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BRIEF REPORT



Personal and Online Contact during the COVID-19 Pandemic among Nonresident Parents and their Children in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This study examines nonresident parents' contact with their children in Hungary during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with 14 nonresidential fathers, 3 resident mothers and 5 parents who have shared custody arrangements in order to reveal whether this unique situation had any effects on their contact patterns and whether online contact became more widespread during the pandemic. Our results showed that considerable changes occurred in the personal contact between nonresidents parents and their children due to the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic, such as changes in working conditions and online education. Online communication became a substitute in cases where personal contact was suspended.

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Introduction

Several studies have examined the factors that can influence the contact between nonresident parents and their children (Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010; Meggiolaro and Ongaro 2015; Goldberg and Carlson 2015; Seltzer 1991). The distance between the residence of the nonresident parent and their child(ren) was found to be important in terms of the frequency of in-person contact (Manning, Stewart, and Smock 2003; Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010). According to a representative study conducted in 2005 in Scotland about nonresident parents, over 80% of nonresident fathers who lived within 30 minutes of their child's residence visited them at least once a week. Meanwhile, only 53% of fathers visited their children once a week who lived over 30 minutes away (Marryat, Reid, and Wasoff 2009). Data collected in Hungary regarding personal contact among fathers who live apart from their children show very similar results (Makay and Spéder 2019; Szalma and Rékai 2019). According to the Turning Points of the Life-Course survey conducted in 2012, two-thirds of Hungarian nonresident fathers meet their children aged under 19 at least every two weeks (Makay and Spéder 2019). Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative studies conducted in Hungary show that physical proximity has a significant influence on the frequency of personal

contact (Makay and Spéder 2019; Szalma and Rékai 2019). For example, 80% of nonresident fathers who live in the same area as their children were found to meet on have face-to-face contact on a weekly basis, whereas only 25% of those who live in different regions visit their children at least once a week (Makay and Spéder 2019).

The majority of research on this topic focuses mainly on the frequency and quality of face-to-face visitation between nonresident parents and their children (Köppen, Kreyenfeld, and Trappe 2018, Szalma and Rékai 2019, Westphal, Poortman, and van der Lippe 2014). Although there have been some studies that explored communication online or via telephone (Marryat, Reid, and Wasoff 2009; Hughes and Funston 2006; Leite and McKenry 2002), they remained marginal. In many cases, it has been emphasized that when face-to-face encounters are regular, it is more likely for the nonresident parents to keep in touch with their children online or via telephone. It suggests that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are a secondary means of communication complementing in-person meetings rather than substituting them (Franzen 2000; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Hertlein and Blumer 2014). For instance, a study conducted by Hughes and Funston (2006) revealed that two-thirds of those fathers who visited their children at least once a week kept in touch online weekly while only one-third of those kept in touch online who visited their children less than once a week. However, other studies highlighted that the importance of online connection is significant in cases when nonresident parents live far away from their children (Rudi et al. 2015). A Hungarian qualitative study (Szalma and Rékai 2019) found that online communication was most prevalent among those nonresident fathers who lived in different countries from their children, and the use of ICTs was negligible between nonresident fathers and their children when they resided in the same country.

This paper aims to examine whether face-to-face contact patterns and the role of ICTs have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2019–2020 between nonresident parents and their children in Hungary. To answer these questions, we conducted 22 interviews in Hungary during the pandemic.

Hungarian context of the COVID-19 pandemic

At the end of January 2020, the Hungarian Operational Staff formed which operates as the official body responsible for responding to and handling issues that emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. After detecting the presence of the virus in Hungary on 4 March, the government announced that the Operational Staff should hold daily meetings at noon to inform the general public about new developments. The first coronavirus-related death was announced on 15 March through the official national website of the virus (<https://koronavirus.gov.hu/>). Creches, kindergartens, schools and universities closed on 16 March, and all education has been held online since. On 18 March, Surgeon General Cecília Müller announced that the virus reached every part of the country (Bakró-Nagy and Fodor 2020). Shortly after, the operational staff announced a partial curfew to last between 28 March and 11 April which has since been extended indefinitely. The decree (71/2020. (III. 27.) gov. decree) restricts movements of citizens going to work, shopping and other activities fulfilling essential needs. Carrying the child

to and from visitation was mentioned as essential; therefore, parental rights remained unaffected by the partial curfew.

Data and methods

The empirical base of the study consists of 22 semi-structured interviews conducted between 24 March and 5 April in Hungary via telephone. Our interviewees were parents who have at least one child under the age of 18 and do not live in the same household as the other parent. Overall, we interviewed fourteen nonresident fathers, three resident mothers and five parents who have shared custody arrangements. We chose to focus on nonresident fathers and those families where the parents raise their children in physical joint custody. A study conducted in 2011 revealed that in 87% of single-parent families the mothers raised the children in Hungary (OECD Family Database 2019) while the number of families who chose joint physical custody after marriage dissolution is increasing and it reached 13,6% in 2017 in Hungary (HCSO n.d.). The 20–40 minutes long interviews focused on how (quasi) nonresident parents keep in touch with their children since the outbreak of the pandemic. To gain a deep understanding of their practices, we asked questions about the parents' opinion and understanding of the severity of the pandemic and whether or not their ex-partner had a similar view of the situation. We examined whether they had any strategies to manage their parenting responsibilities if the current restriction of movement policies tightened. Among other topics, we asked whether they kept in touch via any ICTs. It is a relevant question because the rate of internet users in Hungary is 88.9%, which almost reaches the average rate of internet users (89.4%) in the EU in 2020 (Internet World Stats 2020). Moreover, 72% of Hungarians use mobile devices (smartphones, portable computer, tablets, PDA) to access to the internet, which is close to the EU average (75%) in 2019 as well (Eurostat 2020), indicating that ICTs are available for online communication. Furthermore, we posed questions on whether nonresidential parents planned to compensate for personal contacts they might have missed due to the peculiarity of the circumstances.

The sample has been collected via the snowball method, as we called for volunteers through our networks of acquaintances. We aimed to have a diverse sample with participants from different educational backgrounds, environments and raising children of different ages.

Findings

No changes in visitation

In our sample, we found seven cases where the participants did not report any changes in the contact between nonresident parents and their children. Five out of these seven interviewees said that they did not take the pandemic seriously and therefore, they did not change their visitation customs. Two parents described the pandemic as very serious, but they continued their visitations as usual. Furthermore, it became clear that both families were still uncertain whether they should continue personal visitations. For example, Kate explained that although regular visitations were still intact, she would

advise her 15-year-old daughter to avoid personal contact with her truck-driver father if the pandemic became more severe. Similarly, Liam reported having a fiery discussion with his ex-partner about wanting to continue meeting his five-year-old son. After discussing the situation, the mother agreed not to intervene in their contact, because the son was left without any other social interactions due to the kindergarten closing down and had no other options to socialize. Furthermore, all of the seven parents have already used ICTs regularly as a complementary means of communication besides personal meetings before the pandemic. Indeed, in one of the cases the nonresident father mentioned that Viber video chat is the main communication form between him and his 16 years old son since they do not live in the same city. We found that the usage of ICTs for keeping in touch remained unchanged in all of the cases.

Significant changes in visitation

There were six cases in our sample, where significant changes occurred in the visitation patterns with different reasons behind them. Felix described his contact with his 11-year-old daughter as “hectic” because “it depends on the mothers’ present feelings towards the virus”. He revealed not being allowed to see the child for the first week of the pandemic. The mother then changed her mind and allowed him to see his daughter. Felix explained, “I would understand her decision if they lived hermetically, but her new partner has a child from his previous relationship too, and they keep seeing each other”. Felix’s example further emphasizes that lots of families are uncertain about how to handle the situation, and therefore they often change their standpoints about visitations during the pandemic.

The most common reason for modifying visitation agreements was the alteration of working conditions and parents being unable to reconcile work and child care activities. Evelin has shared custody over her seven years old daughter and partly gave up her custodial privileges because the family is taking the pandemic seriously, and they planned to remain completely isolated until it ends. They agreed that the father’s weekend house was the most suitable residence for isolation. As a result, she only sees her daughter once a week while wearing protective face masks and without having any physical contact. Evelin had to continue working from her small home which contributed to her decision: “I have to be in home-office, and I have to add that I live in a tiny, one-bedroom house... I basically would have had to lock her in the room which would have been devastating. I have to keep working.” Moreover, the child has the father’s full attention in his holiday home, because his photography business lost all its clients due to the pandemic; therefore, he can dedicate his full attention to the child.

Another reason was the online education schedules which required some modifications in visitation patterns. Gray has two eleven years old twins who usually spend three days with their mother and four days with him and alternate the next week. During the pandemic, they agreed to make adjustments to this pattern by adapting it to the children’s online education schedules. They elongated the cycles of visitation and decided to rotate custodial responsibilities weekly. It seems that the significant changes were mainly provoked by the consequences of the pandemic, such as its effects on working conditions and online education rather than being afraid of contracting the virus.

All of the six parents used ICTs with their children before the pandemic, and the circumstances did not bring any change in its patterns. However, they emphasized that it only had a complementary role. They mainly used it to keep in touch between two face-to-face meetings. The most common way of using ICTs was calling each other via mobile phones and through online applications such as Viber and Facebook Messenger. Moreover, two parents who have children in their teens mentioned using online video games to spend more time together while being apart.

Complete lack of visitation

Nine interviewees reported the complete suspension of visitations during the pandemic. Six participants among them said that they terminated the personal meetings with their children because at least one of the ex-partners evaluated the pandemic as too dangerous for face-to-face visitations. The other pattern was related to the indirect effects of the virus, such as borders being closed and being forced to stay in quarantine.

The only outstanding case in the sample was Richard's, who just started having regular contact with his 16-year-old son by working out together at their local gym. As all services providing recreational activities were ordered to close, they lost the link that kept them together and therefore they have not seen each other since. As they did not use ICTs to communicate with each other before, the relationship between them completely disappeared.

Two nonresident fathers willingly gave up personal contact with their small children because of being fearful of the pandemic. Adam's main concern was unintentionally infecting the child's mother since he would have to take over the primary child-caring responsibilities in that case. Meanwhile, Charles was worried about catching the virus during one of the visitations and infecting his own mother. Both of the two nonresident fathers mentioned trying to replace the lack of personal presence through ICTs. Adam said they had already used the video call function on Facebook Messenger to keep in contact with his two years old son since they do not live in the same town. However, the frequency of online contact has become more intense during the pandemic. Charles described the changing use of ICTs between him and his five years old daughter: "So far we didn't need it. We only talked on the phone sometimes, but now we have video calls via Viber".

There were three cases where the resident-mothers evaluated the virus as very severe, and as a result, did not allow the nonresident fathers to continue having face-to-face contact with their children. Christopher described the mother of his child and his ex-mother-in-law as it follows: "They are neat-freaks. Crazy people. This pandemic brings out the worst of them." Overall, it seems that if either of the parents considers that personal meetings are too dangerous, visitations tend to be suspended.

In all of the cases, the resident mothers allowed children to use ICTs to keep in contact with their fathers. For example, before the pandemic, Vanessa did not allow her nine years old son to have a mobile phone despite the nonresident father buying one as a present for his 8th birthday. However, in the present situation, she became more lenient toward ICTs and even encouraged his son to use his mobile phone to keep in touch

with his father. Consequently, we found that suspended face-to-face encounters go together with the increased use of ICTs to stay in touch.

There were three fathers in our sample for whom meeting their children required crossing the borders between countries. For instance, Mark works in Vienna as a waiter and would be ordered to self-quarantine for two weeks in both countries (Austria and Hungary) upon crossing the borders. He added that he would be willing to be quarantined twice to see his children. However, due to the uncertainties of the situation, he was afraid of losing his job if his workplace opened unexpectedly. He explained that online communication did not serve an important role in their relationships before since he used to meet his children every week. Since face-to-face encounters were suspended, they started using ICTs as a substitute for personal meetings. “We call each other and talk on Facebook Messenger several times every day with my daughter. I try to reach my son as well, but he isn’t available as much”. Gregory works as a waiter in England and already used ICTs to keep in touch, as he did not have the opportunity to have personal encounters with his ten-year-old daughter frequently. Even though he decided to travel back to Hungary as the situation worsened, he was still unable to meet his child because he was in quarantine at the time of conducting the interview.

In the third case, the child lives in Slovakia, a neighboring country and the nonresident father normally commutes every second weekend to take his child to Hungary for three days. However, since the borders have closed, the personal meetings had to be suspended. Regardless of living far away from each other, they did not use ICTs for keeping in touch because the resident-mother did not allow it. However, Vincent reported that “[he] received an order from the Slovakian court that the mother must make the child available for an hour every day so we can talk on Viber”. Thus, in his case, ICTs can also be regarded as a substitution for face-to-face encounters.

Future plans

In a lot of cases, visitation became less frequent or suspended, and it may be assumed that this trend will continue as the virus spreads and becomes more prevalent than before. For that reason, it is vital to explore participants’ views on whether missed visitations can be made up for, and if so, how they plan to do it.

We found that most parents do not plan to make up for missed visitations. There were only four participants in our sample who planned to meet more frequently than they normally would. Vanessa planned to provide more opportunities for the father and the child because she believed that she and the child would be bored with each other by the time the pandemic has passed. On the contrary, Gregory wanted to use the pandemic as an opportunity to make up for the visitations he had missed because of residing abroad. Therefore, he planned to remain self-isolated with his daughter for a month after his quarantine ends. Evelin explained missing her daughter so much that she planned to take a week off work and spend quality time together after the virus passes. Meanwhile, Robert counted the missed meetings and would make up for the exact number of occasions he has missed.

The majority of parents whose visitations have been suspended or modified do not plan to compensate for the missed occasions because they see it as pointless. For instance, Tim said “Well, I don’t think these should be made up for, it isn’t like that. It

isn't like I borrowed 50 Euros, and now I will give 50 Euros back. It just won't take place, things go on, and that's all." Meanwhile, Adam explained that it would not make sense to make up for missed occasions, because his child was too young to remember the encounters and therefore, they did not matter. On the contrary, Mark thought compensating for visitations would be necessary, but unfortunately, due to his work commitments, he would not have the time for it. Two nonresident parents believed that counterposing such occasions would meet legal obstacles.

Conclusion

Previous research mainly focused on face-to-face contact between nonresident parents and their children (Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010; Meggiolaro and Ongaro 2015; Goldberg and Carlson 2015; Seltzer 1991). Our research is not exceptional in this regard because we also examined the face-to-face contact between nonresident parents and their children. However, we examined it under a special circumstance: during the COVID-19 pandemic and we raised the question of how this special circumstance can affect parental visitations. Furthermore, we extended the previous studies focusing on less frequently examined contact forms, such as telephone and video contact (some exceptions Marryat, Reid, and Wasoff 2009; Hughes and Funston 2006; Leite and McKenry 2002).

We found that there have been significant changes in in-person visitation patterns. Six out of the twenty-two participants reported that they changed their meeting habits, and further nine participants said that they did not meet personally during the pandemic at all. This large-scale change is surprising because the partial curfew announced by the Hungarian government on 28 March states that parental- and visitation rights should not be affected by the restriction of movement policy. However, the cessation of encounters related to the direct effect of the epidemic: when either of parents evaluated the situation too dangerous to keep face-to-face contact the (quasi) nonresident parents did not meet with their children. The resident parents in all of the cases were cooperative when personal visitation did not take place to help the nonresident parents to keep in contact with their children via ICTs. Therefore, the importance of such technologies has increased in those families during the pandemic.

At the same time, some changes in face-to-face meetings can be regarded as an adjustment to the indirect consequences of the epidemic, such as the introduction of home-office work and online education. We did not find any changes in the patterns of ICTs usage among them, and neither in the cases of families where visitation habits remained unchanged. Based on these results we can partly confirm the results of previous research, specifically that communication via ICTs only has a complementary role besides personal meetings (Franzen 2000; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Hertlein and Blumer 2014).

However, we also found some evidence that in cases where face-to-face meetings were suspended, the online meetings served as a substitute for them. It seems that social distancing could cause similar effects on the contact between nonresident parents and their children as the effects caused by significant physical distance. A previous study (Rudi et al. 2015) found that those nonresident fathers highlighted the importance of the online connection who live far away from their children. Thus, the role of ICTs is appreciated when personal encounters are impossible due to physical or social distance.

However, we should be cautious about generalizing our results because of the small sample size and because our participants were uncertain about the final visitation arrangements at the time of the interviews. Several of them reported only an instantaneous state that may change in light of developments of the pandemic. Furthermore, the state of emergency introduced in March as a response to the outbreak of the coronavirus has been terminated by the Hungarian Parliament on the 16th of June (Hungary Today 2020). This announcement indicates that life will gradually return to its usual schedule, which would be a great opportunity for conducting further research on this issue. It would be useful to reveal how contact patterns change between nonresident fathers and their children after the end of the pandemic as well as exploring whether the use of ICTs will remain a significant mode of communication between nonresident parents and their children in the long-run.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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