

EARLY EXPERIENCES AS A PREDICTOR OF COPING WITH LIFE EVENTS

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Abstract: The presented study attempts to investigate to what extent the coping with life events in adulthood is affected by early experiences, parents' attitudes in approach to upbringing, and experiencing relationships in early childhood. Our study involved 699 participants (M=37.33 years). We employed the short version of the parental rearing style questionnaire (s-E.M.B.U) to analyse the early experiences, the Parental Bonding Instrument to identify parents' attitudes in approach to upbringing, the Questionnaire on attachment typology in adulthood to analyse how close relationships are experienced, and, finally, the CORE-OM questionnaire to assess the level of coping with life events in adulthood. The results suggested that the level of coping with life events is significantly affected by the characterizing experiencing anxiety in relationship and rejection from father.

Keywords: early experiences, parents' attitudes, experiencing relationships, coping with life events.

1 Introduction

The early relational experiences of an individual, the upbringing approach and practices in childhood, as well as the parent-child relationship are, besides the genetic predispositions for a child's mental development, the important determinants of an adult individual's personality traits and mental disposition (which includes also a precondition for coping with various life events). This area has attracted an extensive research, where the first studies that inspired the consequent research were conducted on psychiatric patients (Perris et al., 1980). The results indicated that a childhood deprivation was present in similar extent in all diagnostic sub-groups of affective or cycloid psychoses. According to Bleuler and Bleuler (1998), an individual's experience with close attachment figures or life experience significantly affects forming of individual's personality, which is reflected in his/her reactions in various life situations (especially in stressful conditions) and frequently also causes various psychic and psychosomatic diseases. Bowlby's attachment theory also inspired numerous different research studies in the fields of early relational experience, quality of interpersonal relations, risk and protective factors in individual personality development, and many others. An extensive research on upbringing practices in early childhood and parent-child relation reflects their importance as determinants of personality traits and dispositions for later problems (mental disorders) of an adult individual.

The relational life experience is expected to have a formative influence on neurobiological regulations (Hašto, 2005) and on establishing an individual pattern of utilized defensive mechanisms (Kaščíková, 2007). Hašto and Tavel (2015) were dealing with a relationship between mentalization (they understand mentalization simply as a complex empathy in implicit and explicit terms with a simultaneous contact with self as well as with the others) and attachment. They consider the developed mentalization ability as an important factor for resilience, and the safe attachment developed with sensitive communication behaviour as a key precondition for its further development. With this respect, they focused on the importance of attachment and mentalization in prevention of transgenerational trauma transmission. In their definition of mentalization, the authors rely on Allen et al. (2011; in Hašto and Tavel, 2015), who understand mentalization as recognizing and reflecting of own and others' mental states and adequate interpretation of behaviour.

In their study, Halama and Mazureková (2013) analysed the relationship between attachment styles and argument-solving strategies in partnerships. Their findings indicated that safe

attachment style positively correlates with constructive argument-solving strategies, such as problem-solving and cognitive restructuring. Further, they found out that insecure attachment styles are more related to unconstructive means of dealing with arguments, such as escape, problem avoidance, or looking for social support from people other than the partner. The authors of this research consider the attachment as a key factor for communication in partnership.

Based on the findings of selected research studies presented above, we might conclude that the quality of attachment, resp. an individual's early life experience, is nowadays considered as one of the core pillars of resilience and coping with life events. As for resilience, we rely on the definition by Herrman et al. (2011; in Rybárová and Konrádová, 2013), who defines resilience as individual's ability to maintain or regain mental health despite experiencing adversity. The concept of resilience according to Ungar and Liebenberg (2005; in Rybárová and Konrádová, 2013) comprises four aspects – 1. individual domain (problem-solving ability, self-efficacy, insight, empathy, goals, aspirations, ...), 2. relational domain (parenting style, social competence, meaningful relations, perception of social support, ...), 3. community domain (adequate job, violence avoidance, rituals with acceptable risk, safety, perception, access to education, ...), and 4. cultural domain (life philosophy, cultural/spiritual identification, ...). The authors of the paper dealt with the mutual relationship between resilience and type of attachment. In their results, interestingly, they found no statistically significant differences in rate of resilience depending on the type of attachment. This means that individuals with safe attachment who participated in the study did not exhibit higher rates of resilience.

Findings of several research studies indicate that rejecting a child during upbringing is a significant predictor of experiencing, coping and behaviour in adulthood. Poliaková, Mojžišová and Hašto (2007) describe this parenting approach as obviously inappropriate for creation and development of a healthy personality. Many interpersonal situation that a child is exposed to provide it with negative experience with external social environment, which leads to construction of various types of defence against this environment (with respect to the above-mentioned, we can understand these defences also as mentalization - an interpretation of an experience that influences further coping, interpretations and behaviours in new or other situations). The rejecting environment does not „allow“ the child to develop its true „self“, so it may become hostile to the external environment (in accordance with the understanding of Horney, 2000 & 2007). Hostility and anger at bad treatment are described by Horney (2007) within a vicious cycle when a child suppresses its hostile feelings due to its fear of losing love and safety, which leads to significant feeling of anxiety in the respective relation. Such feelings of anxiety in the primary relation from early childhood are „transmitted“ by an individual to his/her adult relations, which can, according to Bowlby (2010), lead to the following reactions: 1. An individual puts excessive requirements on other people and feels anxiety and anger when these requirements are not fulfilled, 2. An individual has a disability to build deep interpersonal relationships. Therefore, a rejecting parental behaviour is significantly linked to perceived anxiety in relationships.

The findings and information from the selected research studies we have presented above, as well as many other works provide an inspiration to continue researching this area. The relationships we are addressing concern the remembered parental rearing, attachment (child to parent) and bonding (parent to child), personality, and coping with life events. We focus on subjective well-being, interpersonal and social life, problems, symptoms and risk behaviour towards self and the others in connection with individual's early experience. Therefore, the aim we set for our research is to explore the relationship between early childhood experiences and coping with life events in adulthood.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Sample

Our research sample comprised of 699 participants, out of that 509 women and 118 men (2 participants did not indicate their gender), with an average age of $M=37.33$ years (minimum 14 years, maximum 74 years) of varied socio-economic status and religion.

2.2 Methods

Jacobson, Lindström, von Knorring and Perris (1980; translated by: Poliaková, Mojžišová, Hašto, 2007). The s-E.M.B.U. is focused on retrospective assessment of perceived remembered parental upbringing behaviour, and comprises of 23 questions grouped into 3 sub-scales: Rejection (provides negative experience with external environment (focus on punishing a child, making it feel ashamed, ignoring, criticising and rejecting a child as an individual), resulting to development of various defences against the environment); Emotional warmth (a child is given a maximum acceptance in a form of unconditional love (it is characterized by tenderness, encouraging, praising, positive judgement, equal treatment), and Overprotection (excessive fear and anxiety about child's safety, excessive involvement, orders and control by making a child feel guilty). The participants answer the questions referring to their mother and father separately, on a 4-point Likert-type scale (No, never; Yes, but seldom; Yes, often; Yes, most of the time). The internal consistency of the s-E.M.B.U. questionnaire referring to mother on our sample achieved a satisfactory level for the entire questionnaire ($\alpha=0.747$) as well as for its sub-scales (rejection: $\alpha=0.799$; emotional warmth: $\alpha=0.814$; overprotection: $\alpha=0.783$). Also, the internal consistency of the s-E.M.B.U. questionnaire referring to father achieved on our sample also a satisfactory level for the whole questionnaire ($\alpha=0.725$) and for its respective sub-scales (rejection: $\alpha=0.779$; emotional warmth: $\alpha=0.832$; overprotection: $\alpha=0.756$).

Parents' attitudes in approach to upbringing as perceived during the first sixteen years of individual's life were assessed using the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) questionnaire, created by Parker, Tupling and Brown (1979; Czech translation: Čikošová and Preiss, 2011). The PBI questionnaire comprises of two parts (each containing 25 items referring to mother and father separately), where the participants evaluate various attitudes and behaviours of their mother and father on a 4-point Likert-type scale (very unlike, moderately unlike, moderately like, very like). Each part comprises of two scales - care and protection. The care scale contains 12 items and can be defined as tenderness, emotional warmth, empathy and proximity as opposite to emotional coldness, carelessness and rejection. A higher score means a higher level of subjectively perceived care. The protection scale contains 13 items and can be understood as control, overprotection, burden and preventing from independence as opposite to providing possibility for independence and separateness. A higher score indicates a higher level of subjectively perceived protection. The internal consistency of the questionnaire referring to father achieved satisfactory levels overall ($\alpha=0.749$) as well as for the specific scales (care: $\alpha=0.908$; protection: $\alpha=0.786$). Similarly, the questionnaire referring to mother also achieved satisfactory levels of internal consistency for the entire questionnaire ($\alpha=0.657$) as well as for its subscales (care: $\alpha=0.911$; protection: $\alpha=0.760$).

Experiencing of close relationships was analysed using the Revised Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR-R) developed by Fraley, Waller and Brennan (2000; translation: Bieščad and Hašto). The ECR-R questionnaire comprised of 36 items divided into 2 scales: anxiety scale (defined as strong need of attention and care from the attachment figure) and avoidance scale (defined as a strong discomfort with psychic intimacy and closeness with other person). Participants indicate their level of agreement with individual items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The internal consistency of

the ECR-R questionnaire on our sample achieved satisfactory levels for the entire questionnaire ($\alpha=0.745$) as well as for its sub-scales (anxiety: $\alpha=0.846$; avoidance: $\alpha=0.682$).

Finally, to evaluate the level of actual psychological distress, we used a Slovak language version of the CORE-OM (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation - Outcome Measure) self-assessment scale developed by Evans et al. (2002). The instrument comprises of 34 statements on how an individual has felt during the last week, where the responses are indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (from not at all to most of or all of the time). The factor analysis yielded four dimensions: subjective well-being (4 items); problems/symptoms (12 items); functioning - general, interpersonal and social (12 items); and risk - risk behaviour to self and to others (6 items). Results of several studies (e.g. Elfström et al., 2013; Palmieri et al., 2009) indicate that the CORE-OM questionnaire can be also used in non-clinical population. The internal consistency of the CORE-OM questionnaire on our sample achieved satisfactory levels for the entire questionnaire ($\alpha=0.820$) and two of its sub-scales (problems/symptoms: $\alpha=0.894$; risk - risk behaviour to self and to others: $\alpha=0.808$). Another two sub-scales achieved very low levels of internal consistency (subjective well-being: $\alpha=0.450$; functioning - general, interpersonal and social: $\alpha=0.402$).

2.3 Statistical analysis

To confirm reliability of the research instruments we employed the internal consistency estimate using the Cronbach alpha coefficient. Then, to confirm presence of the determined factors we executed the factor analysis using the Varimax rotation method. Further, we used the Shapiro-Wilk test to determine the normality of our data. Following the results achieved (showing statistical significance in all tested variables) that indicate non-normal distribution of our data, we further used non-parametric tests. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to identify relationships between the analysed variables. Finally, multiple linear regression was used to estimate an effect of the analysed variables on the perceived psychological distress, resp. on coping with life events.

3 Results

The data obtained from the questionnaire survey were processed using the IBM SPSS v.25.0 statistical package, where we conducted the multiple regression analysis. Before estimating the regression models, we thoroughly inspected the data to ensure that our variables are in line with all important requirements of regression analysis.

Tab. 1 Results of the regression analysis using the ENTER method

| VARIABLE | B | Beta | Sig. | R Square | Sig. |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|--------------|----------|-------|
| Rejection from father | 0.720 | 0.179 | 0.026 | 0.226 | 0.000 |
| Rejection from mother | 0.022 | 0.006 | 0.947 | | |
| Father's emotional warmth | 0.412 | 0.124 | 0.216 | | |
| Mother's emotional warmth | 0.305 | 0.088 | 0.345 | | |
| Overprotection by father | 0.002 | 0.001 | 0.994 | | |
| Overprotection by mother | 0.232 | 0.087 | 0.317 | | |
| ECRR_avoidance | 0.006 | 0.007 | 0.890 | | |
| ECRR_anxiety | 0.278 | 0.361 | 0.000 | | |
| PBI_care_mother | - | - | 0.250 | | |
| PBI_protection_mother | 0.174 | 0.093 | 0.529 | | |
| PBI_care_father | 0.094 | 0.045 | 0.175 | | |
| PBI_protection_father | 0.166 | 0.103 | 0.175 | | |
| PBI_protection_father | 0.011 | 0.005 | 0.939 | | |

Dependent variable: coping with life events

In the first step of our analysis we attempted to identify which variables are significantly related to coping with life events in adulthood (CORE-OM gross score). We used the ENTER method to test this assumption. The findings of the regression analysis (Tab. 1) show that the independent variables we have

tested in the model (remembered parent behaviour, parents' attitudes in approach to upbringing, experiencing close relationships) explain 22.6% of variance in coping with life events in adulthood. A closer look at the results presented in Tab 1 indicate that, among the variables inspected, there are two variables that show statistical significance, namely the rejection from father's side and experiencing anxiety in relationships.

Looking at the beta coefficients (Tab. 1), we might suggest that the anxiety experienced in relationships is the strongest factor influencing the level of coping with life events (0.361) - the higher is the level of anxiety in relationships, the more difficult becomes the coping with life events. The second relatively strongest effect was observed in case of a variable reflecting the rejection from father's side (0.179) - the highest is the rejection from father, the more difficult is the coping with life events. Further, the regression analysis suggests that the variables characterising parents' approach to upbringing play no significant role in explaining the coping with life events (their significance level exceeds the 0.050 threshold and their beta coefficient reach low values). Thus, this regression analysis suggests that coping with life events is affected mainly by early experiences representing the rejection from father and the way how we experience relationships in adulthood, mainly with respect to anxiety.

In the second step of our analysis we attempted to estimate the most appropriate regression model, thus we used the STEPWISE method. Following the Beta coefficients and statistical significance, two variables were included in the regression analysis, namely the rejection from father and anxious experiencing in relationships.

Tab. 2 Results of the regression analysis using the STEPWISE method

| MODEL | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Change Statistics | |
|-------|--------------------|----------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | | | | R Square Change | Sig. F Change |
| 1 | 0.413 ^a | 0.170 | 0.169 | 0.170 | 0.000 |
| 2 | 0.445 ^b | 0.198 | 0.195 | 0.027 | 0.000 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), anxious experiencing of relationships

b. Predictors: (Constant), anxious experiencing of relationships, rejection from father

c. Dependent Variable: coping with life events

The variables that achieved the statistical significance in the first step of analysis were sequentially inserted to the regression analysis. Their characteristics are presented in the Tab. 2 above. First, the variable indicating the anxiety experienced in relationships, which explains the highest percentage of variance (17.0%) was inserted into the analysis. Then, we inserted the variable characterizing rejection from father. As the model 2 indicates, the R^2 increased by 2.8 percentage points to 19.8%. Despite this increase is rather moderate, the Sig. F Change shows it is statistically significant ($p=0.000$). Thus, the stepwise method helped us to estimate the best model with two variables that are the best predictors of the dependent variable - the coping with life events.

4 Discussion

The presented research focused on a question to what extent the coping with life events in adulthood is affected by early experiences, attitudes of parents in approach to upbringing, and experiencing relationships in early childhood.

Rozvadský Gugová and Kovalev (2010) emphasize that individual interpretation, perception and mentalization are more important than the actual form of the upbringing model, and they further determine his/her reactions in coping with life events. These authors further deal with relationship between coping with posttraumatic stress and individual's upbringing. They build on findings of Ruchkin et al. (1998) and Castro et al. (1999) (in: Rozvadský Gugová and Kovalev, 2010) who argue that parents' emotional warmth positively influenced the overall level of posttraumatic stress reaction, while rejection from parents had

a very negative influence. Another finding proves that rejection from parents and favouring an individual over his/her siblings has the strongest influence on development of type A behaviour. Further, the overall level of posttraumatic stress and consequent reaction exhibited negative correlation with father's emotional warmth and positive correlation with rejection from father. In their study, the authors also found out that rejection from parents seems to be a factor significantly influencing aggressiveness.

The link between attachment and parental upbringing and partnership relations were studied by Hubinská (2016), who found out, for example, significant relationships between disoriented attachment and rejection from both father and mother during upbringing, disoriented attachment and anxiety, and safe attachment and self-acceptance.

Subjective life well-being, interpersonal and social functioning and risky behaviour towards self and the others are further areas that are influenced by the early experience and that are subjects to our study. The aspects examined in our analysis are also related to findings of a research study by Hubinská (2016), who found out that rejection in upbringing negatively correlates with life satisfaction, while, on contrary, a positive correlation was proven between emotional warmth in upbringing and life satisfaction. Moreover, she also found that individuals who developed a safe attachment exhibited higher scores in items related to self-acceptance, autonomy and life satisfaction. Individuals with avoidant attachment exhibited higher score in meaning of life (this result can be considered as interesting and even surprising, and according to author's interpretation, discovering a meaning of life might partially replace the missing sensibility and safety in early childhood). Further results related to our study (in terms of interpersonal and social functioning) indicate that rejection during upbringing positively correlates with anxiety experienced in relations and avoidance in relations, with currently experienced anxiety as well as tendency to anxious behaviour.

In her research, Kopaničáková (2014) focused on influence of remembered parents' behaviour on perceived safety. Her main findings suggest that the respondents who perceived their parents' upbringing as emotionally warm tend to feel safer. The rejecting behaviour from parents was not related to risk, preventive behaviour or safety itself. As she presents, Muris (2000; in: Kopaničáková, 2014) on contrary found out that children who perceived their parents as more rejecting and anxious exhibited generally higher levels of being worried. In conclusion of her study, she summarizes that a lack of emotional warmth and rejecting behaviour in parental upbringing can be transmitted also to other social relations and can lead to distrust and avoiding other people, which in fact is one the prevention strategies from danger. Such behaviour is explained by Brisch (2011) as a social adaptation to experiences of emotional ignorance.

5 Conclusion

Our findings confirm to a high extent the findings of previous studies. In particular, the greater is the rejection from father, the more difficult it becomes to cope with life events. We explain the presented finding by the fact that in most families, the father is understood as a role model for behaviour in stressful and difficult situations, and he is the one who provides the child with an example how to cope with and manage strongly unpleasant situations. If the father has a rejecting attitude in relation to his child, the attachment that would ensure transmission of a model of behaviour in stress situations will most probably not be developed.

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