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TOUGH, RESISTANT, HARD: RESILIENCE AND CRIMINALITY

Abstract

The concept of resilience explains human ability to the good adaptation and functioning in situations abounding into considerable psychological loads. However resilience is identical nor with the psychical good health, nor with the social competence. The adaptation in specific conditions do not mean a compatible with social standards. Developing the high-level resilience joins with communities in the family and the local community, with the support and the cohesion of the peer group. In the depraved environment it is possible to develop the high level of self-efficacy, competence and self-esteem, and a positive bond with meaning persons (or with the meaning person) can be associated with the transmission of anti-values. The question appears therefore, how resilience is shaped in the case of criminal offenders? Authoresses of the elaboration show the configuration of psychosocial factors, related to resilience and responsible for resistant behaviours – in the form which is socially accepted or not accepted. They also present some possible directions of the work with prisoners, for the purpose of an increase of the resilience level or prevention to its reduction under the stressful conditions. The elaboration is theoretical; it is a form of literature review.

Key words: resilience, offenders, crime

Hardzi, odporni, twardzi: prężność psychiczna a przestępczość Streszczenie

Koncepcja prężności (*resilience*) stanowi wyjaśnienie zdolności człowieka do dobrej adaptacji i funkcjonowania w sytuacjach obfitujących w znaczne obciążenia psychologiczne. Jednak prężność nie jest tożsama ani z dobrym zdrowiem psychicznym, ani z posiadaniem kompetencji społecznych. Adaptacja w konkretnych warunkach nie musi oznaczać funkcjonowania zgodnego ze społecznymi standardami. Rozwinięcie wysokiego poziomu *resilience* wiąże się ze wspólnotowością w rodzinie i społeczności lokalnej, wsparciem i spójnością grupy rówieśniczej. W środowisku zdemoralizowanym możliwe jest wykształcenie wysokiego poczucia własnej skuteczności, kompetencji i samooceny, a pozytywna więź

z osobami (osobą) znaczącymi (znaczącą) może być połączona z przekazem antywartości. Pojawia się zatem pytanie, jak kształtuje się prężność psychiczna osób dokonujących przestępstw kryminalnych? Autorki opracowania przedstawią konfigurację czynników psychospołecznych związanych z prężnością psychiczną i odpowiedzialnych za zachowania odporne – w formie akceptowanej lub nieakceptowanej społecznie. Prezentują również możliwe kierunki pracy z osobami odbywającymi kary izolacyjne, w celu zwiększenia ich poziomu prężności psychicznej lub zapobiegania jej obniżeniu w warunkach silnego stresu. Opracowanie ma charakter teoretyczny, przeglądowy.

Słowa kluczowe: prężność psychiczna, niedostosowanie społeczne, przestępczość

Introduction

Criminal psychology recognizes many determinants of criminal behaviours (Hołyst, 2004). Only a portion of them are associated with the perpetrator's traumatic past (Courtney, Maschi, 2012; Lis-Turlejska, 2002) and emotional burdens that provoke aggressive reactions. In addition, only a very small group individuals among criminals could be diagnosed as psychopaths. A significant number of culprits engage in criminal activity in order to reap the potential benefits: satisfaction of psychological needs, material gain, and also social benefits like identification of a reference group. Many of them function for years as criminals, and their illicit career leads to a range of diverse experiences – successes, but also failures, conflicts, humiliations, physical injury, fraud, the collapse of family bonds, social alienation. Some are unsuccessful in plying their criminal trade, while others rise up their felonious career ladder and excel in their field. A great deal of attention is paid in penitentiary psychology to the trauma which may visited on inmates as a result of serving a custodial sentence and its psychosomatic consequences (Ciosek, 2003). However, among criminals there are people who retain an even psychological keel while inside the prison walls, displaying adaptive behaviours which facilitate survival and render the conditions of incarceration bearable, establish social contacts, build their status and find interesting ways to occupy themselves. They leave the prison in good psychophysical shape. Can such people, in spite of their asocial behaviours, be assigned the attribute of high psychological resilience? How can we explain the mechanisms which lead during development to the formation of both a tendency to break the law and to hardness, resilience, the capacity to survive in sometimes extreme circumstances, and to easily dust oneself off after critical moments?

The Construct of Resilience

The expression resilience is a label used to represent proper functioning in spite of the vicissitudes of fate and traumatic events. This dynamic disposition, often identified with the concept of psychological hardness, determined the process of adapting to difficult life situations. Its value emerges only in the course of a difficult situation,

while its essence consists in the full use of both one's own resources and those of the surrounding environment in response to the challenges presented by the situation, for survival and development in the environment where the individual is present, or to effect changes in that environment. It is based on inborn predispositions supported by socializing impacts and the experiences of adult life.

In the simplified schema of *resilience* processes proposed by K.L. Kumpfer (1999), the impact of stressors on an individual occurs within a specific environmental context. In this context a transaction between the individual and the environment emerges, in which each challenge thrown up by the environment is associated with the reaction of an individual attempting to restore balance, which in turn elicits further reactions from the environment, creating a chain of intertwined interactions. The person functioning in this transaction is characterized by specified individual dispositions which modify his reactions, as well as which co-determine the intrapsychic consequences of stress experiences. The reciprocal influence of individual and environmental factors is responsible for the enhanced state of the resilience evoked in a difficult situation, which in turn determines the shape of later reintegration following the experience of stress; in consequence, it also determined reactions to future difficult situations.

Resilience, however, is neither a characteristic of personality nor a type of competence, and is also not the simple sum of protective factors and risk factors (Rutter, 2006, 2012). It is differentiated by its processual and interactive character. Its essence may be perceived in the reduction of an individual's susceptibility to the detrimental impact of environmental factors; the capacity to cope in spite of real environmental risk. Individuals displaying a high level of resilience do not only manage better at a comparable level of difficulty than those who are characterised by a lower degree of it. The former become stronger and more resolute in the course of strife, while the experience of stress and burden by those of lesser resilience contributes to increased sensitivity during future difficult situations and renders them more susceptible to being wounded.

The interactive character of resilience means that, in spite of functioning well in a broad range of difficult situations, some circumstances may occur in which an individual characterized by high resilience is wounded. This resilience may also evolve over time, which is indicated by the processual character of the construct. Successful coping by an individual of high resilience triggers "a complicated mixture of psychological habituation, changes in mental set, alterations in perceived and actual self-efficacy, hormonal changes (especially in the hypothalamic – pituitary – adrenal axis) and neural alterations" (Rutter, 2012, p. 341). Some authors also treat resilience as a property of the family and local environment (McCubbin H., McCubbin M., 1988; Mycota, Muhajarine, 2005).

The formation of resilience is influenced by life experience and significant situations in adult life, and modified by genetic conditions, particularly those concerning the functioning of the nervous system. Constitutive factors are the quantity and quality of risk factors, protective factors and trigger factors which refer to the character of current

events (Rutter, 1987). The impact of factors constituting resilience can be associated with the particular stage of life in which a given factor has the greatest significance and influence on developmental processes (Borucka, Ostaszewski, 2008). Among biological risk factors, the role of constitutional and temperamental characteristics is highlighted. Risk is increased by *inter alia* low birth weight, microdysfunctions of the nervous system, the presence of concentration difficulties in a small child coupled with psychomotor hyperactivity, while in an adult it can stem from changes associated with psychoorganic characteristics. Among environmental risk factors are poverty, low parental educational attainment, parents' poor childrearing skills, family conflicts, low social status, alcoholism in the family, domestic violence and racial discrimination. A protective influence is exerted by high intelligence levels, educational attainment, a safe environment, extensive and harmonious social relations, strong feelings of self-efficacy, problem-solving capacities, and a flexible, adaptive approach to new situations. The experiences of adult life (a good job, a successful marriage) can weaken the effects of previous wounds and improve coping skills. It should be observed that the personal, subjective meaning assigned to the adversities and challenges of the environment is important in assessing risk factors.

In Rutter's (1987) opinion, the experience of successfully managing stressful situations at earlier stages of life can make an individual resilient to future life challenges of a similar nature. It also enhances one's feeling of self-efficacy. However, chronic stressors are pathogenic when they are not handled.

Within the concept of resilience, taken from developmental psychology, the greatest attention has been dedicated to identifying risk factors and protective factors. Indeed, it has been stated that their recognition could aid in building up mental resilience and protect children in high-risk groups from detrimental environmental influences. The assumption underlying mental resilience understood in this way is that it forms a positive value, as resilience is linked with mental health and proper socialization. Resilience is generally associated with resistance to the influences of a deviatory environment. In classic studies by Emmy Werner (1992), children exposed to the negative impact of a deviatory environment did not exhibit aberrant psychosocial functioning if, during their childhood, they found support in at least one good bond with an adult from the family or from outside of it. However, other researchers exploring resilience (Rutter, 2001) point out that it is not the same thing as mental health, nor the possession of advanced social skills, nor the avoidance of violating legal norms. The question thus arises of how resilience is formed among individuals functioning in an asocial and antisocial manner, and what mechanism facilitate the co-existence of a high level of *resilience* with engagement in a life of crime?

Resilience among Criminals

In seeking the causes of criminality, researchers focus on three main groups of factors: biological, psychological and social (Holyst, 2009). Criminology doctrines

grounded in biology point to the significance of nervous system dysfunctions and neurotransmitter disruptions, as well as of glandular dysfunction. Psychosocial theories underline the role of improper socialization (Ciosek, 2003). They explain the mechanisms of aggressive behaviours in psychological terms, referring to psychoanalytical theories of destructive impulses, through concepts of frustration, models of learning aggressive behaviours and concepts of moral maldevelopment. Explanations offered from the evolutionary psychology perspective constitute an interesting attempt at capturing the phenomenon of criminality. Sociological doctrines primarily point to phenomena of marking, primary and secondary deviation in the aetiology of criminality, and the role of subcultures in processes of disturbed socialization. A synthetic indication of the multiplicity of concepts points to what is contemporarily the most frequently adopted concept of the polyaetiology of criminal behaviours.

In looking at criminality through the lens of resilience processes, many interdependencies can be found between them. Resilient criminals generally achieve success in their illicit lifestyle, they occupy a high position in the criminal hierarchy, and they achieve, however temporary, financial success. They are aided in this by a relativism of norms and values. They are characterized by haughtiness, hardness, the absence of fear, bravery, and the inclination to take risks of various kinds. They are clever, ruthless, active and eager to engage in successive challenges, capable of taking advantage of circumstances. They cope with the difficult situations which occur in the course of criminal activity without injury to their mental health or decompensation, and quickly recover after traumatic events. They are relatively adept at coping with serving a prison sentence and situations involving deprivation, developing survival strategies in prison which ensure higher status and better conditions for themselves. The development of high resilience among these criminals seems to be possible in conditions of the following constellation of life experiences: improper socialization towards criminality, the presence of risk factors (e.g. poverty, domestic violence), yet linked with the presence of protective factors which contribute to individual resources (e.g. high intelligence, courage, dexterity, physical strength, the support of at least one person from either inside or outside the family). Possession of these resources contributes to success in criminal endeavours. Those, in turn, boost their self-esteem, confirm them in their feeling of self-efficacy, and strengthen their significance in the deviatory environment. During the course of their criminal lives, these individuals perfect the vital skills and toughen themselves psychologically. As a rule, their illicit lifestyle becomes engrained and their network of interdependencies does not allow them to escape from the criminal environment. However, among individuals with a high level of resilience and in possession of extensive personal resources, the passage of time may lead to reflections on their own lives and readiness to make a break with their criminal past; in this, they are aided by the very same characteristics responsible for their previous criminal success: stubbornness, stamina, flexibility and openness to new challenges.

In turn, criminals with low resilience level do not generally achieve great success in their criminal career. They are merely assistants to the more clever and ruthless felons, they are abused and manipulated, and are sacrificed in the event of a failure. Their functioning is unstable, while as a result of their misfortunes and the manner in which others treat them they display symptoms of frustration. They engage in crimes of an emotional or opportunistic character. They can display reactive disorders in situations involving mental burden, and lapse into addiction. In a prison facility, they develop disadaptive behavioural strategies, experience violence at the hands of other inmates. The constellation of their life experiences can be associated with improper socialization, leading to criminality and the presence of risk factors coupled with the absence of protective factors, which in turn results in a deficit of personal resources. They have neither the strength nor openness needed for change, to emerge from criminality – yet remaining it in does not provide them with success, but rather leads only to prison.

Studies have confirmed the possibility of differentiating the aforementioned two groups. Among those who have found themselves in a penitentiary facility as a result of a conviction, researchers (Claes et al., 2014) have distinguished a group of prisoners who are emotionally stable and resilient, as well as a group of emotionally unstable convicts, unable to control themselves and their aggression, who most frequently displayed symptoms of dependence and committed crimes of an impulsive or sexual nature. The obvious conclusion is that the prognosis for post-penitentiary readaptation in the case of the latter group would be less optimistic.

Mechanisms of Intersection High Resilience/Criminality

High mental resilience can not only co-exist with asocial behaviours of a criminal nature, but can also determine the success of a criminal career and be a disposition exploited to benefit criminal undertakings.

The following mechanisms may be of significance in shaping this configuration of psychological factors:

The only strong bond in childhood (with an adult family member, from outside the family or in the peer group) can be associated with the transmission of anti-values. Intimacy, warmth and strong support can be given to a child by a person who acquires means of subsistence by stealing or prostitution; this individual's message about the world and important values, both the overt and intended message as well as the unintentional one which results from modelling behaviours, can be associated with the cult of cleverness, cunning, taking advantage of the situation and avoiding consequences. The message of anti-values can be associated with the transmission of convictions involving cognitive reinterpretation, facilitating the violation of moral and legal norms without a guilty conscience.

The environment socializing towards criminality may be disorganized, deviatory, devoid of clear norms and rules, and yet it may also be very well organized,

cohesive, with clear principles and norms, strong family and local traditions, and a deep sense of community. A good example are mafia families, which compose a network of organized relations with a clearly defined hierarchy of authority and responsibility, established communication channels in which failure to observe the rules is immediately punished or criticized. In this environment there are clear customs (rituals) for the passing through phases of growth, which facilitate the performance of developmental tasks. Initiation into the criminal trade is synonymous with entry into adulthood.

The individual experience of a future criminal may involve events giving rise to traumatic stress, accumulated stimuli perceived as chronic stressors, a feeling of helplessness and deficient personal resources, absence of support. However, it is also possible that the individual can manage stressful situations – not necessarily in a socially acceptable manner – but without incurring losses, and while gaining confidence in his own capacity to cope based on prior minor successes. For example, a child living in poverty may begin to steal in order to satisfy his needs, and an abused child may himself beat other, weaker children in order to reduce stress and acquire a feeling of strength. Difficult situations start being treated as challenges rather than burdens, habituation and desensitization ensue, and awareness grows of being in possession of the resources necessary for managing in life. A milieu of socially maladapted teenagers becomes a source of strong support. In adult life, successes in criminal undertakings can counterbalance exposure to stress during childhood and adolescence.

Criminality may be associated with the use of signature strengths (Seligman, 2004). During the process of acquiring individual experience, future criminals become familiar with their own predispositions such as physical strength, dexterity, endurance, agility and intelligence; the combination of these attributes with training in criminal skills leads to the development of competencies which facilitate prowess in illicit trades. Pickpockets may place the greatest stock in manual skills, enforcers for criminal groups value strength and low levels of empathy, and bigamists – emotional intelligence. In accordance with the concept of signature virtues, their application in criminal activity facilitates not only achieving success, but also generates satisfaction and a feeling of fulfilment, and is therefore strongly rewarding.

Resilience of Psychopaths

Psychopaths would seem to be particularly resilient criminals. This term is associated with such characteristics as implacability, the absence of fear or ignoring things which should cause it, a strong focus on activity, relatively rare perception of situations as truly difficult and a rapid return to equilibrium following traumatic experiences.

In the same manner as two subgroups within the population of individuals serving custodial sentences can be distinguished (Claes et al., 2014), similar subgroups

have been identified within the smaller group of prisoners-psychopaths (Hicks, Markon, Patrick, Krueger, Newman, 2004) – emotionally stable psychopaths, who display relaxed reactions to stress, highly active, and aggressive psychopaths with intense negative emotionality, devoid of barriers and restraint, with a very limited feeling of fellowship. According to Dutton (2012), there are three possible constellations of risk factors and resources among psychopaths. The first group is composed of individuals characterised by traces of psychopathy, who had a difficult start in life and are of low intelligence. These are people prone to tempestuousness and violence. They function as common, brutal bandits, gangsters or enforcers in a criminal group. As a result of their criminal activity they inexorably land in prison. The second group comprises individuals with a similar psychological profile, but without the inclination to violence. These psychopaths become petty criminals, fraudsters and drug dealers. As in the case of people from the first group, they are captured and sooner or later placed in confinement. However, the third group, characterised by psychopathy but with a good start in life and in possession of high intelligence, are successful people such as businessmen, or – as Dutton jokingly says – wardens of the prisons in which people from the first two groups land. In emphasizing how psychopaths are generally resilient and tenacious, as well as courageous and stubborn in achieving their objectives, Dutton shows that they have significant chances of being successful in modern society. Their personality is charismatic and well-integrated; what is more, they do not need to be extremely ruthless nor violent. He differentiates functional psychopaths from non-functional ones. The former demonstrate psychopathic traits in a modulated manner, adapting themselves with flexibility to the demands of the situation. In the latter group, the concentration of psychopathic traits is constantly at a maximum, which leads to problems associated with antisocial and criminal behaviour. Dutton's concept may be used as grounds for the thesis that psychopaths, in spite of diagnosed personality disorders, are resilient individuals, and that functional psychopaths pursuing a career and achieving success are also well-adapted to the modern world.

Resilience and a Custodial Sentence

A custodial sentence unveils the full potential of resilience. As it constitutes a string of stressful and difficult events associated with the deprivation of needs and degradation, it may exert a negative influence on the psyche of the inmate. Analysis of adaptive strategies employed while serving a custodial sentence sheds light on the mental resilience of a prisoner. The fear, on the one hand, may arise that a prisoner who applies maladaptive coping strategies when serving a custodial sentence will lose their mental resilience, will fail to cope with the emotional burden, will become aggressive or will begin displaying symptoms of reactive syndromes; he may even commit suicide. On the other hand, an

individual of strong mental resilience will select coping strategies which ensure that mental equilibrium is maintained and will serve his sentence without greater difficulty. These strategies may be possessed of a dual nature – associated with participation in a so-called “second life,” which facilitates the acquisition of status and satisfaction of deprived needs, or they may be strategies beneficial from the perspective of future social readaptation, consisting in model behaviour, engagement in work, study, acquiring a trade or repayment of debts. Both one and the other strategy may be adaptive in prison conditions for a mentally resilient individual, while evaluated differently from society’s point of view and future prospects for abandoning a life of crime.

Strategies proposed to inmates for reinforcing their own resilience when serving a prison sentence encompass the following pieces of advice (<http://www.prisonfitnessonline.com> [accessed: 3.01.2015]):

- Maintain and nurture relationships with loved ones outside of prison.
- Avoid seeing crises and stressful events as problems that cannot be solved.
- Accept change.
- Set goals and move toward them.
- Take positive and decisive actions on adverse situations.
- Look for opportunities for self-discovery after loss.
- Nurture a positive view of yourself.
- Keep things in perspective.
- Maintain a hopeful outlook.
- Take care of yourself.

Prevention of a reduction in the potential of resilience during a prison sentence should constitute an important element in resocialization efforts. In order for post-penitentiary readaptation to prove successful, it is vital to maintain at least a modest level of resilience in the former prisoner, who, upon leaving prison, will be confronted with a range of difficulties and unpleasant treatment at the hands of society. It is worth remembering, however, that prisoners also require steps be taken to prevent reduced levels of resilience, as among this population there are individuals demonstrating high resilience and applying coping strategies which provide them with support for their self-esteem, confirmation of their beliefs, minor successes in prison life, acceptance of a reference group and reinforcement of their self-worth or masculinity and strength. In the case of inmates with a low level of resilience, care should be taken to prevent its deterioration, as well as to strengthen it through maximization of protective factors accessible within a penitentiary facility (such as pedagogical support, engagement in tasks with the potential for success) and minimization of risk factors. However, in the case of prisoners with strong resilience, apart from efforts to prevent its deterioration while serving their sentence, it is also worth paying attention to how personal satisfaction is achieved and to create opportunities for attaining success in a more socially appropriate manner, while reducing the importance of support from the criminal milieu by offering alternative means of support.

Conclusions

The preceding analysis confirms that resilience should not be identified as a synonym of good mental health, nor of developed social competencies. A high level of resilience can be associated with criminality, which, in certain conditions and environments, can serve as an adaptive survival strategy or even the sole path for development; however, it remains a maladaptation from the broader social perspective. In the case of inmates serving custodial sentences, it would seem crucial to identify their mental resilience levels, as well as to expend effort in maintaining or strengthening it (depending on diagnostic results). Indeed, resilience is the psychological characteristic which should serve as the point of reference for developing a resocialization programme, in order to enhance the potential for its success.

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