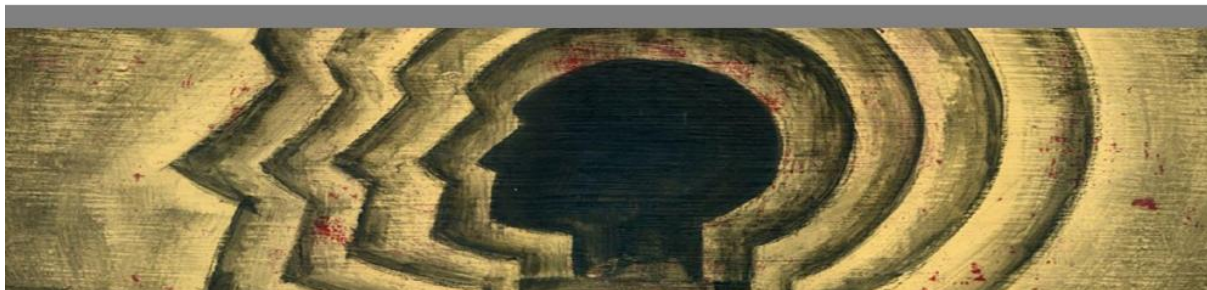


TAVASZI SZÉL 2016 / SPRING WIND 2016

Tanulmánykötet



Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége
Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Students

IV.

TAVASZI SZÉL SPRING WIND

Szerkesztette:
Dr. Keresztes Gábor

**Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége
Budapest
2016**

Tavaszi Szél – Spring Wind 2016

IV. kötet

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**TAVASZI SZÉL
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PROTECTIVE ROLE OF SIGNIFICANT CHILDHOOD RELATIONSHIPS IN THE APPEARANCE OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR IN MALE ADULTS GROWN UP IN FOSTER CARE

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Abstract

Results of several studies indicate that young people who age out of foster care to “independent living” are more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment, unplanned pregnancy, legal issues, substance misuse, or they even lack the basic health care services (Courtney, Dworsky, Ruth, Havlick & Bost, 2007).

Research in developmental protective factors clearly showed that positive connections with parents or caregivers have an important role in healthy development (Masten et al., 1990, Cederblad et al., 1994).

Studies conducted with young adults raised in foster-care showed that those individuals, who lacked secure attachment or long-lasting supportive relations were more likely to experience homelessness, underage pregnancy, incarceration, victimization and poverty (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011).

In our retrospective study, we examined whether childhood connections of children growing up in foster care show specific features that can serve as protective factors against the occurrence of criminal behaviour.

Sample: 161 adult males participated in our study. Half of them grew up in foster care, and the other half grew up with their biological parents. Half of both groups were currently in prison, while the other half had no criminal records.

Method: Participants had a semi-structured interview made by the first author concerning their childhood connections. Firstly, they drew a Moreno’s social atom about those people who were important in their lives, then the stability of their childhood attachments were assessed. Finally they answered questions about their memories of their parents/foster parents. Since we got quite diverse results, we used discriminant analysis to analyse how these effects independently or jointly influenced the possibility of incarceration.

Results: Our results partly supported our hypotheses based upon our literature review. Our results supported that the more individuals were present in the childhood years of foster-children, with whom they could form long-term connections that lasted up to their adulthood, the less they were prone to exhibit criminal behaviour. Our results concerning connections with biological parents were seemingly surprising, but we could find studies conducted during the past few years that supported our results. It seemed that those who kept in touch with their biological parents and had good relationships with them were more likely to commit crime. A reason for this can be on the one hand that the relationship with their biological parents makes the deepening of alternative, compensatory relationships more difficult. On the other hand,

lifestyles of biological parents can function as a negative model for their children. Our results also confirmed that when more of the above mentioned risk factors co-occur, it results in a higher probability of antisocial development/ illegal activity compared to when these factors stand independently.

1. Introduction

In our retrospective study, we examined whether childhood connections of children growing up in foster care show specific features that can serve as protective factors in the occurrence of criminal behaviour. Results of several studies indicate that young people aging out of foster care to “independent living” are more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment, unplanned pregnancy, legal issues, substance misuse, or they don't even have access to basic health care services (Courtney, Dworsky, Ruth, Havlick and Bost, 2007).

Research in developmental psychopathology has clearly showed that positive connections with parents or caregivers have an important protective role in healthy development (Masten et al., 1990, Cederblad et al., 1994).

Studies conducted with young adults raised in foster-care showed that those individuals who lacked secure attachment or long-lasting supportive relations were more likely to experience homelessness, underage pregnancy, incarceration, victimization and poverty (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor and Nesmith, 2001; Hook and Courtney, 2011).

The aim of our research was to investigate whether significant relationships in childhood (number and quality of relationships, frequent break ups in relationships, traumatic experiences in significant relationships) play a role in creating a criminal lifestyle. We intended to reveal which factors of significant relationships serve as protective factors against criminal behaviour in the development of those growing up in state care.

The modification of Child Protection Act conducted in recent years ensures that currently in Hungary, children under 12 taken away from their families are placed in foster care. This legal direction emphasizes the role of the foster parents and the network of social workers in the child's healthy development.

Our research question was therefore whether the number, quality and durability of childhood relationships, experiences with people they are attached to and possible traumas could lead to the increase in probability of incarceration.

2. Sample and procedure

Since our intention was to examine the relationship between early and present significant relationships and becoming an offender, we included people spending their imprisonment at the time. Men with a criminal record participating in the study were spending their prison-level imprisonment. It means that they have committed a crime punished with at least two years of prison-time, but not as serious as to be jailed (the misdemeanour was not homicide or involvement in a criminal organisation, terrorism, etc.). In other words, persons who were convicted for a minor offense were not included, only men who committed a real crime (Act C of 2012).

We were able to acquire the criminal records of people who grew up in state care with the help of the Foundation ÁGOTA (state care and support for vulnerable young people). People who stayed in contact with the foundation, people who left state care, and people known to their peers were included in the study group.

When compiling the group without any criminal records who grew up in the family, we had to search for less qualified men of a lower socio-economic status in order to have a control group with an equal educational level, and we asked them to complete the questionnaire.

Since the majority of people who left state care were living in large urban housing estates and small towns, the control group was recruited from the same environment by personal contact, with snowball method.

Altogether 161 men participated in the study, aged 19 to 46, 82 of them grew up in state care or have spent more than 5 years in state care in their childhood years.

The participating persons can therefore be grouped into 4 groups:

group 1: 42 (offender) people were serving their prison sentence at the time and they lived in state care in their childhood. Mean age was 26.5 years (SD = 8.6), they spent an average of 12.2 years in state care (SD = 5.6).

group 2: 40 (non-offender) people without criminal record (self-reported), who lived in state care in their childhood. Mean age was 27,8 years (SD = 5.9), they spent an average of 13.4 years in state care (SD = 5.8).

group 3: 39 (offender) people were serving their prison sentence at the time and have grown up with their biological family. Mean age was 27.3 years (SD = 6.9).

group 4: 40 (non-offender) people without criminal record (self-reported) and have grown up with their biological family. Mean age was 29.6 years (SD = 6.7).

According to qualification, mainly people with primary and secondary education were represented in all four groups (see Table no. 1):

Table 1: Distribution of education of people examined

	primary education	secondary education	higher education
group 1	26 people (62%)	16 people (38%)	0 people (0%)
group 2	20 people (50%)	18 people (45%)	2 people (5%)
group 3	25 people (64%)	11 people (28.5%)	3 people (7.5%)
group 4	24 people (60%)	13 people (32.5%)	3 people (7.5%)

3. Measures:

The participants took part in a structured interview designed by the authors. At the beginning of the interview we have recorded the Moreno social atom (Pintér, 1992). We have asked the subjects to name and place the people who play or (in case of the childhood atom) have played an important role in their lives in the figure containing concentric ellipses, in the centre of which is the word "ME" (see Fig. 1). We have emphasized they should indicate positive and negative relationships as well.

Firstly, participants completed a social atom regarding their adult relationships; secondly, they completed another social atom regarding their childhood relationships. In the original method, wished for relationships are considered to be related to the social atom as well. However, we have not included these relationships in our measure, since we were curious about perceptions of actual relationships and their quality.

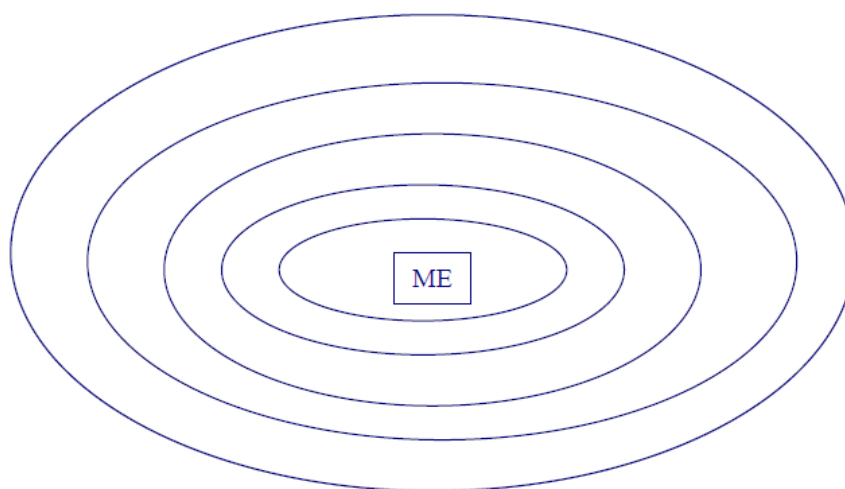


Figure 1: Social atom

The subjects were able to represent the importance of relationships, since they could place the names in 5 concentric circles, further and further away from the central “me” concept (less significant relationships were indicated in the more distant circles). We have not determined how many people should be included in the social atom, so the number of people might be informative, too.

After filling in the circles, a group of questions – considering information about every single indicated person – were asked from the participants. Participants had to assess the quality of the relationship experienced with each person on a scale from 1-to-5 (1 = completely negative, 3=variable, 5 = completely positive), and they were also asked to determine the length of the relationship and characterize the relationship in a few words.

The next part of the interview was different for those who grew up in a family and those who grew up in foster care. Adults raised up in state care were asked about the relationship they had with their biological parents and with their foster parents as well. Questions about the positive and negative experiences connected to their families were also included, since we wanted to investigate what kind of memories a person had related to their family of origin and one or more foster families.

Further questions considered the amount of support the participant had during the process of becoming an adult (18-20 year), since for those aging out of state care this is a particularly critical period, but it is also crucial for those living with their families from the perspective of their future life. Reaching the age of majority does not imply that those living in child protection care are ready for an independent life. Many leave the system with unfinished education and unfinished interpersonal connections as well as unprepared financially to live independently (Racusin et al., 2005). We have therefore asked them if anybody had helped them while they were growing up.

reaching the age of majority does not mean that the child protection care people are ready to live independently. A lot of people are out of the system so that neither finished their terms, not in terms of interpersonal relationships, but financially are not at that level, to live an independent life

From the interview data following variables had been extracted:

1. Number of childhood relationships
2. Durability of childhood relationships
 - The length of the longest relationship in years
 - Number of relationships lasting beyond childhood
 - Among peer figures how many are present in the current atom
3. Childhood relationships experienced with adults
 - Number of relationships
 - How many have lasted till present day
 - How many have lasted beyond childhood
 - Did anybody provide help when becoming an adult (yes or no)
4. Quality of childhood relationships
 - Evaluation of the relationship (on a scale from 1-to-5, the mean of results)
 - Closeness of relationships (distance of the person from ME in the social atom, the mean of results)
 - Number of positive memories regarding biological family
 - Number of negative memories regarding biological family

Variable groups 5, 6, and 7 are interpreted only with regards to subjects growing up in state care.

5. Time spent in state care (number of years)
6. Relationship with biological family
 - Did they keep in touch (yes/no)
7. Relationship with foster parents
 - Did they have foster parents
 - How many foster parents did they have
 - Do they currently keep in touch with at least one of them
 - Number of positive memories in connection with foster parents
 - Number of negative memories in connection with foster parents

4. Results

Since we received very differentiated data – continuous and binary variables- , we have used discriminant analysis to study how these factors separately and jointly impact the probability of avoiding imprisonment. We tried to look for factors which may serve as protective factors and those which should be avoided in order to prevent criminality from developing.

Table 1 contains the results of discriminant analysis with regards to the group of participants growing up in family, and Table 2 contains the results with regards to participants growing up in foster care.

Table 1: The results of discriminant analysis for subjects growing up with their biological parents; significant predictors are highlighted in bold.

	Explained ratio	Level of significance
Childhood variables together (variable groups 1 to 4)	.419	.001
1. Number of childhood relationships	.057	.035
2. Durability of childhood relationships	.216	.001
The length of the longest relationship in years	.119	.002
Number of relationships lasting beyond childhood	.162	< .001
Among peer figures how many are present in the current atom	.010	.385
3. Childhood relationships experienced with adults	.221	< .001
Number of relationships	.036	.093
How many have lasted till present day	.127	.001
How many have lasted beyond childhood	.114	.002
Did anybody provide help when becoming an adult	.116	.002
4. Quality of childhood relationships	.173	.009
Evaluation of the relationship	.055	.044
Closeness of relationships	.004	.568
Positive memories regarding biological family	.132	.001
Negative memories regarding biological family	.003	.608

Table 2: The results of discriminant analysis for subjects growing up in state care; significant predictors are highlighted in bold.

	Explained ratio	Level of significance
Childhood variables together (variable groups 1 to 7)	.436	.007
1. Number of childhood relationships	.014	.288
2. Durability of childhood relationships	.076	.185
The length of the longest relationship in years	.022	.177
Number of relationships lasting beyond childhood	.035	.093
Among peer figures how many are present in the current atom	.016	.262
3. Childhood relationships experienced with adults	.091	.115
Number of relationships	.013	.304
How many have lasted till present day	.054	.035
How many have lasted beyond childhood	.072	.015
Did anybody provide help when becoming an adult (1 = yes; 2 = no)	.003	.616
4. Quality of childhood relationships	.066	.309
Evaluation of the relationship	.015	.298
Closeness of relationships	.016	.252
Positive memories regarding biological family	.003	.660
Negative memories regarding biological family	.003	.643
5. Time spent in state care	.052	.038
6. Relationship with biological family (1 = yes; 2 = no)	.049	.046
7. Relationship with foster parents	.139	.020
Did they have foster parents	.011	.351
How many foster parents did they have	.008	.420
Do they currently keep in touch with them	.101	.004
Positive memories in connection with foster parents	.000	.939
Negative memories in connection with foster parents	.003	.872

Table number 1 illustrates which factors played a role in the development of criminal career for people who grew up with their family. It can be seen that almost all measured factors significantly impacted the outcome. Numbers on the arrows show the explained proportion, and only significant results are indicated. Based on our results factors that may protect from a criminal lifestyle are: multiple significant relationships in childhood, lasting and durable relationships, several adults in a person's life with whom they could keep in touch even after their childhood, positive memory of relationships, more positive memories related to their families. It is also unequivocal from these results, that a joint protective effect of all these factors is much stronger than the effect the factors have individually. Table number 2 shows that with regards to people who were in state care, less factor have relevance. There were only two factors which can be considered protective, and these mark almost the same thing, namely the durability of relationships developed in childhood with adult significant persons (how many have lasted till the present day, how many have lasted after the end of childhood). At the same time, we also see that the time spent in state care is related to criminality. These results however did not show what we would expect at first glance. Namely, the shorter period of time somebody spent in state care, the bigger the chances for them to have a criminal record.

Interestingly the fact that a person kept in touch with their biological parents in their childhood is also a factor that comes up with greater probability of having a criminal lifestyle. Both of these results mean that for the people grown up in state care the more time spend with their biological parents, the bigger the chances to become an offender.

5. Discussion

According to our results, in the case of adults growing up in state care fewer variables explain the outcome, but the explained proportion of variance is nearly the same in the two groups. It can be speculated, that the most significant factors have a greater impact on the development of criminality in adults growing up in foster care.

A part of our results are in line with previous results from the relevant literature (Lawrence, Carlson, Egeland, 2006, Cushing at all., 2014). Namely, the more people with whom a fostered child can develop a long lasting relationship, the less likely this person would become a criminal.

The result regarding the positive relation between keeping in contact with the biological parents and having a criminal record may be surprising at first, but we have found a recent study (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013) supporting this result in the literature from recent years. It has been found in several studies (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013) that the relationship with biological parents may pose difficulties to developing alternative, durable relationships. Furthermore, the lifestyle of the biological parents may set a negative example for the children. Our study also confirmed that the cumulative effect of these risk factors will result in a stronger probability than in each of the factors playing a role separately.

6. Limitations and future directions

The retrospective nature of the study should be noted. It is probable, that the self-reported evaluation of childhood relationships was heavily affected by the current state of mind and context. Therefore the reliability of the results is questionable.

In an ongoing study we wish to investigate a younger sample – between 18-25 years – just growing out of foster care to clarify the relationship between committing minor crimes in young adulthood and the stability of their significant relationships. The participants complete the same social atom as did the previous sample, with special regard to the quality of the

relationship to the biological parents and the occasions of changes in caregivers and significant others in his/her childhood. As coping mechanisms seem to be important mediators between childhood relationships and criminality, participants' coping mechanisms are also assessed.

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