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The Impact of Poverty on the Family System Functioning

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how life in poverty affects the functioning of family system. We focused on family functioning in the dimensions based on McMaster model. We employed The Family Assessment Device.

The result shows that there is an association between poverty and disrupted family functioning. Family functioning in different dimensions is in the range of "unhealthy", mainly in communication, behaviour control and family role. Family stress caused by problems with the fulfilment of the family economic function, affects the way parents fulfill their parental role.

We consider it necessary to focus on effective interventions to help families living in poverty in the restoration of family functioning in different dimensions.

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Keywords: Poverty; Family functioning; Family system; Family Assessment Device

1 Introduction

Poverty is a social problem, which is given a big coverage in society and new strategies are continuously being developed in order to minimize and reduce its impact. However, we might conclude that under the social-economic development in Slovakia, the at-risk-of-poverty rate has currently an increasing tendency. The National Social Report for 2012 (ec.europa.eu) shows that there is a significant increase in the number of people living in households with a very low intensity of work within individual indicators. These families are one of the groups at highest risk in terms of falling into poverty. Based on the findings of the Statistical Bureau of the Slovak Republic, as regards poverty, the most endangered households are predominantly those with two adults and with three or

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more dependent children. Nearly one third of them (32,6%) was at risk of poverty. The next risk group were the households made of one parent with at least one dependent child, thus incomplete families (26,4%) (www.portal.statistics.sk). With respect to the prognosis of development of macroeconomic indicators until 2015, it can be assumed, that in spite of the measures adopted, no significant decrease in poverty risk or social exclusion will occur in that period.

The life in poverty has a negative impact on whole families (Dodge et al., 1994; Gedbery, Bodnárová a Filadelfiová, 2007; Currie a Stabile, 2003 etc.). For instance Gedbery, Bodnárová a Filadelfiová (2007), but also Bodnárová, Džambazovič at al., (2005) highlight both the important role of nuclear family, which influences the development and growth of a child, and transference of inequality from one generation to another. Children raised in the families with lower income are disadvantaged in numerous aspects in comparison with those from economically well established families. Studies conducted by Currie and Stabile (2003) demonstrate that children from families, which can be classified as poor, have lower birth weight, higher risk of infant mortality. Duncan et al (2004) examined the influence of economically disadvantaged environment on the behaviour of children. Their research shows that those children are more frequently diagnosed with behavioural disorders. Likewise, Havemen and Wolfe (1995) came to similar conclusions and furthermore they discovered worse school results of children from economically disadvantaged environment. After completion of their education they experience difficulties with employment in the labour market (Gregg a Machin, 1999) and they have health problems more frequently (Currie et al, 2004). Consequently, all these facts have impact on the employment options and subsequently on the individual's income rate (Jenkins, Siedler, 2007).

The presence of poverty in a family limits also the development of children through budget restrictions of family sources, which parents invest into them. However, experts (Becker In Kalil, 2003) emphasize, that these sources cannot be viewed only through market value and costs for quality care. The investment of a parent is also the value of time. Sources can include not only income, but also non-financial sources such as education, access to information, etc. Families living in poverty can have a restricted access to sources on both levels – in the access to material sources (cost of living, food expenses, cognitively stimulating toys for children, books, etc.) but also immaterial sources (for instance in the area of education, in the access to information, in possibilities of development of one's experiences and skills etc.). This indicates that families with lower income are not able to invest sufficient human capital into their children.

However, poverty, apart from the direct impact on individual family members, endangers and disrupts the functioning of the family system as a whole. The family functioning is a multi-dimensional construct reflecting family interactions and activities. Effectiveness or ineffectiveness of family activities and interactions determines whether the family is able to fulfill its aims, provide its members with material and emotional support and well-being, support their prosperity and development (Walsh, 2003). Pezzullo et al. (2010) characterize the family functioning through a variety of family governance frameworks, emotional attributes, cognitive engagement and development characteristics, physical health habits, intra-familial relationships and social connectedness.

Currently, there is no consensus in basic dimensions of the family functioning. Specification of dimensions and key areas of family functioning varies depending on the specialization of the author of given concept or model. In the assessment of family strengths Orthner, Jones-Sanpei and Williamson (2004) considered 6 dimensions: economic stability, communication skills, problem-solving skills, family cohesion, social support and presence of risky factors. The outcome of this assessment demonstrates that the economic insecurity, which families are confronted with, correlates with lack of problem-solving skills and eroded family cohesion. Furthermore, the analysis also discovered considerable differences in communication skills and provision of social support in the observed low-income families.

2 Methodology

In order to achieve our objectives and evaluate the functioning of the family system, we took into consideration the McMaster model of family functioning. The model is based on systems theory and its crucial assumptions are as follows: (1) All parts of the family are interrelated; (2) One part of the family cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the family system, (3) Family functioning cannot be fully understood by simply understanding

each of the individual family members or subgroups; (4) A family's structure and organization are important factors that strongly influence and determine the behaviour of family members; (5) The transactional patterns of the family system strongly shape the behaviour of family members.

In order to assess family functioning, similarly to the McMaster model, we concentrated on 6 dimensions of family life: problem solving, communication, family roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement and behaviour control. As noted by Epstein et al. (1993), in order to fully understand such a complex entity as a family, it is necessary to evaluate many dimensions. However, the dimensions in our chosen models are not an exhaustive calculation of all aspects of family functioning. The authors describe only those considered important in the clinical context. Their goal was to conceptualize and operationalize the dimensions in a way that would allow their easy and helpful usage in research.

Purpose of the study: Determine whether poverty affects the family functioning in all its dimensions and identify the most affected dimensions.

2. 1 Participants

The sample consisted of 332 participants divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 172 participants (mean age= 28.38 ±15.38, range =12 – 67) living in families with income below the level of subsistence minimum. The subsistence minimum in the Slovak Republic is recognized by the state as a poverty line. The second group was control group consisted of 160 participants (mean age = 30.19 ± 14.56, range = 13 – 67) living in families with standard income.

2. 2 Measures and procedure

In order to evaluate family functioning, Family Assessment Device (FAD) questionnaire was used. It is a 60 - item self-assessment tool. It is designed to assess selected dimensions of family functioning and is based on the McMaster model of family functioning. Assessed dimensions are the following: (a) problem solving - a family's ability to resolve problems at a level that maintains effective family functioning, (b) communication – how information is exchanged within a family (the focus is on verbal exchange) , (c) roles – the recurrent patterns of behaviour by which individual members fulfil family functions , (d) affective responsiveness – the ability to respond to a range of stimuli with the appropriate quality and quantity of feelings, (e) affective involvement - the degree to which the family shows interest in and values the activities and interests of individual family members, (f) behaviour control – the pattern a family adopts handling behaviour in specific situations.

The last dimension is general functioning – the overall health or pathology of a family (Epstein, Baldwin, Bishop, 1983). The task of a participant was to identify how well the statement describes his family (on a scale from strongly agree - agree - disagree - strongly disagree).

3. Results

The results were analysed using statistical software SPSS.

Table 1. Mean scores of family functioning dimensions (Family assessment device)

Dimension	Cut-off Score	Mean Score	Minimum	Maximum
Problem solving	2,20	2,22	1,20	3,40
Communication	2,20	2,24	1,00	3,17
Roles	2,30	2,60	1,50	3,50
Affective Responsiveness	2,20	2,44	1,50	3,33
Affective Involvement	2,10	2,59	1,43	3,57
Behavior Control	1,90	2,37	1,44	3,11
General family functioning	2,00	2,32	1,00	3,75

As shown in Table 1, comparing average scores of individuals living below the poverty threshold with Cut-off Score, the largest differences were observed in the dimension Affective Involvement (mean score 2.59) and in the dimension Behaviour Control (mean score 2.37).

Table 2 Differences in family functioning dimensions

Dimension	Group	N	Mean Rank	U	Z	P
Problem Solving	Group 1	172	164,51	13418,500	-,397	,692
	Group 2	160	168,63			
Communication	Group 1	172	187,01	10233,000	-4,066	,000
	Group 2	160	144,46			
Roles	Group 1	172	211,48	6023,500	-8,900	,000
	Group 2	160	118,15			
Affective Responsiveness	Group 1	172	188,60	9959,000	-4,399	,000
	Group 2	160	142,74			
Affective Involvement	Group 1	172	217,28	5026,000	-10,044	,000
	Group 2	160	111,91			
Behavior Control	Group 1	172	180,85	11291,500	-2,846	,004
	Group 2	160	151,07			
General Family Functioning	Group 1	172	206,28	6917,000	-7,843	,000
	Group 2	160	123,73			

*Group 1 – income below the poverty threshold
Group 2 – standard income

The findings in Table 2 show that the results of Mann Whitney U test, applied to compare the average score in the dimension Communication show a significant difference between the group of participants living below the poverty threshold and the group of participants with a standard income ($Z = -4.066$, $p = 0.000$). The average score of the group living below the poverty threshold was 187.01, while in the group of participants with a standard income, the mean score was 144.46. In the dimension Roles was found also a significant difference ($Z = -8.900$, $p = 0.000$) between the group of participants living below the poverty threshold (mean rank 211.48) and the group of participants with a standard income (mean rank 118.15). The analysis of the results showed a statistically significant difference ($Z = -4.399$, $p = 0.000$) between the participants whose income is in the range of poverty (mean rank 188.60) and the participants with a standard income (mean rank 142.74) also in the dimension Affective Responsiveness. Another comparative dimension was Affective Involvement. Similarly, this dimension showed statistically significant differences ($Z = -10.044$, $p = 0.000$), where the group of participants living below the poverty threshold reached a mean rank of 217.28 and the group of participants with a standard income reached a mean rank of 111.91. The dimension Behaviour Control demonstrated a statistically significant difference ($Z = -2.846$, $p = 0.004$) between the participants whose income does not exceed the poverty threshold (mean rank 180.85) and participants with a standard income (mean rank 151.07). The only dimension which showed no significant difference between the two groups was Problem Solving ($Z = 0.397$, $p = 0.692$). The group of participants living in poverty reached in this dimension a mean rank of 164.51. Mean rank of the participants with a standard income was 168.63.

The last evaluated dimension was General Family Functioning. This dimension demonstrated a significant difference in average score ($Z = -7.843$, $p = 0.000$) between the group of participants whose income is below the legal poverty threshold (mean rank 206.28) and the group of participants with a standard income (mean rank 123.73).

4 Discussion and conclusion

The family functioning is determined by family structure, level of societal development, cultural background and by social – economic status of a family (McCreary – Dancy, 2004). The influence of life in poverty on individual is undeniable, thus both in past and in present it has been a subject of numerous studies. Nonetheless, a very little attention in research has been focused on the influence of life in poverty on a family as a whole and on its functioning. For this reason, we aspired to determine whether poverty affects the family functioning in all its dimensions. Moreover, we wanted to know which dimension was the most affected. We applied the self-report inventory Family Assessment Device, through which we monitored the average score in each dimension. Subsequently, we compared the results from families living below poverty line and the control group of respondents living in families with a standard income. The adopted inventory enabled to discover the degree to which the family functioning was disrupted, yet it did not indicate through what this disruption manifested itself. Therefore, it will be indispensable to conduct a qualitative investigation in families, aimed at an elaborate analysis of functioning in all dimensions.

The analysis of results showed that respondents from the observed group proved an average score below the cut-off score in all dimensions. The highest degree of disruption of our respondents was shown in the dimension Behaviour Control. Miller et al (2000) relates this dimension to behaviour in three types of situations. The first type involves situations connected with physical threat of family members. The second type is defined by situations connected with fulfilment of basic psychobiological needs. The third type concerns situations involving interpersonal socializing behaviour towards family members but also towards the environment in which the family lives. Further findings were proposed by Dodge et al (1994) or Papp et al (2009) who noted that the long-term economic stress leads often to less effective parenting. The studies also indicate that parents apply coercive and punitive parenting styles more frequently. Corporal punishments are frequently used, opposed to negotiations and argumentations (Sampson, Laub, 1994). In addition, a higher risk of violence against partner, a development of various addictions or a criminal behaviour was found among parents living in a long-term poverty (McLoyd, 1990; Hasima, Amato, 1994). Behaviour of individual members of family is closely linked with the manner in which they hold their roles. Disruption of this dimension was clearly proved in our research, too. In the families with low income, the conflict between the parental role and the working role occurs more frequently. The conflict between these two roles consists in an excessive pressure on parents to provide for the family and to meet the needs of all family members from the economic point of view.

Another area which proved the impact of poverty on the family functioning in our research was the Affective Involvement. This dimension reflects the degree to which the family shows interest in values and activities of others. (Epstein et al, 1978) Likewise, the disruption of Affective Involvement dimension was proved also by Dodge et al (2004), in that the poverty and its accompanied factors both reduce the ability of parents to engage in affectionate and supportive interactions with their children and increase the risk of negative or repressive behaviour. This behaviour of parents was identified as a crucial mechanism, through which poverty affects the development of children. Not only Gershoff et al (2007) but also Fine and Finchman (2013) highlight the fact that the stress caused by constant economic pressure results in instability of family relationships. As a consequence of increased conflicts imposed by financial problems not only the functioning of a couple is endangered. Due to stress the disruption of supportive parent-child relationships often occurs.

As the results suggest, poverty is a negative-acting factor in the family functioning. It has been proved that all its dimensions are influenced by an insufficient income. It is necessary to pay further attention to qualitative analysis of all dimensions of the family functioning in families living in poverty. Knowledge about the specific dimensions and aspects which are most affected by poverty and by which means are essential especially for the selection of the most effective strategy and the most appropriate methods for work with family.

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