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How Students Estimate Family Relationships and Competent Parenting

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Abstract

The subject of the paper is the correlation between family relationships and competent parenting, perceived from a systemic perspective. The aim of the research was to determine which family relationships are perceived as the most functional by the students, when the parents are presented with a permissive, authoritative, authoritarian, inconsistent, or indifferent educational style. We assumed that students assess, most positively, the family relationships where the parents are permissive. Our expectations, that the permissive style will be estimated as an indicator of the most functional relationships in one family, were based on the results of the research conducted by McGillicuddy-De Lisi, De Lisi (2007), and on the characteristics of the adolescent phase which our respondents are a part of. We used the following research instruments: Index of Family Relations (IFR, Hudson 1982) and five vignettes in which the educational style of parents was described (authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, inconsistent and indifferent). The examinees were 316 male and 268 female students. The results showed that the participants estimated most positively, the story about a family in which both parents apply the authoritative educational style, and then a situation in which the father applies the permissive and inconsistent educational style, whereas, when the mother is in question, inconsistency comes before permissiveness. When both parents apply authoritarian and indifferent educational style, family relationships are estimated as significantly negative, especially in the case where the indifferent education style is applied by both parents. This finding is not in accordance with our expectations, but it agrees with the Circumplex model of family relationships and the expectations that the authoritative educational style relies on functional family relationships, in other words that the functionality of family relationships affects competent parenting. Students' perceptions of family relationships and competent parenting are very important for their adequate parenting in the future.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, the research of family relations and competent parenting is conducted from the systemic perspective. A systemic approach to family includes perception of the family as a living system composed of subsystems – partner, parental, subsystems created by children, while perceived as a whole it is a part of the ecological suprasystem with which it exchanges energy and information. In order to understand in which way family functions, it is important to understand the relations that exist between these subsystems, as well as the relations that exist between the family and the environment in which the family functions. Intimacy and closeness in partner relation, or distance and conflicts, are reflected on the functioning of the family system as a whole, on creating interactions between parents and children which finally gives a specific tone to family functionality and parental functioning.

2. The connection between family relations and competent parenting

Studies related to the relationship between marriage and parenting have started during the eighties. Belsky (Belsky, 1984) pointed out that the effects of marital relationships on parenting must be observed and explored. The first empirical studies in this area (Grych, 2002) explore the connection between marriage and parenting during the period of accepting the parental roles, pointing to the significance of the marital functioning in the moment when the spouses accept their parental roles. Erel and Burman (Erel & Burman, 1995) have determined, based on the analysis of 68 researches related to the connection between marital quality and parenting, that there is „the spillover effect“, i.e. positive and negative effects of marital functioning on parental functioning. However, certain studies emphasize the negative correlation between the marital and parental functioning, pointing to the compensatory model according to which parents invest even more in their relationship with their children when there are problems in their marriage or marriage dissatisfaction. Others imply that parents are less focused on interacting with their children when they are very content with their marriage. It is obvious that both marital quality and parenting are multidimensional constructs and that understanding the functional mechanisms is very complex.

Certain studies show that there is a negative relationship between marriage and parenting (Grych, 2002) because parents, in conflicted marriages, are more invested in their parental roles but it is certainly not a condition for good parenting. That type of relationship can only be burdened with the overprotective parenting style of the parents that can be negatively reflected on child's development. Findings show that fathers who put stability over contentment in marriage have shown more adequate behavior towards their children, whereas fathers who have recognized a fall in their marriage contentment, express more intrusive behavior in their interaction with their children. In contrast to that, mothers who have recognized a fall in their marriage contentment, behaved more adequately towards their children.

The already mentioned empirical studies denote a association between marital and parental functioning and in different ways manage to document this association; however, it seems that this association is not yet fully clarified compared to the effect of some other factors as well as compared to the age of the examinees, because researches are usually conducted with parents of small children. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that there is a certain accordance when the gender of the examinees is in question because the majority of the findings denotes that male functioning in their parental role is more significantly connected to marital contentment, i.e., marital contentment to them is more important in order to achieve a competent marital functioning. Furthermore, there is a significant number of researches that indicate a presence of „the spillover effect“ between marital and parental functioning, which moreover indicates that marital relationship serves as a primary source of support in parenting. When parents in marital functioning show greater closeness, warmth and better communication, then they are also more affectionate towards their children and their parental role is more adequate, which contributes to creating a healthier and more encouraging environment for their children's development.

3. The parenting style of the parents and competent parenting

The competence of the authoritative parents is connected, according to Baumrind, to instrumental competence of their children. Instrumental competence (Baumrind, Thompson, 2002) refers to a behavior that is socially

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