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The Parental Competence of Single-parent Families from Vulnerable Groups

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Abstract

Starting from studies including the single-parent family in the category of vulnerable groups and from researches that drew a certain connection between the specificities of the parents' conduct and the development of the child, the objective of this research was to identify the particularities of the parental competence of the single-parent family. The results of the study (N=65) indicated that the parents from rural environments had a higher level of the "affective support" and "disciplining" dimensions than those from urban environments and, also, that the parents with a precarious financial situation had the lowest score in parental competence.

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Keywords: parental competence; single-parent family; knowing the child; affective support; disciplining; time management; crisis management.

1. Introduction

A more and more often encountered situation in the current society is that of the single-parent family, representing approximately 13.4 % of the total families. It is made up of a single parent along with the child/children, and its' existence can be determined by multiple causes: divorce/death of one of the parents, the leave of one of the parents in the non-married couples after the birth of a child; the decision of some women to have a child without entering a conjugal relation etc. (Cambir *et al.*, 2009; Voinea, 2005). In the specialized literature, there are numerous studies and researches regarding the association of the single-parent family with lower levels of school attendance of the children, as compared to the ones originating from the classical "nuclear families" (DeLeire & Kalil, 2002), but also with higher level of the probability of occurrence, at the adult age, of the risk behaviours,

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alcohol and drug consumption (Carlson, 2006), dissolution of the romantic/conjugal relations (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997). At the same time, there are also encountered descriptions of the manners in which some disturbances of the child and of the future adult can be prevented (Deal, 2012; Ginsberg, 2009; Morris, 2007).

However, children raised and educated by both parents can also develop psycho-social disturbances in relation to the parents' conduct toward them (practically, in relation to the parents' level of „parental competence”).

The „parental competence” was defined by Glăveanu & Creangă (2009) as a system of knowledge, skills, capabilities, abilities and habits that allow the parent to successfully fulfill the parental responsibilities and also to prevent/deal with crisis situations in a manner that contributes to the child's development.

No matter the family type (parental/single-parent/recomposed), what has a major importance for a normal bio-psycho-social development of the child is the harmonious management by the parent/parents of all the factors which could negatively influence his evolution – an aspect whose degree increases in direct reaction with the level of the parental competence.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Purpose

Starting from a series of studies which included the single-parent family in the category of vulnerable groups (Popescu, 2011) and from researches which revealed the detrimental impact of the parents' divorce (VanDenBerghe, 2000), of the economic difficulties of single parents (Dowd, 1997) and of certain particularities of their conduct (Ghani *et al.*, 2014) over the development of the child (Tihan, 2004), the objective of this research is that of identifying the particularities of the parental competence of the single-parent family in relation with the living environment and the financial situation (criteria of inclusion in the social category of the vulnerable groups being the rural environment and the precarious financial situation).

The investigative process was guided by two hypotheses:

- There are significant differences in terms of the parental competence between the parents in the single-parent families in the urban and rural environment.
- The parental competence encounters variations in reference to the financial situation of the parents in the single-parent families.

2.2. Subjects

The study was conducted on 65 parents belonging to single-parent families (61 women and 4 men – age $M=32.96$; $SD=5.42$) having from 1 up to 5 children with the age ranging between 7 and 11 years, of which 32 from the rural environment and 33 from the urban environment, with various financial situations – 21 had a precarious financial situation (benefiting from unemployment/social allowance or without any official income), 23 – national minimal wage and 21 – medium and good financial situation. The data were declared by the subjects, the author of the research not having control over their accuracy.

2.3. Methods

In order to study the parental competence of single-parent families, the Parental Competence Questionnaire – PCQ (developed by Glăveanu, 2009) was used; the PCQ has 81 items grouped on the following five dimensions:

- Knowing the specificities of the child between 7 and 11 years of age (17 items) – is about the parent's ability of becoming aware of the child's level of development (dependent on the child's age), therefore being able to explain and understand the child's reactions and needs and to provide adequate answers.
- Affective support and stress management (17 items) – is about the parent's capacity of knowing and applying efficient methods for both preventing an up rush of the familial stress and coping with it; this capacity is about

managing the familial tensional situations and also, about providing some affective assistance that helps the child to manage and overcome negative emotions.

- Disciplining (19 items) – reflects the parental capacity of being assertive in relation to the child and of adequately managing the reward-punishment system in order to permit and stimulate the development of all the components of a well-balanced personality.
- Time management (14 items) – reveals, on one hand, the parent's ability of defining the amount of time spent with the child (as well as its quality) and, on the other hand, the parental capacity of guiding the child's own time by creating situations that are stimulative for the development of critical and creative thinking, aesthetic sense etc. and, also, that sustain the child's social insertion.
- Crisis management (14 items) – reflects the parental capacity of being a good leader, of finding solutions to the child's problems together with the child, consequently overcoming the educational, personal etc. crises and stimulating the development of critical (rational) thinking and problem-solving capacity (Glăveanu, 2009, p 184).

The scaling of the items was done by assigning numbers from 1 to 5 to the levels to which the subjects were characterized by the listed conducts); subsequently, the final score of the questionnaire was between 81 and 405. The existence of several dimensions having certain autonomy in the evaluation of the investigated construct allowed the elaboration of distinct standards for each of the five dimensions of the questionnaire. The item analysis revealed the difficulty coefficient of the items (between 0.3 and 0.8) and their discrimination coefficient (between 0.3 and 0.8). The exploratory analysis revealed the communality (0.51 and 0.67), the saturation (over 0.4) and the degree of sample adequacy (KMO coefficient=0.61).

The psychometric qualities of the questionnaire (fidelity and validity) were revealed as follows: for the internal consistency the calculation of the Cronbach alpha coefficient revealed statistically acceptable values (the lowest=0.69, the highest=0.82); the content validity was mostly ensured by extracting behavior samples from the results of the qualitative research and by using expert analysis (eight experts evaluated the relevance of the items for the investigated construct). PCQ was validated in 2009-2010 on 535 parents with the Parental Authority Questionnaire (Buri, 1991) (r between 0.5 and 0.9; level 0.01, bilateral) (Glăveanu, 2012).

3. Results

The first hypothesis of the research was analyzed by the t test procedure for independent samples, thus the global score obtained in PCQ and, respectively, the sizes thereof being compared by the subjects (single parents) in the urban and rural environment.

The obtained results proved that there are statistically significant differences ($t=-2.14$; $df=63$; $p=0.03$) in terms of the parental competence of the parents in the single-parent families in the rural environment ($M=231.62$; $SD=43.67$) and, respectively, in the urban environment ($M=253.15$; $SD=37.28$).

Also, significant differences ($p<0.05$) were recorded between the two categories of subjects on the following dimensions:

- Affective support and stress management ($t=2.35$) between parents in single-parent families from the rural environment ($M=58.56$; $SD=10.4$) and those from the urban environment ($M=50.06$; $SD=17.8$)
- Disciplining ($t=2.16$) between parents in single-parent families from the rural environment ($M=64.46$; $SD=11.36$) and those from the urban environment ($M=56.6$; $SD=17.38$)
- Time management ($t=-4.78$) between parents in single-parent families from the rural environment ($M=29.75$; $SD=12.67$) and those from the urban environment ($M=44.75$; $SD=12.59$)
- Crisis management ($t=-5.08$) between parents in single-parent families from the rural environment ($M=31.43$; $SD=15.46$) and those from the urban environment ($M=48.72$; $SD=11.74$)

There were no statistically significant differences ($t=-1.68$; $p=0.1$) between the two groups on „knowing the specificities of the child between 7 and 11 years of age” (single-parent families from the rural environment: $M=47.71$; $SD=15.09$; single-parent families from the urban environment: $M=52.39$; $SD=4.49$).

The second hypothesis of the research (investigating the variation of the parental competence in reference to the financial situation) has been analysed using the One-Way Anova procedure. The resulting data indicated statistically significant differences between the three categories of parents in single-parent families: $F(2,62)= 50.09$, $p<0.001$ (the values at post-hoc - Bonferroni ($p<0.05$) being taken into account since the homogeneity of the variation had been proved by the result of the Levene (0.57) at $p>0.05$). Also, according to Hopkins' grid (2000) (Perța, 2009), the size of the effect ($\eta^2=0.37$) indicated a moderate effect in regard to the percentage of the variation of the dependent variable (parental competence) explained by the variance of the independent variable (financial situation).

Table 1. The relation between the parental competence and the financial situation of the single-parent family

Financial situation	Parental competence			Levene	p	df	F	p
	N	M	SD					
Precarious	21	198.09	24.82	0.57	0.56	65	50.09	0.001
National minimum wage	23	251.43	28.31					
Medium and good	21	277.28	25.01					

Thus, the parents with a precarious financial situation had the lowest score in terms of the parental competence ($M=198.09$; $SD=24.82$), followed by the one with the national minimum wages ($M=251.43$; $SD=28.31$) and those with medium and good financial situation ($M=277.28$; $SD=25.01$).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Starting from a series of studies that include the single-parent family (along with the families in the rural environment and those with precarious financial situation) in the category of the vulnerable groups (Popescu, 2011) and from researches which brought into discussion the fact that the ambient constructed by the single parent may affect the harmonious development of the child (Carlson, 2006; Amato & Cheadle, 2005), this research tried to analyse the parental competence of single-parent families in reference to two variables – the living environment and the financial situation.

The results of the study indicated that the parents in the single-parent families in the rural environmental have (in general) a lower level of parental competence, as compared to the ones in the urban environment – which may justify the conception of certain authors (Popescu, 2011) of including the family in the rural environment in the category of vulnerable groups without other criteria/without correlating it with other types of vulnerabilities. At a more profound level of the analysis, differences were also identified in terms of the level of the parental competence, respectively: the parents in the single-parent families from the rural environment had a higher degree of the “affective support” provided to the child and his “disciplining”, while those from the urban environment proved better abilities regarding the “management of the time spent with the child” and the “management of the crisis situations” in the child’s life. Both groups ranged at a medium level in the “Knowing the specificities of the child between 7 and 11 years of age” dimension, there being no statistically significant differences.

The parental competence of the single-parent families varies in reference to their financial situation, the parents with a precarious financial situation obtaining the lowest score, the ones with minimum national wages – an average score and those with medium and good financial situation – the highest score.

The results of this research comply with those of other studies, which proved the existence of a direct relation between the socio-economic level of the parents and their conduct towards the child (the economic difficulties encountered by the parents creating an environment prone to the formation of socially invalidating personality traits – such as the lack of self-confidence, shyness, distrust in others, deficient development of cognitive abilities, language and concentration ability, low participation in the social life or even - in extreme cases - aggressiveness, substance abuse, other deviant behaviours (Glăveanu, 2012; Bourbeau, 2009; Gray, 2008; Ginott, 2006).

This research has been conducted predominantly on female subjects (more than 90%) – as a consequence of the fact that usually, following the separation of the parents, “women who take the children in their care and provide their education” (Leman, 2006).

The study is part of a more extended research entitled “The Development of the Parental Competence of the Vulnerable Groups as a Mediating Factor of the Socio-Economic Integration of the Future Generation” (the first programme of this type in Romania, developed under the aegis of the Romanian Academy). The following research directions deal with some more fine differentiations, in reference to: the socio-demographic data, the type of relation with the partner, the number of children cared for, the education/literacy level, the personality traits, the help received from the close ones from an economic perspective and/or in terms of child care.

The final purpose of the study is to identify the parents from single-parent families that have a low level of parental competence (evaluated using their overall/single-dimension score) and to include them amongst those who will attend the parental competence development programme for the vulnerable groups.

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