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Contemporary Family as a Factor of Deviant Behaviour

Współczesna rodzina jako czynnik zachowania dewiacyjnego

Streszczenie

Rodzina uznawana jest za znaczący czynnik zachowań dewiacyjnych w wieloczynnikowej teorii poszukiwania ich przyczyn. Środowisko rodzinne kształtuje najważniejsze cechy osobowości, w tym dewiacje. Uległo ono radykalnym zmianom w ciągu ostatnich dwudziestu lat, co pozostawiło swoje piętno na wzroście występowania zaburzeń społecznych. Niniejszy artykuł wyjaśnia najważniejsze konteksty tego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: Zaburzenia społeczne, rodziny, zmiany społeczne, socjalizacja.

Abstract

Family is considered to be a significant factor of deviant behaviour within the multifactor theories searching for its causes. Family environment forms the core features of personality, including the deviations. It has undergone radical changes in the course of the past twenty years, which left its marks on the increase of the incidence of social deviation. This paper explains the most important context of this development.

Keywords: Social deviation, family, social changes, socialization.

It is the multifactor approach to social deviation aetiology which is clearly prevalent nowadays. Even if we avoid an underestimation of endogenous factors, the factors affecting the shaping of personality and its socialization remain the most important ones. Without doubt, the family, affected by all social changes of the past twenty years, is the decisive factor of this kind. It may be stated that in the context of the transformation of the whole society, the family has undergone much greater changes than in the previous decades. It has been affected by the processes of social anomy, social corrosion, significant social differentiation, etc.

Basically, the tendencies of the development of our families are very similar to the changes of family behaviour in Europe. Nevertheless, in contrast to western countries, the changes here take place in a highly unstable environment, having revolutionary character in some respects. A number of facts connected with the results of social transformation raise doubts whether the changes in family behaviour are natural, especially in the case of the young generation¹. Although the family remains monogamous, the monogamy is of a „serial” kind, i.e. an individual changes partners several times in his/her life. I speak about partners, not spouses, which is a word connected with another radical change. The model of „single” life becomes more and more frequent. U. Beck sees the crucial defining aspect of contemporary families in the collision of love, family and personal freedom. He calls the present society „risk society”, claiming that the current model of market modernity expects a society without families and children. The individual needs to be free, independent in order to satisfy all the requirements. The modern society is a society of individuals, not families, which makes the statement that family is the basic unit of society lose validity². An increasing number of young people regard family as something restricting personal freedom. The traditional family bonds lose importance as well. There are fewer and fewer titles, fields, meadows and family businesses which pass from generation to generation³. Let us have a closer look at some of the features which make contemporary families potential factors of deviant behaviour.

Demographic situation

The fall of the number of legitimately founded families and the current trend of living together without being married are inevitably connected with the rise of the number of children born outside marriage (the current percentage is more

¹ M. Tuček, V. Kuchařová, *Proměny rodiny v období transformace*, [in:] *Rodina – zdroj lidského kapitálu Evropy v 21. Století*. Sborník z česko-německo-rakouské konference, Praha 2000, Národní centrum pro rodinu, Brno 2001.

² U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 1986.

³ O. Matoušek, A. Kroftová, *Mládež a delikvence*, Portál, Praha 1998, p. 39.

than 40%). This fact already is a serious problem from the perspective of the child's personality development since it tends to disturb the whole process of education. The absence of the father resulting from divorce or the fact that he never began to live with the mother is an important risk factor, especially for boys, who (due to the feminization of our education system) entirely lack male models. Moreover, the lack of the models also affects the development of girls, making it difficult for them to create a model of their future partner.

Divorce is generally regarded as a „safeguard” in case of potential failure by the young generation. Similarly, the belief that children do not need to grow up in complete families is becoming more and more common, while international comparative surveys suggest that children growing up in single parent families have worse grades at school, more mental problems and also commit offences more often. Current research clearly shows that the presence of the father in the family is a factor preventing the delinquency of the son⁴.

Economic and housing issues and unemployment are the causes of another phenomenon related to contemporary families – the decrease of the average number of children per family. Up to the 1980s statistics pointed out the connection between youth crime rate and the number of children, the majority of youth offenders being children from numerous families. Nowadays, a child is often regarded as a kind of luxury (not only for economic reasons) or (more often) as an obstacle to professional growth and self-realization of both parents. There is a prominent increase of the number of pairs who plan to have just one child. However, the development and education of an only child brings as great a risk of deviant behaviour as education in numerous families does.

Democratization of family life

The chief cause of the democratization of families in the past decades is the long emancipatory effort of women and their struggle for equality in all areas of life. It is connected with women's rising level of education and qualification but partly also with the transformation of the scale of values. A parallel trend is a shift in roles, mainly the decrease of the father's authority. Some authors even speak of a crisis of fathers. This situation is another potential problem leading to deviant behaviour, mainly in the case of the personality development and education of boys.

The democratization tendencies are present not only in the relationship between the parents but also in their relationship with children. It has not been very long since children commonly used the polite form of address when talking to their parents. The general current trend is to have more equal relationships and

⁴ Ibidem, p. 40.

much more tolerant approach to children. Again, the question arises whether this change is purely beneficial for the development of the child's personality and whether the „friendship” is not abused by the children, the result being that the child ceases to perceive the role of authority, which contributes to the elimination of the restrictions of behaviour.

Long-term research has brought convincing evidence to the fact that parents of delinquent adolescents exercise lesser effort to prevent asocial behaviour of their children⁵.

Social and economic situation of families

The influence of the described problems of our time and, most importantly, the ongoing differentiation of society result in a change of the economic situation of families. The overall trend in the 1990s was a decrease of real income and the situation of the majority of families in the lower income bands. The structure of needs changes, food, housing and medical care becoming more important to the detriment of clothes, culture and recreation. Recently, these relations began to slightly shift back again, however, the differentiation lasts, threatening a part of the families with social exclusion. One half of the families in our research admit being in debt and almost 60% state that a crucial factor in the choice of food to buy is its cost⁶. From the perspective of deviant behaviour, both extremes in the population structure represent a threat.

Risk families are doubtlessly those living in poverty or on the margin of poverty. The need to keep up with other families exerts a pressure on children and parents, which often leads to criminal acts. Up to the 1950s, the vast majority of delinquent youths came from the poorest families with the lowest level of education, testifying to the fact that the fertile ground of criminal acts is mainly in the lowest classes with the lowest level of education and high unemployment rate, however, there has been a marked increase of the incidence of these acts even in families in a very good economic situation. This movement of criminality to higher classes may be interpreted as a consequence of the decreasing influence of families on the behaviour of adolescents in all social strata⁷. This is often connected with the so-called „conversion of childhood into money”, i.e. with excessively high allowances for children, which may lead to more manifestations of deviant behaviour such as alcohol/drug abuse or pathological gambling.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 44.

⁶ B. Kraus, I. Jedličková, *National report from the Czech Republic, University of Hradec Králové*, [in:] Z. Benkő (eds.), *Tradition and modernity in the life-style of the families of the Visegrad countries*, SZEK J. Gyula Higher Education Publisher, Szeged 2007.

⁷ O. Matoušek, A. Kroftová, *Mládež a delikvence...*, op. cit., p. 41.

The social and economic situation of families is also often connected with bullying. The victims of bullying are often children who cannot participate at certain events and are different because of worse clothes and equipment. In some cases, however, the situation may be the opposite, the children from poor families becoming the aggressors because of their effort to compensate for their disadvantage.

Disintegration of family life

One of the significant impacts of social changes on family life is its disintegration. The span of time spent together in order to talk about new experiences, joys and worries and search for the possibilities of mutual help and cooperation diminished in almost all families – this trend has been present for some time. Simultaneously, members of an increasing number of families merely meet or write to each other and in some cases, they even cease to communicate at all. The families very often do not meet even at meals. Mere 43% claim to have common dinners on a daily basis and 15% have them on weekends, when almost a half of the families (45%) meet at lunch as well⁸. The family becomes a kind of walk-through space, its members living rather next to each other than together.

Simultaneously, our research proves that family bonds are strengthened mainly by such factors as mutual communication and common spending of free time. Eroticism and sexuality come afterwards. The most frequent answer (88%) to the question „What holds the family together most?” was „I can rely on someone, I have emotional background”⁹.

Sadly, the disintegration of family life affects mainly the children, who feel the absence of firm family background most. It is not surprising that they seek the lacking background in various „gangs”. However, those are often fertile ground for delinquent behaviour.

Studies focusing on delinquent youth describe their family environment as cold with minimal interest in the child on the part of the parents. The children described their parents as passive, or even rejecting, with no interest in the child’s needs¹⁰.

Isolation of families

Contemporary families appear to be more closed to the others, becoming in a way isolated and living more „inwards”. As a result, families become smaller

⁸ B. Kraus, I. Jedličková, *National report from the Czech Republic...*, op. cit.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 298.

¹⁰ O. Matoušek, A. Kroftová, *Mládež a delikvence...*, op. cit., p. 43.

as to the number of their members but even more as to the number and intensity of mutual relationships. Such families are less stable and more vulnerable by any internal shocks. The consequences of the lacking external anchorage in society are that any conflicts or problems make the family, figuratively speaking, lose balance and the situation may very quickly develop in a state of threat to the overall stability, potentially resulting in utter collapse¹¹.

Moreover, many parents live their personal life (usually connected with hobbies or intimate matters) divided from the common family life, which leaves the children no choice but to live their own separate life as well. This leads to the atomization of family life, potentially increasing the risk of deviant behaviour as the children have to find their way of life on their own. The less the parents watch their child, the greater the probability that s/he will commit a crime at an early age, do it repeatedly and eventually commit a really serious crime¹².

Lifestyle of contemporary families

All of the above described changes and shifts influence the lifestyle of families, affected mainly by consumerism. Almost 20% of families in our research give „visits of shopping malls” as their dominant free time activity¹³. This lifestyle is one of the causes of the previously mentioned „conversion of childhood into money”. Parents compensate for the lack of time for their children by buying them anything that they want. Unfortunately, this approach damages the development of the child’s personality, potentially leading to deviant behaviour.

The phenomena of disintegration, atomization and general inner instability are reflected in the general life of the family, which becomes affected by various social deviations in the family itself. The global increase of social deviations is certainly connected with the rise of the number of families influenced by the phenomena (unemployment, alcoholism, violence etc.), i.e. families with dissocial lifestyle. A considerable number of children or youths having problems with deviant behaviour come from families directly affected by social deviations (see the increase of domestic violence). „A parent who has problems with deviant behaviour, drinks alcohol excessively, abuses drugs is often unemployed or otherwise manifests „lack of social adaptation” increases the probability that his/her child will break the law in his/her pubescence and adolescence”¹⁴.

¹¹ Kraus B., *Rizika současné doby a jejich dopad na rodinu*, [in:] J. Levická, B. Balogová (eds.), *Sociália 2005*. Sborník z konference, Trnavská univerzita, Trnava 2008, p. 112.

¹² O. Matoušek, A. Kroftová, *Mládež a delikvence...*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹³ B. Kraus, I. Jedličková, *National report from the Czech Republic...*, op. cit., p. 294.

¹⁴ O. Matoušek, A. Kroftová, *Mládež a delikvence...*, op. cit., p. 45.

Shifts in functions

The disintegration of industrial society changes the nature of pressure on the family to such an extent that it stops to fulfil its basic functions. The above mentioned quick tempo of life, increasing demands and mainly the social, political and economic situation require the family to face tasks which it was not used to previously and it is not ready for them. The rise of the number of dysfunctional families in European countries is inevitable and there are very limited possibilities for the society to make the parents, who favour their own interests rather than children, fulfil their parental duties¹⁵. Above all, the society requires greater general responsibility for family members. This applies mainly in the case of care for an ill, old or disabled family member. The institutions dealing with issues of this kind count on a much greater involvement of the family in comparison with the past. The families (especially single parent families) have difficulties to meet the requirements, which often have an impact on the life of the children.

Similarly, the demands in the area of education and relaxation increased, including financial matters (paying for free time activities). Therefore, the possibilities to fulfil these functions are strongly determined by the above discussed social differentiation.

Another issue connected with the educational function is the growing feeling of responsibility for the success of children. As for parenting styles, we may say again that any extremes increase the risk of the occurrence of deviant behaviour. It has been proved that excessively strict rules and aggression towards children on the part of the parents often provoke similar behaviour on the part of the children. A child in such a family learns to consider aggression acceptable¹⁶.

The opposite of the strict authoritarian parenting style is the liberal, all permitting approach. It is obvious and also proved by research that a considerable part of children and youths with deviant behaviour come from families who applied the liberal style. These children are not used to respecting rules, orders and interdictions.

There are more problems connected with the character of education in the family. A common cause of failure or deviant behaviour can be found in inconsistent education (a transgression is sometimes punished strictly and sometimes fully tolerated) or in divided attitudes of the parents (the mother has different requirements and procedures than the father).

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 40.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 44.

Considering the fact that an increasing number of children spent the decisive early stage of their lives in family environment affected by the problems discussed above, it is difficult to find an optimistic conclusion.

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