The Phenomenon of Flow in Inner Game As an Important Protective Factor in Personality Resilience (2002-2020 Longitudinal International Qualitative Study)

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Abstract

The main objective of the study performed for a period of 19 years was to determine protective factors in participants from a troubled environment of primary families. The study was implemented at Czech, Slovak, Argentinian, Chilean and Spanish universities between 2002 and 2020 (Czech Republic – 21 participants, Slovakia – 11 participants, Argentina – 10 participants, Chile – 2 participants, Spain – 7 participants). The participants came from primary families at risk where the following reportedly occurred: low solidarity among family members, weak attachment between the parents and participants, low tendency to communicate together. There was prevailing authoritative father control and a lack of emotional support from the parents in stressful situations. The study is designed as qualitative. The participants were selected based on intentional selection. Four interviews per year were conducted with each participant. In total, there were 3,544 semi-structured interviews. Case studies were prepared on the basis of the interviews, providing closer details of important protective factors promoting a resilient personality. The data obtained were analysed using the ATLAS.ti 7 program. The phenomenon of flow showed to be the most important protective factor that the participants experienced repeatedly in the inner game, and in the management style applied by their supervisors, older colleagues or research partners.

Keywords

Personality Resilience, Primary Family, Risk Factors, Protective Factors, Flow, Inner Game

I. Introduction

The article is aimed at pointing out the possibility of developing personal resilience in participants that come from problematic primary families. A problematic primary family was considered a risk in the formation of a resilient personality. The participants described low solidarity between the primary family members and authoritative approach of the father to the children. Resilience is then understood as a process of good adaptation to such difficult conditions. We focused on university students who later, during the study (after completing their university studies), started working for various companies, institutions, universities (state and private). It was a longitudinal study implemented over a period of 19 years.

II. Risk and Resilience

Resilience means flexibility, resistance and hardiness. It is used in various fields of science. Personal resilience is the ability of an individual to cope with the consequences of stressful life situations and adversities. It is a process of good adaptation after experiencing a long-lasting difficult period, a period of risk that could happen suddenly, after many years of a happy life, but we can also speak of a good adaptation to a permanently existing negative situation

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(Lacková, 2019). Furthermore, it can be an adaptation to relationship problems, serious health problems, stressful work factors and financial issues. To be able to speak of resilience, two factors need to be present: exposure to unfavourable conditions (a kind of risk) and successful adaptation to such conditions (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Villalba Quesada, 2004; Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006). Sometimes, it is complicated to even define the risks (not only the term of *resilience*). The likelihood of maladaptation is expected during the effect of a risk (Šolcová, 2009; Schoon, 2006). Šolcová (2009, p. 13) also states that: "…risks are environmental stressors that increase the likelihood of maladaptation of a child, or negative consequences in the area of physical and mental health, school performance, social adaptation." Families that fail, where there is a lack of communication, mutual openness and respect, first have to determine the cause of the problem. When the cause is not determined and the family continues to live in its dysfunctional system, it is quite likely that the children will repeat this trend, unless they have an opportunity to experience another, constructive and positive lifestyle. Such a family is a risk to the child, the consequences of which the child might bear into their adulthood, as processed individually.

III. Flow as an Important Protective Factor

Finding protective factors that promote the formation of a resilient personality is currently a hot topic all over the world. Authors focus on describing the specific processes involved in the management of negative life circumstances. We focused on guiding the client through the process of inner game, which was a source of satisfaction for the participant in the given moment and during which he or she experienced flow.

At present, the experience of flow is considered to be one of the important factors that promote mental health. Even though it is frequently mentioned in positive psychology as a factor that can help establish and develop the state of comfort and subsequent satisfaction, it is not often mentioned in relation to personality resilience. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) characterises *flow* as a state of mind when the individual is immersed in the activity, while all the other feelings and thoughts remain away. In this experience, joy replaces boredom and interest suppresses the aversion to work. Emotions are fully activated, harmonised and coordinated with the task that the individual is solving. The characteristics of the experience of flow include a spontaneous joy while the individual is performing the activity, during which *flow* is experienced (Csikszentmihalyi 1993; 1997; 2017). Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) characterise *flow* using indicators. According to them, the most important ones are: the positive impact of flow on the individual, the high level of activation, the existence of inner motivation, and the feeling of freedom. Furthermore, they state a full concentration on the activity as an important factor. The situation that the individual has a complete control of should not be new, unknown and threatening. It should be an activity that the individual knows. Thus, the individual does not need to concentrate on how to manage the situation, but can fully experience it. The state of *flow* is linked to a strong feeling of mental balance. It is a pleasant state, regardless of the objectives achieved. A number of psychological and physiological changes occur during flow: a change in the state of mind, affectivity and perception. The individual's attention is completely absorbed in the activity. *Flow* is not likely to occur when the individual is trying too hard to reach the objective and is not enjoying the activity itself, or the activity is not bringing anything to him or her. It cannot be induced by the will. On the contrary, too much effort is a huge obstacle in achieving the state of *flow. Flow* occurs in situations when the individual has a high level of knowledge, skill, and a clear and successfully achievable objective. The individual has to experience extreme concentration on the activity that removes all other barriers (disturbing information, fear, a feeling of weakness, physical pain and discomfort).

Flow can occur in various activities that, however, should differ from everyday ones, as the process of "discovering something new" must be in place. The activity has to be mastered well enough that the individual no longer has to concentrate on whether or not the actions are performed properly, but instead can focus on the activity as a whole. Csikszentmihalyi (2017) emphasises that in order to experience *flow*, the activity should not be performed for the first time. *Flow* is the optimal balance between an insufficient challenge (boredom) and an unachievable challenge (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). Sometimes, the *experience of flow* can occur randomly, but it is much more likely to occur as an outcome of a structured activity. The experience of the *state of flow* is related to the feeling that the individual is in charge of the activity, when he or she makes the decisions on how the activity evolves further. The *phenomenon of flow* is best experienced in a moment when work becomes a play.

IV. Supporting the Experience of Flow with the Inner Game Method

Concentration is a typical and substantial element of an excellent performance in any area, regardless of the skills and age of the individual performing the activity. The best performance is delivered when one concentrates. A concentrated attention enables learning and understanding, it is a key factor in learning, understanding and effective actions. There is no space for doubts and worries in full concentration. The person only lives in the activity (Gallwey, 2010; 2012). The method of inner game helps better implement changes in everyday life. It helps develop skills required for any activity. Many people want to change their approach to learning, to tasks, to issues, and thus achieve better results. Gallwey (2012) was the first one to mention this method in 1970s when he worked as a sports instructor. A sport performance can be watched directly, its quality determined right away, and its objectives are so precisely defined that any differences in the performance are more visible than in other areas of human activity (Gallwey, 2012). Education does not only mean to learn, but to put what we have learned into practice. It should help us get to the essence of understanding changes in the system of learning, and their significance, but also any potential risks, unless the change arises from the individual.

Students take guidelines given by teachers very seriously and they use them to check their activity. However, this does not respect their natural prerequisites to solve problems without a supervisor. This is how one is aware that it is better to be led by a teacher and his or her suggestions, or critical comments. Gallwey (2010) let the clients decide for themselves during the inner game. They decided what they would learn, they accepted their own decisions and the teacher was responsible for the quality of the external environment, in which the process took place. The teacher should ask the client what they want to learn and why, and help them as much as possible in their efforts. However, students are "used to" the model of learning based on instructions and checks and it is not easy for them to work with a new model that both provides and requires a much broader scope of own choice. When they find out that the teacher does not assess their decisions as good or bad, they accept the role of the one who makes decisions and who is, at the same time, responsible for the outcomes of the decisions made (Gallwey, 2010). The work with the client is done in a system of individual steps: defining the purpose of the session, the client defines their own challenges that motivate them to work (it can be the activity itself), regular assessments of the activity (or the individual points in which the client is getting better), dialogue about the activity, creation of other plans (suggestions) for the improvement of performance, and active practicing of the activity. In addition to other methods, the STOP method is also used in the sessions with the client to stop the unconscious effect of stress and to start thinking about it. The first part – stopping, becoming aware of the stress, thinking about what causes the stress, what really triggers the stressful reaction. The second part – "what the obstacles that I struggle with are, and what my options are". In the third part, the client focuses on the preparation of a plan and then, in the fourth part, the client

continues in the activity that stressed them out, but with a clear understanding of the entire situation (the stress is not a stress but an explained action, "why this thing is happening to me"). Discipline is not enough to make an individual concentrate (Lacková, 2017; 2019). It seems that the most important thing is to get rid of the worries about achieving the required result. Interest and motivation are closely connected, as well as the ability to concentrate. Concentration creates pleasant feelings and the work that is subsequently performed is good. A creative state of mind is established, required for the experience of the *state of flow*, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1997; 2017).

V. Studying Flow during Inner Game

Research implementation method

We decided to use the method of intentional selection of participants for the study. In this method of selection, we looked for such participants that met our requirements. The students could only be included in the study when they met all the following postulates: they were university students in the last two years of a master study programme, they were willing to describe their lives in their primary families, and their primary families manifested problematic communication between the family members.

Suitable candidates were nominated according to the criteria. Interviews were made with the first participants. At the end of the interview, we asked them to nominate other people whom they knew and who met the criteria of participation in the study. That way, we gradually obtained a theoretically saturated sample formed by participants from several consecutive selections. The participants from the Czech Republic and Slovakia joined the study in 2002, when our South American colleagues announced their interest in studying resilience in 2004, the groups from Argentina and Chile joined in 2006 after the mutual cooperation had been established. Then, in 2007, a group from Spain joined the study. The shortest interview was an hour and a half long. The interviews took two hours on average. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The "Transcriber" program was also used (Lacková, 2019; 2015; 2014).

An integrated approach was used for processing the study results, especially for the analysis of the occurrence of flow in the participants. The same data collection methods can be used both in the quantitative and qualitative research (interview, observation, researching documents etc.), however, their application differs. While quantitative research reduces data by definition, qualitative research strives to record data in maximum abundance and process those using specific analytical procedures. Coding is at the centre of analytical procedures; it is an operation by which data are analysed, conceptualised and re-founded in new ways.

Research group

The longitudinal study only included 303 participants (180 men and 123 women) out of the total number of 2,031 participants (with whom we performed three introductory interviews about their primary families, a total of 6,093 interviews). The last research data collection (in April 2020) only included 51 participants (22 men and 29 women). The parents of all participants had university education. No parents were divorced or separated. The students were first addressed using a list. The list was placed on the notice board at the faculty entrance or next to the study department. Also, psychology lecturers had it available (when psychology was taught at the faculty). The youngest participant was 23 years old and the oldest was 31 years old.

Table 1 Number of Participants from the Individual Countries in 2020

Country	Men	Women	Number of participants	Study duration in years
Czech Republic	7	14	21	19
Slovakia	6	5	11	19
Argentina	5	5	10	15
Chile	1	1	2	15
Spain	3	4	7	14
Total	22	29	51	-

Source: own

Table 2 Faculties Attended by the Participants at the Beginning of the Study

Faculty	CZ	SK	Argentina	Chile	Spain	Total
Technology	4	1	2	1	-	8
Arts	6	6	2	-	7	21
Economy	9	2	4	1	-	16
Legal	2	2	2	-	-	6
Total	21	11	10	2	7	51

Source: own

Study participants' employment in 2020

Take note that the participants did not always work in their areas of study in 2020.

Czech group: 1 attorney's practice, 8 personnel department, 3 economics, 1 journalism, 8 translation

Slovak group: 2 attorney's practice, 4 journalism, 2 translation, 2 economics, 1 technical area

Argentinian group: 2 attorney's practice, 2 translation, 2 oenology, 3 economics, 1 technical area

Chilean group: 2 economic area

Spanish group: 4 tourism, 3 translation

All participants work at universities, at least part-time.

Method used to obtain research data – semi-structured interview

The method of semi-structured interview, built on a prepared list of topics, was selected for research data collection. Four (at least) meetings per year (every three months) were organised with each participant in order to do an in-depth interview. In total, 3,544 semi-structured interviews were implemented.

Method used in the analysis of the research material – explanatory case study

Explanatory case studies were selected in order to understand how each of the participants coped with the experience of a dysfunctional primary family and subsequently with its consequences in their lives. Case studies should expose the casual chain of the occurrence and mutual influence of the individual protective factors. The individual connections described by the participants might not seem to be important (at first glance), however, over the years of the study, even the smallest details of the participants' lives contributed to the result of their current effect. The data were analysed using the ATLAS.ti.7 program.

Research data processing method

The following are the stages of the analysis of the acquired data:

1. **Analysis of statements concerning the participants' experience.** The individual lines of the transcript are analysed.

2. **Recognition of topics surfacing in the material on experience.** Emphasising differences and similarities between individual data collections and between individual participants.

3. **Organisation of the material** into a form enabling to trace up a trajectory from the initial comments in the transcript to the final category structure.

4. **Writing the complete narration,** documented in detail by commented citations of raw data, or supplemented with visual aids in the form of diagrams, tables, for better orientation.

5. **Reflection on concepts** that the researcher used to enter the process of data acquisition and analysis and that appeared in the story (Lacková, 2017; 2019).

The coding process in research data analysis

The process of coding was used in the data analysis. We used the approach of Strauss & Corbin (2008) who mention coding as capturing the sequences and connections between various processes featured in the study.

The following was used:

Open coding

Open coding means creating terms that define the units of text. It means assigning names to events. The created terms are then categorised, which means that those that can be assigned to the same event are grouped together.[6]

Axial coding

Axial coding is a method that follows open coding. Its objective is to create a connection between categories and subcategories.

Selective coding

Selective coding includes the selection of one crucial category.

VI. Results of the Analysis of Data Acquired in the Interview

Flow in the inner game

The participants described a deep immersion in the inner game of the coaching interview. It was an activity that fulfilled them. They lost track of time. The activity has a positive impact on their personality, as well as on achieving the required result. The activity itself made them feel good – the form of the coaching interview and particularly the work with the STOP method – not only the achieved objective, which was a subsequent improvement of work results.

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[6] We started open coding with a data analysis. We used a meaning unit as a coding unit and we coded the interview transcripts line by line. The codes were then categorised.

Table 3 Flow in Inner Game in Participants from 2002 to 2020

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Czech Republic	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2
Slovakia	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	2
Argentina	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	2
Chile	-	-	-	-	3	3	3	3	2	3
Spain	-	-	-	-	-	3	3	3	1	2

Source: own

When stating the codes, we use the theory of integrated research (Loučková, 2010)

Code explanations:

1.   Low level of flow (2 situations in the statements when flow occurred)

2.   Medium level of flow (3-4 situations in the statements when flow occurred)

3.   High level of flow (5 and more situations in the statements when flow occurred)

Other protective factors that helped participants cope with stressful situations

•   A helping, natural authority in the participant's environment (encouraging supervisors and colleagues) with whom the participant practiced the inner game – coaching dialogue during which flow occurred

•   An interesting activity that they were able to completely immerse themselves in and during which flow occurred (university seminars, leading technical discussions).

Manifestations of resilience in participants after repeated practice of the inner game

•   Concentration on solving present problems

•   Deeper immersion in the study of the work text

•   Ability to remain concentrated on work for a longer period of time

•   Adherence to the daily work plan without the tendency to postpone task fulfilment

VII. Conclusion

Laying very high demands on the participants in their primary family, authoritative approach of the parents to children (especially the father): those were significant risk factors that the participants experienced in their childhood and puberty. As a consequence, they experienced disorders in managing stressful moments in their lives, a low level of attachment to the parents, and disrespect of formal authorities. The study focused on determination of factors that (despite the aforesaid risks) had a positive effect on the participants who then better coped with stressful situations. There are no universal factors for coping with problems that could be identified in all the participants in the same way and at the same level. However, there is the protective factor of flow that recurred in all the participants during coaching using the inner game, used by the supervisors and more experienced colleagues. The phenomenon of flow seems to be an important factor in two forms, as a short-term dynamic element and as a long-term characteristic of the participants that gradually led to achieving a high level of expertise in their field of study. Based on the longitudinal study, we described the most frequently displayed traits of the participants' resilient personality: concentration on the solution of present problems, deeper immersion in work assignments, and the ability to fully concentrate on work for a longer period

of time and the resulting better adherence to the work plan. One of the qualitative research rules is not to generalise data, therefore, we emphasise that the stated protective factors and the manifestation of resilient personalities in our participants cannot be considered generally true. However, the basic data collected over a period of 19 years represent a sufficient basis for other potential studies, whether quantitative or combined.

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