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The resilience of youth delinquent. Education as a protective factor

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Abstract. Adolescents face difficult developmental tasks and multiple challenges and are exposed to very varied risk factors. In case the protection factors are not strong enough, they can generate many difficulties or emotional and behavioral disorders, especially due to the fragility and vulnerability of the adolescent's inner world during this period. This paper presents an analysis of the protection factors underlying the resilience of young offenders admitted in educational centers in Romania. The analysis is part of a broader research conducted in a doctoral thesis. The conclusions show us that the basic pillar of reeducating these young people relies in completing their studies at least at the level of primary school and the orientation towards learning a profession, so that those who blame material deprivation as the cause of delinquency have the possibility to earn a living through work.

Keywords. juveniles, resilience, protective factors, educational centers

1. Theoretical background

The social and psychological profile shows that many adolescents have at least one risk factor, usually several, for the patterns of aggression and violence. If we follow the list of common risk factors for adolescence and childhood problems according to the level of influence presented by Jenson and Fraser (2006), we can identify, in the history of these adolescents' lives, the fact that in a higher or lesser share, all risk factors are present.

Teenagers are often faced with difficult environmental factors: their neighborhood promotes unwritten laws and norms favorable to the antisocial attitude; the socio-economic status of their family is often defined by poverty and economic deprivation, a low level of education and few economic opportunities. These young people also face interpersonal and social risk factors. In the family profile we can discover different traits often considered to be responsible for chronic patterns of antisocial attitudes (McEvoy, Welker, 2000). They frequently come from families with social-emotional deficits, dominated by poor communication, disorganization, and conflict, with unbalanced links between parents and children (e.g., the family may break direct or indirect ties with the delinquent adolescent immediately after his admission into the center and throughout his/her re-education), ineffective parental discipline, lack of parental involvement, parental crime, alcohol and drug use in the family, abuse or neglect, rejection. Farrington (1995) identified poor child raising as one of the most important independent predictors of juvenile delinquency (Farrington, 1995, p. 930).

Henry et al. (1993) considers that the existence of crime in the family and parental characteristics could be responsible for a higher percentage of diversity in delinquent behavior.

Their social situation also includes, for the majority, poor involvement at school, frequent school and social failures and, as we have shown, the lack of consistency in compliance with the rules, poor and/or inconsistent administrative support, rejection by conformist congeners and association with antisocial congeners.

In these cases, individual risk factors often include some orientation towards strong sensations, poor impulse control, attention deficits, hyperactivity, risky actions, low social aptitudes, instability, anger and certain beliefs and attitudes (e.g., the need for revenge). These adolescents often suffer from certain unbalances, such as emotional disorders, attention deficit disorder – hyperactivity disorder, certain learning disorders usually presented in the psychological literature as risk factors for aggression and violent behaviors (Leone et al., 2000).

This profile can lead to a certain type of manifestation, such as posttraumatic stress disorders or a variety of psychopathological manifestations including depression, alcoholism, generally addictive behaviors, permanent sadness (Dohrenwend, 2000).

It is often the case that, at school and in the community, they have experienced inappropriate and punitive reactions in response to their own aggression or violent behavior such as corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion, incarceration. These zero tolerance approaches are, in most cases, ineffective, leading to increased aggression and violence (Leone et al., 2000).

The research supports the idea that, in exchange for these approaches, a proactive, integrative approach would be desirable in order to identify those factors that contribute to resilience in the presence of risk factors, but also with the aim of creating strategies for prevention. Human resilience is in the sense of Masten, Best and Garmezy (1990, p.425) "the process, the ability to, or succeeding to adapt successfully despite provocative or threatening circumstances". Care and support are the key ingredients in resilience (Rutter, 1987; Masten et al., 1990). A resilience-oriented approach involves identifying positive factors in the life of the child and adolescent that help them cope with the new developmental duties required from them by society and face adversity (Howard, Dryden, Johnson 1999).

Masten, Garmezy, Tilligen, Pellegrini, Lurkin and Larsen (1988) state that all children can be more or less resilient in different situations and at different times in their lives, depending on the interaction and cumulation of individual and environmental factors (Brooks, Goldstein, 2002).

Despite the absence of a single and universally valid definition of resilience, there is still agreement between specialists on two key aspects of this concept: a first aspect is shaped around the idea that resilience is the result of an interactive process in which the person, his family and the environment in which he lives take part; the second aspect refers to the fact that resilience characterizes a person who has crossed or is going through an event of traumatic character or chronic adversities showing good adaptation, this adaptation bearing various meanings depending on the person's age and socio-cultural context (Ionescu, 2011, p. 3).

The resilience approach integrates four conditions mentioned in the specialty literature as necessary and sufficient in identifying a resilience process, this assuming: identifying a trauma or the perception of failure; activation of coping strategies; maintaining the potential for development; the tendency to fulfillment through originality.

Considering the new psychological perspectives of resilience, which, as we have already shown, is seen as a process rather than being considered a characteristic and stable feature of the individual, we endeavor to find, through this work, the best possible ways to facilitate this process in the specific conditions of an educational center.

Most research shows that resilience is the result of the interactions of the individual with the environment and of the processes that either support well-being or protect them from the overwhelming influence of risk factors (Zautra, A.J., Hall, J.S., Murray, K.E., 2010). These processes can be facilitated by families, schools, communities, good social policies that make resilience more likely to occur (Leadbeater, B., Dodgen, D., Solarz, A., 2005).

"Resilience" implies cumulated "protective factors" which most likely play a more important role than the cumulated "risk factors". As we have seen, the psychological and social profile of the adolescent in educational centers is dominated by a large number of risk factors which can seriously affect the mental and behavioral functioning of adolescents. Finding the best way to counterbalance these factors and improve their skills to achieve good integration and achieve good results regardless of the status of major risk is a serious challenge.

Protective factors are considered to be represented by those characteristics "which can counteract the risk factors present in the case of those adolescents considered to be at high risk in engaging in antisocial behaviors".

Consequently, in the absence of exposure to certain risk factors, the individual does not have the opportunity to cultivate his/her resilience, just as it is not possible to evoke any protection factor in the absence of adverse situations that generate the mobilization of the individual's resources within an adaptive process. Resilience involves the individual's use of the interactions between these two categories of factors, and there can be no question of annihilating the risk factors by activating the protection ones. Resilience is not a general and immutable state, it can vary, be visible to varying degrees in different situations, just as it can evolve or devolve over time. (Cyrulnik, Pourtois, 2007, p. 48).

However, some of the factors presented cannot be accessed, much less modified, as they are environmental factors or factors strongly related to the environment, such as family or local community climate. Due to this, it is important that the efforts are focused on those factors that, in the case of carrying out recovery/therapeutic interventions directly addressing them, can be modified. In planning and implementing these interventions, it is also important to consider the specifics of the institution and the limitations deriving from it. Thus, among the protection factors on which one can act within these institutions through intervention programs, with the aim of increasing the resilience of adolescents, there are the following: the level of autonomy, social skills, problem-solving skills, independence, empathy, task orientation, curiosity, relationships with others, education and so on. By social skills Rutter understands children's ability to identify different solutions to social problems (Rutter, 1987). Social skills include the ability to respond appropriately to social cues such as facial expressions, to effectively solve interpersonal problems, to realistically anticipate the consequences of one's own actions, to behave socially in an appropriate way and to express a positive, optimistic attitude towards their own actions. Werner (1989) talks about "the necessary help" as a factor within the experiences of resilient children, including the responsibilities and tasks that involve working in the community and in schools. Referring to self-esteem and efficiency, Rutter describes them as representing a sense of one's own worth, as well as the feeling of being able to manage various situations, to exercise control. Thus, an important element is for a person to consider that he/she is the master of his/her own destiny.

2. Method

The task of identifying variables that can protect adolescents from violent behavior when they have already initiated this type of behavior is complex. To do this, it is necessary to examine the interactions between the factors that place these adolescents at risk of manifesting new violence and those factors that can lead to a decrease in violent behavior. The existence of

multitudes of potential risks and the promotion of possible protection factors complicates the ability to identify factors that have a statistically significant protective effect and that we can use in the programs offered by educational centers with the hope that they will inhibit violence (Krohn, et.all., 2014).

In this paper we set out to analyze education as a protective factor for developing the resilience of the young offender.

The educational measure of admission into an educational center as a penal sanction must activate accountability processes, favoring the change of personal lifestyles and social and family relations. The intervention of specialists, focused mainly on education, work, religion and cultural, recreational and sports activities, must respond to the principle of individualization, that is, it must be modulated on the personal needs of each one, with the possibility of integration and modification of the young person's route.

The admission of the young person in the process of re-education implies by the very nature of things the penetration into the intimacy of his personality, where a more efficient way of communication can be found in attracting him to his own transformation, to the cultivation of the young man's interest in gaining personal dignity in the perspective of a real adaptability to work and social life.

In the framework of this research, the study of risk and protection factors associated with delinquent behaviors in young people was carried out with the help of a specific tool built by the researcher. This tool considered the study of the factors that contribute to the adaptation of minors and young people in the educational center, overcoming daily challenges, the relationship with the family, the relationship with the other people accommodated in the boarding school, as well as with the professionals in the educational center. The use of this tool allowed us to identify both the risk and protection factors in the case of young offenders admitted in educational centers in Romania, as well as the outline of their profile oriented towards improving their resilience, that is, the protection factors.

3. Results

From the analysis of the risk and protection factors associated with the delinquent behavior, several significant elements emerge:

- A single risk factor does not lead a person to delinquent behavior.
- Risk factors do not act individually but are usually cumulated: the more risk factors to which young people are exposed, the higher the probability of having negative results, including delinquency.
- When the risk factors to which a young person is exposed involve more perspectives, the probability of delinquency increases to a greater extent.
- It is possible that different risk factors influence young people at different periods of their development. For example, risk factors in the group of friends usually come up later in the development of a young person than individual and family factors.
- As risk and protection factors are dynamic, service providers should carry out continuous assessments of those conditions.

Although young people face several risk factors, it is important to emphasize that all people have strengths and are able to be resilient. Thus, all children and families have individual strengths that can be identified, built, and engaged, in order to prevent future delinquent behavior and involvement in the criminal justice system. In recent years, studies on juvenile delinquency and the juvenile criminal justice system have increasingly examined the impact of these strengths (protective factors) on the ability of young people to overcome challenges and develop harmoniously.

Attitudes towards school are a factor relevant to the subsequent behavior of young offenders. Those who reported favorably to the school had a route free of wrongdoing to a greater extent than those who related unfavorably to this social value. There is obviously a positive climate and a desire on the part of children to be able to continue school. Young people who have a higher education have more easily overcome the traumas they were subjected to in early childhood or the shock of being admitted in the educational center. Educators, psychologists, and teachers in school have an important role alongside parents in building the resilience of the young delinquent and in defining and establishing his life projects. The need to get involved in lucrative activities very early on or leaving the family and entourage in criminal groups has been directly reflected in the schooling degree of these people, manifested either by early school dropout or by the failure to access the educational system.

The exploration of the cultural, educational and spiritual factors allowed us to observe, beyond the answers of the specialists and young people that led us to the results presented above, a series of other aspects related to the need for attachment of the youngsters, to the stages they were going through after incarceration and especially to the declared desire to become good people. Although, as we have shown, there is a great openness to a positive atmosphere, the specialists who work in the center in a very small number, as well as the intervention programs oriented on the children's problems and not on their potentialities (especially with regard to Roman children), make the effectiveness of the treatment applied in the center be a relatively small one, which also explains the large number of children who reoffend and return to the criminal justice system.

The resilience factors are therefore those factors that diminish the potential for engagement in certain behaviors, which provide a buffer (buffer factors) against exposure to risk factors and the onset of delinquent and criminal involvement (Shader, M.). Jenson&Fraser (2006) believes that protective factors act in three ways: (1) to reduce or cushion the impact of risk in the child's life; (2) to the interruption of the succession of risk factors that may be present in the life of the young person; (3) to the prevention or counteraction of a risk factor. They centralized a list of the common protective factors of childhood and adolescence according to the level of influence (2006), identifying environmental factors such as opportunities for education, employment and other prosocial activities, the existence of care relationships with adults or extended family, social support from others other than family members; interpersonal and social factors, such as attachment to parents, the existence of good relations with siblings, the low level of conflicts between parents, a high level of school involvement, involvement in conventional activities, belief in prosocial values and norms; individual factors, such as social and problem-solving skills, positive attitude, good temperament, increased level of intelligence, low level of stress in childhood.

Lösel and Bender (1999) summarize the following general protective factors in the case of various disorders identified in international research: a stable emotional relationship with at least one of the parents or another significant person; an emotionally positive, supportive and structure-providing educational climate; good behavioral patterns; social support from people outside the family; some responsibility in the family; temperamental characteristics (e.g. flexibility, approach to others, sociability); cognitive skills (at least average intelligence); a good self-image and a sense of usefulness; an active reaction in the event of stress, not just a reactive or avoidance of management; experience of structure and significance in one's own development; realistic planning for the future; sense of humor.

The results of our research have led us to the validation in the case of the people in the educational centers of the essential results from the established research and have demonstrated

to a great extent the known patterns regarding the basic role of education in the recovery of young people in conflict with the law.

4. Discussions and conclusions

During the period of admission to an educational center, the basis of the re-education of these young people remains focused on the educational component and the orientation towards learning a profession, so that the material deprivations considered as a cause of delinquency can be counteracted by earning a living through work. In view of social reintegration, young people must be assisted in obtaining an adequate housing space to minimize the influence of the tense environment that favors deviant behavior.

In this context, resilience is not just refraining from delinquent acts. It rather involves the ability of those in social and personal situations at high risk to resist the criminogenic conditions that cause many others to become criminals, and the educational component plays an important role in this respect. These high-risk young people who can refrain from delinquent behavior are considered to be 'resilient'. Key issues, outlined above, differentiate resilient young people from non-resilient young people. One explanation is that resilience is made possible by the presence of "protective factors" that isolate people from the risks they face every day. These protective factors are typically considered as social and personal resources that encourage prosocial adaptation to criminogenic conditions. Previous studies have found that, although individual protective factors have modest effects, the build-up of protective factors is clearly linked to the resilience of young people to high-risk factors. This is the confluence of several protective factors that seem to be the most important in order to give young people the ability to resist the forces that propel others to commit crimes (Hartman et.al., 2009).

We believe that education and generally speaking the social reintegration of young offenders from the educational centers must continue to the point where we can speak of measures that reflect the authentic, autonomous, real life, a universe built on the resources and potential of each young person released from such an educational center. Thus, the institutional life must continue with an autonomous life beyond the measures stipulated in numerous programs, many of them only formal, in order to be able to speak of a real and efficient social reintegration and a life in accordance with the prosocial values of the society.

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