing and care for a child” (Arendell, apud Cojocar, 1997:1). Parenting has gone through different meanings and the flexibility of the concept allowed for numerous uses. Parenting is the concept that designates the role, responsibilities, social rights of parents in relation with their children and it involves various behaviors, abilities and learned objectives by participating in the social community. The capacity to nurture, to empathize, although intrinsically human, is developed by learning. The parent-child relationships are formed and sustained through social interactions, and the experience of these relationships is interpreted, receiving an educational significance. In the case of teen parents, exercising the parental role is a difficult task, considering the complexity of parental responsibilities and the specific needs of this age. Erikson’s theory argues that “teenage women’s task to switch to parenting coincides with the process of psycho-social development of identity” (Erikson, apud Kroger, 2007: 206-207). Some researches show that, even in conditions of difficult periods of the life cycle, “many young women fit well to the maternal role, accumulating progress for them and their children.” (Arai, 2009: 171-183).

The notion of *public opinion*, introduced a long time ago in the scientific language, but also in the everyday life vocabulary, covers a dynamic social reality representing “all the individual opinions emerging into the public discussion, related to the current social problems” (Chelcea, 2000: 4). Many times, by having different meanings, with various significances, the phrase *public opinion* may create a major interest for the specific issue it reflects, either directly or in relation to other social phenomena and processes.

Press can be a useful source of information, contributing to the alleviation of social barriers through the types, values and attitudes that it broadcasts, or a source of dangerous misinformation. As a result of some severe criticism, the social responsibility of the press became a major theme and a series of standards in the journalistic practice have been set. Media channels are considered to be systems that connect individuals to the social field, but also the elements of a “field of battle that are looking to transform or maintain this field of forces” (p. Bourdieu, 2007: 66).

A study of the way in which the minor mothers are perceived in the press can provide an answer to social and civic control of their vulnerability. Triggering alertness and concern, the problem of young mothers can be located in a corridor of interest of the journal, producing social and media hysteria. Pierre Bourdieu identifies the presence of imitation and copying phenomena in the journalistic practice, which are used for media exclusiveness and could lead to the risk of “uniformization and ridicule” (Bourdieu, 2007: 158).

The way the press reflects early parenting, the profile of the actors involved or co-interested, can be an indicator for determining vulnerability of young mothers, as well as a perspective for analyzing the functions that the print media has in relation to the general public. From the beginning we want to mention that we do not judge the manner in which the media chooses to present young mothers or the phenomenon of pregnancy in adolescence. News articles are based on facts, and the decision to present a theme or another belongs to the journalists, but we can't say that the image of an actor in the media is the one that results from the press articles. Through the study of phenomena and actors portrayed „sociology can contribute to diminishing the symbolic violence that is exercised in social relations and, in particular, in the media communication relations” (Bourdieu, 2007: 23).

Therefore, the journalistic world is a hierarchical system of forms of power and capital, unevenly distributed, and so journalists are constantly subject to manoeuvres to occupy internal positions of power and glory, according to their capacity and disposition. With the social events not having a fixed existence, the journalist is forced to be connected to the social field, and the media is subject to the constraints of this field.

Research Methodology

The study has a dominant qualitative dimension imposed by its exploring character, generated by the small amount of research papers and documents on early parenting. The usage of documentation and content analysis is complementary, and between methods and techniques there are “links of superordination and subordination, generated by the degree of abstraction, of the operating level (abstract, concrete), as well as the relation it has with the theoretical level” (Chelcea, 2001: 50). We considered as appropriate the analysis of the press articles looking at the frequency of appearances and of the subjects dealt with and then doing the core content analysis, thematization and categorization. Press articles, statistical data, and any other documentary sources can be considered social documents and are subject to „a qualitative analysis in terms of the speech used, the social text because they have a semiotic structure” (Iluț, 1997: 134).

The study on the representation of early parenting in the press is organized as a sociological inquiry, starting with the identification of the materials, combined with the specific theory, following the three phases model, namely *pre-analysis*, *material exploration*, *processing and interpretation of the results* (Moscovici and Buschini, 2007: 300). Several selection criteria were used for information filtering

and in order to create the sample, going through the following steps described below: (1) Search engine: Google (www.Google.com); (2) Terms used: parenting, early parenting, minors, minor mothers (for sequential searches were drawn up appropriate lists of terms used); (3) The study was conducted on two time dimensions, as follows: (3.1) analysis of documents published in 2005-2012 in regards to the representation of minor mothers phenomenon in the print media, in the context of the legal regulation upon children's situation in Romani, following the issue of Law No. 272/2004 on the promotion and protection of children's rights; for the identification of archived press articles within the indicated timeframe and of relevance to the study, we decided to use that phrase "minor mothers", by consulting the electronic editions of *Evenimentul zilei* (*Event of the Day*), *Jurnalul Național* (*National Journal*), *Gândul* (*The Thought*), and *Libertatea* (*Liberty*) newspapers; (3.2) analysis of documents published from July 2011 to July 2012; a search in the above listed newspapers' archives was made based on the same key phrase. The choice of the research period is justified by the issue of Law no. 132/01 July 2011, in order to approve the Government Emergency Ordinance (GEO) no. 112/2010 regarding the monthly leave and allowance for children's raising, a normative document published in the Official Monitor (O.M.) 452/1 July 2011, by which financial support for young women who attend day courses of pre-university or university (bachelor or master degree), as well as of post-university studies at the level of master degree is regulated. All these day courses need to be organized according to the legislation, in country or abroad, in an area recognised by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, except the cases where studies are interrupted from medical reasons. (4) Types of sites: the sites of publications included in the study. I have summarized the selection process searches to articles that appear in the on-line editions of publications that could be classified under the five kinds of journalism as identified by C. Sparks, i.e. serious press, semi-serious press, serious-popular press, kiosk tabloid press and super-market tabloid press (Coman, 2007: 35); (5) The search level: I started successive searches using the following keywords: parenting, early parenting, minor, minor mothers. The most relevant answers resulted from the last phrase.

The following findings resulted from the two search paths mentioned at point 3 (first between 2005-2012 and the second between July, 2011-July 2012): from repeated searches, most pertinent answers could be obtained by with the phrase "minor mothers", first link leading to *ziare.com* web site. I considered that I should reduce the search to the top journals and their archives, using the phrase "minor mothers", so the searches allowed the construction of the corpus. The articles identified in the publications archive were arranged in a separate list for each journal, by the date of appearance, relevant to the first period of study. The method was useful in showing the frequency in which the situation of minor mothers is reflected in the print media, and also in the elaboration of quantitative results.

Considerations regarding the choice of Internet for the current study have been supported on one hand by the public interest for the information received from the on-line source, for printed publication, which has been on an increased trend recently, information confirmed by Media Fact Book 2012, published by the

Initiative Media Romania Agency. On the other hand, this was used to diversify the sample, having a perspective upon the reflection of minor mothers situation nationwide. By studying the articles identified on the sites of central (national) publications, there is a coverage over most of the country's regions. Also, the study covers a relatively long period of time (7 years), marked by legislative and institutional reform in the field of child protection.

Articles included in the corpus have been identified and extracted from the site archive, these publications being audited between January-March 2012 by the Romanian Audit Bureau of Circulations. These are in fact the sample for the analysis of articles published between July 2011-July 2012. The corpus of work for the content analysis is built from those 19 articles that have received a code based on the name of the publication and order of appearance. Upon the completion of coding phase, the first activity within the content analysis, was learning about the analysis documents, i.e. achievement of floating reading, “undertaken unorientedly, in full freedom, nonprioric, to allow ideas of techniques to appear” (Moscovici et al., 2007: 304). The corpus was obtained by re-assembling the articles, and then arranged chronologically and encoded. After the first reading we have identified the main and secondary topics so as to outline the “cut unit” (Singly, Gotman, Kaufmann, 1998: 179), around which we have grouped the other categories discovered, actors and portrayals, developing the central category on the direction of characteristics and functions of the media, using the “Thematic Tree” technique. I conducted an inventory of the main topics identified during the research, as well as an inventory of existing collateral topics in the text excerpt.

Limitations of the Methodological Approach

The reduced volume of the sample may be considered a limitation of the study. However, the use of qualitative techniques dogged in on topics and themes that may be considered important tracks for the subsequent researches. Another limitation of the study is a consequence of documentation analysis technique, namely that “the information was not collected for the use of the researcher; they are lacunar, sometimes contradictory or deformed by the subjectivity of those who have recorded them” (Mihăilescu, 2003: 42).

Results

The statistical analysis of the data was based on the interpretation of frequency tables or the respective percentages, on the underlining of major and secondary topics identified in the articles, the selection of dominant characteristics by applying the main components method, various graphic representations, and the establishment of some types using various classification procedures.

It is necessary to emphasize that the sample studied has a limited representativeness due to relatively low volume, which does not provide a big predictability. These aspects might induce certain reluctance towards an extension of

the results obtained from the statistical processing of the sample data to the level of the whole population. The procedures used have highlighted values in particular, and the statistical methods used highlight the quantitative appreciation of the media interest, the frequency and intensity with which topics related to the phenomenon of minor mothers and presentation of real situations are published. The methodology applied in two directions expands and restricts the scope of research, thus answering to multi-dimensional analysis criteria.

The main instruments used in the presentation of qualitative data are the *matrix*, the *table*, the *chart* and the *diagram*. The data entered have in turn several forms: figures, percentages, short text excerpts, quotes, phrases, abbreviations, symbols, images, as the authors considered the presentation to be “a visual format that shows the information consistently, so that the user can draw out valid conclusions and identify solutions and appropriate interventions” (Agabrian, 2004: 150).

After data collection, we concentrated them in the form of tables for each newspaper, where they were listed in order of appearance, the title and the topic approached, where I targeted the distribution of articles on newspapers between 2005-2012. Summarizing the data, I noticed that the media interest of all publications for the topics related to early parenting has been a constant one between 2006-2008. In 2009 a maximum number of articles were recorded in the newspapers surveyed, after which the curve decreases (*Figure 1*).

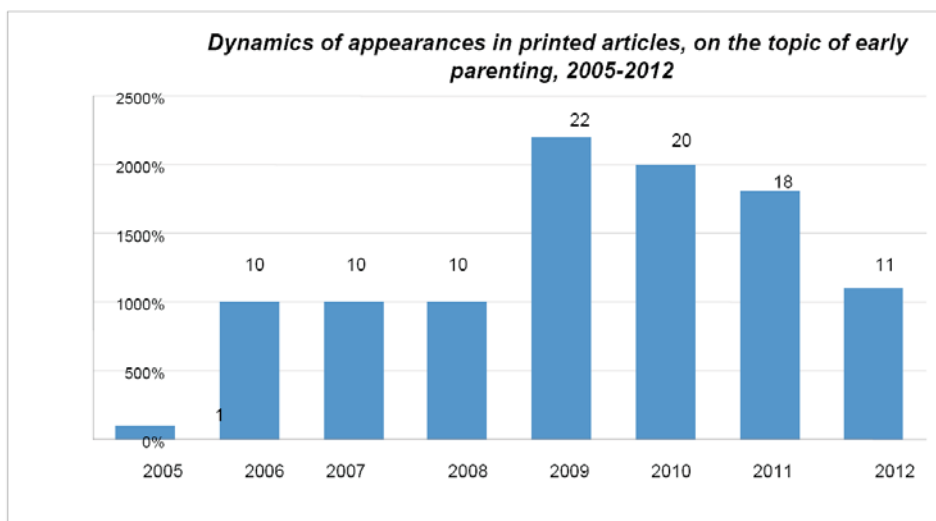


Figure 1. Distribution of articles published between 2005-2012

After listing all the articles published in the 5 newspapers between 2005-2012, out of the 102 articles we obtained two categories, one representing the *articles dealing with early parenting*, and another showing the *collateral topics*. By this criterion it is observed that articles that focus on young women parenting occupy

a percentage of 64.7%, and articles dealing with collateral topics represent 15.3% (Figure 2).

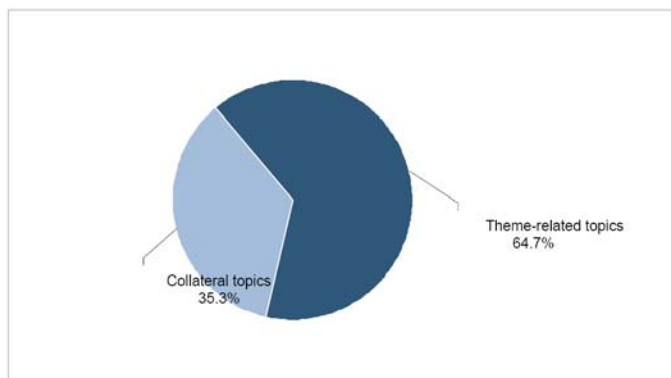


Figure 2. The article appearance rate in written press during the period 2005-2012 according to the categories of topics approached

From the list with all articles collected I extracted those who treat collateral topics. Articles include the following content: *historical chronicle* (the article refers to the existence of minors in between the two World Wars in Bucharest), *in vitro fertilization*, *parental education*, *health education*, *child abandonment* and *lack of staff in health units*, *premature marital relationships (Roma category)*, *sexual relationships with a minors*, *incestuous relationships*, *medical risks of early pregnancy*, *child malformations*, *residential parental assistance and education* (assistance in maternal shelters), *birth rate*, *“long-distance” adoption* (support for orphans), *prostitution*, *human trafficking with minors* and *missing children*.

Out of all the newspapers studied, the *Adevărul* (The Truth) newspaper showed the greatest of interest in the topic under study (47) and published the most articles (65). *Jurnalul National* (National Journal) follows in the ranking with 17 articles; the newspaper was interested directly in the collateral topics, such as: suicide among adolescents, human trafficking, abortion, parental education, child’s malformations, etc. *Evenimentul Zilei* (The Event of the Day) follows with 9 articles and almost the same number of articles with collateral topics (found in 7 articles). This publication offered much attention to issues related to young mothers, a manifested increased interest in parliamentary initiatives that promoted an enabling regulatory act which allowed for health education activities to be carried on in schools. *Gandul* (The Thought) was interested in the topic of minor mothers between 2006-2008, addressing issues related to the situation of this category, with an emphasis on the risk of pregnancy at 12-15 years age group and medical risks for the baby. *Libertatea* (Freedom) newspaper is poorly interested in this topic (4 articles). The interest of this newspaper started in 2007, by publishing an article once a year, in which it referred to the risk of pregnancy at the age 13-15 years, psychological and criminal risks arising from incestuous

situations involving minor women, while in 2010-2011 it has not published any article. The rank of newspapers, intensity and temporal dimension of the articles included in the sample are represented in *Figure 3*.

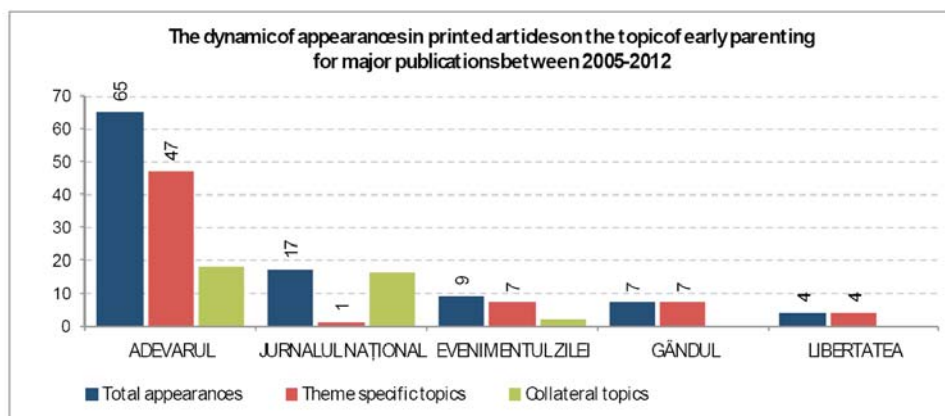


Figure 3. Dynamics of appearances in journals and the topics of interest

Between July 2011-July 2012 a number of 19 articles have been collected, that were coded and sorted based on the initials of the newspaper name’s abbreviation and date of the appearance. The table built with all data show that “Adevărul” continues to publish articles related to parenting, while other newspapers, which have published sporadically, are being absent from the media (Gândul).

The objective of the study is to observe in general, how the print media performs the function of informing the public on this issue, and in particular, information regarding the existence of Government support consisting in financial protection offered to young mothers to continue their studies, but also monitor the interest of newspapers in early parenting.

After the first reading I made a *thematic tree* where I concentrated the information found in each article, ordered and encoded according to the time of appearance. Then I built a matrix in which I considered useful aspects in the analysis of documents, namely: article code, title, main topic, secondary topic (s), stakeholders, portrayals, excerpts and quotes, media functions. Because it was difficult to capture specific aspects, which could be answers to the proposed objectives, I ranked the documents included in the sample into four categories, as follows: *articles that have early parenting as main topic* (A5, A9, A10, A11, EZ18 EZ17, L19), *articles that have early parenting as a secondary topic* (A1, A3, A4, JN13, JN15), *articles dealing with collateral topics* (A7, A8, A12, JN14) and *articles that have no connection with the subject of research* (A2, A6, JN16).

A description of the 4 categories of articles in the corpus is focused on: the connection between title and content, message, media functions, the actors portrayed, and the intensity and magnitude of the media message. These are all

components of the press documents and their classification in categories of articles has facilitated the analysis and the elaboration of conclusions.

Discussion

An analysis in the evolution of media interest (illustrated by the newspapers included in this study) between 2005 – 2012, highlighted the way by which the online media reflects the problem of minor mothers in the Romanian society and showed a poor representation of early parenting topic. Although the number of articles devoted to this theme is not very high, it can be noted the coherent approach on some topics which highlight the consequences and risks of the proliferation of the early parenting phenomenon. The thirty-six (36) articles that have addressed topics collateral to the main theme, out of a total of 102, could lead to discouraging conclusions. Still, through these publications the public receives information concerning the need for parental education and education for health, child abandonment issues associated with the lack of staff in health units, and the medical risks of early pregnancy, child malformations, the implications of premature marital relationships, of sexual and incestuous relationships with minors, residential assistance and parental education, prostitution, human trafficking with minors, missing children, birth rate and in vitro fertilization. The analysis of the 19 articles falling into four categories of journalistic topics facilitated a visualization of the major and secondary themes.

Media's interest regarding minor mothers respected the principle of territorial representation. Therefore, during the period studied, the newspapers provided information from most of the geographic regions of the country, and from the statistical-demographic perspective it communicated relevant and pertinent information to bolster the alarming signal to the public and decision-makers. One of the persistent themes in text documents (A2, A5, A8, A10, EZ18, L19), confirmed by the statistical data (source: Eurostat, 2011), is the one related to the *increase in the number of pregnancies in young women under the age of 15 years* (Figure 5).

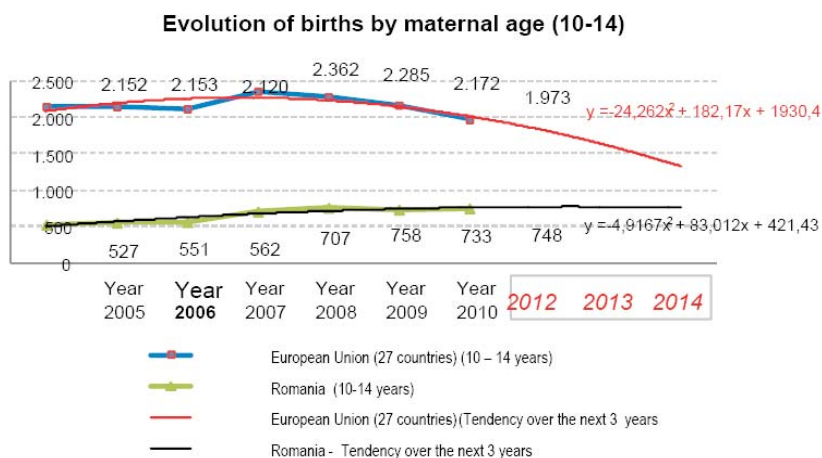


Figure 5. The evolution of births by maternal age (10-14 years old) in EU countries and Romania with trends over the next 3 years, and estimated calculus according to the polynomial model (Anghelache et al., 2012: 160-168).

Source: Eurostat, 2011

The numerous criminal situations related to cases of partners involved in sexual relationships with minor women, in close correlation with the large number of young mothers aged 13-15 years old, is a topic that the journalistic field hasn't identified, yet.

It has also been noted that, although at a first glance, by title, there were articles that had no connection with the relevant research issue, these articles provided information and interesting paths for the study of parenting. An interesting research topic is revealed by an article included in this category (A2), the contents which address the topic of *minimum and maximum age for conception*. The choice of early or late maternity, a topic which articulates elements positioned to the extremes, raises discussions on multidisciplinary controversy. Another theme found in this category relates to suicide among young people. The public is informed and made aware of the pressures put by parents who don't possess knowledge about the characteristics of adolescence, and their excessive pre-occupation for perfection and school success. Once more, the emphasis is on the need for education for life among youth, correlated with severe consequences young people are exposed to if they choose adventure, extreme non-conformism and behavioral deviance. The importance of parental responsibility in preparing young people for life is emphasized, beginning with the family and parents' trust in their children doubled by a strong and conscious control of adolescents' pre-occupations (JN16). The need for education in schools is a topic approached by most newspapers, which is found in articles classified in all 4 categories (A3, A5, A7, A8, A9, JN13, JN14, JN15, EZ18, L19). The newspapers promote the need for education for life among youth through statements coming from professionals

working in the field of social protection, medical doctors, teachers, parliament members and even their parents.

An interesting theme, identified from the first reading, is the stigma of minor mothers (A3, A11, E18). The newspapers re-edit real situations already published and describe young mothers as “little girls who have sex with men of their age or older, are raped or fall into prostitution for little money”, confirming P. Bordieu sociologist’s theory on how journalists imitate. Young mothers are subject to stigma through speeches which, through the voice of specialists or other persons with whom they come into contact, either make them seem pathological, or label them as being deviant. Fear of disclosing the pregnancy, emotional pressure, young women’s anxiety, and cause panic among the medical young staff in health units who are responding to them with special security measures to prevent escape.

The importance of financial support for young mothers to continue school studies is a theme treated with the purpose of informing. (E18), poorly represented in the newspapers included in the study. Journalistic investigation carried out by *Evenimentul* newspaper, highlights that the material aspirations and desires for wealth from the extended family increase and are strongly influenced by the decision of young mother to assume the parental role by delegating responsibilities to the other family members. The media message with the purpose to provide information may offer the public a mercantile feeling of a significant gain that changes the status of young mothers into a paradigm of success and prosperity. The support offered to the young woman can have dual effects on the family - one of increasing family group’s cohesion, and the second one of conditioning the process of collaborative upbringing of the child.

Conclusions

The importance of journalistic field in the social world is due to the monopoly over the large scale information broadcasting instruments, which have a powerful influence on the public. Social actors, whether they are young mothers, grandparents, other members from the social groups or experts, portrayed in the press articles, treat the relationship as any other, experimented or not, the journalist being the intermediary who creates a bridge between the individual’s life and the general public. The dynamics of everyday life expose the individual to a series of interactions that involves overcoming of interior and social barriers, with trust being at stake, defined by Giddens as “ontological safety” (Giddens, 1990: 92), a central component of the author’s theories for understanding the social life in the modern world.

According to the data analyzed, the press as an institution whose unique weapons are credibility and moral authority uses the formative and informative function to a small extent, to enrol in a paradigm of communication in the public and social space. Health education and preparation for adult life should be part of school curriculums, of medical, psychological and social assistance, being one of the main measures for long-term prevention of the situation with premature

involvement in the parental role. Other topics in the area of media interest were those related to domestic violence, suicide, adolescent deviance and delinquent behaviour of young people, emotional support and a tolerant attitude (still low), which is why so many young mothers face stigma in the social and community environment.

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