

Family Structure and Functioning and the Implications for Child Well-being in Albania

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Abstract

In the socio-demographic transitional times, the Albanian family has undergone considerable change in its structure and functioning and during the processes of socialization and interaction (Parson, 1956) it is supporting child development in a different manner (Tushi, 2012). The childhood is being indicated in the international literature as crucially important in the trajectory of human development, and early cognitive stimulation and body integrity are early life determinants of later development. This paper investigates the implication of the family structure and function on child well-being. The research questions are explored through bivariate analyses using nationally representative data from the Albanian Demographic and Health Survey (ADHS), 2008-09, and the theoretical framework relies on the Capability Approach theory (CA), (Sen, 1999) applied to measure child well-being in a family context. The independent factors concerns family structure and family functioning identified through some indicators believed to define parental attitudes towards childrearing such as fertility preference, desired number of children, and provision of adequate care to children. The parent-child interaction is observed through the parent's involvement in stimulating the child to enjoy early cognitive development and body integrity. Therefore, the stimulation of cognitive values as well as the parental discipline style are expected to support the development of two central capabilities of 'Senses, imagination, thought' and 'Bodily integrity' (Nussbaum, 2011) in order to ensure well-being during childhood.

Keywords: family structure, family function, childhood well-being, capability approach, Albania

1. Introduction

During the last two decades Albania has experienced a rapid transition accompanied by large socio-demographic changes. Family as a core social structure has as well undergone a considerable change in its structure (having fewer children, less members, and more disrupted marriages) and is nowadays performing its functions and supporting child development in a different manner (Tushi, 2012). Family dynamics (structure and function) is identified to be critical to the child outcomes and parent-child relationship is central of that dynamics.

A persistent body of literature is developed on the impact of family structure and family change on child well-being. This literature documents significant evidence about children raised in different family contexts that displays differential patterns of outcomes across a wide range of developmental domains. The fundamental characteristics of the family concerns family structure and function. The research has consistently argued that family structure can facilitate or limit the ways in which parents are able to positively influence the future outcomes of their children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002). Furthermore the family structure can constrain family availability to provide its functions related to the social, human and time resources they devote to children for assuring their well-being.

The early years of life, from 0 to 5 years old¹ are being indicated as crucially important in the trajectory of human development. Although the United Nations' definition of early childhood refers to the period up to 8 years of age, most official statistics, including those derived from household surveys, collect data for children under the age of 5. The early childhood beside physical growth and survival, is a period that represent times of exploration, learning, making choices, identity consolidation, and relationship building. But in the other side, deprivation during this life phase—even for short periods of time—can have long-term and irreversible consequences. The Albanian young children 0-6 years old seem to hold a greater poverty risks (Menchini & Redmond, 2006)² and a low probability to escape any form of deprivation as those linked to nutrition, education or material ones (Bascieri & Falkingham, 2007). But we know very little what is happening in terms of family effects on sustaining children cognitive development and social integrity, as early life determinants of later development. Beside, the issues have come out recently also as a policy concern in Albania, even though discussed on generalized manner.

To this aim, this paper will reveal the complex interplay between family dynamics and some early childhood well-being outcomes in Albania. The theoretical framework taken into consideration refers to the 'Human Development Approach' also known as 'Capability Approach' (CA) (Sen, 1999) which is internationally recognized as one satisfying and complete multi-dimensional approach is to analyse child well-being in the family context. The CA identify the main concepts of *functionings*, *capabilities* and *agency freedom* (Sen, 1992: 39-40), and as argued by (Nussbaum, 2011: 26) children functioning's are necessary prelude to adult capability. Nussbaum (2011) has developed a list of ten central capabilities used also for child well-being analysis in developing countries.

Functioning, Capabilities and freedoms are core concepts in the CA. A '*functioning*' is an achievement, i.e. what a person manages to do or be. These 'beings and doings' can vary from being adequately nourished, live a long and healthy life, and being well educated to rather complex achievements like social participation, having self-respect and appear in public without shame etc. The various combinations of functioning (beings and doings) that a person *can* achieve are called '*capabilities*'. The '*Agency freedom*' is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political, and economic opportunities available to us" (Sen, 1999: xi-xii)

The data used for the empirical investigation are obtained from the Albanian Demographic and Health Survey, AHDS 2008-09, a survey includes rich nationally representative information early childhood outcomes such as health, education, early learning, early development. The methods consists on logistic regression analyses, used to provide a deeper understanding of the effects of family structure and function on the outcomes of cognitive development and body integrity, identified through two capabilities as explained in the methodology section.

The results provide interesting empirical findings on the complexity of the relationships examined, as well as are expected to contribute to the policy discourse about family interaction with early childhood well-being.

2. Family Dynamics and the Connection with Child well-being

The two decades of market-led economic growth have been accompanied by a significant transformation on the demographic patterns of the country. The population change over this period has reveals the first signs of the second demographic transition (Lerch, 2011), and family is experiencing important changes in its structure having now less children, less members, and more disrupted marriages. This process is associated with some new social patterns like the individualisation of society, changing values of children and parenthood. Of course all these changes bring consequences on family function as the primary supportive system for the early childhood, that accomplish their basic needs and incite the complete development of the child personality. The presence of this intimate system (family) and its important social roles are crucial for the child to develop adequately and being wealthy (Tushi, 2012).

¹ United Nations General Assembly, Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Report of the Secretary-General, United A/65/206, 2 August 2010.

² It refers to the relative risks that people in the age groups 0-6 yrs old will fall below the PPP \$2.15 poverty line.

Well-being does have the potential of a bridging concept, in highlighting inequalities, acknowledging diversities, and respecting early children's agency. Monitoring, protecting and promoting well-being is central to realization of children's rights, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC, 1989) ratified also in Albania. Child well-being is multi-dimensional and there is no one standard definition of its various components, nor a standard set of internationally agreed indicators for measuring them. Defining and measuring child well-being is a challenge for the country policy and measures as well, because of the complexity of this concept which covers physical, cognitive and socio-emotional aspects of the child's current situation (being), and development (becoming) (UNICEF, IRC 2009).

Child well-being as a well established concept and well evidenced in the international arena, has also become a substantial element of the policy and research discourse in developing countries (Gough & McGregor, 2007) associated with monitoring efforts that use 'well-being indicators' to compare children's experiences and contexts against normative as well as explicitly rights-based reference points (Dominic & Hoelscher & Bradshaw, 2008; UNICEF - Innocenti Reports www.unicef-irc.org/research/). In addition, interesting theoretical and empirical outputs are produced with the support of the Capability Approach, for developing countries including also the Albanian case (Di Tomasso, 2007; Baschieri & Falkingham 2007; Mangiavacchi et al, 2012).

However, child well-being is being introduced in the national research efforts and policy dialogue in Albania only during last recent years. Thus, it become increasingly popular as a concept in the field of social policy, national development, and more recently child development (e.g. respectively Tahiraj, 2008; Save the Children, 2012; Kusi, 2009)

3. Theoretical Framework and Concepts Used

The theoretical framework used here to measure child well-being in a family context, relies on the Capability Approach theory (Sen, 1999). The CA represents a new and innovative paradigm in the development and policy world, that embody the concept of well-being³, which has been successfully applied, in developed and in developing countries. The capability approach claim about the assessments of the well-being or quality of life, and judgments of equality or justice, or the level of development of a country, primarily focusing on the opportunities that people have to lead the lives they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2006).

CA contains as main concepts: '*functioning*', '*capabilities*' and '*agency freedom*'. A '*functioning*' is an achievement, i.e. what a person manages to do or be. These 'beings and doings' can vary from being adequately nourished, live a long and healthy life, and being well educated to rather complex achievements like social participation etc. The various combinations of functioning (beings and doings) are called '*capabilities*' that represent the overall freedom a person enjoys to pursue her well-being' (Sen, 1992: 39-40). While '*agency freedoms*' are the opportunities available to reach capabilities which is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social opportunities available to us (Sen, 1999: xi-xii) which is entirely fined through our relationships to other persons (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010) being thus crucial for the parent-child connection.

Well-being in the CA and applied in this paper, is referring to the possession of those capabilities as the 'the substantive freedoms' a person 'enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen, 1999: 87), thus it has to do with the substantive freedoms that people have, rather than only on the particular outcomes with which they end up. The core valued human freedoms are well argued and presented on the Nussbaum version of the approach - more explicitly in her list of ten central human capabilities (2000: 78-80). Her list values in offering a comprehensive global assessment of the quality of life in a society, embracing numerous non-economic aspects of human life which is concerned with entrenched social injustice and inequality (Nussbaum, 2011). Two of the capabilities: *Senses, imagination, thought* and *Bodily integrity*, are drawn from this list to provide an analysis linked with some well-being aspects of Albanian children during early childhood. This choice is also inspired by Gough (2003) argument that find these capabilities among the privileged from Nussbaum because they are particularly developed at early ages. These capabilities connects to the outcomes of 'early cognitive stimulation' and 'social integrity', crucial for the development of the child character and for latter success in life (Tough, 2012). The capability failure is what produces latter deprivation (child deprivation) what creates imbalances and inequalities inside this group of population.

However the well-being state of a person, her beings and doings, may be the outcome of her own or of other people's decisions and this has to do with another important concept developed in the CA - that of "agency" cited above

³ CA is integral to Sen's contributions to welfare economics, for which he was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics in 1998 (Atkinson, 1999; Arrow, 1999).

which allows taking account of the interdependencies that characterize the capabilities of parents and children in particular during early childhood development that is more impacted by the agency of the children's care persons than any other stage of life (Volkert and Wust, 2009). For example, parents devote time, personal care and support to the well-being of their children by playing, singing or reading with them – i.e. performing activities that have been shown to be decisive for the early child development of cognitive, language and social skills (UNICEF, MICS 2005). Similarly, parents foster the capabilities of their children to enjoy social and body integrity by teaching their children with the right behaviour or by addressing a behavioural problem.

But parents/caregivers relationships with children could be seen in the light of the inputs enabled in the family life, well represented by family structure and function. Family structure means composition of the family. Defining types of family structure has been a recent subject of debate, and the resulting ambiguity in terminology has contributed to the confusion about its effects (Popenoe, 1988; Stacey, 1996). In describing family (households) that do not conform to a "normal" conception of the family (that is, two married parents and their biological children), researchers often employ categories such as traditional/non-traditional, intact/non-intact, biological or natural parents, stepparents, cohabiting partners, and mother- only or father-only households. Here in the paper we use the concept of nuclear family (consisting of a husband, wife and their children or a single parent one. The extended one has a nuclear family at e core but including more members). While family size refers to the number of the family members.

The family is the first unit with which children have a continuous contact and the first context in which socialization patterns develop (Elkin & Handel, 1978). The parental attitudes in developing the 'early cognitive stimulation' and 'social Integrity' of young children are defined here as family functions. More concretely, we have identified some resource relevant indicators believed to represent important family functions with regard to the time, and human capital dedicated during early childhood in order to foster capabilities that ensures child well-being.

Besides, the identified depended and independent factors discussed here are linked to the indicators supplied by the ADHS 2008-09, a multipurpose survey carried out widely in developing countries for monitoring demographic, health and social aspects of the population.

4. Data and Measures

This paper investigates the implication of the family structure and function on child well-being, using nationally representative data from the Albanian Demographic and Health Survey (ADHS) 2008-09. This survey was designed to measure child developmental aspects and collects information for children under 5 years.

Descriptive and multivariate methods are used to study the relationships of interest in the research, using the subsample of 1550 children under 5 years to analyze 'early learning' and of 600 children 2-5 years old to analyze 'social integrity'. The ADHS 2008-09 has measured discipline only for children 2-14 yrs old.

We have produced a two step models to see first the linkage between family structure and the outcome indicators. Family structure represents an important demographic component of a society in transition and also it is crucial for the policy making decisions.

In a second step are seen the potential linkages adding also the family function variables organized in two groups according to the type of function: (1) time devoted to children and (2) human capital devoted to children. This idea is supported by a considerable amount of family research who argue that parenting processes are more important than family structure when analyzing childhood outcomes.

The independent categories/variables considered in the analyses are described here in the table. The choice of indicators is driven by the relevance to the theory and to the availability in the ADHS dataset.

Independent Categories	Indicators
A) Family type	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family size 2. Biological parents versus step parents 3. Nuclear family versus extended family
B) Family function	B1. Time devoted to children
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mother working versus Mother not working last 12 months 2. Non-parental child supervision 3. Desired number of children
	B 2. Human capital devoted to children
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Level of education of the mother Primary or secondary University +

2. Fertility preference Want to have another child Want no more children
3. Age of mother at first birth Under 19 19 – 24 25 – 49

For measurement purposes in this paper we use the capabilities (rather than functioning) and the reference is made to two capabilities from the “Central list of Capabilities” from Nussbaum (2000). Nussbaum also mention the concept of ‘threshold levels’ for each of the capabilities on her list, below which “truly human functioning is not available to citizens (children); and the social goal should be understood in terms of getting citizens (children) above this capability threshold” (Nussbaum 2000: 6). The connection to the outcome indicators and the threshold level are explained here:

The capability of *Senses, imagination, thought*⁴ for children under 5, is measured by the indicator of ‘*Parent support for learning*’ which specifies whether the parents are (a) reading books or looking at picture books with the child; (b) telling stories to the child; (c) singing songs with the child; (d) taking children outside the home compound or yard; (e) playing with children; (f) and spending time with children naming, counting, or drawing things, during the 3 days preceding the interview. A dummy variable is created: 1-4 category = 0 and 5-6 category = 1. The mean number of activities parent are engaged is 4.7 (from ADHS 2008-09 descriptive analysis) and this is defined as a *threshold level*, below which children experience capability failure because there is lacking the proper parent support.

The capability of *Bodily integrity*⁵ for children under 5 years old is measured by the indicator of ‘*Child discipline*’ which specifies whether a child 2-5 years old had experienced any form of psychological or physical discipline in the month before the survey. It is created a dummy variable: Non violent discipline or punishment = 0 and any psychological or physical form of discipline = 1. The experiencing of the non violent form of discipline is used as a *threshold level* in order to capture capability failure because of the physical and psychological forms of discipline parents administered to their children what in consequence disrupt their body and social integrity.

5. Results and Conclusions

Development in early years automatically concerns interaction with parents because the individual development happens in a contextual approach and the “family environment role in the overall achievement and ability of an individual is important” (Kagitçibasi, 2007). Through the binary logistic regression model we wanted to explore how family structure and function can facilitate or limit the ways in which parents are able to influence the well-being outcomes of ‘early cognitive stimulation’ and ‘body integrity’ in their children in order to stimulate the proper capabilities.

The majority of families analysed here and which have a child under 5 years of age belong to an extended family type and are living in rural areas (62 percent and 61 percent respectively) and both categories are characterise by a high fertility rate (TFR 1.8) and the traditional (non modern) way of living is likely to be much stronger (ADHS 2008-09).

Table 1 in the appendix shows the results of the logistic analyses where the two indicators of ‘Early learning’ and ‘Child discipline’ are used as dependent variables. We created two binary measures from these indices to indicate whether a child receives the appropriate form of support for early learning and form of discipline in both contexts. In both cases, the categories were explained in the methodology section. In addition, the score test for the proportional odds assumption conducted for the final models indicate that it was appropriate to use the two indicators as outcome variables.

We are applying a two step model, in order to initially look at the relationship between the family structure variables with the selected outcome variables, and then after the relations with other potential family function variables were estimated. The results from the analysis in model 1a show that ‘early cognitive stimulation’ is significantly associated with the family size and family structure (Table 1 in the appendix). The likelihood ratio of ‘early cognitive stimulation’ is lower for children living in extended families compared to reference category, when other variables remain constant in the model. Among family variables, only the structure of the family is significant (OR = 0.766), indicating that the children

⁴ Senses, Imagination, and Thought is one from ten central capabilities from Nussbaum (2011), which means: Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and to reason -and to do these things in a “truly human” way.

⁵ Bodily Integrity is one from ten central capabilities from Nussbaum (2011), which means: Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence.

living in extended families are less likely to get involved with early education activities and thus have lower chances to develop the capability of senses, imagination and thoughts. Involvement in early education activities is higher for mothers engaged in working activities during the last 12 months (OR = 1.288) and for mothers with higher education (OR = 1.485). Obviously, being in the families where children are left with inadequate care in a considerable number of times (as per ADHS 2008-09), significantly reduces the chances to have the adequate stimulation for cognitive activities. While the preference of women for another child (OR = 0.680) decreases the chances for developing the capability of senses, imagination and thoughts.

When we examined family structure as a direct causal influence on aspects of child capabilities of 'body integrity' represented through 'child discipline' variable, none of the family formation variables show significant differences (model 2a in Table 1). The use of any psychological or physical form of discipline from parents into their children appear lower for the category of mothers that declared to desire more children (OR = 0.532) and that would prefer a bigger family with many children (OR = 0.970). Having a highly educated mother increases the chances for a child to receive the appropriate form of discipline without psychological or physical punishment, but surprisingly there is no significance appearing for the mother employment variable. This result is effected by the high correlation between mother education and mother employment variables ($r = 0.336$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 2). The chi-Squared test for this two variables shows a value of 173 for the p -value < 0.001 , which confirms that employment and education are statistically related.

The analyses fails to control for crucial familial contextual characteristics such as such as 'wealth index of family' and 'family residence' which indeed were initially considered to get included in the analysis but has been excluded in a latter stage from the model in order to check the possibility of increasing the significance of "mother education" and "mother employment" variables (because of high correlation). Indeed after moving out this variables, the estimates changed showing a higher significance. The table of correlations indicates also higher correlations values had the residence and poverty status ($r = 0.594$, $p < 0.001$) as shown in Table 2 in the appendix.

The 'early cognitive stimulation' and 'body integrity' during early childhood are being recognized in the child development literature as very important because they foster life course trajectories. In the transition period from infancy to early childhood, the parents role is shifting from a caretaker to a role of directing, shaping, and reinforcing children's cognitively for facilitating critical early learning. Furthermore parents today practices diverse modeling, reinforcing, and punishing behavior, important for developing their children social integrity. According to this view, family formation, being a young mother, dependence, joblessness, parent education may have particularly harmful effects during early childhood, generally defined as infancy through the first five years of life (Hetherington, Cox, and Cox 1978; Davis-Kean 2005).

Of course Albanian parents with their own agency and capabilities, and under the influence of culture and tradition, transmit to children at the age 0-5 years at a level of 79 percent the required care (four or more of the specified children's activities) (ADHS 2008-09). They also practice some forms of psychological or physical discipline at a level of 68.9 percent for children under 5, when they misbehave (ADHS 2008-09).

From our analysis, is evident that parents invest time, energy, and human resources in performing their role to increase their children's well-being. The intimate relationships between family formation, family childrearing function and child well-being outcomes, already confirmed in the international literature, are also apparent in the estimated binary logistic regression model. The results demonstrates that the aspirations of the adults (parents) towards advancing the well-being of their children (measured by fertility preferences, desired number of children, care after children) have a significant effect on creating the capabilities of 'senses and thought' and 'body integrity' confirming that the parental efforts for developing the cognitive skills in young children as well as the parental discipline style either ensures child's well-being or leads them toward deprivation.

More concretely, human capital, reflected in parents' years of education, age of parent, preferences for another child, represent some important human resources that conditions parents investment for their children's well-being. Educated parents have greater knowledge and expertise to build a supportive cognitive and emotional environment for the child to develop and this is true for both parents, with a odd ratio of 1.485 for mothers with university and higher education, and with an odd ratio of 4.169 for fathers with university and higher education. Still, education appears as a very decisive attribute for getting fathers involved in this process.

Age of parent (mother) is crucial for quality of care, safe and stimulating environments to increase their children's achievements and decrease their problems. Conversely, teenage mothers may have fewer personal resources to invest in their children. Conventional wisdom suggests that teenage and younger mothers may be emotionally unprepared for parenthood, have fewer parenting skills, and lack resources compared to adult mothers (Furstenberg et al, 1990). The preference to stopping child bearing means more human capital available for the existing children and in the contrary, it reduces the chances for the children to have adequate early stimulation support from parents (as it is shown in Table 1

with $OR = 0.680$). While for the body integrity capabilities the higher level of education of the mother and father, as well as the preference to stop child bearing ($OR=0.532$) reduces the chances for the capability failure.

Time resources are embedded in parents working relations – what means reduced time for their children, in quality of care in supervising the child in early ages and in the preferences for a numerous family with many children. Indeed the time resources appear to influence parent- child relationships inside the family, especially concerning the creation of early learning capabilities. While for the body integrity capabilities, only the preferences for a numerous family appears to increase the possibility of the capability failure.

In return to the parent support and care which constitute the child 'agency freedoms' - named as the opportunities available to them to reach capabilities – children do not only refrain the lack of capabilities, but are consequently capable to acquire greater human and social capital and accumulate greater wealth in their life.

At the very end, this analyses contribute in stimulating the national research discourse about family and child well-being issues recognizing the "exceptional role of the family as a social structure, which is explained by the functions it carries out for the greater society" (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993).

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Appendix

Table 1. Interaction of family dynamics with child well-being outcomes (odds ratios from binomial logistic regression models)

Dependent variable	Family support for learning: 5-6 activities vs 0-4 activities		Child discipline: Any psychological or physical vs no violent form or no discipline at all	
	Model 1a	Model 2b	Model 1a	Model 2b
	Exp(B) (sig)	Exp(B) (sig)	Exp(B) (sig)	Exp(B) (sig)
A) Family type				
Family size	0.936 (0.058)	0.943 (0.123)	0.951 (0.540)	0.876 (0.122)
Living with biological parents				
Living with both biological parents	1.154 (0.360)	1.034 (0.834)	1.151 (0.692)	1.225 (0.576)
Living with one or no biological parents	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Structure of family				
Nuclear family (one or two parent family)	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Extended family	0.741 (0.022)	0.766 (0.060)	0.771 (0.405)	0.981 (0.955)
B) Family functioning				
Maternal employment				
Not working in the last 12 months		1.000		1.000
Working		1.288 (0.056)		1.290 (0.416)
Non-parental child supervision				
Child left with inadequate care		1.000		1.000
Otherwise		1.402 (0.056)		0.415 (0.112)
Desired number of children		0.900 (0.061)		0.970 (0.000)
Level of education of the mother				
University +		1.485 (0.072)		0.509 (0.059)
Primary or secondary		1.000		1.000
Level of education of the father				
University +		4.169 (0.003)		0.714 (0.034)
Primary or secondary		1.000		1.000
Fertility preference of the mother				
Want to have another child		0.680 (0.002)		0.532 (0.027)
Want no more children		1.000		1.000
Age of mother at first birth				
Under 19		0.773 (0.186)		0.928 (0.888)
19 – 24		0.779 (0.158)		0.572 (0.216)
25 – 49		1.000		1.000
Sample size	1550	1550	600	600

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Correlations for some independent variables

	Mother employment	Poor vs non poor	Mother education	Place of residence (urban/rural)
Mother employment	1	-0.002	0.336**	0.104**
Poor vs non poor	-0.002	1	0.256**	0.594**
Mother education	0.336**	0.256**	1	0.333**
Place of residence (urban/rural)	0.104**	0.594**	0.333**	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.