

Summary of the Habilitation Thesis

Vulnerable Populations, Behaviours and Risk Factors for Health

Cristina Faludi

Field of Habilitation: Social Work

This habilitation thesis presents the academic, scientific, and professional achievements of **Cristina Faludi**, while outlining her future research and academic development plans in support of obtaining the habilitation qualification for supervising doctoral research in Social Work. The thesis demonstrates a coherent and sustained scientific trajectory focused on vulnerable populations, health-related risk behaviours, social vulnerability, family solidarity, and evidence-based social work interventions. It highlights original interdisciplinary contributions situated at the intersection of social work, sociology, demography, public health, and social psychology.

Over more than two decades of academic activity within the Department of Social Work of the **Babeş-Bolyai University**, the candidate has developed a consistent research agenda grounded in rigorous quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Her scientific contributions have been disseminated through internationally indexed publications, participation in national and international competitive research projects, conference presentations, editorial activities, and collaborations with prestigious European research institutions.

The research program developed after obtaining the doctoral degree is organized around six major thematic directions.

The first and most extensive research area concerns **sexual and reproductive health among adolescents and young adults**. Beginning with participation in a large international comparative study on students' sexual and reproductive behaviours across 9 countries, the candidate has made significant contributions to understanding sexual debut, contraceptive behaviour, family communication about sexuality, adolescent pregnancy, substance use, and sexual health education. Her doctoral research and subsequent monograph provided one of the first comparative analyses of sexual and contraceptive initiation among Romanian students in a European context. Later studies demonstrated the protective role of family-based sexual education, identified gender differences in communication patterns regarding sexuality, and offered innovative operationalizations of "healthy sexual debut." These findings have informed social

work interventions, youth health promotion programs, and evidence-based recommendations for sexual and reproductive health policies.

A second line of inquiry examines **romantic relationships, intimacy, violence, and life-course transitions among young people**. Through longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, the candidate investigated how intimacy and partner violence influence young adults' future plans regarding marriage, parenthood, and relationship stability. Her work revealed gender-specific patterns in the experience of intimacy and violence and identified important links between relationship quality, psychosocial wellbeing, and successful transitions to adulthood. Additional studies demonstrated the impact of family experiences and attachment relationships on adolescent loneliness, romantic satisfaction, educational outcomes, and sexual risk behaviours. These contributions advance social work knowledge concerning prevention, counselling, and psychosocial support for young people navigating intimate relationships.

A third research direction focuses on **family solidarity, informal social protection, and intergenerational support**. Drawing on comparative European datasets and national surveys, the candidate explored the role of the family as a primary source of welfare provision in Romania and Eastern Europe. Her research demonstrated that Romanian family patterns display strong intergenerational ties similar to those found in Southern European countries, where family networks compensate for limited public welfare provisions. Additional contributions investigated childlessness in post-communist societies, highlighting gender-specific explanatory mechanisms and the influence of factors such as socioeconomic status, education, religiosity, and history of partnership. Furthermore, qualitative studies on older women generated original psychosocial profiles relevant to designing age-sensitive social services and interventions. These studies contribute to the understanding of family resilience, demographic change, ageing, and social protection systems.

A fourth and highly productive line of research concerns **clinical social work and health-related vulnerabilities**. Within national and international research projects, particularly in psycho-oncology, the candidate investigated psychosocial needs, distress, quality of life, intimacy, communication, and ethical challenges faced by cancer patients and healthcare professionals. Her research produced some of the first empirical evidence in Romania regarding intimacy and quality of life among oncology patients and highlighted the importance of integrating psychosocial assessment into healthcare practice. Additional studies addressed social and emotional loneliness

among older adults, mental health problems, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behaviour among Romanian adults and psychiatric patients. These findings emphasize the importance of holistic, biopsychosocial approaches to prevention, mental health promotion, and social work intervention in health settings.

A fifth area of contribution addresses **psychosocial vulnerabilities during social and health crises**, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies conducted during this period explored alcohol consumption, coping strategies, personality traits, emotional distress, and disordered eating behaviours among Romanian students and adults. The findings identified both protective and risk factors associated with problematic alcohol use and unhealthy eating patterns, highlighting the complex interaction between psychological wellbeing, social isolation, coping mechanisms, and socioeconomic vulnerability. These studies provide valuable evidence for designing preventive interventions and public health strategies in times of crisis and contribute to the broader understanding of social determinants of health.

The sixth research direction concerns **professional education, evidence-based practice, and workforce development in social work**. The candidate has investigated innovative pedagogical approaches in higher education, including service-learning, community-based learning, online and blended learning environments, and competency-based professional training. Comparative studies conducted during the pandemic examined the effectiveness of face-to-face and online teaching in developing social work competencies of university students. Other research addressed rural social work practice, professional challenges faced by social workers in disadvantaged communities, anti-bullying interventions in schools, social inclusion of Roma children, and transitions from vocational education to employment. These contributions support the modernization of social work education, strengthen evidence-based practice, and foster stronger links between academic institutions and community organizations.

Methodologically, the candidate's work is characterized by the consistent use of advanced statistical analyses, longitudinal and comparative designs, qualitative inquiry, and mixed-methods approaches. She has participated in all stages of the research process, from instrument development and fieldwork to data analysis, scientific publication, and dissemination. Her expertise includes working with large national and international datasets and translating empirical findings into practical recommendations for social work services, public health interventions, and social policies.

Alongside her scientific achievements, the candidate has accumulated extensive teaching experience, contributing to undergraduate and graduate education through innovative curricula, methodological training, and student mentorship. She has coordinated research-based educational initiatives that actively involve students in community partnerships, program evaluation, and applied social research. These activities reflect a strong commitment to developing future social work professionals through experiential learning and academic excellence.

The future research agenda builds upon the 6 established lines of inquiry and aims to strengthen international collaboration, doctoral supervision, interdisciplinary research, and participation in large-scale European projects. Planned developments include research on sexual and reproductive health promotion among adolescents, long-term care and ageing, family change, community-based learning models, and psychosocial wellbeing from a life-course perspective. The candidate intends to supervise doctoral research in these areas while fostering academic integrity, scientific excellence, and international visibility.

In conclusion, the habilitation thesis demonstrates a mature and coherent scientific profile, characterized by sustained research productivity, methodological rigor, international visibility, and a strong commitment to evidence-based social work. Through original contributions addressing health risk behaviours, vulnerable populations, family systems, psychosocial wellbeing, clinical social work, and professional education, the candidate has significantly advanced knowledge in Social Work and has proven her capacity to supervise doctoral research and contribute to the future development of the discipline.