RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN THE LIFE OF YOUTH IN RELATION TO RESILIENCE

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Abstract: Introduction: A certain degree of stress is present in everyone’s life and young people are not an exception. Most of them show a certain degree of resilience and can cope with stressful situations without any difficulties, however there is a group of youth who live in toxic environments and need help. If there is a risk of failure due to the intensity of stressors; external formal and informal support have a great role to play as they have the potential to prevent negative developmental outcomes.

Purpose: The authors’ intention was to make a review of available literature on the current issues of resilience research with a focus on the importance of protective factors in young people’s lives – especially when they are exposed to adversity. An emphasis is placed on the vital role of social support to individuals provided by schools as well as social services.

Methods: In the presented literature review, multiple formal search methods including hand searching of key journals; electronic searching of journal databases and subject specific websites; reference scanning; and citation tracking were used.

Conclusion: Individuals commonly demonstrate some level of resilience, yet most of them are able to deal with stressful situations without any harm. On the other hand, if the adversity is too high, the presence of social support provided by their social environment is important. In this context, good relationships in general and sufficient external protective factors provided by their social environment (schools, school psychologists, institutional social and health service providers) are important.

Key words: resilience, risk factors, protective factors, coping, social and health services

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1 Introduction

Understanding the concept of resilience is important for all professionals working not only with children and youth at risk but also with every young person as it can have a positive or negative impact on their whole development (Komárik, 2009, 2010). It is not only youth at risk experiencing serious adversity in their social ecologies that must learn how to cope with stress. Even children and adolescents from functioning families and favourable social environments are vulnerable and must deal with daily hassles, must face stressful situations at school and meet the demands and requirements of their environment and the society as such. It is generally accepted, that external factors have a great impact on individuals’ behaviour (e.g. Krásna, 2014) and their overall success. Therefore, one of the roles of psychologists – especially school psychologists – is to make parents, teachers and school counsellors aware of their powerful potential to significantly improve the psychological, emotional, social and educational outcomes in young people.

2 Definitions of resilience

Resilience can be considered a special kind of competence that helps people to deal with difficult experiences and, as not being a stable personality trait, it can be developed. In contrary to its original meaning, it cannot be understood as “bouncing back” to the original state, as after confrontation with stressful situations, harsh circumstances or any kind of adversity, that influence individuals. Resilience makes positive developmental outcomes possible even in harmful situations. Simply said, it is about keeping or maintaining inner balance and preventing difficulties in the future. Resilient individuals are able to overcome adverse situations, they actively seek and use help from their social environment and take advantage of various social relationships available to them.

There is a lot of resilience research that has been done recently, so there is a great range in what is considered to be resilience. Most commonly, it is understood as an individual’s capacity to recover, adapt, and keep mental balance and normal functioning when exposed to significant adversity or a personal crisis, i.e. the sum of such attitudes, behaviour and external factors that help people adapt to changing conditions and meet new challenges (Tamášová & Barnová, 2011; Barnová & Gabrihelová, 2017). An interesting finding is that there is a link between psychological resilience and creativity (Szobiová, 2013; Filkorová & Szobiová, 2013) – highly creative and highly resilient individuals share several characteristics, e.g. flexible thinking, ability to produce alternative solutions/suggestions, accepting challenges, and the ability to apply a positive approach in various situations (Boleková & Szobiová, 2013).
Motivation to solve a problem is typical for both creative (Szobiová, 2015) and resilient individuals.

It was the work of Werner and Smith (1982), which represented a milestone in resilience research. They defined resilience as the capacity to cope effectively with internal and external stressors that changes over time. Werner held an ecological view on resilience and pointed out the importance of balance between risks and protective factors – the more risk factors are present, the more protective factors are needed (Werner, 1989).

Rutter considers resilience a dynamic concept (Rutter, 2012) and defines it as reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of a stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences (Rutter, 2006). According to him, findings have indicated that some individuals have a relatively good outcome despite having experienced serious stresses or adversities – their outcomes are better than those of other individuals experiencing similar situations (Rutter, 2013). That is what we call resilience. Resilience is situationally related – individuals can show resilience in certain situations (or in relation to some specific risks) but not in others. Rutter highlights the importance of the presence of a reasonable level of risk that he considers a part of normal development. It is only when an individual is faced with obstacles, stress, and other environmental threats that resilience, or the lack of it, emerges. Exposure to low levels of risk can even result in better coping skills. Moreover, without risk, there is no resilience.

Garmezy held an ecological view of resilience, which he considered a positive resource. According to him, individuals’ social ecologies (family, peers etc.) are decisive in the process of coping with stressful situations. He distinguished between individual, familial and extra-familial (teacher, school counsellor, school psychologist, social worker, church etc.) protective factors having an influence on resilience. Garmezy (1991) defined resilience as the evaluative awareness of a difficult reality combined with a commitment to struggle, to conquer the obstacle, and to achieve one’s goals despite the negative circumstances to which one has been exposed, which were and remain evocative of sadness, i.e. the capacity for recovery, the ability to cope with changes and maintain adaptive behaviour in the face of adversity.

Luthar et al. (2000) define resilience as a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity and consider resilience the result of the interaction between individuals and their environment. The emphasis is on two factors – they are: exposure to significant threat or severe adversity and the achievement of positive adaptation.

Masten has carried out a whole series of research on resilience. In 1997, she found out that if “competent children” growing up with little adversity and resilient children growing up with very high levels of adversity are compared, awareness of self-worth, self-efficacy and mental health are very similar in both groups, what is
more, resilient children sometimes perform better (Masten, 1997). Together with Coatsworth, they described resilience as manifested competence to adapt in the context of significant challenges to adaptation or development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Masten and Gewirtz (2006) pointed out that not all well-performing children are necessarily resilient; i.e. the presence or absence of resilience can only be observed within the context of harsh circumstances, when resilient children are able to distinguish between the desirable and undesirable outcomes and consequences of their actions and identify threats and potential risks. Ten years later, Masten and Obradović (2008) provided a new definition of resilience, according to which it refers to the processes of, capacity for, or patterns of positive adaptation during or following exposure to adverse experiences that have the potential to disrupt or destroy the successful functioning or development of the person. They emphasized, that for studying resilience, in addition to personality traits, it is necessary to learn about the individual’s environments as coping strategies are culturally and situationally related. In accordance with that, Masten and Obradović identified two fundamental adaptive systems for human resilience, i.e. social capital (relationships) and human capital (own resources). In 2014, Masten brought an intentionally broad definition of resilience, according to which it encompasses the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development (Masten, 2014).

Ungar (2013a) considers resilience a social construct and proposes a social ecological understanding of resilience. He emphasises the importance of respecting cultural and contextual specificities, i.e. the environment. According to his definition, resilience is both an individual’s capacity to navigate to health resources and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these resources in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2006). In his research, he has dealt with the concept of hidden resilience, which helps individuals “survive” but is often associated with antisocial forms of behaviour, as well. Therefore, offering youth better, i.e. positive, interesting and meaningful alternatives is important.

3 Risk factors and protective factors

The direction of youth’s development is determined by the presence or absence of stressors and protective factors. In the context, where risk factors prevail, the level of psychological resilience might be decisive. It is not possible to classify various circumstances as favourable or unfavourable, they are strongly situationally related; the same factor can be protective in one situation but in another one, it can represent a serious threat to a person’s development. In this sense, risk factors and protective factors are not two distinct categories, but rather there is an overlap between them.
Risk factors represent a short-term or a long-term threat to individuals’ healthy development. They increase the probability of negative outcomes and can be of various intensity and duration. Negative experience may have either a sensitizing effect (increased vulnerability) or a strengthening “steeling” effect (increased resistance) in relation to the response to later stress or adversity (Rutter, 2012).

Rutter (2005) considers an absence of long-lasting harmonious relationships, a lack of social cohesion within social groups and a lack of opportunities to learn (insufficient reciprocal conversational exchange, an absence of games etc.) the most frequent sources of risky experiences.

Protective factors promote mental health and positive development in the face of risk. They can serve as a buffer to risk factors, interrupt their cumulative effects or intervene to prevent a risk factor from having a negative effect on the development of the individual (Barter, 2005). Thus, they help individuals exposed to risks preserve a certain degree of functioning and can positively influence their life trajectories.

Protective factors in the form of social support in the individual’s environment represented by meaningful relationships, which are among the resilience-related factors contributing to an individual’s healthy development (Ungar, 2006), are of a great importance in the context of risks, in other words, they are crucial to mitigating the negative impact of toxic environments (Ungar, 2013b). However, efficiency of social support is not automatically the result of its presence – its adequacy to the specific needs of the individual in a demanding situation is decisive (Solomon & Laufer, 2005).

Both risk and protective factors tend to create chains and occur in various combinations (Barnová & Gabrhelová, 2017). The more of them occur together, the stronger their effect is; they have a cumulative effect. If individuals must cope with cumulated risks in their environments, they need more protective factors to prevent negative outcomes and maintain normal functioning. There must be a balance between risk factors and protective factors.

4 Institutional social support in the process of coping with adversity

Coping as a multidimensional process is one of the decisive factor when dealing with strain and being confronted with pressure; it represents a tool of stress reduction and elimination. It includes both cognitive and behavioural strategies.

Coping strategies are not universal – individuals’ reactions to stressors and the selection of coping strategies vary depending on a number of different factors determining the context of a particular situation (Ruiselová, 2008) and they are effective to various extents. The process of dealing with demanding life situations is related to individuals’ stage of development, to their specifics and experiences, and their
perception and subjective interpretation of stressors influenced by their personal history. For children facing harsh circumstances, social support, i.e. relationships, offered activities and resources available at group, cultural and societal level, are important when dealing with stress (Richardsen & Matthiesen, 2014). It must be pointed out that resources provided to youth-at-risk, their access to these resources, and how well these resources address a specific problem have an important role to play in the process of coping with adverse situations.

Ungar et al. (2015), based on their research, identified a three-phase reciprocal process that helps young people to cope with unfavourable circumstances. In the first phase, individuals tend to use their own resources. These individual coping strategies are helpful especially in contexts of lower risk exposure (Ungar, 2015), but they may not fully address more complex situations. If the level of stress is so high that individuals are not able to adapt successfully, they start to seek for alternative strategies and engage informal supports to cope better. If it is still not enough and the problem is so serious that failure is likely, in the third phase, they are ready to accept help from formal services (institutional providers) where these are available.

Research shows that when at-risk youth are provided with resources in the form of psychosocial services, many do well in spite of their personal characteristics such as low motivation, self-esteem, or sense of efficacy (Ungar et al., 2013). So, services and service providers may serve as facilitative environments to improve the outcomes of young service users (Martin et al., 2015) and youth exposed to high levels of risk, often become clients of multiple social and health services (Ungar et al., 2013). These formal services do not always meet young persons’ needs, so they start moving from one coping strategy to another. The decision to move from one strategy to the next, or back again, to use only two or all the three strategies simultaneously is influenced by the youth’s exposure to risk; the fit between the resources available; and the youth’s needs (Ungar et al., 2015).

The mental health and wellbeing of young people facing significant adversity can be influenced by the provision of interventions at school level as well. When formal services are not available, informal supports can take on multiple roles, e.g. teachers become caseworkers (Ungar et al., 2015). For youth at-risk, schools are often the only formal institution that can provide them with support when they are exposed to adversity in their environment, as other formal service providers are, due to various reasons, unavailable to them. In such a case, teachers are uniquely positioned to offer social support and to promote resilience in vulnerable individuals. Thus, they facilitate positive psychological outcomes in adverse contexts (Ungar et al., 2015; Liebenberg et al., 2015; Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Sharkey, You, & Schnoebelen, 2008). They can provide many different types of both informal and formal support depending on the youth’s needs and so maximize their capacity to cope. If a school can offer positive teacher-pupil relationships, it constitutes a potentially
positive resource, which can compensate for the lack of other resilience resources that are missing in students’ lives (Liebenberg et al., 2015).

5 Conclusions

People are being exposed to stressors of various duration and intensity on a daily basis. Some can overcome them easily; others may have problems in coping with situations, which they subjectively perceive as demanding, by using their own resources. If their individual coping strategies are insufficient, external protective factors come into play. For maintaining normal functioning, it is crucial to preserve the balance between the whole range of risk and protective factors present in individuals’ ecologies. The balance between young persons’ capacities to cope on their own and the capacity of their environments to provide care is important as well.

Understanding the concept of resilience provides an important basis for practices designed to promote healthier development in youth threatened by adversity. Resilience is shown to be a multidimensional construct, involving both exposures to adversity and access to multiple internal and external resources. As being a competence, which can be developed, it is important to pay sufficient attention to its promotion in the whole society. It is also necessary to learn how to foster positive change, how to improve the odds for favourable development. Based on the above, it can be assumed that professionals working with youth should be aware that it is resilience, which is often decisive in risky contexts as it can have a strong impact on the entire further development of young people and their outcomes. Teachers, school psychologists, school counsellors, school systems and social service providers have a powerful potential to provide youth with care and support that can contribute to their positive development; however, as indicated by Ungar, Russell and Connelly (2014), resilience is seldom the result of interventions within schools alone, or any other single system that provides services to students.

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**Resumé:** A certain degree of stress is present in everyone’s life and young people are not an exception. People commonly demonstrate some level of resilience, most of them can cope with stressful situations without any difficulties or negative outcomes, but there is a whole group of youth who live in toxic environments and need help. If there is a risk of failure due to the intensity of stressors, external formal and informal support have a great role to play as they have the potential to prevent negative outcomes. In this context, good relationships in general and sufficient external protective factors provided by their social environment (teachers, school psychologists, school counsellors, institutional social and health service providers) are important.

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