

Protective Factors of University Students

Abstract

Among the professional public the following question has been discussed quite often: “Why are some individuals able to cope with a stressful situation even if they are subjected to highly stressful conditions during a certain concrete time and why do they come from it even strengthened in contrast to some individuals who are not able to cope with it? What helped these people? Does it deal with certain concrete factors?”

Human behaviour is not random. It is a result of internal and external factors actions together with experiences that the individual faced. By all means, the individual's personality plays an important role in it. Also selection of one of the parents, siblings or of another person from closer or larger surroundings as a behaviour pattern might play an important role.

Many personalities got over the stigmata of their primary families and live tranquil adult lives. It is not a rule that all consequences of adverse living conditions disappear and we can say about a given person that he/she reached maturity as an adapted personality despite many adverse problems of life. What is the source of strength of healthy adult individuals who did not get conditions for their healthy development in their families, but were able to get over these problems in spite of these obstacles?

Keywords: *protective factors, personality, primary family, culture*

In connection with personality psychological resistibility, factors that decrease the effect of individual fragility and unfriendly influence of surroundings must be mentioned. They do not necessarily lead to resilience. It might happen that they are not strong enough in the case where the individual's vulnerability is large or

the life situation is absolutely demanding. Within this study, we focused especially on the factors which might influence personality and the individual's development to such a degree that these changes will become evident in his/her behaviour. Adverse experiences and events from childhood and adolescence might negatively influence the individual's behaviour. Some children and adolescents seem to be protected against these negative consequences and they are not affected by them. This is the reason why researchers concentrate on the detection of protective factors in their studies.

Wernerová (1989) divides them into three groups:

Personality's protective factors: For children of early age it deals especially with the characteristics that give rise to positive reactions of people who look after the child. Children are nice, sociable and adaptable. During preschool age, children who are resilient show characteristics such as independence and ability to ask for help. In the period of educational age and adolescence, an important role is played by the ability to communicate and solve problems. Generally, these children have an area of interest outlined. They spend the whole time on this interest and they excel at it. It is their source of self-confidence and enthusiasm. Thus, the personality protective factor is a positive self-concept, steady friendly relationship and internal locus of control.

Protective factors in family: It is useful when the child or adolescent has a deep emotional relationship with at least one emotionally stable person out of close or more distant relatives. It is very important in order for an individual to have a basal feeling of confidence created exactly at this age. It might be connected even with some people other than parent figures. A confidential relationship might be created, e.g., between an adolescent and an older sibling or between an adolescent and a grandparent. Resilient individuals later look after their old parents or ill members of family. It was found out that resilient boys come from families where there was a masculine model of identification and where an individual was encouraged to express his/her emotions. According to research, resilient girls came from families where willingness to take risks and independence were supported. Those families were distinguished by a reliable mainstay of the mother, a grandmother or an older sister. A mother who is successful sets an especially good example for her daughter (Hernández, 1998).

Protective factors in community: Generally speaking, we might talk about socially protective systems. They deal with friends, assisting members of family, but it might also deal with a respected personality of a teacher or a colleague at work or a superior.

Research

The research subject was recording of protective factors of probands and focus on their respective changes over time. We started with Werner's publications (1989, 1993), and Werner's and Smith's publication (1982) on protective factors. They deal with a combination of a qualitative and quantitative study.

Research Goals

- To determine perceptions of probands' families hierarchy structures by means of a Family System Test (FAST).
- To determine perceptions of probands' families cohesion by means of a Family System Test (FAST).
- To determine the connection of personality structure: an individual's neuroticism, extraversion and strength with a focus on respective differences between the probands tested within our study and a standard of undivided Slovak population.
- To determine concrete factors that act as probands' protective factors.
- To determine probands' preferred terminal and instrumental values by means of the Rokeach Values Survey (RVS).

Researched File

- Within the research we selected probands from families with a high hierarchy, low cohesion and defective ways of communication. Family hierarchy and cohesion were evaluated on the basis of the results of structured interviews. Since 2005 also the Family System Test (FAST) has served for the evaluation of family cohesion and hierarchy. (This test was administered subsequently also on the probands who joined the research in 2001 as mentioned above). According to the probands' opinion, there was little communication in families at all the stages. It dealt with a positive selection of the probands. At the time of participating in the research and in spite of the burden of the primary families, all the probands were successful university students. However, it does not deal with a representative file. We are aware of the fact that the probands' file is small (the last interview was realised with 303 probands who remained in the research until 2011. 24

probands left in 2009, in 2010 217 probands left the research). Our aim was to map individuals' behaviour over time. The shortest monitoring lasted 4 years; the longest monitoring lasted 9 years of longitudinal observation.

In 2011 the final research included:

STATE	Men	Women	Total	Research Length
CZECH REPUBLIC	53	44	97	10
SLOVAK REPUBLIC	14	13	27	10
ARGENTINA	71	32	103	7
CHILE	11	12	23	7
SPAIN	31	22	53	4

Research Process

1. The first part of the research dealt with questions related to the influence of the primary family on personality life resilience. We focused on the analysis of family relationships and on the analysis of the total influence of probands' families on university students' personalities. The research comprised 341 students from Czech and Slovak universities and it was conducted from 2001 to 2004. All the probands were selected with the use of positive selection. However, not all of them were subjected to longitudinal research automatically. Only the people who had experienced stress or adversity of life conditions in the past within the first social group that they lived in, i.e., in the family with low cohesion and high hierarchy, were included in the research. In 2005 we administered the FAST test to probands from the research which had started in 2001.
2. The research on young people from the Czech and Slovak Republics continued further. In 2004, people from Argentina became involved in the researched file. (It means that probands from Argentina and Chile participated in our research for 7 years).
3. In 2007 (January) Spanish university students were incorporated into the research.
4. Within the researched study, we concentrated on the factors which help the probands to cope with stress at work and in relationships. We also focused on the personality traits that help probands overcome burden and stress. We concentrated on their values, too.

5. Interviews with the respondents were made every 3 months. Later, we added the results of a Temperament and Character Inventory Test (TCI-125 Test), the Antonovsky Sense of Coherence Test and the Rokeach Value Survey of terminal and instrumental values.

6. Individuals' longitudinal behaviour in the course from 4 up to 10 years was analysed. Consequently, we connected individual probands' data with an integral file that was analysed. We paid attention to context factors that preceded a certain type of behaviour. As a matter of priority, we analysed past experiences from the primary family, which were related to resilient behaviour. We focused on searching processes and factors that made formation of resilient personality easier as well as on the factors that could disturb resistibility. In order to be able to create an evaluated longitudinal study, we had to use psychodiagnostic tools mentioned further.

Methods Used to Obtain Researched Material

Structured Interview

The probands were asked precisely formulated questions with a tendency to minimize the interviewer's influence on the interview quality together with minimization of the variety of questions that the respondent was asked. (It was used because of time demands on the research). Space-time that we could devote to a respondent was limited. Open questions were used within the interviews. An open question gives a possibility to select any aspect and any selection of words.

Tests Used

Family System Test (FAST)

The first pilot studies of FAST test were realized with patients and their families at the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry of the University of Zurich. The test was realised with the help of figurines that represented family members and their relationships. The proband was asked to demonstrate his/her perception of the family and family relationships between its members. The Family System Test weathers limits of some other approaches because it is three-dimensional. It investigates cohesion, hierarchy and flexibility (Sobotková, 2005, p. 14). Cohesion is formulated by a distance between the figurines. Difference between the figurines' heights formulates the hierarchy. (The proband selects cubes of various heights for family members according to their hierarchy). "For clinical usage specially coloured figurines were added in order that they encouraged the respondents to talk about personal characteristics and relationships between family members without

restraints. The final part consisted of 27 questions of a consequential interview, which were added to investigate family structures (Sobotková, 2005, p. 15).” “The test is focused on the investigation of closeness between the individual family members to find out the influence or authority of the individual family members (Gehring, 2001, p. 19).”

Rokeach Value Survey: The test of values hierarchy

Rokeach determined terminal and instrumental values on the basis of literature studies, but also according to relations between individual respondents' expressions. The mentioned determined values created a basis for testing values orientation. The terminal and instrumental values were presented to the probands. They were asked to choose 6 most important terminal values and 6 most important instrumental values for them and to arrange them from the most important ones to the least important ones according to their individual feeling. (The most important values were given 6 points and the least important values were given 1 point).

Test TCI 125 (Temperament and Character Inventory)

Cloninger (1987) describes 7 personality traits. Every trait is given a value in the sense of its high or low occurrence.

NS: Novelty Seeking:

H: Exploratory, curious, impulsive, extravagant, enthusiastic, disorderly

L: indifferent, reflective, frugal, detached, orderly and regimented

HA: Harm Avoidance:

H: varying, pessimistic, fearful, doubtful, shy, fatigable, nervous

L: relaxed, bold, vigorous, optimistic, confident, resilient, outgoing

RD: Reward Dependence:

H: sentimental, warm, dedicated, attached, dependent, sociable

L: practical, detached, insensitive, independent, cool, withdrawn

P: Persistence:

H: hard working, ambitiousness, productivity, tendency to win recognition

L: inactivity, negligence, indolence, it is not easy to motivate him/her

CO: Cooperativeness:

H: ability to get into the spirit of, empathic, sociably tolerant, ethical, helpful

L: sociably intolerant, critical, unwilling to help, destructive

SD: Self Directedness:

H: mature, strong, reliable, responsible, effective, self-accepted

L: immature, fragile, blaming, unreliable, not oriented on future, self-striving incongruent with long term goals,

ST: Self Transcendence:

H: authentic, cool, patient, creative

L: impatient, self-conscious, proud, lack of humility

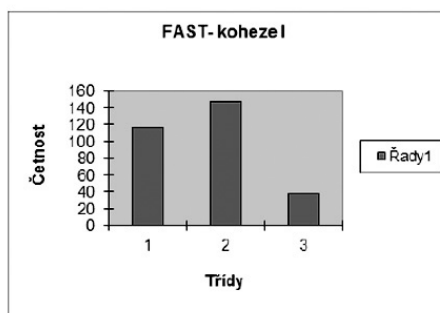
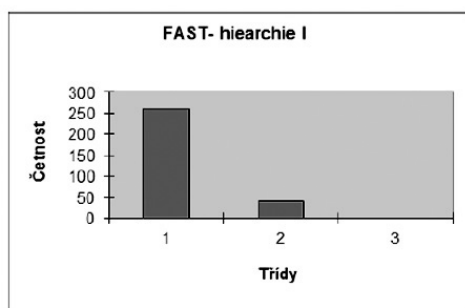
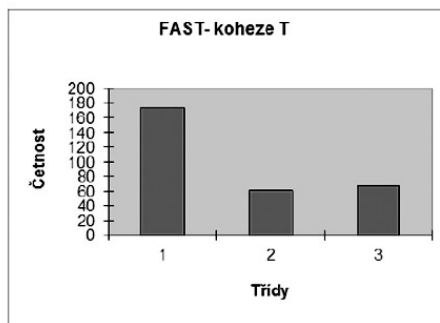
Personality Test: EOD-A

It deals with an original psychological searching method, a complex test of personality created by Hans Jurgen Eysenck and his wife Sibyl B.G. Eysenck. The method is used in basic and applied research for clinical and counseling purposes. The main goal of the method is to identify two main dimensions of personality, i.e., extraversion and neuroticism (personality integration disorder and emotional instability).

Research Results**Goals 1 and 2**

Table Graphs of typical hierarchy and typical cohesion of probands' primary families and graphs of ideal hierarchy and ideal cohesion of probands' primary families

(četnost=frequency rate; třídy=classes; řady=rows)



Typical Representation

Hierarchy Level

A high rate of hierarchy occurred in the majority of the probands' families. The probands emphasized that their parents had an authoritative approach. 256 probands declared that their fathers demonstrated a higher rate of dominance. Mothers were highly dominant in 47 cases from the total file. The mothers found help in looking after their families from the oldest child in 11 cases. A high dominance towards the partner was described by the probands in 5 cases out of the total number of 303 families. The question is how the high rate of dominance of one parent influenced the consequent development of the probands' behaviour towards their siblings, later towards schoolmates, colleagues, friends and partners.

Cohesion Level

There was low cohesion of family within the whole file of the probands. The low togetherness of family members might have been a consequence of high family hierarchy. This fact became evident by the tendency of family members to leave home and look for functional friendly relationships outside the family.

Ideal Representation

Hierarchy Level

The probands would consider a low hierarchy in their primary families as an ideal one. They did not indicate a high hierarchy at all. It is difficult to evaluate why they think this way. It might have resulted from an experience from their childhood or adolescence, when they had experienced a highly dominant approach of their parents that they did not consider the best variant of their parents' behaviour towards them. They are aware of the fact that authority is necessary. However, they said that only orders had been used during their upbringing and that they lacked dialogue. It might have been a reason why they selected this extreme during decision making, i.e., a low hierarchy.

Cohesion Level

The probands would consider an intermediate level of cohesion as the ideal one. The reason might have been the following: too high cohesion might influence their free decision making and low cohesion shows low interconnection among family members and all that while solving problems as well as while sharing enjoyment.

Goal 3

Relation of Personality Structure: neuroticism, extraversion and the individual's resistibility with a focus on respective differences between the probands who took part in our study and a standard of undivided Slovak population

Probands from our longitudinal study reached a lower score in the personality dimension of neuroticism and a lower score in the personality dimension of extraversion in comparison with the standard of undivided Slovak population.

Eysenck's Personality Inventory EPI- A:

Table 1. Eysenck's Personality: Inventory EPI- A:

Variable	Long. Study			EPI Standard			t -test		
	N	M	S	N	M	S	t	p	V
E (EPI)	303	9.71	3.27	390	13.02	5.43	9.94	0.0001	s
N (EPI)	303	5.26	2.87	390	11.15	5.06	19.33	0.0001	s

Matching of Probands' File of longitudinal study and Standard of undivided Slovak population

Goal 4

Concrete factors that take effect of probands' protective factors

TCI 125

Table 2. Matching of Probands' File of longitudinal study and Standard of undivided Czech population of University Students

Variable	Lacková			Vašina			t -test		
	N	M	S	N	M	S	t	p	V
CO	303	15.75	1.69	141	17.22	3.44	4.80	0.0001	s
SD	303	5.82	1.81	141	14.88	4.77	21.83	0.0001	s
ST	303	9.37	1.60	141	6.11	3.50	-10.54	0.0001	s
NS	303	10.09	2.28	141	9.04	4.68	-2.51	0.013	s
HA	303	18.28	1.54	141	10.58	4.27	-20.83	0.0011	s
RD	303	11.11	1.82	141	9.07	3.30	-6.85	0.0001	s
P	303	4.69	0.61	141	2.17	1.86	-15.69	0.0001	s

According to TCI 125, the results of the longitudinal study reached higher values in comparison with the Czech population of university students in the items: ST, NS, HA, RD, and P. It means that in comparison with the Czech population they are more patient, more creative, more impulsive, more curious, more careful and more ambitious. In addition, they are more focused on performance and winning recognition.

Interviews

Proband Primary Family

Coping with unpleasant situation in primary family

- Leaving home
- Leaving because of sport
- Leaving because of work, one's own money (especially in Argentina)
- Looking for a friend's support (especially in Argentina)
- Visiting a psychologist, a psychiatrist (7 Argentinean probands mentioned use of antidepressant drugs)

Initiative/ passivity during coping with problem situations

- High initiative (all the probands were active: "nobody helps me, I have to help myself")

Fight with stressful situations in primary families

- Psychotherapy (especially in Argentina, nobody mentioned psychotherapy in the CR or SR, only two probands mentioned psychotherapy in the Spanish file)
- Sport (especially probands from the CR and SR mentioned it)
- Work "under the counter" (the probands from Argentina who were under 21)

Present situation

Coping with unpleasant situations

- Chat with a friend, a partner or a family member (only Argentinean probands mentioned that).
- Creation of a work: a painting, a building, construction of new things, every proband went in for improvement of his/her surroundings. It was a form of working therapy where the proband could see the results of his/her work

immediately (It was mentioned by all our probands. It might have been a reason for the fact that they all worked).

- Hobbies: one's own pizzeria, plumbery (of a translator from French)
- Sport (151 probands from all the countries mentioned it, "...when I do sport I do not think of problems. I am exhausted after sporting activity". The question is if it is not pushing problems out of one's mind only), orientation run.
- Going to a party (It occurred in 37 cases of probands)
- Reading (books, professional literature; all the probands).
- Psychotherapy: psychoanalysis (until 6 months all leave psychoanalysis), KBT, RET
- Active solving problems, all the probands consider reliability as a problematic situation
- Psychotherapy (antidepressant drugs, 6 cases in the last interview, Argentinean file)

Personal characteristics that help probands to cope with stress

- Ability to start from the beginning
- Toughness, wifullness

Traits that assisted the probands in success the most

- Education
- Diligence
- Toughness

Sense of responsibility for not fulfilled tasks, problems and failures

- They feel responsible (all the probands, we may assume internal locus of control)

Goal 5

Probands preferred terminal and instrumental values, Rokeach Value Survey

Terminal values

- Mature Love
- Feeling of Personal Confidence
- Enjoyment
- Wisdom
- Internal Harmony
- Social Appreciation

Instrumental values

- Intellectual
- Independent
- Rational
- Capable of Self-Control
- Responsible
- Obedient

As mentioned by Frankl (1996, p. 91) “The fact whether a traumatic experience, i.e. a highly demanding experience, is the cause of personal irreparable injury is always dependent not only on the appropriate person, on his/her trait of character, but also on the experience that he/she had to face.” As he continues (2005, p. 91): “Already Adler (1991) said that whether and how an individual gets an ambient world sucked into his/her life is dependent on the individual himself/herself”. Frankl (2006) even declares that a highly demanding situation supports mental health. “I always compare that with the following case: if we apply more loads on a building that is endangered by destruction, we may make it stronger. In the opposite direction, it is also obvious that a situation of distress, i.e., a situation when an individual gets rid of a long and severe mental stress, is dangerous from the mental point of view. For example, if we think of the situation of liberation from captivity. Many people experienced a real mental crisis not earlier than after leaving captivity. Although at the time of captivity under pressure they were willing and able to put their foot forward physically and morally and give it everything they had got and make their best of possibility. However, when stress is removed, it rather harms the individual. These relationships to a certain extent evoke memories of so-called Caisson disease when a scuba diver who surfaces too quickly may die because of decompression (Frankl, 1999, p. 92).“

We think that at the moment when we talk about resilience, we may think of a certain kind of mental immunity towards stress that the individual faces during his/her life. Childhood and adolescence in a family with disturbed communication and relationships certainly does not mean that the individual is forced to repeat the model behaviour, i.e., his/her parents’ behaviour. On the contrary, if the individual is able to create a critical attitude towards his/her ancestors’ behaviour, in course of time he/she realises that it is the behaviour which he/she does not want to repeat or he/she will repeat. Repeated exposure to criticism, especially to non-constructive one, to directive behaviour or on the contrary ignoring personality, may damage the child’s or adolescent’s personality markedly, and that in the sense of losing confidence in functional human relationships. If the individual is able to

become aware of the fact that he/she does not bear the blame for his/her parents' unkind behaviour and considers their decisions as demonstration of their failure, it serves more as preparation for facing people who do not behave honourably to their surroundings and who disturb interpersonal relationships, human effort and partnerships by their behaviour. However, the truth is that such a positive effect of difficult childhood and adolescence may be detected in a small number of people only. It deals especially with people who replace their own parents with other people in whom they can see a positive example for their behaviour. They also devote most energy in work and hobbies, in order not to think about unsuccessful family relationships, to escape from dysfunctional family. However, we think that stressful childhood must scar every individual for life. Repeated stressful situations in childhood and adolescence need not always result in the creation of a vulnerable personality; on the contrary, early exposure to stressful situations and, at the same time, frequent exposure to stressful situations teaches the individual to behave and cope with such stressful moments.

Recently, the questions of resilience have been discussed very often. However, there are few studies that would describe personal resistibility of young adults who come from various families and nations. Our study contributes to the enrichment of the knowledge on the mentioned questions of resistibility and provides incentives for further research.

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