

Life Histories of Caregivers in a Romanian Orphanage

Patricia Ward, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Introduction

In 1990 when cameras first entered the Romanian orphanages, following the downfall of Ceausescu, the world was shocked by images of thousands of “shaven-headed children bathing in their own urine and rocking back and forth” (Rodina. 2009. Agence France Presse). The orphanages’ living conditions were “compared to the Nazi concentration camps” (Fox. English 1 class projects. 2009) as images of “malnourished orphans locked away in filthy, unheated institutions” (Rodina. 2009. Agence France Presse.) were released to the world as representative of the legacy of Ceausescu.

This article is about the caregivers from two Romanian orphanages that I spent time with, and the piece examines the changes that have occurred in the orphanages since 1990. The main research question for this research was: “What is the reality of working as a caregiver in a state run orphanage in Romania?” The research focuses on three different time periods in the orphanages, the time during Nicolae Ceausescu’s reign up to 1989; the immediate time period after 1989 when he was ousted from power; and the present time in the orphanages. I am examining the life changes the carers went through in the orphanages and how the carers’ roles have changed over time, during Ceausescu’s reign until now. I also study the factors that the carers felt influenced how well they were able to do their job. I examine factors such as the carers’ level of education, courses and training undertaken by them, their salary, the ratio of orphans to carers, and funds the orphanage received.

The carers look after young adults in the orphanage and are also responsible for the maintenance of the house and garden. They have no specific training or education relevant to their job, as many of them dropped out of secondary school before it was mandatory to have finished secondary school to become a carer. I have used quotes directly from the caregivers I met during my research and from my translator, Stefana, throughout the article. As English is their second language their spoken English is not always grammatically correct.

The fieldwork for this research was conducted in Romania for a period of one month in June and July of 2009, during which time I spent on average five or six hours every day with the carers. I had spent eleven days, on average, each summer, for the three previous summers, volunteering in an orphanage in Romania and this provided a basis for my research. I used participant observation, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to explore this topic. I hired a translator, Stefana, who came with me every day, as I spoke only a little Romanian myself. Casual conversations and the majority of the interviews were conducted in Romanian, with Stefana translating the questions and answers. The questionnaires had six questions and were written in Romanian; they focused on factors carers felt influenced how well they were able to fulfil their jobs, such as salary, ratio of orphans to carers, training, education and funding.

For this project I spent time with caregivers from two orphanages in the region of Cylenia. (I have assigned each of the caregivers, young adults, and place names of the orphanages pseudonyms.) One was a large orphanage “Taorescu” and the other orphanage, “Burcesti,” consisted of two small group homes. These orphanages house young adults, all over the age of eighteen, who displayed some form of delayed mental development and had physical disabilities or mental health problems, too. Many of them are social orphans, meaning they were children taken from their parents by the state or those “who have been abandoned or voluntarily given over to state institutions by living parents” (Kligman,

1998:226). I will be referring to the orphans as young adults throughout the article. The caregivers used terms such as “resident”, “beneficier”, and “kid” when speaking about the orphans, because the adults entered the orphanage as children and the carers have raised them. The term *beneficier* is used by the carers when speaking about the young adults in a formal context, such as the interviews, and describes an adult who benefits from living in the orphanage.

During June I spent time in Romania on the beach with the carers and orphans of the Taiorescu and Burcesti orphanages and representatives of an Irish aid organisation for a fundraised holiday, for eight days. In stilted Romanian or through translators, on the beach I joined in with the volunteers and carers as they played games with the young adults, swam in the sea, and painted their nails. I sang and danced with the young adults and talked to the carers. At the end of the beach holiday, on the day before the young adults returned to the group homes and orphanages, the volunteers organised a party. The carers and young adults danced traditional Romanian dances and then the Irish volunteers danced a traditional Irish dance. Bags of toys were given to all the young adults, sweets were given out and everyone danced to music. The carers had helped the young adults to make cards thanking the volunteers and the volunteers made photograph collages of the time on the beach for the young adults.

In July I spent my time at Burcesti, one of the orphanages with whose staff and young adults I had spent time with at the beach. Burcesti consisted of two group homes, which housed sixteen young adults altogether. I spent on average five hours a day at Burcesti and varied the time period I was in the Burcesti each day, to see the full routine of the day, with different carers. During my time there I conducted participant observation and carried out interviews with four of the nine carers there and with the director, Madalina. Although I was unable to conduct field research at Taiorescu, I did interview one staff member, Tatiana, who describes herself as a therapist. Her job description is very broad, including feeding and changing the young adults and writing hygiene plans, and does not fit into a western category of a specific therapy such as physical or psychotherapy.

Outside of my time with the carers each day I spent the majority of my time immersed in Romanian culture. I spent a lot of time with my translator Stefana and her friends and family shopping, having meals and going on trips to the countryside and the mountains. For the duration of my research I stayed in two different hotels and with Stefana and her husband in her grandmother's house.

My main argument throughout this article is that the caregivers in Romanian orphanages are viewed negatively by the outside world and that this is due to lack of understanding and knowledge about carers' lives and working conditions, by the world outside the orphanages. I observed carers do a physically and emotionally draining job under difficult circumstances where they do not get the recognition they deserve. The Western media has branded all carers in Romanian orphanages as “very cruel and heartless” (BBC forum 2005) people who “don't treat the children as people, they treat them like frozen chickens” (Yallop. 1990. *The Independent*) and presumably do not care about the orphans they are taking care of. (I am using the term western media to include popular journalism, online forums and websites, including volunteer websites about the orphanages in Romania.) The caregivers I have spent time with over my past four visits to Romania were certainly not cruel or heartless and they cared hugely about the people they care for. The caregivers told me stories of bringing food and soap from their homes to the orphanages for the children, bringing the children to their own houses and digging the graves for the children that had died in the orphanage. These women were not people who did not care about the orphans but were working with limited supplies and did what they could, but these stories never seem to be in the media.

The participants

I spent the majority of my time with the eight carers in Burcesti, so I decided to interview four of them. As Madalina used to be their employer in Vasnarii orphanage, she suggested four of the longest working carers for me to interview. I also interviewed a therapist, Tatiana, and the director of Taorescu orphanage (Madalina), whom I spent some time with. After receiving permission from Madalina to conduct my research, she advised me to contact the department of child protection and the department of social services in Romania for permission. Madalina and I then discussed what would be feasible for the research, such as where to conduct it and who to interview. Using the information given to me during the interviews and my participant observation I have given a brief description of the carers I interviewed and spent most of my time with.

Lenuta

Lenuta is a 50+ year-old Romanian woman. She has children and became a carer when she was thirty-six years old. She has worked in Vasnarii for four years, Casa Georgeta (a group home catering for six young adults) for five years, and Burcesti for four years. Lenuta told me she had not planned to become a carer but after the 1989 revolution she could find no work. She was hired ‘indefinitely’ at first in Vasnarii and after a few months took an exam to become a carer. Before she started working as a carer, Lenuta believed, her job would entail being “a person who will draw with the kids and who will play with them,” (Lenuta, Patricia Ward, July, 5th, 2009) but discovered when she started working at an orphanage that it was very different. She described liking to see the small changes in the young adults’ behaviour every day. Although there is nothing she dislikes about her job, she admitted finding it hard to see the young adults rocking back and forth, a habit from Vasnarii orphanage. She is trying to teach them not to rock every day but states “the rocking is one of the hardest things” (Lenuta, Patricia Ward, July 5th, 2009) about being a carer.

Dana

She is a Romanian woman in her thirties, and is married with children. Before working as a carer, Dana believed her job would entail “to supervise them [children/young adults] just for dancing, playing” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009) but explained that once she started working she realised “they supposed to be like a family” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009). She has completed eleven courses over the years since the 1990s on how to work with people with special needs. She began working in the orphanages just after the revolution and has worked in Vasnarii for twelve years, Casa Georgeta for two years and Burcesti for four years. Dana describes liking everything about her job; specifically, now she is working with a good team and feels the young adults she works with are her “second family” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009). The only thing she dislikes in her job is sometimes not being satisfied that she has accomplished enough progress.

Simona

She is a 50+-year-old Romanian woman and is married with children. Simona had not planned to become a carer but told me that a difficult situation had arisen and she needed the salary. Simona has worked in orphanages during Ceausescu’s reign and afterwards. She has worked in orphanages for the past 29 years and has worked in three different orphanages. She spent the first 20 years working in the Vasnarii orphanage, four or five years working in Casa

Georgeta and then the past four years in Burcesti. She described when she first started working in the orphanage as being surprised because the children's "handicaps was so big" (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009). The only thing Simona dislikes about her job is that she has to travel far to work, and the amount of money that costs. She loves everything else about her job, and mentions particularly liking how "we develop an attachment between us and the beneficiar" (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009).

Roxana

Roxana is a 50+ year-old Romanian woman with children. She did not intend on becoming a carer but says she loves children. She describes raising her children on her own and seeing them grow up without a father. As a result, she believes she understands the young adults without parents better. She became a carer when she was 38 years old. She has worked in three different orphanages: the Vasnarii orphanage for six years, Casa Georgeta for five years and then Burcesti, for four years. She identifies the best thing about her job as working with a great team and says that Burcesti has become a second home for her. Roxana explains that no matter how hard the job is, a "smile, something... a response or a good word from him [one of the young adults] will make you continue your work" (Roxana, Patricia Ward, July 14, 2009).

Madalina

Madalina is a 50+-year-old Romanian woman who is the director of the large orphanage Taorescu. She started working in Vasnarii orphanage as a nurse when she was 19 years old. The state assigned jobs to individuals based on where they lived and because there was a job opening for a nurse in an orphanage in her town she had to take it, although she had not planned to work in one. She had never worked before this and was given no special training for working in an orphanage or with people with disabilities. She told me she often felt she needed to do more for the children, outside of her job description. Madalina then moved with some of the children to a new orphanage and now is working in Taorescu orphanage as the director, with most of the same young adults from Vasnarii.

Madalina feels that the good of the job outweighs the bad. She describes the following as good aspects of her job: having a great team to work with at the orphanage; how every day is a new one; and how she loves people coming there for help. She dislikes how the community are not very friendly towards the orphanage (she feels they do not really understand the young adults) and laments the fact that there are no Romanian volunteers coming to the orphanages.

Tatiana

In her twenties, Tatiana is a therapist in Taorescu. She was an educational inspector before becoming a therapist. Tatiana undertook a three-month course after finishing secondary school to become a therapist, and she continues to take courses annually. She has worked for three years in Vasnarii and three years in Taorescu. Tatiana describes her job as being hard but better than she expected, stating that it appeared worse from the outside. She describes liking many aspects about her job, but says she specifically loves the satisfaction she feels when she sees a child smile. Tatiana notes that "when you are seeing someone that he or she can hold the spoon correctly that's... that makes you feel like you are god" (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). The only thing Tatiana states she dislikes about her

job is that she has to travel far to get to work, as she lives an hour and a half away from Taorescu.

Public Perception of the carers

“You don’t have time for them [orphans], for communication or whatever, just feed them, clothe them, change their pampers, going to the washing machine and washing the clothes” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009)

The western media often portray carers in the Romanian orphanages as cruel and uncaring people. Statements in the media such as “care-workers are cruel and resent giving the orphans attention because they feel like the orphans are getting a free ride” (Fox. University English class project. n.p), show the lack of understanding and information the investigators had concerning the carers and orphanages. The writer of this website about the orphanages in Romania obviously did not ask the carers why they did not bathe or play with the orphans; or why they did not spend much time with each child. As Dana explained to me, when she worked in the Vasnarii orphanage in the 1990s she had so many children in her care that her priority was to feed them and change their nappies. There was no time to spend time with each individual child. I discovered the many reasons behind this perceived lack of care in the course of spending a month with a group of carers and discussing with them the conditions of the orphanages in the 1980s and 1990s. Many statements in the media about the conditions of the orphanages are correct, but many newspapers and reporters seem to presume the reasons why the conditions were bad and blame the carers for the level of care they provided. The media attacks carers for keeping children in environments “compared to the Nazi concentration camps” (Fox. University English class project. n.p), where “simple needs like baths and exercise were unmet” (National Catholic Reporter. 1995:18). Newspaper articles also blame the carers for the orphans’ disabilities, claiming that the carers’ lack of stimulation and attention for the children “has stultified the babies’ mental and physical development” (Robinson. 1990. *The Independent*). Madalina felt that the Romanian media “will come out with all bad things about those kinds of centres (orphanages)... they are saying ... they are so bad, they are mistreating, the carers are doing this and they are so bad” (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). Fox’s website complained about the carers not washing the children and stated “the care-workers are so detached from the children that in some cases the children were hosed down with cold water to be washed” (Fox. University English class project. n.p). One carer in Burcesti, Adriana, told me that she had previously worked in a larger orphanage where she had 36 children in her care and one hour of hot water to bathe all of them. This was not enough time to bathe all the children so sometimes they were washed in cold water. She explained that a number of the children could not walk or move, and that they did not have wheelchairs in this orphanage so she would have to try and bathe them in their beds. Fox did not stop to question why the children were not washed or why they were washed with cold water.

One volunteer on the BBC News website forum stated that after a baby in an orphanage had died, “Nobody from the orphanage cared, nobody helped” (BBC News. 2005:n.p). The volunteer assumed that the carers were indifferent because they did not take time to mourn and dig a grave for the baby. The carers explained to me that when they had worked in Vasnarii in the 1980s and 1990s, when a child had died there one person went to dig the grave. The carers explained they had to “just get on with” (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009) their work because they had so many other children depending on them. This could explain why the volunteer believed that the carers did not care. During my interviews

with the carers in Burcesti, many become very upset when discussing children in their care who had died, about whom they clearly had cared deeply.

When the carers were asked in the interviews what image they felt the Romanian people and the world outside of Romania had of them, most of the carers thought they had a negative image. Tatiana felt that some Romanians appreciated the work she was doing but also felt that “some of them are just making fun of them [orphanage workers]” (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). She described not having much contact with people outside of Romania, so she assumed that because volunteer groups come to Romania people outside Romania are “having a positive way of thinking” (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009) about her hard work. Lenuta believed that there were mixed opinions of carers but that some people admired them and believed they were courageous to do that job.

Simona stated “I think they [Romanian people] are having a very bad opinion of us. They are saying, ‘Oh you are working with handicaps’” (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009). Madalina explained that up until the 1990s the public was not allowed into the orphanages. She explained that people did not know the reality of the conditions inside the orphanages. Madalina invites the public to visit Toarescu but states that not many people take up this offer. Thus the public in Romania and the western world still do not know the reality of the carers’ experiences in the orphanages, and rely for information on the media, believing many of these negative assumptions to be true.

Daily Life

I spent sixteen days in Burcesti, where nine carers worked. During my interviews with four of the carers, I asked each of them to describe their daily tasks and to talk me through a typical day’s work for them. Each of the carers described their jobs as cooking, cleaning and a bit of gardening. The carers did not mention the young adults as part of their work or tasks, perhaps because as many described them as their second family, they do not view them in the same category as their labour intensive work. I do not know the actual formal job description for the carers, as none of the carers or Madalina, a director, could provide me with a formal job description and informed me that they had not seen one prior to starting work, nor had they ever seen one. During my participant observation I observed them doing a lot more work than they had self-reported.

Two carers work each twelve-hour shift and go home for twenty-four hours. A typical day for the carer would be to make the breakfast and set the breakfast table by 6.30am and start waking up the young adults after 7.00am. By about 8.00am the carers were starting to make both the *ciorbă* (Romanian sour soup with many vegetables and usually meat), for lunch and the meal for dinner. In between breakfast and lunch they tidied the house, gardened and taught some of the young adults how to speak, walk and bake. As two of the young adults were in wheelchairs and could not walk, some of the carers helped them stand up and were teaching them to walk and dance with them by lifting them out of their wheelchairs and stepping away so that the young adult had to step towards them to avoid falling. Two of the young adults had very little speech, so some of the carers would try to teach them words. They would sound out words slowly emphasising each syllable and have the young adults repeat it after them. The carers had no training for these activities and did not classify it as therapy. After breakfast some days Dana would teach Dorina, one of the young adults, how to bake donuts. Hagerstrand (1997) stated the “passing on recipes and particular cooking techniques from one generation to another (usually mother to daughter) is one way in which some households have traditionally reproduced their ‘identities; over time” (66). When they

were cooked, all the young adults would gather in one house and Dorina would hand the donuts out to everyone.

Other days the young adults would help to pick the vegetables. They harvested green beans from the garden one day, and we all (carers, young adults, Stefana and I) gathered round the kitchen table pulling the ends off them before they could be cooked and eaten. Hagerstrand (1997) describes that “a commitment to sharing the preparation and consumption of food can be just as important to the production and maintenance of households that are shared voluntarily as it is to the social reproduction of ‘proper families’” (65).

Once lunch was finished everyone did housework. The carers washed the dishes and helped the young adults sweep, mop and wash the windows. Between lunch and dinner, the young adults took naps and the carers ate their lunch and cooked the dinner for everyone. After this they mended and altered the young adults’ clothes, most of which were donated. Then the carers would write a detailed report comprised of all the activities performed by and with the young adults; their developmental progress and any health issues and/or behavioural problems were also noted. When the carers changed shifts, the new carer would look at the book before starting work.

After dinner the carers played games with the young adults, including doing jigsaws. Then they taught the young adults how to write letters and numbers and, for the more advanced young adults, words. They produced copybooks with each young adult’s name on one, and the young adults showed Stefana and me the numbers and letters they had written inside. Each carer would write a number, letter or word on a page for each young adult and the young adult would copy this for one page; then the carer would check it and write something else for them to copy. Some days the carers would colour with them instead, producing crayons, colouring pencils and blank sheets of papers. They also performed house maintenance on occasion. (I observed the garden fence and broken presses in the kitchen being fixed.)

On some of the nights I was present in the group homes Iolanda and Juana, two carers, told stories to the young adults before bedtime. They gathered all of the young adults into one of the houses and told Romanian fairytales. The young adults were actively engaged in the process, laughing and joining in with the details of the story. They were using their hands to describe the characters, such as one who had a large nose, and all of the young adults gestured with their hands a large nose on their face. On other evenings some of the carers would put on music and sing and dance with the young adults.

Twice during my time in the group homes there were storms and the houses flooded. One carer brought all of the young adults over to one house and told stories or put on music for them to dance to. While this was going on, the other carer mopped up the water as it gushed in through the doors, running from house to house putting blankets in front of all the doors to prevent more water entering the houses. In all my time in the group homes I rarely witnessed the carers sitting down taking a break.

It is interesting to note that all nine carers in Burcesti were female and the majority of the carers in Taorescu orphanage were also female. Peacock (1991:344) believed because women gave birth to children “they will always have primary responsibility for childcare.” Historically women undertook household duties as well as childcare. Sharma and Gupta (2006) believe that because the work women are used to doing in the home “is now available for purchase in the market, women follow this work out into the economy” (197).

Working during Ceausescu's reign

Working conditions

Some of the longest working carers, such as Simona and Lenuta, left school between 14 and 16 years of age. Carers from Burcesti felt their level of education, combined with courses, was the primary factor influencing how well they were able to do their jobs, while carers from Taorescu felt education was the third highest factor. Yet there was no required level of education or preparatory courses to become a carer in an orphanage before 1990. Before Madalina started work in Vasnarii, her nursing training did not provide her with any training for working with people with special needs. She described not knowing "what was in the orphanages or what to expect" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009) when she was sent to work there at the age of 19.

Most of the carers had not planned to become carers and had no training for working in an orphanage, or with people with special needs. Most of them described needing a salary or a job opportunity coming up in an orphanage as the reasons why they had become carers. Nearly all of the carers stated that because they were mothers they already knew how to do the job. Some of the carers described crying when they started working there. Madalina stated, "When I started working there, I was crying for a week, I wanted to go from there" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009).

The media constantly complains about the carers not spending time with individual orphans, with claims such as "they [orphans] didn't cry, because no one had ever answered their cries" (Yallop. 1990. *The Independent*). Before 1989 the ratio of orphans to carers was so high the carers could not spend time individually teaching or playing with the children. Carers were expected to wash, feed and care for all the children in the orphanage. One carer in Burcesti, Adriana, informed me that while working at her previous orphanage she had 36 children in her care. Simona recalled that before 1989, in the orphanage she worked each carer had 25 to 30 orphans to mind. Roxanna informed me she did not have the time to teach the children how to feed themselves. She described how she fed 30 children: the children would sit in a row, four bowls would be on the table and she would go from one end of the row to the other putting a spoon of food into every child's mouth, and then start again at the top of the row. Madalina informed me she was left on the night shift with one carer to look after about 300 children. She explained that they could not watch all of them and said "they were sedated very well. We used to give them tablets like candies" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). She explained that before 1989 there was no control of drugs. A psychologist I met briefly at Taorescu told me she had also worked in Vasnarii, and with just one other psychologist had to attend to 400 children there.

All the caregivers mentioned lack of staff as a limitation to their ability to do their job. All of the caregivers felt they could not do their job as well as they would have liked to because they had too many children to look after. Simona stated "when there was so many sick, she said [translator talking] they were hurting themselves and bumping their heads. It was very hard" (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009). Madalina felt that she needed to do more but that her "hands were tied. There was so many in my care at the time, so I didn't know exactly what to do" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009).

Treatment of orphans

"There were children there we never knew their names... because nobody remembered. So they were brought from the orphanage twenty at a time with a thing on their hands, with their names was put on it, a plaster ... a plaster and we didn't bother to learn their names ... the

first week the plaster just came off and that's it...they were tied up in the beds...the worst thing you can think of... it happened there" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009))

The terrible conditions portrayed in the media of the orphanages during Ceausescu's regime were mostly true. The caregivers revealed that in some cases it was worse than that portrayed by the media. The caregivers often had to do extra work and to provide essentials that were lacking in the orphanages.

To prevent lice, all children had their heads shaved; Madalina described not being able to tell the boys from the girls because they all looked alike. She described the orphans as being "kept like animals" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009); large groups of girls and boys were washed together naked in the showers, and they slept three children to a bed. She explained there were so many children and young adults in Vasnarii and so little staff that there was no alternative to this way of working.

Simona stated the "kids were having not enough clothes" in Vasnarii. Madalina informed me they would have one set of clothes a year, which were only put on when government officials came to visit—this was a regulation. She remembered seeing the children in winter with no clothes on, freezing, when she described herself looking like she was going skiing, because it was so cold.

The caregivers also described a shortage of food in the orphanages. Simona stated Vasnarii was "very, very bad with food" (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009). Madalina told me that sometimes the only food they had was potatoes and rice, and when they had meat, it would be "maybe once a week" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). She described drinking tea in the orphanage as "no tea, no sugar, just jam. It was coloured water" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). As Romania is a very agricultural country, most of the carers grow vegetables or raise animals in their gardens. Some of the carers described bringing in bits of food from their own gardens to the children in the orphanage when there were shortages there.

Madalina informed me that the government at the time was supposed to provide hygiene products but did not. All that was supplied was detergent for their baths. She explained the detergent was supposed to be for washing laundry, not for baths, so the carers often brought in homemade soap to wash the children and young adults.

Madalina informed me that before 1989 she had to use glass syringes on the children and young adults. She explained that with both the syringes and the needles "we boil them, use them again" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). She remembered having bandages and tablets to sedate the children and young adults but those were the only medical supplies she remembers having.

Adriana described in her previous orphanage how in some rooms the windows had no glass and the children had to share a thin blanket in bed. In Vasnarii, Madalina said three or four young adults shared a thin bed with no clothes on. She remembered "they were urinating in the bed, in the morning, six o'clock in the morning we just lift their sheet and the steam, because it was cold, the urine was you know warm" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009).

Death

"I'd say the death was the relief for them. That's what I'm thinking now, I was thinking the same back then because it wasn't a life for them there. Uh... they had a really hard life. If you saw something on TV about them that is true, they were kept like animals. For them it was a relief." (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009))

Crentsil's (2009) study on caregivers for children with AIDS, describes how "the hardships of those who are faced with caring for the unfortunate children are not made public" (82). This was the case for caregivers in orphanages. The media have been very critical of caregivers in Romanian orphanages and research on Romanian orphanages has tended to ignore the caregivers. The carers all describe the job of a being a carer as like being a mother. Having a child in your care dying is unimaginable and these women had to continue with their work after a child died and even dig a grave for them.

Vasnarii orphanage opened in 1975. All the caregivers I interviewed worked in Vasnarii during the 1970s and 1980s. Madalina informed me that the remains of 300 children who had died in Vasnarii were discovered. She explained that 200 of these children died from 1975 to 1989, and the other 100 children died after 1989.

Simona remembered that when she started working at Vasnarii "every week somebody was dying". She explained "those were the ones who were dying first with big heads [hydrocephaly] and with most ... the biggest handicaps, the physical ones" (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009). She felt the cold weather, lack of proper food and lack of more staff were the main causes for so many deaths in the orphanage. Madalina told me they had a saying "kids coming to our centre [the Vasnarii orphanage] in the spring they would get over the next winter, if they were coming in the fall they won't get through the winter. That was the ... like a rule" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009).

Madalina explained when someone was about to die they were put into a room in a building beside the orphanage. She described the ritual of lighting a candle when she thought a child was about to die, to light the way to heaven. Afterwards the carers would wash the body, Madalina would declare the person dead, send a telegram to the child's family to inform them; and a staff member in the orphanage would go to the cemetery to dig a grave for the child and bury them. Madalina describes writing the names of the children on crosses for the grave, but that they often disappeared because "people in Vasnarii [town] took them to heat themselves in the winter" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009).

Madalina informed me that in the winter of 1989, from October to January, she had to declare sixty children dead. She stated that pneumonia was the biggest cause of the deaths. Each of the carers remembered a child in their care dying and became upset recalling the event to me. Roxanna recalled the story of one boy in her care who died and remembered that when Madalina asked who was going to take him to the room to die "she [Roxanna] hide away because she was too emotional involved in that and she couldn't go and take him in that place to die" (Roxana, Patricia Ward, July 14, 2009). After he had died Roxana went to the church and cemetery and made "all the traditional stuff for him ... brought the juice and I brought the donuts, for the people who is coming there to just, to stay around him when he was dead" (Roxana, Patricia Ward, July 14, 2009). Klass describes ritual as a "space in which one can construct the meaning of the deceased's life, death" (Klass. N.d). Roxana felt it was important that someone who cared for the boy perform this ritual of cooking and providing food to people grieving.

Madalina remembered "I was next to one child when he died and I never wanted to be with someone else when he was dying. That affected me very much, I will never forget that child" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). When asked about deaths in the orphanage, Dana became too upset to even talk about the deaths, stating "I cannot talk about that, it's too hard" (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009). Madalina recalled one night a boy escaping from Vasnarii and how there was only one carer and herself on duty. They sent people to look for him but could not find him. She explained he was found six months later, dead, frozen from the cold winter.

The carers did not receive time off or any grief counselling after a child in their care died. Tatiana was surprised when I asked if she had received counselling or time off after a

child she was close with died. She explained that she could not take any time off, because she had so many other children depending on her, she had to just “get on with” (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009) her work.

Although the majority of these deaths occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, the caregivers were still extremely upset by them. A study on caregivers in a paediatric hospice, which may have been a similar place to the Vasnarii orphanage before 1989 based on the descriptions from the carers in Vasnarii, found that some staff “manifested symptoms of psychological distress” (Cherny 2005:836). The author found one reason to be that the staff had “failed to resolve their grief about a bereavement that had occurred some considerable time ago” (ibid.). The carers not getting any time off to mourn or grieve the loss of a child who was in their care must affect them, and may not allow them to move on.

Management of funding

Before 1989, funding given to the orphanages was extremely low, as the government did not want to acknowledge them: “the party [communist party in government] didn’t want people to know those kind of institutions exist or those kind of people exist in Romania” (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009)). Madalina informed me that in Vasnarii orphanage, at the start of the year the ministry would give the orphanage all the funding to last for a year. As she explained, usually it was not enough to cover all of the orphanage’s expenses: “we supposed to pay the staff, buy the food, buy the clothes” (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). This led to lack of funding in all areas, including paying the staff, as Madalina remembered: “sometimes we stayed without being paid!” (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009), for three or four months. When I mentioned this to some of the longer working carers, they also remembered times when they were not paid, telling me they could not just leave the children. Twigg and Arkin (1994) stated carers “do not simply give up when the balance of interest turns against continuing. Carers carry on caring against their own interests” (10). Staff accepted this but unfortunately even without paying staff the orphanage still ran out of other supplies: “there were times when we had ...well probably for a month we didn’t have enough food or we didn’t have another money for medication or another you know medical supplies” (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009)). Before the revolution the government required parents to pay money to the orphanage their child was residing in.

Madalina described how a man from the communist party used to visit Vasnarii orphanage. She explained that he refused to acknowledge the lack of funding from the communist party that led to a shortage of supplies that were needed in the orphanage. I asked Madalina if they could make complaints to this man. She laughed at my inquiry, telling me that “we weren’t allowed to say anything... the party won’t let you” (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009).

After the revolution

Working conditions

After the revolution the working conditions for the carers improved greatly. These changes did not happen immediately and were due to several reasons. Madalina explained the carer changed from working “Monday to Saturday eight hours a day (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009)” before 1990 to working five days a week. The ratio of children and young adults in the care of carers lowered. In Vasnarii Madalina explained that the children were all moved out of the orphanage and only the adults stayed in the care of the orphanage. The carers believe the quality of their work and the quality of life for the young adults

improved as the ratio lowered. Simona, who took care of twenty-five or thirty children before 1989, explained that after 1989 thanks to help arriving and the move of the children to another institution, she then had eight or nine young adults to take care of. She moved to Casa Georgeta, a group home, in 2001, taking care of six young adults. She described how having a smaller group made it easier for her to “take care of them properly” (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009). Lenuta noted that when caring for so many young adults, the carers did not work together. Now, with fewer young adults in her care, she stated that everyone is “cooperating, every shift is helping the other together and it is better now” (Lenuta, Patricia Ward, July 5, 2009). She gave an example of Dimitry, a young adult who “never walked before but now every shift they try to do that [carers teaching him to walk] and now he’s walking, so it helped” (Lenuta, Patricia Ward, July 5, 2009). Twigg and Arkin (1994) state “carers do not simply do things for people; they can also support them with encouragement, personal attention” (8). It would be easier and less time consuming for the carers simply to push Dimity around in his wheelchair, but with increased time flexibility every day they take the time to teach him to walk a few steps.

Dana informed me that with a smaller ratio of young adults to each carer they no longer feed the young adults from one big bowl. She explained now “meals was taking a lot of time because they [carers] were trying to teach them [young adults] how to feed themselves, and it was hard to show them how to quit eating from the bottle and the spoon” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009).

Simona described times when before 1989 she was beaten by the young adults in the orphanage. Many of the carers mentioned problems with violence, either between the young adults or from the young adults towards them. Having smaller groups of young adults to care for now has enabled the carers to be able to tackle this problem. For example, Simona stated that once the groups got smaller, the young adults’ behaviour improved. Based on conversations with the carers, I have the sense that there seems to be less violence towards the carers now. Tatiana stated that occasionally now she gets scratches and bruises but that it only happens from “time to time” (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). Carer-to-young adult ratio was considered by the carers at Burcesti to be the least important factor influencing how well they were able to do their jobs; the carers of Taorescu identified it as the second least important factor.

Lenuta, Dana and Simona described taking weeklong courses in hygiene and massage therapy. Simona also took a course on anatomy and diseases during the past few years, and Roxana described taking courses in art and massage. Tatiana explained that to qualify as a therapist now, one must attend courses and training. She attended a three-month course to become a therapist, studying “communication, about the working behaviour, how to work with the wheelchairs, about hygiene, about everything that you have to do with the beneficiar” (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). The carers from Burcesti and Taorescu felt the courses they undertook was the most important factor influencing how well they were able to do their jobs. Most of the courses the carers undertook were voluntary courses they paid for themselves.

Treatment of orphans

After 1989 the treatment of the orphans changed hugely. The carer-to-young adult ratio lowered, staffs were given more training, more funds were put into the orphanages and the carers described how people began to have an understanding about mental health and disabilities.

In contrast to the situation before 1989 in Vasnarii (recall that Madalina described the children arriving with their name on a bandage, and no one knew their name once it washed

off), in Burcesti the majority of the young adults call the carers *Mama*. This might not be the case in a large orphanage, but in Burcesti where there are only eight young adults per carer there is more of a family feel to the group homes. After I had overheard a number of the young adults in Burcesti calling carers “*mama*”, my translator Stefana asked the young adults who their *mama* was. All of the young adults named one carer, but I noticed often they called more than one carer “*mama*”. One young woman told us Dana was her “*mama*” and Cami, an older carer in her sixties, was her grandmother. After visiting Burcesti for a week, one young woman, Nadia, came up and greeted me with “*frumoasă mama*” (pretty mother), and informed me she had four mothers, four of the carers. Freed (1963) described that “the use of kinship terms ... for genealogically unrelated people is one kind of fictive use of kinship terms” (86). The carers reciprocated this fictive kinship. Maddy (2001) believed these fictive kinships “while informal, can, nevertheless, exhibit characteristics as strong as consanguineal and affinal ties” (286). I found this to be the case, as it was clear how much the carers and young adults cared for each other and regarded each other as their family. Lenuta speaks of Cezar, one young adult, in the following terms: “he is my boy because I taught him to draw at the beginning” (Lenuta, Patricia Ward, July 5, 2009). Roxanna mentioned in the interview that on her days off she rang Burcesti to see how Sorin and Lavinia, two of the young adults, were doing, and stated they were like her children. Once during my time there Tatiana travelled an hour and a half from her home to the Burcesti orphanage on her day off to visit with a young adult. She had cared for this young adult in a different orphanage a few years previously and had been close to her. It is clear from spending time with the carers and young adults that they have formed “a second family” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009). The carers clearly loved the young adults; as Lenuta informed me, “I love them very much and I’m not lying” (Lenuta, Patricia Ward, July 5, 2009).

Gail Kligman (1998) described how during Ceausescu’s regime people with special needs were “labelled ‘non-productive’ in a society ideologically dependent on production, the handicapped were effectively sentenced to death” (227). Many children with disabilities were placed in the orphanages by their families; as Georges (2003) states, “efforts may be made to conceal mental illness or it to isolate the afflicted family member in a mental asylum” (684). The carers felt that after the revolution an understanding about mental health and disabilities began in Romania, trying to erase the stigma attached to mental and physical disabilities. The carers described how some parents of children with disabilities began taking their children home for weekends and that the attitude of shame is starting to disappear. Goffman describes how often a ‘courtesy stigma’ occurs for the family of someone with a mental illness; they “are likely to be subjected to similar negative reactions via their association with the mentally ill family member” (Mayville & Penn 1998: 242). Lenuta described how it was important when working with people with special needs that they “had to understand that what they [the carers] were doing was a real pleasure to work with them [young adults], and to treat them like equals” (Lenuta, Patricia Ward, July 5, 2009). Tatiana described the young adults with special needs as being misunderstood and stated that “When we are working with them we are seeing that they are having feelings, they are human beings. That is not their fault that they are like this” (Tatiana, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009).

Management of Funding

After 1989 the department of child protection took control of funding for the orphanage. Madalina explained that the orphanage is no longer given money. She must send a request to the department when the orphanage needs money for anything: hiring staff, purchasing food, including to “fix a window, to replace a window, to do the painting there, to fix a door, eh everything” (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). She explained that every

month she sends her requests to the department but she always receives a lower number of staff than she asked for. Madalina believes that this is due to lack of funding in the department. The carers from Burcesti felt that the funding the orphanage received was the third most significant factor influencing how well they were able to do their jobs, and the carers from Taorescu felt funding was the second most significant factor.

Madalina sought out a sponsor for the orphanage because, otherwise, "I have to wait for my request to be approved [by the department] and then for someone to come and fix it, that would take about three weeks" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). She described being lucky to find a sponsor for the orphanage as "usually the sponsors are going to institutions [orphanages] for kids" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009). She explained "there is someone which is very important person in Romanian parliament who has a brother who lives in here [Taorescu]" (Madalina, Patricia Ward, July 6, 2009) and he was able to find a company to sponsor the orphanage. The sponsor provides money immediately when the Taorescu orphanage needs it for little repairs, such as broken windows, which need to be replaced immediately. Firth (2004) believed money is used as "a measure representing the resultant of the subjective balancing of ends achieved against ends sacrifices" (20). This does not appear to be the case with the caregiver's jobs, as the caregivers have sacrificed a number of things, including their own salary and time with their families and have achieved huge improvements with the young adults they work with.

Simona told me that "the salary that we are getting for what we are working it's not so big," (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009) but she emphasised that the salary has improved since the revolution. When someone begins working as a carer they earn €150 or €200 per month for working with children or adults, respectively. Madalina explained this was because those working with adults were deemed to be at greater risk of personal injury. The salary increases after every five years of work. In the past some of the carers have stayed working in Vasnarii for three or four months without being paid. Salary was the second lowest factor for the carers at Burcesti and the lowest factor for the carers at Taorescu influencing how well they were able to do their jobs. Maurer (2006) describes money as providing "a universal yardstick against which to measure and evaluate the universe of objects, relations, services and persons" (16). The fact that the carers are being paid a low salary suggests that they are unappreciated in their job.

Dana told me that an orphanage where she had previously worked, Casa Georgeta, had received funding from Aurelia Trust, an Irish aid organization: "not much but you know for small things that they [orphanages] didn't get from the state ...for birthdays, for buying watermelon, to buy an ice-cream, to go to a movie" (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009). She described how having this extra funding affected the young adults' behaviour, explaining that the young adults understand that if "they are working good, they are going to be a reward at the end" (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009).

Outside help

Madalina informed me that before the revolution, not even local Romanians were allowed to enter the orphanages and that nobody knew what was in there. All of the carers informed me they had not known what to expect when going to work in an orphanage and were shocked with the conditions inside the orphanages.

After the revolution, at the end of 1989, after viewing photographs and documentaries of Romanian orphanages, volunteer groups and aid arrived in Romania in the early 1990's. Madalina described how many Irish and Belgian volunteer groups arrived in Romania to work in the orphanages. Simona described in her interview how "a lot of help from the foreigners, the volunteers" (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009) had come to Vasnarii,

where she worked. She informed me that the volunteers had brought clothes, food, wheelchairs and nappies for the orphanage. The volunteers had taught her how to massage the children and helped teach the children how to eat by themselves.

The volunteers had also built a soft room in the orphanage for the children who were self-harming and fighting, so that they could be put in there for an isolation period to stop the behaviour. Simona described how “having all this, the children start to improve their behaviour” (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009) and she felt it was a “very important accomplishment for the kids” (Simona, Patricia Ward, July 10, 2009) to get these resources and have a chance to learn. Funding from aid organizations has contributed to building the Burcesti group homes.

Dana and Tatiana also spoke of the many volunteers from various countries that came to Vasnarii just after the revolution, but both remembered one group of volunteers who had been negative towards them. Dana and Tatiana described how the foreign volunteers had criticized how they were working and explained that they did not know how to do some things, but the volunteers did not show them how. Dana stated “all the time they [volunteers] wasn’t satisfied with their [carers’] work” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009). Aside from this one group, Dana described her experience with the volunteer groups as positive, stating that she learnt lots of skills from them.

A number of charities sponsored the carers to undertake courses. Dana described being sponsored to do an occupational therapy course by a charity and that “Aurelia Trust [an Irish aid organisation] sponsored courses in communication and massage” (Dana, Patricia Ward, July 7, 2009) for some of the carers in Vasnarii.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ceausescu’s policies and ego resulted in thousands of unwanted or unplanned- for children who could not be provided for by their own families. State institutions were created to deal with this problem and to house people with any type of disability, as Ceausescu refused to admit that Romania had anyone with special needs. Very little money was put into the state orphanages, and they became a death sentence for the children who entered them.

The working conditions in Vasnarii, where all the caregivers worked in the 1980s or 1990s, were extremely difficult for them. They had to take care of up to 30 children or young adults with special needs even though they had no training or courses on how to do this. The fact that they stayed in this job, going months without being paid, bringing in supplies that were lacking in the orphanage, such as soap and food, shows the caregivers’ level of commitment to the children and young adults they were working with. Listening to the caregivers remembering stories of children in their care that had died, and seeing them tearing up and becoming upset, it was obvious these women had cared deeply for the people in their care.

The media tends to label all carers as cruel and portrays the carers as people who do not care about the children they are minding. But my research suggests that this is not the case. Assumptions and misunderstandings on the media’s part have led to misrepresentative statements being made about the carers. The caregivers often told me stories of the harsh conditions in the orphanages in the 1980s and 1990s and explained that they were not in control of the orphanage’s conditions and had no authority of power over the circumstances. The caregivers felt the need to explain and even defend themselves to me, perhaps viewing me as a symbol of the West, who believe caregivers are all cruel, uncaring women just working in an orphanage for the salary. To the contrary, the women I interviewed reported strong bonds between the young adults and carers, bonds even characterized as fictive

kinship. That the young adults view the carers as their *mama* proves this relationship was not simply a fabrication on the carers' part to persuade me or to persuade others of the care they feel for the young adults.

In comparison to the news footage (Panorama's 'Triumph Over Tyranny' or ABC News's 20/20) and reports of orphanages in the 1980s and just after the revolution 1990s of caregivers shutting the door on cameras and hiding the truth from the world, I was surprised to find the caregivers were so open and honest with me. Although most were a little hesitant at the start, when Stefana informed them that Madalina, their previous boss, had spoken out about the problems in the orphanages the other caregivers seemed happy enough to do so as well.

The caregivers all described major changes in the orphanages after the revolution but stated that these changes did not happen overnight. The sponsoring of courses for the carers was one of the major changes for the carers, who stated that this opportunity positively affected the quality of their work and thus the quality of life for the young adults they cared for. These courses helped the carers to understand the needs of the young adults and how to work with the young adults' special needs and disabilities.

There are many factors that are influencing how well the caregivers are able to do their jobs now, including courses they have taken, their own level of education, the funding the orphanage receives and the ratio of young adults to carer. The ratio of young adults to each carer is lower now and thus is no longer a problem for most of the carers. The caregivers are continuing their education by taking classes, courses and special training to improve in their job. Overall funding does influence how well they are able to do their jobs, as it is funding that pays for more staff, supplies such as food, clothes and wheelchairs, activities for the young adults and general equipment for the young adults. Despite the many constraints they face, the caregivers I interviewed have sought to improve the care of young adults in Romanian institutions today. The carers work with few resources, being criticized by the world and under huge emotional stress, for a small salary, and frequently do not get the recognition they deserve for doing a hugely stressful, but often rewarding, job.



Vasnarii orphanage, where the caregivers all worked. Now closed.



One of the rooms inside Vasnarii orphanage, where 3 children slept to a bed.



The bathroom is Vasnarii orphanage, consisting of one toilet and one hole in the ground.



The garden behind Burcesti group homes, where they are growing vegetables.



The garden in Burcesti, with the rabbit and birds hutches.



The beach in Asohania, where I spent my first ten days with the caregivers and orphans from Burcesti and Taorescu orphanages.



At Stefana's grandmother's house in Vasnarii town.



Stefana's grandmother's garden.



Stefana's grandmother's garden.



The road into Vasnarii.



The view driving from Vasnarii to Burcesti, which the carers drive every day.

Thank you to all the caregivers from Burcesti and Taorescu orphanage. I appreciate everything you did for me and am forever grateful. Thank you so much for trusting me with your stories, I will never forget them.

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