

WESTERN UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

**Assisted resilience of vulnerable groups
and social service professionals**

SUMMARY OF THE ABILITATION THESIS

APPLICANT:

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The habilitation thesis entitled “*Assisted resilience of vulnerable groups and social services professionals*” reflects the author’s current position on the career path after the award of the PhD title in 2009 with the thesis “*A psycho-social study of the experiences of young people leaving care in Romania: lessons for service development*”(Queen’s University of Belfast, coordinators Dr. Caroline Skehill and Prof. John Pinkerton), representing the meeting point between the professional, scientific and didactic achievements achieved so far and the vision of the main directions of future development.

The postdoctoral research activity started at Spiru Haret University of Brasov, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (2009 – 2013), continuing for the most part at Transilvania University of Brasov, Faculty of Sociology and Communication, Department of Social and Communication Sciences (2013 – present), as well as through collaboration with researchers from other university centres in Romania (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Psychological Research Centre and Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance, Centre for the Prevention of Family and Societal Violence) and abroad, through his activity as a member of the *International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care* (INTRAC) and the *Research Committee of the European Federation of Psychodrama Training Organisations* (FEPTO).

The research field that I approached during this period of time represents a creative combination of my training and practice in social work (post-graduate and doctoral studies) and group psychotherapy - psychodrama (bachelor studies and post-graduate training). My interests for vulnerable groups, especially *young people leaving the childcare system* and *abused women, victims of domestic violence* were reflected in the in-depth research of their experiences as reflected by their eyes and voice, the understanding of specific needs, risk and protection factors and psycho-social support needs. As a natural continuation for a researcher passionate about investigating and understanding vulnerable groups, as well as supporting and empowering them, the research results were the basis for the design of intervention projects and programmes (the international project “*EMPOWER - Empowerment of Women Environment Research*”; the national projects “*Psychodrama in youth training programs in residential care*” and “*OUR HOUSE*” project for young people who are preparing to leave or have left the childcare system) presented in this paper.

Equally natural was the shift from focusing on research on vulnerable groups and intervention through assisted resilience programmes to increasing interest in social service professionals working with vulnerable groups (projects “CONNECT- *Building the Network of Specialists in Trauma Counselling*”, “*Psychodrama and Creative Education in Prison*”, more recently “*Stress, burnout and resilience of social workers in the COVID-19 pandemic*”). The experience gained in projects centered on research or continuous training of social professionals, coupled with the experience in the field of academic training of social workers (Bachelor's and Master's programs), brings to my attention the need for growth and enrichment of initial training programs, not just continuous. The results of the pilot project “*Personal development groups in social work education*” carried out online as part of students’ practice in the pandemic, at a time when access to state institutions and NGOs was banned, show the need for and value of personal development and increasing resilience in training for the professional role of social worker.

In the first part of the thesis I focused in two chapters the scientific contributions from research of vulnerable groups and professionals in the field of social services and the assisted resilience programs for both categories that enter the helping relationship - the client and the specialist.

Chapter 1 entitled “*Research of vulnerable groups*” starts with a brief overview of vulnerable groups, as identified by a series of socio-economic statistical indicators contained in government documents and research, which includes the two groups of vulnerable people that I have focused on in scientific research.

In sub-chapter 1.1 “*Framework of social policies within which scientific research is carried out*” I have included a description of the evolution of social and legislative policies concerning young people in the childcare system, discussed in several articles and contributions dealing at international level with this topic. Among the most prestigious are: (a) collaboration in the *DataCare Project* led by Eurochild in partnership with UNICEF for the development of comparable benchmarks in EU Member States; (b) inclusion of the chapter “Romania” in the forthcoming book “*Leaving Care around the world: Twenty years of the International Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care*”, edited by T. Refaeli and V. Mann-Feder, to be published at Oxford University Press in 2025, presenting the situation in 32 countries. The volume is a continuation of the first volume “*Young people’s transitions from care to adulthood*” edited by E. Munro and M. Stein (2008), including 16 countries among Romania too (Anghel, Dima, 2008).

Sub-chapter 1.2 “*Theoretical framework underpinning scientific research*” starts from defining key concepts, reflecting the progress made in social policy discourse and documents on the exclusion – social inclusion axis, from the vulnerability paradigm with its focus on problems to the resilience/assisted resilience paradigm centred on inclusion, resources and transformation. Several other theories – resilience, attachment, stress and burnout among social workers – underpinning my research and intervention projects are also reviewed.

Sub-chapter 1.3 “*Personal contributions*” presents in the first part, personal contributions to the application and development of the theory on vulnerable groups, through applications and adaptations of theoretical models in new areas. The first contribution is the adaptation of *Bridges’ transition model* (2002) to explain young people’s transition from care to independent living published in the article “*Making sense of leaving care: The contribution of Bridges model of transition to understanding the psycho-social process*” (Dima & Skehill, 2011). This contribution is validated by Jan Storø in the article “*Which transition concept is useful for describing the process of young people leaving state care? A reflection on research and language*” published in 2016 in the *European Journal of Social Work*. Another proof is the number of 93 citations recorded by the article Dima & Skehill (2011) to date, many in prestigious international journals. Bridges’ transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2019) was recently applied to explain the resilience process of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, article published very recently (Dima & Şimon, 2024). The most relevant contribution to the title of this thesis is the presentation of a typology of change of victim role in the case of abused women combining the theory of change in psychodrama (Baim et al., 2007) and the theory of assisted resilience (Ionescu, 2013), published in the article “*When you Thought that There is No One and Nothing*”: *The Value of Psychodrama in Working with Abused Women*” (Bucuță, Dima, Testoni, 2018).

The last part of the contributions refers to the development of the research methodology of vulnerable groups and presents the main method used in my research - *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)* - considered the most appropriate in the exploration of vulnerable groups due to the concern for the in-depth understanding of the lived life experience and their empowerment by giving them voice, listening to them and validating their experiences. With this method developed in the UK by Jonathan Smith (1996), I became acquainted during my doctoral studies at *Queen’s University of Belfast* and fell ‘in love’ with it, promoting it in Romania,

where it was very little known in the early 2000s, through conferences, published articles and the coordination of bachelor's and master's degrees thesis.

Chapter 2. "*Assisted Resilience*" is organized in three sections and presents in the first part the most important projects developed for young people in care, abused women, the multidisciplinary team of intervention in domestic violence, social workers in practice and in training. In the second part are presented some elements of the theory and practice of group psychotherapy - psychodrama, the main method used in intervention programs for vulnerable groups and professionals described in the first part.

Chapter 3. "*Developing the professional role*" describes the work within international research networks and participation in relevant conferences, integration into research and project teams. The most beloved and at the same time challenging project, with an important contribution to the development of complex skills for my professional role was "CONNECT - CONstruct NETwork in Counselling for Trauma ", a project initiated by me, from the selection of the team, national and international partners, the development of the project with the team, the management of the first 8 months until its handover due to the entry into maternity leave. This project resulted in 2 books, a manual for specialists (Dima & Beldianu, 2015) translated into Hungarian and a guide for trainers (Dima, Bucuță, Beldianu, 2015). Also in this section are presented achievements in the role of teacher, with a focus on innovation aspects: approach from the perspective of the 4MAT Instructional Design model, which combines research findings in neuroscience, learning and communication (McCarthy, O'Neill-Blackwell, 2007) and psychodrama techniques in education. Acknowledging the valuable contribution in the training of students, future social workers, is the 1st place (2023), the 2nd place (2021), the 3rd place (2019) obtained within our university "*Most appreciated Bachelor & Master Professors*" program.

The paper ends with chapter 4 which presents the plan of evolution and career development on the following dimensions: research, teaching, training of social work professionals, partnerships and networking. Among the boldest dreams is the introduction of a 'Self-care' course and a *personal development traineeship for students* in the curriculum of the undergraduate social work programme.