CHILDREN'S CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL PATHOLOGY PHENOMENA: INTERPRETATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF SELECTED PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

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Abstract: This article presents individual outcomes of the grant project and its specific research into children's conceptions of internet addiction, gambling and religious sects. The qualitative research objective was to identify selected social pathology phenomena in the young population aged 10 to 15 years. There were in total ten participants recruited from two primary schools. Analysis of the three most interesting cases revealed elementary aspects of the genesis of children's conceptions. Based on a comparison of the cases selected and with the use of in-depth interviews it was found that conceptions of internet addiction, gambling and sects vary qualitatively. Individual factors influencing children's conceptions were also specified.

Keywords: children's conceptions, primary school pupils, social pathology phenomena, qualitative research

1 Introduction

Many forms of social pathology phenomena[1] have been subject to numerous research and epidemiology studies. And many reveal the tendency of children and young people of our so called 'information society' to develop addictions to psychoactive substances as well as the non-drug related dependencies. The selected phenomena include - *gambling* - (Nešpor, Csémy, 2005; Valentine, 2008; Forrest, McHale, 2012), a problematic internet use - *internet addiction disorder (IAD)* - (Vondráčková, 2011; Šmahel, Brown, Blinka, 2012; Sinkkonen, Puhakka, Meriläinen, 2014), and addiction to destructive religious ideology - *a sect phenomenon* - (Maniscalo, 1997; Furseth, Repstad, 2006). The research shows that Czech children and young people are some of the most vulnerable in the world in terms of alcohol addiction, drug misuse or other hazardous activities (Nešpor, 2012).

Unlike today, the IAD, gambling and sects used to be rare occurrences (if not entirely absent) before 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia. These phenomena have become omnipresent but often overlooked by the modern Czech democratic society in terms of understanding. Undoubtedly, these phenomena jeopardise our society and therefore a child's life and development. Children and young people should have at least a basic understanding about these phenomena to be able to take an adequate approach. The task of educational institutions is to convey necessary information and to minimise the impact of social pathology phenomena on the lives of children and young people. The phenomena discussed so far have become a part of today's reality that they form. Moreover, they significantly contribute (often in a negative way) to a socialisation of a child (pupil). Social pathology phenomena have been a subject of many research studies. However, we now know only a little about attitudes and approaches of those who are endangered the most - children and young people. Therefore this research investigates and presents children's conceptions to the selected social pathology phenomena, i.e. IAD, gambling and sects.

1.1 Theoretical foundation of children's conceptions

It is a generally accepted fact that a child makes his own so-called naive notion or preconception/ child's conception (Barrett

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[1]　Modern terminology also refers to the term *risk behaviour*. It is mainly used in relation to pupils and school environment. *Social pathology phenomenon*, on the other hand, refers to the context of entire society. It covers phenomena that cross boundaries of social norms and maybe perceived by society as threatening. In relation to this study the term social pathology phenomena is regarded as a more suitable one than the risk behaviour.

et al., 1993; Held, 2001). Children's conceptions and their genesis stem from important schools of thought utilised in pedagogical psychology. They include a theory of scientific concept development that was formulated by L. S. Vygotsky, and cognitive psychology proposed by J. Piaget and his psychological theories. Piaget as well as Vygotsky considers some differences between the two groups of children's ideas (conceptions) about a particular phenomenon (Škoda, Doulík, 2011).

Vygotsky distinguishes *spontaneous* (*common*) concepts and *scientific* concepts. Spontaneous concepts are forms of thinking that develop through child's practical activities or during close interaction with people, whereas scientific concepts arise during pupil's learning processes at school. (Doulík, 2005) Vygotsky says that the development of scientific (socio-scientific) concepts takes place within a systematic liaison between a teacher and a child who acquires higher psychological functions under adult's supervision (Vygotsky, 2004). At school a child's learning is transmitted in a certain *system* that is crucial for scientific concept development. On the other hand, concepts that originate in day-to-day living through spontaneous learning are acquired in *isolation*. A problem of the scientific concept formation (e.g. as part of formal education process) is its initial verbalism and inadequate support of practical means, experiences, experiments, observations, etc. Traditional education poses a threat. It remains at verbal level without an adequate practical support resulting in child's adoption of non-meaningful words simulating and imitating the presence of particular concepts. In this case a child acquires words but not concepts, and becomes unable to utilise such knowledge in a meaningful way. He/she learns blank verbal schemes and cannot integrate them into their inner knowledge system. (Škoda, Doulík, 2011) Scientific concepts must be supported by certain levels of mature thinking. Therefore, spontaneous (common) concepts cannot be ignored when forming scientific concepts! At the same time, scientific concepts are affected by previously acquired spontaneous concepts, because both types are not isolated in child's mind, they merge and interact. (Doulík, 2005)

Piaget's view considers imminent cognition of qualitative specificity of child's thinking that is based on purely spontaneous concepts and ideas. The non-spontaneous concepts that have developed under the influence of people who were present in a child's life reflect the level and attributes of the adult's reasoning rather than the child's at a particular operational level. Piaget and Vygotsky, however, agree with the idea that a child projects specific elements of their own thinking in the process of learning and processing a concept. He/she creates their own conceptions. Piaget applies this thesis to spontaneous concepts, whereas Vygotsky supports its validity related to both, scientific as well as spontaneous concepts. (Doulík, 2005)

Piaget's intellectual development (i.e. a problematic of learning and development) may be simply interpreted as a gradual replacement of specific qualities of a child's thinking by durable and more sophisticated adult reasoning. With increasing age the child way of thinking disappears until it is no longer present. The developmental process is understood by Piaget as a gradual and continuous replacement of particular forms of thinking with other forms. Whereas, *Vygotsky* believes the developmental process is a continuous formation of new attributes and higher and more complex realms of thinking that originate from elementary and simpler forms. The gradual growth of higher thinking consequently resembles fully developed reasoning. (Doulík, 2005)

1.2 Characteristics of children's conceptions

Children's conceptions are recognised as a set of specific knowledge and notions or interpretational models of an

individual and are influenced by many factors. Content structure of knowledge in forms of thought clusters and notions create an idiosyncratic unique knowledge pattern (i.e. cognitive dimension) that is accentuated by an individual´s emotional component (affective dimension).

It is often the case that children's (pupils') conceptions may differ from the adults' interpretational framework (including teachers, parents, and specialists). That is why the children's conceptions are so important for teaching (from a theoretical point of view they are subject to research practices, and from a practical point, the pupils enter school environment with their interpretational framework and subjective theories embedded - in other words - a pupil is not a 'tabula rasa'). Children's conceptions, however, shape the understanding of different content structures of their knowledge (their epistemological character). It is possible to analyse the structures only if they relate to a particular content, a process, a rule, a phenomenon etc. A competent person (such as a teacher) can consequently decide on adequate didactic approach for their analysis and possible modification (e.g. if children's conceptions are not in accordance to a particular scientific theory, or socially accepted).

1.3 A review of the current research on children's conceptions

Research into children's conceptions mainly focuses on areas of natural science (Nakhleh, 1992; Stover, Saunders, 2000; Mandíková, Trna, 2011). Social scientific subjects are far less studied. The disparity may be due to a difficulty to set (in) correct criteria of the so called lay interpretational framework (children's conception) of a social phenomenon, its objective, and scientifically accepted interpretation. Despite the fact it is still possible to find many interesting studies which present stimulating material for this project (theoretical as well as methodological). These include a study by Pivarč, Škoda and Doulík (2012) who conducted a quantitative analysis of grammar school student's misconceptions to alternative religiosity, or a study by Barett and Buchanan-Barrow (2005) who investigated pupil's understanding of a society's function.

Most research studies choose quantitative methodology, whereas this study supports a qualitative methodology as it enables characterisation of pupils' content structures in more detail and emphasises the individual's understanding and interpretation of the social pathology phenomena. This is the key objective of this study. The research problem originates from the research objective and its formulation is as follows: *What are children's conceptions to the selected social pathology phenomena?* Children's conceptions to the selected phenomena are investigated as so-called multidimensional entities (Škoda, Doulík, 2011) and include cognitive dimension (phenomena understanding) and affective dimension (pupils' attitude). In line with the study objective and its problem the following questions are specified:

▪ Questions focused on pupils' understanding and notions (e.g. what is their understanding of internet addiction (netholism), gambling, sects; what is it; why does it exist; how, why, when does an addiction appear and who is susceptible; what do they know about IAD, gambling and sects; etc.).
▪ Questions directed at pupils' attitudes (e.g. how do they relate to IAD, gambling and sects; what importance does it have; can the phenomena be beneficial in any way; can they be harmful; etc.).

2 Children's conceptions of social pathology phenomena: basic description of research methodology

This investigation is to some extent inspired by a multiple case study as its research strategy. Compared to others (ethnography, grounded theory) it is regarded the most suitable design, because it allows to outline children's conceptions and to find answers to questions: 'how' or 'why' a specific notion of reality occurs. At the same time the researcher has almost no opportunity to influence the phenomena standing in the forefront of his interest.

The qualitative research was conducted in 2013 (April to October). Research sample includes primary school pupils from the same town in the Central Bohemia. They are children and young people aged 10 to 15 years (5th, 7th and 9th grade), of different socio-cultural background (e.g. under threat of social exclusion), and of various personal, family and social histories (e.g. victims of bullying). The diversity of the sample representatives is a deliberate choice, because it is those factors that may project into and interfere with the variability of children's conceptions. There were in total 10 participants (3 boys and 7 girls). But due to limited extent of this project the following analysis only includes outline and interpretations of three most interesting cases of children's conceptions.

An in-depth interview was conducted with semi-standardised questioning. The questions (see above) focus on experiences, opinions, knowledge (cognitive dimension), and pupils' feelings and attitudes (affective dimension) related to the phenomena. Individual interviews were recorded on a camera at the school premises. On average there was a time limit of 10 to 15 minutes for each theme (IAD, gambling, and sects). The researcher's role may be considered as non-biased; he acted as "a stranger" (Šeďová, 2007). The data was transcribed and subject to a content analysis which enables identification of the level (of complexity) of children's conceptions. In addition to an in-depth and systematic analysis of empirical data the analysis of variable factors was also performed. Especially those factors that have a direct influence on shaping the children's conceptions are under close scrutiny.

Due to the young age of the participants it was necessary to obtain the written consent of their legal representatives and of their school principal. Pupils and their parents were informed about the research purpose and all the ethical aspects involved (i.e. anonymity, voluntary participation, opportunity to withdraw from the study anytime, etc.). Some study limitations emerged during the individual interviews. Some of the younger pupils would give answers that were socially acceptable (Smith, Mackie, 2006), and some had difficulties to verbalise their ideas. Even the use of camera by the researcher had probably some influence on pupils' responses.

2.1 Participants characteristics

▪ *Kateřina, 10 years old (5th grade primary school)*
Kateřina commutes to a larger school in town. She has no problems in terms of education and school results. She has many friends and feels she is accepted in her class. She has been growing up in a complete family with a little brother, and with sufficient financial support.

▪ *Sára, 13 years old (7th grade primary school)*
Sára goes to a primary school in the town centre. Her school results are average and she had some behavioural problems in the past. She had been experiencing problems with class acceptance. She has also had conflicts with the teachers and on some occasions she even bullied her classmates. She had been growing up in a complete family without any siblings. Currently she lives with her mother in an asylum house.

▪ *Jaroslav, 15 years old (9th grade primary school)*
Jaroslav goes to the same primary school as Kateřina. He lives in a village and has to commute to school. He has been growing up in a dysfunctional family without his biological father, but his mother has a boyfriend. He has four siblings (two younger sisters and two older brothers who have been prosecuted for some criminal offences including distribution of class B drugs - cannabis). The family is under threat of social exclusion. Jaroslav lives in problematic social, emotional and material conditions that make studying more difficult.

Please note: the real names were concealed to ensure protection of identity.

3 Findings and their interpretation

It is impossible to project the findings validity into the whole population of children and young people. It is only possible to keep within the frame of the research sample. Jaroslav, Sára and Kateřina's conceptions are briefly outlined and interpreted for each phenomenon individually. Based on analysis of the categories the factors presented are those that are predominant in children's conceptions to the social pathology phenomena.

3.1 Internet addiction disorder (netholism)

All pupils had problems to understand the term 'netholism'. Sára demonstrates some effort to explain the term as follows: *"I think it's some kind of crude manner, smashing things or anything really"*. The rest of participants cannot sufficiently verbalise their ideas and state that they are unable to clarify such a technical term. Perhaps, this is the case because the term is not a commonly used word. After netholism was explained the pupils express the following associations: Sára: *"yeah that people play various games and they have to finish it. Because they get nervous if not finished so they get stuck, because they have to finish it and so become addicted. They do it every day so they can't be without it"*. Kateřina: *"addiction is mostly when they get used to the internet, those kids. When the parents allow it, then the kids create Facebooks and so on. Well and then they're hooked, they're on it all the time (they don't go out, but stay on the internet all the time)"*. Those interpretations prove that the pupils relate addictions to particular activities that they know personally and identify with them. Pupils' interpretational frameworks are very varied even in terms of causes. Jaroslav's comment: *"these people haven't enough friends at school and generally. They don't know life, he knows only the internet and computer and nothing else. It's not my case. I am always outside with my friends. I'm not interested in the internet very much"*. Sára and Kateřina also suggest the lack of friends as a cause of internet addiction. Additionally, it is mentioned that the addiction can occur at the age of 10. Pupils' opinions once again reflect their experiences from the environment they live in. All pupils state that some of their classmates or friends can be regarded as addicted.

Participants' attitude to internet addiction or to people who suffer from it is outlined as follows: Sára: *"the people have worse character than the normal people. When they play games, they can be dangerous - like the addict can harm even his parents if they forbid him from playing. To me he can't be dangerous, if I don't provoke him"*. Jaroslav comments: *"people who are addicted to the internet are weird. But for me it can't be dangerous. I'm not scared to ever become addicted."*

3.2 Gambling

The term gambling is frequently used term in today's media and so it is expected that pupils understand it better. Unlike the previous term the gambling definition and understanding is more precise. Jaroslav explains it as follows: *"yeah that's clear. It's something to do with a slot-machine, they are people addicted to slot-machines. They spend evenings in casinos, and lose lots of money, because they usually lose. Gambling comes from psyche, because it makes people more relaxed if they hit the bottom. Age is not important - someone can start playing when 17 already."* Sára's comment is: *"gambling is addiction on slot-machines, rullete, cards and so on. The person likes it. If he's nervous he can relax."* Kateřina's reaction is: *"that's the machine playing''*. Jaroslav proposes an interesting suggestion when asked about addiction development and its impact: *"when you have no job, you can see some hopes that you could win, so you try anything that there is. It's also about boredom. You need to kill time and you can't sit and watch telly for ever..."* Jaroslav also believes that gambling may have influence on interpersonal level: *"it's*

good that you can talk to other people, play with them and so on." Similarly to IAD all respondents think that gambling presents a threat especially among men and it develops between ages 17 and 25 (compare to Nešpor, Csémy, 2005). Age and gender stated by the pupils probably relates to their understanding and assumption that only people aged 18 and older are allowed to enter such places as bars and casinos, and that more men than women visit these places. Clearly the pupils understand the term and are able to interpret it correctly even though their definitions and concepts vary. As already mentioned this is the case because the term is in common use. In addition, there are numerous casino bars situated near schools and this may also influence the conceptions of pupils' cognitive dimension.

Jaroslav's attitude to gambling is more or less neutral. However, it is obvious that he is strongly influenced by his family environment. He is fairly open about the fact that there were problems with pathological gaming in his family too - his oldest brother used to be addicted for some time: *"I don't know if it was harmful to him, he just wanted to beat some time"*. On the other hand, Kateřina verbalises a different attitude to gambling. For her it is something unacceptable, something to be ashamed of: *"I think I would be looked down on at home or at school, if I played the machines. It has no sense to me"*. Clearly Kateřina's relation to her parents is very important for her. They influence her beliefs. Sára's attitude is somewhat indifferent: *"I can't say, I just don't know. Maybe, it can be bad for the family when someone spends a lot of money in gambling... anyway, for me it's not dangerous or beneficial"*.

3.3 Sects

A term 'religious sect' is very problematic. There has been no consensus agreed in terms of its definition. It is a commonly used term in the media as well as in public, but it takes many forms (Furseth, Repstad, 2006). Czech people embrace it as potentially dangerous when describing a religious group. The term 'sect' is explicitly outlined in the educational material of Czech primary and secondary schools.

Defining the term was an uneasy task even for the young participants. Kateřina imagines it as a group of people who give loans (it may be interpreted as her personal experience when her parents applied for a financial loan): *"people who give papers for money loans."* Sára claims: *"I'd say they are secluded groups not open to all. Someone is leading it. They have meetings, demonstrations (when for example something is about to be demolished), they negotiate"*. Jaroslav stated: *"hmm, I'm not sure. I'd say they are some kind of morons. I don't believe in God so I don't care about these things and wouldn't want to belong to any such group."* The participants make the following statements about the possibility of sect addiction: Kateřina: *"I think that nobody can become addicted to this, it's not like internet."* Sára: *"it's not for kids, it's more for the grown ups."* Jaroslav: *"you can become addicted to drugs and so on, but to a religious sect full of morons?"* The pupils perceive the term 'religious sect' as too abstract, because its content saturation is formed by ideas that are not concrete (they refer to undefined social groups), or they have incorrect ideas about it (people who lend money).

Pupils' responses imply their more positive attitudes to the phenomenon. This is possibly because of their inadequate understanding of the sect problematic. When the concrete questions are asked which relate to attitude and significance, the responses are as follows: Kateřina: *"they can be beneficial. They've lent us the money for example. I think it's good that such people exist."* Sára: *"it's something mysterious maybe you have to undergo a ritual to be a member. I wouldn't be afraid to get in, because it could be an adventure, to fulfil the tasks and generally to be the member."* Jaroslav: *"I've never met anyone like that and don't want to. It definitely can't be beneficial for me in any way."*

3.4 Factors influencing children's conceptions

Children's conceptions are a result of a wide range of influences. They are determined and shaped by many factors. To list all that contribute to the genesis of children's conceptions would be practically impossible (Pivarč, Škoda, Doulík, 2012) as also demonstrated by the study analysis.

Analysis identified the following factors that have impact on variability of children's conceptions: Interpretational framework of the social pathology phenomena is reflected by their *experiences and spontaneous aspects* of their current understanding. The *after-school factors* seem to be crucial for shaping their own episteme. Especially the *family environment* falls into this category. Its emotional, social and economic values that project into children's conceptions give it a unique profile. Other important factors include *media and peers*. Despite their intensity it needs to be realised that those elements may involve provision of incomplete or incorrect information, and may interfere with the pupils' attitude formation.

On the other hand, *school and its preventative programmes* have a much lesser effect on formation of children's conceptions. The pupils involved are not willing to accept the programmes designed by their school, because they see it as another tedious teaching of a certain social problematic (most often drugs, alcohol and problematic sexual behaviour). The effectiveness of preventative programmes is minimal, because the programmes are limited to verbal transmission of knowledge (e.g. discussions, film screenings). These findings are in line with other research studies (e.g. Nešpor, 2012).

Children's conceptions to the selected social pathology phenomena are also influenced by a pupil's ability to cognitively process information from his/her environment, to integrate it to his/her knowledge system, and to use it. This ability is dependent on an ontogenetic development of an individual's intellect (thought process maturation). Moreover, older pupils (such as Sára and Jaroslav) have more complex conceptions of social pathology phenomena (they are able to facilitate their inner representations in a more complex way and to employ multi-conceptual thinking).

4 Conclusion

This research suggests that individual interpretational frameworks of the selected social pathology phenomena are qualitatively varied among the pupils involved. These patterns are the result of a wide range of factors (peers, media, ontogenetic development, family environment, etc.) these project into children's conceptions. The purposeful impact of school institutions and their preventative programmes have no direct effect on the shaping of children's conceptions to the selected social pathology phenomena. A school is a place where pupils adopt a burst of intellectual knowledge from many fields. However, it should also be a place where pupils receive useful and relevant information about the modern social pathology phenomena, and where they adopt socially accepted approaches to them. In line with this the school should refrain from provision of preventative programmes and teachings that are based on one-way transmission of the knowledge. There needs to be more of an interactive programme where pupils gain social skills and learn to critically evaluate existing information, especially if acquired through after-school activities. It is this after-school environment that may present the source of incorrect or incomplete information leading to the development of undesirable behaviour and attitudes of an individual.

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