REVIEW OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Ivana Maurović

"The Resilience of Adolescents in Children's homes"

Ivana Maurović, research assistant at Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences in Zagreb, defended her doctoral thesis entitled *The Resilience of Adolescents in Children's homes* on 10th of April, 2015. The doctoral thesis was created as a part of PhD Program in Social Work and Social Policy Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, Zagreb. Thesis were written under the supervision of prof.dr.sc. Antonija Žižak. Other members of Defense Committiee were prof.dr.sc. Marina Ajduković (president) and prof.dr.sc. Branka Sladović Franz (member).

Doctoral dissertation, *The Resilience of Adolescents in Children's Homes*, consists of nine chapters. The first four chapters represent an introductory part of the doctoral dissertation. Drawing on the ascertainment that the researchers are predominantly oriented toward the „deviance" in marginalised groups, the author briefly explains at the beginning of the first chapter her focus on the research of „normality" in these groups by focusing on the complex phenomenon of resilience. Generally speaking, the first chapter focuses on describing the context in which the phenomenon of resilience is explored. It is composed of three smaller parts. The first part is a glossary of terms, providing an overview of the meaning of key terms used in the research. The second part of the first chapter briefly portrays the features of the developmental period to which participants of the study belong to (adolescence) as well as the type of care and accommodation where participants live (children's homes).

In the second chapter, titled Resilience, this phenomenon is being viewed as a complex construct that has not been unambiguously defined in recent literature. Based on the well-reasoned orientation, the definition has been accepted which defines resilience as a process of effectively negotiating, adapting to or managing significant sources of stress or trauma (risk). Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment (protective mechanisms) facilitate this capacity for adaptation and „bouncing back" (good outcome) in the face of adversity (Windle, 2011). In this study, each of these elements (risk, protective mechanisms and good outcome) is described on the basis of insights from recent literature and its meaning is operationalized. At the end of the chapter, two approaches to scientifically based measurement of resilience (variable-based approach and person-based approach) are presented and their significance for research is discussed. The

following chapter (Theoretical Foundations of Research), describes and analyses theories (Ecological system theory (Bronnferbrenner, 1979, according to Renkert, 2005 and Self – determination theory of Ryan and Deci, 2001) whose numerous constructs are mutually complementary and therefore important for the comprehensive understanding of the research foundations. The introductory part of the dissertation concludes with an overview of empirical results on predictors (risk and protective mechanisms) of different developmental outcomes (internalising and externalising behaviour problems, academic competence and happiness).

In the chapter titled Purpose, Goal and Research Problems, the author states that the aim of the research which the thesis are based on is defined according to its scientific (extending knowledge on resilience) and professional purpose (improving quality of care for children in children's homes). Accordingly, the goal of the research is to determine predictive roles of demographic factors, risk, and protective mechanisms in explaining different developmental outcomes, and to define differences in gender, age, and protective mechanism among participants with a high risk and good developmental outcome as well as those with high risk and poor developmental outcome. With regard to this goal, two research problems have been set out: 1) to examine the contribution of demographic factors (age and gender), risk (major life events/everyday stress) and protective mechanisms (internal and external) in explaining developmental outcomes (externalising and internalising behaviour problems, academic competence and happiness); 2) to compare the groups of participants based of high risk/good outcome and high risk/poor developmental outcome with respect to age, gender and protective mechanisms. In accordance to these problems, six hypotheses have been set up (four for the first and two for the second problem).

Research methodology is presented in the comprehensive chapter six. First part of this chapter presents the design of this quantitative research study, in which plan for using both variable – based and person–based approach was presented. In variable-based approach, additive model was planned to be used, and operationalisation of predictor (risk and protective mechanisms) and criterion variables (internalising and externalising behaviour problems, academic competence and happiness) was presented. Person-based approach was planned to be conducted trough dividing participants into two groups, based on their results regarding risk and developmental outcomes variables (high risk/good outcome and high risk/poor outcome), and comparing them regarding age, gender and protective mechanisms. An integral part of research methodology is pre-research, that has been extensively illustrated and accompanied by a dissertation. This chapter also describes the research participants. Namely, the sample comprised 228 young people aged from 14 to 18 years, (M=16.79

(SD=1.11), 54% females and 46% males, beneficiaries of 14 residential children's homes in Croatia. This is convenience sample.

Data on resilience of participants were collected via six instruments, three of which were designed for the purpose of this research, and three are revised versions of original questionnaires :1)Socio-demographic questionnaire and features of out-of-home placement; 2) The List of major life events/stressors; 3) The Everyday Stress among Adolescents in Residential Care, 4) Revised version of Resilience and Youth Development Module (WestEd & CDE, 2000; 2001); 5) Youth Self Report (Achenbach, 1991); 6) The Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). Data were gathered mostly via self-assessment (except socio-demographic and data on academic competence, that were assessed by caregivers).

The chapter on methodology closes with the description of the implementation of research, the ethical aspects of research, and modes of data processing. In order to achieve the research objectives, the following methods of data analysis were used: Descriptive statistics, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, Chi-square test, T-test/Mann-Whitney test, Hierarchical regression analysis and Discriminant analysis.

Research findings and discussion are presented in chapter seven as descriptive results, and results are sorted according to the research problems. Descriptive analysis indicates that on average, participants have a high level of risk and relatively good outcomes, both important criteria for resilience. As the process of resilience depends upon presence of internal and external protective mechanisms, information according to which these mechanisms are present in high values in this population confirms this assumption on resilient process. Namely, participants have on average experienced 4.68 (SD=2.45) major life events and 11.74 (SD=8.87) daily worries (indicating everyday stress). Also, participants were assessing their protective mechanisms, both internal and external, in high values. Gender differences regarding protective mechanisms were found in female participants assessing more protective mechanisms regarding relationship with friends, empathy, as well as goals and aspirations, and in male participants regarding relationships with family as well as participation in hobbies and interests. When taking into account developmental outcomes, with the necessary caution when making conclusions because of lack of recent norms, it can be sad that the majority of participants do not achieve clinical level of internalising or externalising behavioural problems. Also, they were assessing their levels of happiness as moderate to high, and their academic competence as good.

The first research problem refers to identifying significant predictors (age, gender, risk, protective mechanisms) of different developmental outcomes (internalising and externalising behaviour

problems, academic competence and happiness). In order to examine this problem and four hypotheses that are connected to it, four hierarchical analyses were conducted. In each analysis, predictors were introduced in the model trough four steps: demographic variables (age, gender), risk, external protective mechanisms and internal protective mechanisms. Criterion variables were internalising and externalising behaviour problems, academic competence and happiness.

In this manner, depending on analyzed criteria, predictors explained from 18.8% (externalising problems) to 36.8% (happiness) criteria. All hypotheses were partially accepted. Briefly, significant predictors of externalising behaviour problems proved to be number of major life events/stressors, number of daily worries and participation in hobbies and interests in school and community. Significant predictors of internalising problems were gender, number of major life events/stressors, number of daily worries, caring relationship, high expectation and participation in meaningful activities in the family, and connection to school. Results that were least expected were shown in relation to academic competence. Namely, only significant predictors were gender, program of education, and goals and aspirations. Among the significant predictors of happiness were: connection to school, participating in decision-making and important things in children's home and school, self-awareness and self-efficacy, and participation in hobbies and interests in school and community.

The second research problem refers to the comparison of groups of participants with results high risk/good outcome and high risk/poor outcome regarding age, gender and protective mechanisms. Result regarding major life events/stressor that is of the same value as median or above median was taken as a criterion of high risk. Namely, 30 participants had the result which was the same as the median (value 5) and higher then a mean for major life events (4.76), and in order to prevent loosing participants for further analysis, this solution was set. Results of median and above median in at least three of four developmental outcomes were taken as a criterion of good outcome. The first group (high risk/good outcome) consisted of 37 participants, and the second group (high risk/poor outcome) consisted of 80 participants. Therefore, it was possible to classify about the half of the participants (51.32%) in the research regarding to the mentioned criteria. In order to explore this research problem, two hypotheses were set up. Verification of this hypothesis was conducted with χ2test and Mann – Witheney test (for   hypothesis Nr.5) and discrimination analysis (hypothesis Nr.6). With regard to the results (no significant difference was found between two groups regarding age and gender), hypothesis Nr.5 was completely accepted. Last hypothesis (6.), assumed that participants in high risk/good outcome group will have more of all protective mechanisms. The biggest difference between those two group were expected regarding some of protective

mechanisms. Findings indicated that most of expected protective mechanism were different for these groups (self-awareness and self-efficacy, high expectation from friends, participation in hobbies and having interest in school and community, participation in decision making in children's home and school). Caring relationships with friends were not proved to be significantly different (as expected). On the other hand, several protective mechanisms that were not predicted proved to be significant. Those protective mechanisms are: connection to school, goals and aspirations, and problem solving.

Final discussion (chapter eight) is organised on two levels. In the first part of the chapter, results are interpreted through comparison to results of other relevant studies and associated with theoretical constructs that are in the base of research, but also with some other theoretical approaches (such as neurophysiologic stress response). The second part of the chapter provides research limitations and guidance for further research. In this sense, as a key limitation of research, way of comprehensive operationalization of all elements of resilience (risk, protective mechanisms and developmental outcomes) is highlighted. Limitations that come from quantitative methods and self-reports were considered regarding limited possibility of comprehensive understanding of resilience. This chapter ends with elaboration of the scientific and practical contribution to research. The scientific contribution is primarily associated to the construction/implementation of instruments and research findings. Numerous practical contributions have been highlighted. Through description and schematic illustration, possible interventions in empowering protective mechanisms and facilitating process of resilience within numerous systems were presented.

The dissertation ends with the chapter nine, which highlights how the overall results indicate, on average, the presence of the process of resilience of adolescence in children's homes. It was pointed out that the subject of resilience has an important role in the study of psychosocial functioning of adolescents (in children's homes), and that it is a very complex phenomenon.

Prepared by

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