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Psychological birth – the separation-individuation process among female Adult Children of Alcoholics

Psychiczne narodziny: postępy procesu separacji-indywiduacji u kobiet – Dorosłych Dzieci Alkoholików

Aneta Pasternak*, Katarzyna Schier

University of Warsaw, Faculty of Psychology, Department of Clinical Psychology of Child and Family, Warsaw, Poland

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The research aims to answer the following question: What are the dynamics of the separation-individuation process (according to Margaret Mahler's theory) in women who are Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACoA) in comparison to women who did not experience a parent's alcoholism in their childhood. The authors state that children of alcohol-dependent parents may experience relational traumas and this may inhibit the separation-individuation process. The study also seeks to answer whether there are relations between the severity of the difficulties in the area of separation-individuation and parentification (role reversal) in the past and in the present parentification of ACoA women.

Method. Research was conducted on 110 women (55 from an experimental group and 55 from a control group). The following tools were used to measure the variables: Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (CAST) by Jones and Pilat and the PATHSEP questionnaire by Lapsley for estimating the dynamics of the separation-individuation process. A questionnaire FRS-A (Filial Responsibility Scale for Adults) by Jurkovic and Thirkield to study levels of parentification was also used.

Results. The results of the study have shown that distortions in the separation-individuation process occur more often in women with the ACoA syndrome compared to women who did not grow up in alcoholic families. In the ACoA group the sense of injustice associated with parentification in the past was a mediator of the relation between difficulties in the separation-individuation process and current sense of injustice.

Discussion and conclusions. The analysis of the results of this study serves as a valuable guide for work with women who experienced a parent's alcoholism in their childhood. It seems relevant that educational and therapeutic work with these women should include the component of regaining their intrapsychic and interpersonal individuality.

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STRESZCZENIE

Słowa kluczowe:
kobiety z syndromem DDA
proces separacji-indywiduacji
parentyfikacja

Wprowadzenie. Celem pracy jest odpowiedź na pytanie: jak u kobiet – dorosłych dzieci alkoholików (DDA) przebiega proces separacji-indywiduacji (rozumiany zgodnie z teorią Margaret Mahler) w porównaniu z kobietami, które nie doświadczały w dzieciństwie alkoholizmu rodzica. Autorki przyjmują, że sytuacja panująca w rodzinach z problemem alkoholowym może narażać wychowujące się w niej dzieci na przeżycie traumy relacyjnej. Sprawia ona, że proces separacji-indywiduacji może ulec zahamowaniu. Innym zamierzeniem badania jest poszukiwanie odpowiedzi na pytanie: czy istnieją zależności pomiędzy nasileniem trudności w obszarze separacji-indywiduacji i parentyfikacją (odwróceniem ról) w przeszłości a parentyfikacją w teraźniejszości u kobiet DDA.

* Correspondence to: Katedra Psychologii Klinicznej Dziecka i Rodziny
Wydział Psychologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, ul. Stawki 5/7, 00-183 Warszawa,
Polska
e-mail: apasternak@psych.uw.edu.pl

Metoda. Badanie przeprowadzono w grupie 110 kobiet (55 z badanej grupy i 55 z kontrolnej). Do pomiaru zmiennych zastosowano następujące narzędzia badawcze: kwestionariusz przesiewowy do badania dzieci alkoholików CAST (*Children of Alcoholics Screening Test*), autorstwa Jonesa i Pilat, kwestionariusz PATHSEP Lapsleya, służący do oceny zaburzeń przebiegu procesu separacji-indywiduacji oraz kwestionariusz służący do badania poziomu parentyfikacji FRS-A (*Filial Responsibility Scale for Adults*), autorstwa Jurkovića i Thirkield.

Wyniki. Badania wykazały, że u kobiet z syndromem DDA w porównaniu z kobietami, które nie dorastały w rodzinie z problemem alkoholowym, częściej występują nieprawidłowości w zakresie przebiegu procesu separacji-indywiduacji. W grupie DDA poczucie niesprawiedliwości związane z parentyfikacją w przeszłości było mediatorem zależności pomiędzy trudnościami w zakresie separacji-indywiduacji a poczuciem niesprawiedliwości w teraźniejszości.

Omówienie i wnioski. Uzyskane wyniki stanowią wskazówkę do pracy z kobietami, które doświadczyły w dzieciństwie alkoholizmu rodzica. Wydaje się istotne, aby praca edukacyjna i psychoterapeutyczna z kobietami pochodzącymi z rodzin alkoholowych obejmowała aspekt odzyskiwania przez nie odrębności intrapsychicznej i interpersonalnej.

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Introduction

Analysis of the literature [1–5] regarding “psychological birth”, i.e. building autonomy (both intrapsychic and interpersonal) in relationships with close friends and loved ones, shows that this issue is primarily discussed by representatives of psychoanalytical theory and systems theory.

First attempts to create a scientific basis for understanding the mental separation process were made by psychoanalysts. They appealed mainly to intrapsychic phenomena [2, 6, 7]. One of the most popular ideas is the separation-individuation process theory, due to Hungarian doctor Margaret Mahler. Theses of this theory are the starting point for the studies presented in this paper, which describe the relation between a child and its alcohol dependent parent [8].

The separation-individuation process, which consists of consecutive stages of the development of the Self, is referred to as the “psychological birth of a child” [2, 8]. Chronologically ordered development stages reflect the way in which a child develops: from the stage of total immersion in symbiotic unity with its mother (who is the primary object of love), through gradual emancipation from her to the full sense of separation [9]. According to foundations of this theory the beginning of the separation-individuation process occurs when a child is 4–5 months old [2, 9]. This process is based on two complimentary and simultaneous processes: separation and individuation [10]. The process of separation consists of a progressive construction of boundaries between a child and another person of creating an intrapsychic image of the self [6]. This is possible due to the following phenomena: differentiation, distancing, disattachment and becoming independent [2, 9]. The ability of the child to maintain normal activity in its mother's absence is evidence of its capability of intrapsychic separation [6, 8]. This in turn makes the progress of the individuation process possible. In this process the child achieves inner autonomy, related to the development of perception, memory, ability to test reality, as well as other cognitive functions [2]. Individuation cannot be achieved without the separation process [2, 6, 8]. It is essential that the separation-individuation process (as with all intrapsychic processes) goes on throughout an individual's entire lifespan [2, 6].

Irregularities (inhibitions) in the process usually lead to various forms of pathology in the child's mental development [6, 9]. When the child-mother relationship is disturbed, no definite distinction is formed between the internal representations of the self and one's mother (care giver) [6, 7].

Selected aspects of Mahler's theory were applied to general systems theories, emphasising the role of interpersonal phenomena [7, 11–13].

Helm Stierlin and Murray Bowen believe that there are two types of forces in family systems: mutual attraction and repulsion, which come from a deeply hidden family rhythm [1, 4, 12, 14, 15]. They are manifested by pursuing closeness while simultaneously tending to maintain independence and autonomy [4]. According to Stierlin, there are two types of forces in families, which are described by him as centrifugal and centripetal. These reflect two patterns of separation that children experience while growing up [13, 14]. On the other hand, Bowen's systems theory points out the fact that no one reaches full emotional autonomy from their family of origin [4, 13, 15]. The most important is one's ability to maintain balance manifested at the intrapsychic level as an ability to differentiate emotional experiences from cognitive ones and at the interpersonal level – as one's ability to experience intimacy with others while simultaneously retaining autonomy [1, 4, 13]. The author suggests the term “degree of differentiation of Self” to describe this phenomenon.

A serious doubt arises when considering the process of shaping intrapsychic and interpersonal separation by people from families with an alcohol problem. Does living in a family in which one of the parents is alcohol dependent always leave a permanent trace in the mentality of children? And does this have an impact on their adult lives? Are these traces so strong that they do not allow the child to differentiate its Self, i.e. to separate from the parent's inner representation.

A growing interest of clinicians and researchers [16–20] in problems of members of alcoholic families (including children) resulting from the constellations systems of mutual relations they co-created with the alcohol dependent person goes back to the 1970's and 1980's. It is related to the development of the co-dependence theory. This theory states that alcohol dependence of one or more family members influences the entire family system. This idea led to the introduction of the Adult Children of Alcoholics syndrome (ACoA) [17, 19]. The concept is not ambiguously defined [21, 22]. Following Agnieszka Litwa, the authors adopted the following meaning of the syndrome [23: 254]: “people with ACoA syndrome are adults whose traumatic experience resulting from living in an alcoholic family was so strong that it exceeded the capability of their defence mechanisms; leaving permanent marks on their self-image and general functioning, with characteristics of complex post-traumatic stress, and superposed with various personality traits”. According to some researchers [6, 24, 25] ACoA can experience relational trauma in their family associated primarily with neglect of their own needs.

A systematic growth of empirical studies [16, 18, 21] researching people who had a drinking parent during childhood is observed, they indicate that ACoA cannot be considered a homogeneous

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