

Researching the Identity Development of Individuals within the Family System

Raziskovanje razvoja identitete posameznikov v družinskem sistemu

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Abstract

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In the article, the author summarizes the main findings of her research, aimed at examining the role parents and interactions within the family system play in the identity formation of female students. The research of the family is based on Beavers' family competence theory (Beavers, 1976; Beavers and Hampson, 1993). The two foundations for the research of identity development are the aspect of psychosocial development, presented by Erikson's (1968; 1989) theory and the theory of identity statuses (Marcia, 1993a). The instruments used are based on the theoretical foundations listed above. The research included 93 families (with both parents) of female adolescents – students of the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana. One of the main findings of the research is that family members perceive interaction within the family differently. This can be an important source of conflict in the family. How a family deals with conflict depends on the competence of

the family system, which also represents the foundation for the healthy psychosocial development of the adolescent. Both parents and their psychosocial development also play important, but different roles in their daughter's psychosocial and identity development.

Key words: *psychosocial development, identity development, family competence, the role of the father, working with families of adolescents.*

Povzetek

V prispevku avtorica povzema temeljne ugotovitve raziskave, katere namen je bil raziskovanje vloge staršev in interakcij v družinskem sistemu pri oblikovanju identitete študentk. Raziskovanje družine temelji na Beaversovi (1976; Beavers in Hampson, 1993) teoriji kompetentnosti družinskega sistema. Temelja raziskovanja identitete sta dva: vidik psihosocialnega razvoja, ki ga predstavlja Eriksonova (1968; 1989) teorija in teorija identitetnih položajev (Marcia, 1993a). Uporabljeni merski instrumenti temeljijo na predstavljenih teoretičnih izhodiščih. V raziskavo je bilo zajetih 93 dvostarševskih družin mladostnic in študentk Pedagoške fakultete v Ljubljani. Ena od temeljnih ugotovitev raziskave je, da družinski člani različno zaznavajo interakcije v družini. Različnost pogledov članov družine je lahko pomemben vir konfliktov v družini. Kako družina razrešuje te konflikte, je odvisno tudi od kompetentnosti družinskega sistema, ki je temelj za zdrav psihosocialni razvoj mladostnice. Oba starša igrata s svojim psihosocialnim razvojem prav tako pomembno, vendar različno vlogo v psihosocialnem razvoju in razvoju identitete svoje hčerke.

Ključne besede: *psihosocialni razvoj, razvoj identitete, kompetentnost družinskega sistema, vloga očeta, delo z družinami mladostnikov.*

Introduction

The aim of the research is to examine the role of the parents and the interactions within the family system in forming the identity of adolescents – female students (of social pedagogy).

The research sheds light on the “inner life” of (one segment of Slovenian) families – it examines the psychological processes taking place in the family unit, using the method of self-reflection of its members, as defined by Čačinovič Vogrinčič (1998).

The research deals with adolescence, a period of development that is of key importance to the shaping of an individual’s identity. This is connected to the findings of those authors, who view different types of interaction between the adolescent, the father and the mother, as vital for successfully concluding the development of identity (for example, Cooper and Grotevant, 1987; Bartle-Haring, 1997). Another valid premise is the claim that a competent family is one that provides the (male or female) adolescent with the optimal conditions for developing his or her identity (Lewis, 1989).

In researching *family*, I have drawn from Beavers’ (1976; Beavers and Hampson, 1993) theory. He defines family as an interactive unit. This systemic viewpoint for understanding family is based on the premise that all family members contribute to creating and maintaining a family, and that every member of the family affects all of the others, and that all the other members in turn affect him. The unit under observation in this case is the family as a system. The key dimensions, defining the level of a family’s functionality are, according to Beavers (cf. Poljšak Škraban, 2007), competence and the style of interaction in the family.

Competence is defined in connection to the capabilities of the family as an interactive unit, performing the necessary tasks of organizing and managing itself. The key elements of competence are: 1. *the structure of the family unit* – egalitarian leadership of the family, strong parental or other adult coalition and established generational boundaries; 2. *the development of the autonomy* of family members, evident in increasing trust, clear and distinct boundaries, clear and direct communication and the ability to deal with or accept differences, 3. *the ability to resolve conflicts, skills of clear and direct communication*, 4. *spontaneity, expressing a wide array of emotions, optimism*.

The style of interaction is a dimension Beavers based on Stierlin, and refers to centripetal (directed inwards) and centrifugal (directed outwards) tendencies concerning the effect on an adolescent's separation. In centripetal families, the parents bind the adolescents to themselves, and in centrifugal families they encourage the separation of the adolescent. The family system functions in a healthy way when it is flexible. This means that a competent family alters its style according to its responsibilities and developmental needs throughout the family's life cycles.

Identity is explored in this article from two aspects. The first is the point of view of *psychosocial development*, based on Erikson's (1968; 1980) theory, where personal development is defined as the transition between eight stages (trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity and integrity). Successfully solving the tasks of each stage means a higher level of personal integrity. Erikson's theory deals with development throughout an entire life span, and is therefore suitable for examining the degrees of psychosocial development in adolescents and their parents, as I was also interested in the role the parents' psychosocial development plays in the identity development of the female adolescents.

The research employs another method of examining identity: the theory of identity status, for which Marcia (1993a) has developed a theoretical model, enabling the empirical verification of identity structure indicators in adolescents. He writes about four identity statuses that can be classified according to the level of development. The criteria for ascertaining one's identity status are *the presence of crisis or exploration* (referring to searching for and experimenting with identity issues) and *commitment* to certain values, viewpoints, standards and social roles – in other words, the level of personal self-investment. In accordance with the above criteria, the following identity statuses are formed: the status of *identity achievement*, which includes those individuals who have surpassed the crisis phase and have successfully committed to certain values, behavioural norms and social roles. The other type of individual has reached a choice and committed; however, instead of taking into account various options for his own future, he has accepted the designs of others (usually the parents or other leadership figures). This is the position of *identity foreclosure*. There are two types of individuals, who have not yet committed. In the case of an individual who is still actively searching

for identity, we are dealing with *identity moratorium*. The adolescent is still actively seeking out alternatives. The final position is that of *identity diffusion*, where the adolescent has not yet experienced a crisis or attempted self-definition. An adolescent finding himself in this position, does not know how to define the contents of his identity.

Description of the research and its basic findings

The research named “The role of parents and interactions within the family system at forming the identity of female students of social pedagogy”¹ included 93 female adolescents from families with both parents – students in the second, third and fourth year of study at the Faculty of Education, the Department of Social Pedagogy. Because some authors have found that there are significant gender-specific differences in the shaping of identity (Marcia, 1993b; Josselson, 1987), the research focuses on a narrower field, researching the identity of adolescent females. The sample is comparable to the demographic structure of the population in terms of the students’ residence, and to the population of students’ parents in terms of the educational structure of the parents. For more thorough information concerning the sample selection and method, cf. Poljšak Škraban (2002b and 2003).

The instruments used in the research are based on the theoretical foundations presented in the introduction. With the help of a modified Family of origin questionnaire (Lewis, 1989), I have examined the quality of family interactions and the way that all three family members experience them. The results of the factor analysis and the internal reliability coefficients all illustrate the satisfactory psychometric characteristics of the instrument.

For measuring the degree of psychosocial development of the adolescents, I have used the Psychosocial development questionnaire by Wessman and Ricks (1966, in Lamovec, 1994); a questionnaire suitable for adults was used for the parents (Ochse and Plug, 1986, *Ibid.*). Both questionnaires are based on Erikson’s theory. For measuring the identity status of the adolescents, the EOMEIS-2 questionnaire was used (Adams, Bennion and Huh, 1989). All three instruments satisfactory fulfil the required psychometric characteristics.

¹ The project was conducted in 2002 and financed by the Faculty of Education.

The basic principle of this research is that interaction within the family system is explored through the perceptions, the experiences of all three family members, both parents and the daughter – the adolescent. This fact also determines the technique used to analyse data on an individual (for each family member), dual (comparative analysis of pairs) and a systemic level (the family as a unit).

Experiencing the qualities of parenting and the family as a system

I used a modified version of the Family of origin questionnaire (Lewis, 1989) to examine two issues: family interaction, relating to important qualities of parenting, and family interaction, relating to the family as a system.

In the first part of the questionnaire, where the family members answered questions about important *qualities of parenting*, I analysed six variables referring to childhood, and six variables (of the same content) referring to the adolescence of the daughter. I asked about: 1. The anxiety the parents may feel about the daughters, 2. The sensitivity to the daughters' feelings and needs, 3. The ability of the parents to respond and satisfy the daughters' feelings and needs, 4. Closeness to parents, 5. The parents' intrusiveness into the daughters' lives and independence, 6. The satisfaction the parents derive from their parental roles. Significant differences in perception were apparent in the period of childhood in three, and in the period of adolescence in five out of six variables. For the period of adolescence, compared to the period of childhood, there were also more significant differences between the adolescent and both parents. Therefore, the differences in experiencing the qualities of parenting between a daughter and her parents increase in adolescence. As far as significant differences are concerned, the daughters are consistently more critical in their perceptions of family interactions than either parent. Only with the variable concerning the satisfaction the parents derive from parenting, are the results inverted. Fathers rate the satisfaction derived from their roles lower than their satisfaction is rated by the daughters. No significant differences were found when it came to mothers and daughters. It is also obvious that mothers and daughters do not recognize the father's dissatisfaction with his parental role.

While examining whether or not individual family members saw their interactions with each other differently during the period of the daughter's childhood and adolescence, there were significant differences in five (out of six) variables, except for the variable concerning the parents' anxiety. All family members experienced a drop in the quality of interaction during adolescence.

The second part of the questionnaire concerns *experiencing the family as a system*; I inquired about: 1. The structure of the family (decision-making within the family and the parental coalition); 2. Communication (negotiation, manner of communication, dealing with conflicts and connecting to surroundings) and 3. Dealing with emotions (ascertaining the level of permeability, expressiveness, the mood and the tone and the empathy).

Significant differences concerning the family structure were apparent between the daughter and the father when it came to decision-making processes within the family.

The perception of communication within the family in general terms (taking into account all the variables for communication) differs with all three family members.

Significant differences appear between the way the daughter and the mother experience dealing with emotions within the family (taking into account all the variables concerning emotions).

As with experiencing the quality of parenting, the individual's perception of the family system is consistently assessed better (higher) by the parents than by the daughters. In the majority, the assessments given by fathers were the highest. Only in two individual variables did the mothers give the highest assessment of interaction.

The more complex (using factor analysis) the analysis of the results concerning the family as a unit, the more reliable it is, and the more apparent the differences between the family members become. Daughters perceive interaction differently than their parents. This is one of the main findings of the research; out of all the family members, the evaluations of the daughters were the most critical. Similar findings have been recorded by others (for example, Adams, 1985; Dekovic, Noom and Meeus, 1997; Paulson and Sputa, 1996). Dekovic, Noom and Meeus (1997) claim that these differences in perception are larger in families where there are more conflicts between the adolescents and the parents, usually concerning different

expectations both have for the autonomy of the adolescents. There are probably no differences between the parents because of the necessary generational differences in a family structure (cf. Poljšak Škraban, 2002b). Because the parents are fulfilling specific parental roles, it is understandable that their perception is similar, while on the other hand different from that of their daughter.

Noller and Callan (1991) think that the evaluation given by adolescents is more 'objective' than that given by parents, and usually correspond to the assessment of the experts. The results of the research illuminate the fact that the daughter's perception within the family system carries much weight (in the results of the factor analysis, the high percentage of the shared variance is explained precisely by the daughters' evaluation), which confirms the premise of the systemic theory that all family members shape the family and that in the period of adolescence, the adolescent has a prominent role in shaping that system.

The above results confirm the thesis of many authors who claim that the period of adolescence is the hardest test for the quality of the relationship between the parents and within the family as a whole. The finding that individual family members perceive interaction within the family differently, begs the question if there is such a thing as an objective fact when it comes to families. It is my claim that an individual's perception, the way one experiences things, is vital, because it significantly defines an individual and what is, to him, an objective view. The differences in experiencing interpersonal interaction within the family often lead to conflict. The conflicts caused by the adolescent compel the family (particularly the parents) to change, which cannot be achieved without adequate communication. The family should be able to repeatedly establish mutual and open communication, thus making it possible to strike a balance between the autonomy and the interconnectedness of family members. In principle, only a competent family is able to do this, which is why it is important for a counsellor – together with the family members – to recognize and treat these differences as real, and in accordance with Walsh's findings (1993), stress the importance of respecting individual differences, autonomy, an individual's needs, and to encourage the fostering of the family members' well being, regardless what generation they belong to.

The role of the father in the family

These are some of the results of the research, raising questions about the father's role in the families that were part of the sample:

- Fathers and daughters have a significantly different perception of decision-making in the family.
- Fathers rate themselves (and the daughters rate them) lower on the variable of recognizing and satisfying the emotional needs of their daughters, compared to the way mothers and daughters rate each other.
- Fathers and daughters do not feel as close to each other as mothers and daughters do.
- Fathers are not satisfied with their parental role, a fact that goes undetected by the other two family members.

Predominantly:

- fathers are less anxious about their daughters in childhood, and more concerned in adolescence, and
- intrude on the adolescent less than the mother.

It has been noted that there are significant differences between the way the father and the daughter perceive decision-making in the family. It is interesting that the adolescents taking part in the research view mothers as the predominant decision makers in almost a third of the families, fathers in nearly a quarter, and both parents together in less than half of the families.

Mothers view decision-making somewhat differently. They similarly feel that they make decisions in about a third of the families; however, only 15 percent see the father as the one to make decisions, while both partners make decisions in more than half of the families. 20 percent of the fathers see themselves as the decision makers, while the partners are only seen as such in 14 percent of the answers. Two thirds of the fathers are of the opinion that they make decisions together with their partner.

In another research (Poljšak Škraban, 1996), which included only 30 families, and also employed different methodology, the percentage of families, where decisions were made by the mother was significantly lower (10 %). The new research obviously shows

that the percentage of women making decisions within the family is rising. It would appear that mothers are more involved in decision-making for various reasons, one of the main ones being that they are employed and therefore economically independent. Women generally also perform the greater amount of family duties in the afternoons, which certainly contributes to having greater influence in the family. Another aspect, found also by certain Slovenian authors (for example, Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 1993; Tomori, 1989), is that the father in Slovenian families is often less involved in a child's upbringing and often psychologically absent. Probably one of the reasons the father withdraws, according to certain authors (for example, McGlodrick, Heiman and Carter, 1993) is that he often feels uncomfortable during the period of the daughter's adolescence because of her developing sexuality. This might also be the reason he experiences the family situation differently than the daughters and prefers to withdraw.

I am of the opinion that the mother's role in the decision-making and her greater level of involvement in the upbringing can be linked to corresponding results where the other family members view the mothers as the ones who inhibit the daughters' independence more than the fathers (both in childhood and in adolescence). If the mother is more involved in the upbringing, then she is more often the one to set boundaries and make demands. According to Beavers (1976), the dominance of the parent is necessarily linked with the subordination of the adolescent; there is less room for negotiation, and consequently, the adolescent daughter naturally experiences more of a threat to her independence. It is also probably true, as some authors have found (for example, Cooper and Grotevant, 1987), that parents find it easier to accept and adapt more quickly to the growing up of boys rather than girls.

In the research sample, both parents were employed in almost 90 % of the families. Some (for example, Piotrkowski and Hugher, 1993) claim that families, in which both parents work, live under a lot of strain. The authors snidely remark that the family team where both parents are employed is short of players. If the father is also psychologically distant, the situation is even more difficult.

To understand the role and the identity of the father, I think it is important to be aware of the fact that in creating, accepting and committing to a fathering role, the man's conscious decision to take

care of and be responsible for others is of central importance. To construct a model of fatherhood they can be satisfied with, fathers need the time, support and trust of their immediate social circle (particularly their partner). The support of the wider environment is also necessary as it encourages fathers to have a larger role in the family on the one hand; however, with more and more pressure for efficiency in the work place, it does not really provide this support in actuality (Poljšak Škraban, 2001). When working with a family, this must be taken into account and fathers must be encouraged to participate.

The competence of the family system and the identity development of family members

Beavers' competence model, representing the starting point for examining the family in this research, defines competence in terms of the structure of the family unit and the interactions within it; it has proven to be a useful model for examining the family's role in the development of the female adolescent. Cluster analysis has turned out to be the most useful method for examining the family as a unit. The families have, in terms of perceiving the family as a system, separated themselves clearly on the competence continuum into two equally sized groups: into less and more competent families.

The premise that a competent family enables the development of not only the children, but of the parents (Lewis, 1989) has been confirmed by the significant – although not very high (around 0.30) – correlations between the family's competence and the level of the adolescent's, as well as the parents' psychosocial development. We can therefore conclude that a favourable family atmosphere presents a good basis for an active search for and formation of the identity of all family members.

The results have also pointed to a significant correlation between the degrees of the daughter's and the mother's psychosocial development, but not of the daughter's and father's. This result is related to the theory presented in Gillingan (1982) and Josselson (1987), stating that female adolescents build their identities through interpersonal relationships (especially with the mother). The mother provides closeness, sensibility, support and friendship.

In predicting the daughter's psychosocial development, we can see that the level of the mother's psychosocial development is the most important factor for the development of the adolescent's autonomy; for predicting the other stages, the competence of the family system is generally the most relevant factor.

The results concerning the correlation between the way the family's competence is perceived and the achieved identity statuses are less discernable. The significant connection between identity foreclosure and family competence was to be expected. The correlation between the competence of the family system and identity achievement (mature identity) is low and only approaching statistical significance; the research did not yield any significant correlations when it came to the remaining two identity statuses.

The level of the father's psychosocial development has a significant role in shaping the identity achievement status of the daughter. Bartle-Haring (1997) has discovered that particularly the father's encouragement of the female adolescent's autonomy is important. It is also vital that the father forms his expectations realistically and expresses them clearly (Elium and Elium, 2001). This might be easier to accomplish if the father is somewhat distant.

In view of the negative significant correlation between the level of the parents' psychosocial development and the daughter's moratorium, and a similar negative connection between the level of the mother's psychosocial development and the daughter's identity diffusion, I have concluded that the parents each play a different role in the daughter's development. The role of the mother (or her level of psychosocial development) is more fundamental, while the father (or his level of psychosocial development) is the one who will encourage his daughter to be active on her path towards actively shaping a mature identity (identity achievement).

In predicting identity statuses, we can see that for predicting identity achievement, the only relevant predictive element is the father's level of psychosocial development, and, as mentioned, the competence of the family system is relevant for predicting identity foreclosure.

The highest level of correlation with identity foreclosure is to be expected, because it by definition presupposes that the adolescents

accept the patterns and the decisions of the parents, rather than define themselves on the basis of their own quest for identity. It appears that an adolescent female does well in a competent family. Communication within the family affords her enough space to establish her autonomy. And if the parental models are acceptable and favourable, there is no reason why the adolescent, after some consideration, should not accept them.

We can conclude from the above results that the competence of the family system represents the foundation for the healthy psychosocial development of the adolescent female. Both parents with their individual levels of psychosocial development also play important, yet fundamentally different roles in the psychosocial and identity development of their daughter.

Conclusion

The results of the research naturally cannot be generalized and cannot be applied to the entire population. After all, modern society is so diverse, that it is important to conduct research within a carefully selected context (Petzold, 1996), which in turn sheds light on merely a small part of a very complex field. There are, of course, some findings that are very useful for working with the families of adolescents.

In my research, I have focused only on nuclear (two parent) families. However, I feel that the results of the research can to some extent be applied to different family structures, namely those with only one parent. The adolescent should, in any type of family structure, experience the feelings, mentioned by Kempler (1975, cf. Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 1995): that a happy family is one where the home is formed according to the reality of those that dwell in it, and not according to what a home should look like and how a family should behave. The adolescent needs the home to change, but the home is shared with others and therefore all family members take part in altering it.

This is exactly what happens in a competent family; G. Čačinovič Vogrinčič (1995, p. 125) describes it like this: “...*boundaries constantly need to be re-established; sometimes they need to be*

demanded, other times negotiated. ... We both learn. The adolescent learns to act according to his new competence levels, and we as parents learn what it is they need from us, what they wish to alter. As parents, we learn to change the rules as well as the roles; we learn to accept the new degrees of the adolescent's autonomy and competence. And in doing so, we require each other's help."

The role of the counsellor, the way the author sees it (Ibid.) is also in collaborating when it comes to discerning, explaining and naming every single element of very concrete situations in terms of these major themes – just authority, new competence of the young person, negotiation over changing rules, accepting the adolescent's assistance, negotiating new but clear boundaries.

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