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**Sense of coherence and coping with stress in fathers of children
with developmental disabilities¹**

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to analyse the sense of coherence (SOC) and strategies of coping with stress in fathers of disabled children.

The research involved 128 fathers of children with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy and those of normal development. Two questionnaires were used: The Sense of Coherence Questionnaire (SOC-29) measuring SOC level and Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) measuring strategies of coping with stress.

The research revealed that there is a relationship between the type of child's developmental disability and SOC in fathers. The fathers with a low level of SOC more frequently used strategies of avoidance while the fathers with a high level of SOC more frequently used confrontation, positive reappraisal and planful problem solving.

The results of the research indicate that looking after a disabled child may lower SOC and in turn may cause difficulties in coping with stress.

Key words: SOC, coping with stress, fathers, developmentally disabled children

INTRODUCTION

The study investigates the relationship between sense of coherence and coping with stress in fathers of children with developmental disabilities. The concept of sense of coherence was put forward by A. Antonovsky within the framework of the salutogenic approach (1997, 2005). Crucial to this approach is the search for factors responsible for people staying healthy or becoming ill in stressful situations and whether they can hold their current position on the illness continuum. The key element of salutogenesis is the sense of coherence (SOC) defined as “(...) a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli from one’s internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable (comprehensibility); (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli (manageability); (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (meaningfulness)” (Antonovsky, 2005, p.34)

The concept of sense of coherence provides a good framework for dealing with the phenomenon of people experiencing extreme or chronic stress (Şek & Pasikowski, 1998). People with a high level of sense of coherence cope better with difficulties, more frequently perceive stressors as challenges and apply cognitive-behavioural ways of coping with them. People with a low level of sense of coherence are more likely to look at difficult situations as threats and use avoidance as a way of coping with stress.

Being a parent of a child with developmental disability puts one’s resources at risk (Eker & Tüzün, 2004; Ones, Yilmaz, Cetinkaya & Cglar, 2005; Pisula, 1998a, 2002). The concept of sense of coherence was rarely used in this field. Most research indicates that parents of sick or disabled children report a lower level of sense of coherence than parents of normally developing children (Margalit & Ankonina, 1991; Margalit, Raviv & Ankonina, 1992; Olsson & Hwang, 2002; Grohølt, Stigum, Nothagen & Köhler, 2003). It also reveals that parents with lower levels of sense of coherence use avoidance as a way of coping with

stress more frequently and experience many psychological problems. Although these results help us understand the psychological situation the parents find themselves in, they fail to consider the type of child's disability, and, consequently, parents of children with different disabilities are put into the same category.

It is reported that parents of children with autism show an exceptionally high level of stress (Pisula, 1998b; Tarakeswar & Paragament, 2001). It is caused by the child's disabilities in cognitive, social and emotional development, difficulties in understanding and predicting his/her behaviour, problems with communication, lack of or atypical expression of emotions (Gray, 2003; Rodrigue, Morgan & Geffken, 1990). Sharpley (1997; after: Boyd, 2002) argues that lack of social as well as family's acceptance of child's "difficult" behaviour as well as a poor system of social support add to a great burden.

The two groups compared here are parents of children with autism and parents of children with Down syndrome. The situation of these two groups is different. Despite various difficulties and psychological problems, parents of children with Down syndrome find themselves in a relatively better situation than parents of children with autism and – as research data indicate - parents of children with cerebral palsy (Pisula, 1998a). Although parents of children with Down syndrome show a higher level of stress than parents of normally developing children, it is still lower comparing to the stress experienced by parents of children with developmental disabilities. Wanamaker and Glenwick (1998) reported that parents of children with cerebral palsy have a higher level of depression and helplessness, and a greater sense of parental incompetence than parents of normally developing children. Problems of this group of parents are caused in particular by the child's physical dependence and constant need of assistance throughout their lifetime. The level of difficulty that a particular situation poses may be influenced by other co-existent abnormalities (both primary and secondary). Among these co-occurring abnormalities are, for instance, intellectual disability that is found in 40% of children and also difficulties in communicating with the child (Britner, Morog, Pianta & Marvin, 2003; Mazanek, 2003).

The study sets out to analyse the sense of coherence in fathers of children with developmental disabilities. Due to the fact that most often it is the mother who looks after the child and bears more responsibilities, fathers are frequently excluded from research (Young & Roopinaire, 1994). The difficulties experienced by fathers are often ignored and their situation is viewed from the financial perspective (Hess, Teti & Hussey-Gardner, 2004; Navalkar, 2004). Despite time limitations, fathers seek information on developmental disabilities and learn about different ways of helping their child. They feel there is a clash between their professional duties and a strong need to get involved in their child's activities (Quinn, 1999; West, 1998). The younger the fathers are the stronger is their need to interact with their child and participate in his/her development. It may be related to a current transformation of the man's role in the society (Oleś & Oleś, 2001; Turbiville & Marquis, 2001). Herbert (1996; after: West 1998) states that fathers also try to support their partners; at the same time, however, they hide their emotions and difficulties they experience in order not to worry their partners too much. On the other hand, Olechnowicz (1995) shows that fathers of children with developmental disabilities want to be perceived as strong, therefore they tend hide their worries about psychological as well as physical well being of their child and wife.

Many studies emphasise the fact that fathers of children with developmental disabilities suffer from greater stress and depression than fathers of children normally developing (Hastings, 2003; Olsson & Hwang, 2001; Ricci & Hodapp, 2003). Veisson (2001) proved that fathers of children with developmental disabilities are more extrovert, open and responsible than fathers of normally developing children. According to Pisula (1998b), the greatest stress experienced by fathers of children with autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and intellectual disabilities results from the sense of responsibility for their child and involvement in childcare. Wannamaker and Glenwick (1998) claim that a high level of stress in fathers is associated with a low level of parental satisfaction and a higher level of difficulty in their child's adaptation processes.

There is a wide variety of fathers' reactions to difficulties related to looking after a disabled child and numerous ways of coping with stress – ranging from rejection of the child and abandonment of the family to total acceptance of the child and situation (Gray, 2003; Steuden & Zdunek, 2000). Research shows that fathers often apply strategies of avoidance – they escape from the problem or get involved in other activities which keep them away from home (eg. sports, addictions or long working hours) (Olsson & Hwang, 2001; Steuden & Zdunek, 2000). According to Antonovsky (2005), people who use such strategies of coping with stress have a low level of sense of coherence. Some fathers, despite the stress, are able to deal well with difficulties by applying active strategies of coping with stress and confronting the difficult situation (Pisula, 1998a; Taanila, Syrjälä, Kokkonen & Järvelin, 2002; Young & Roonpinaire, 1994). Antonovsky (1997) argues that those who choose active strategies of coping with stress have a high level of sense of coherence.

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between the sense of coherence and coping with stress in fathers of children with Down syndrome, autism, and cerebral palsy and fathers of normally developing children.

Formulated hypotheses:

1. There is a relationship between the sense of coherence in fathers and the type of child's developmental disability.
2. Fathers with a higher level of sense of coherence are more likely to use problem-orientated strategies of coping with stress while parents with a low level of the sense of coherence use avoidance strategies.

METHOD

Participants

The research involved 128 fathers:

1. 37 fathers of children with Down syndrome ($M=38,5$; $SD=8,7$); children aged between 1 and 22 ($M=9,9$; $SD=5,9$).
2. 31 fathers of children with autism ($M=40,3$; $SD=7,7$); children aged between 2 and 20 ($M=8,1$; $SD=4,7$).
3. 30 fathers of children with cerebral palsy ($M=41,9$; $SD=8,9$); children aged between 2 and 21 ($M=11,2$; $SD=6,3$).
4. 32 fathers of normally developing children ($M=38,3$; $SD=7,2$); children aged between 1 and 20 ($M=8,2$; $SD=3,8$).

The subjects examined came from Mazowieckie, Podlaskie and Lubelskie voievodships. Groups were organised according to the child's age and developmental disability.

Measures

1. The Sense of Coherence Questionnaire (SOC-29)

The questionnaire was drawn up by A. Antonovsky (2005) in 1983 in order to measure the level of sense of coherence. It consists of 29 questions divided into three subscales: I – Comprehensibility (11 questions); II Manageability (10 questions); III Meaningfulness (8 questions), with high scores indicating a stronger sense of coherence. It is also possible to analyse each of the subscales. The questionnaire was adapted to Polish by J. Koniarek, B. Dudek and Z. Makowska (1993). It is distinguished by its good psychometric properties – high accuracy and reliability (Pasikowski, 2000).

2. Coping with Stress Questionnaire (WCQ)

The questionnaire was designed by S. Folkman and R. Lazarus (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). It measures the frequency of applying various strategies of coping with stress. The Polish version of the questionnaire drawn up by Pisula (1998a) was used in the research. On the basis of the factor analysis in the examination of parents of children with developmental disabilities, she came up with eight strategies, seven of which are consistent with the version developed by Folkman and Lazarus. In Pisula's analysis an extra factor was determined - resignation. The strategies thus include: (1) searching support, (2) self-blame (taking responsibility), (3) avoidance/escape, (4) distancing, (5) confrontation, (6) positive reappraisal, (7) planful problem-solving, (8) resignation.

The questionnaire consists of 66 questions.

Procedure

Fathers who agreed to participate in the research were given a set of questionnaires to fill in at home.

RESULTS

1. The type of the child's developmental disability and the sense of coherence in fathers

The results of the One-way ANOVA showed differences in relation to meaningfulness. Fathers of children with Down syndrome reported a lower level of sense of meaningfulness than fathers of normally developing children and fathers of autistic children ($F_{(3;128)}=4,723$; $p=0,004$) (Figure 1). No differences among the groups in relation to the global sense of coherence, comprehensibility and manageability were established.

2. The type of child's developmental disability and strategies of coping with stress in fathers

The results showed differences as far as the seeking support strategy was concerned ($F_{(3;128)}=3,501$; $p=0,018$). Fathers of children with Down syndrome applied this strategy less often than fathers of autistic children and fathers of normally developing children. Fathers of children with cerebral palsy looked for support less often than fathers of children with autism.

3. Sense of coherence and strategies of coping with stress in fathers

Due to the fact that differences occurred only in terms of meaningfulness, further analysis is based on the relationship of this particular variable with the strategies. The research based on quantile division revealed two groups of fathers – fathers with a high level of sense of coherence (upper quantile – 47-68) and fathers with a low level of sense of coherence (lower quantile – 19-37). The results from the t-Student Test indicated that fathers with a high sense of meaningfulness more frequently applied:

- confrontation ($t(48)=2,376$; $p=0,023$)
- positive reappraisal ($t(48)=2,385$; $p=0,002$)
- planful problem solving ($t(48)=3,104$; $p=0,002$)

Fathers with a low sense of coherence used avoidance more frequently ($t(48)=2,376$; $p=0,023$) (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the research was to determine the relationship between the sense of coherence and coping with stress in fathers of children with autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and normally developing children. The results demonstrated that raising a child with a developmental disability is not associated with a lower level of global sense of coherence in those fathers when compared with fathers of normally developing children. The results are

consistent with those of Grohølt and others (2003), who did not establish any differences between fathers of sick and developmentally disabled children (eg. diabetes, asthma, vision and hearing disorders or ADHD) and fathers of healthy children. Similarly, Hedov and others (2002) did not find any differences regarding the level of the family sense of coherence between fathers of children with Down syndrome and fathers of normally developing children. There were also no differences in terms of global sense of coherence among fathers in the study on parents of children with intellectual disability and/or autism carried out by Olsson and Hwang (2002).

Interestingly, fathers of children with Down syndrome when compared to fathers of children with autism and normally developing children showed poorer sense of meaningfulness. The result is not surprising when one takes into consideration the difficulties and challenges that fathers of children with Down syndrome have to face. What is surprising, however, is the fact that fathers of children with Down syndrome reported poorer sense of meaningfulness than fathers of children with autism. Authors of various publications often emphasise that a stress level in parents of children with autism is higher than that in parents of children with cerebral palsy and Down syndrome (e.g. Pisula, 1998b). On the basis of that information, one can expect fathers of children with autism to lose their resources faster and to have poorer sense of meaningfulness than fathers of children with Down syndrome.

Effective therapy that children with autism undergo may justify the results discussed above. Down syndrome is an intellectual disability and, despite parents' effort, the child does not make any progress. Moreover, with time the child's disability becomes more and more visible when compared to normally developing children (Twardowski, 1999). Parents' expectations towards their child's developmental progress are too high, not commensurate with their achievements, which causes great stress (Phua, Reid, Walstab & Reddihough, 2005). The sense of helplessness and the feeling of having little control over the child's and family's future may lead to a point where parents have little hope and are not motivated to look for more resources (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004). The children with autism, on the other

hand, may improve their state if they undergo regular therapy, which is why fathers hope that their children may function relatively well in the future. This hope motivates them to put even more effort into raising their child and ensuring the best conditions for his/her development.

Antonovsky (2005) noted that long-standing stressful life conditions may influence the level of sense of coherence. He believed, however, that this influence does not have to be negative and cause a decrease in one's sense of coherence. On the contrary, he emphasised that a change in the level of sense of coherence may be positive or last only temporarily and then go back to the initial level. The data collected in the present research proved that Antonovsky's idea may be applied to fathers of children with autism who in relation to the global sense of coherence and its components did not score lower than fathers of normally developing children. Moreover, the results may find a point of reference in Quinn's thesis (1999). She observes that when parents' life situation changes (e.g. the child is diagnosed with a developmental disability) fathers already have some resources. If they use them properly, there is a chance that after some period of time they will cope even better than they did before. If they fail to do so, they risk running into adaptation difficulties. Conversely, once they have enough information and support, they are able to meet the demands and confront the situation, which enhances their parental competence.

The research demonstrated that fathers of children with autism sought support more often than fathers of children with Down syndrome. It is possible that fathers of children with autism obtain their resources from the received support, which may result in their increased sense of meaningfulness. Fathers who rarely look for support are obviously less likely to receive it (Veisson, 2001; West, 1998). At the same time, from the very beginning fathers try to support their partners (Pisula & Dąbrowska, 2004).

A lower sense of meaningfulness poses a serious threat to the global sense of coherence. Antonovsky (1997) emphasised that meaningfulness is an emotional equivalent of the cognitive sense of comprehensibility and allows people to see the need for making an effort in order to cope with the most stressful situation. Fathers should find support groups

and cognitive therapy very helpful in this situation. Lustig (2002) argues that therapy allows for reinterpretation and reappraisal of the situation. It may have a positive impact on fathers' understanding and reappraisal of the situation and the ways they confront it. In this study, it was found that fathers with a stronger sense of meaningfulness showed positive reappraisal, confrontation and planful problem solving. The lack of resources and motivation to look for them may be related to strategies of coping with stress that include avoidance and resignation, which in turn may lead to conflicts within the family and lower quality of interaction with a child (Ricci, Hoddap, 2003). The study presented here reported that fathers with a poor sense of meaningfulness more frequently used avoidance and escape as means of coping with stress.

To conclude, the collected data shall serve as a starting point for further research. The results prove that the sense of coherence and its components play an important role in coping with difficulties that arise from bringing up a child with developmental disabilities.

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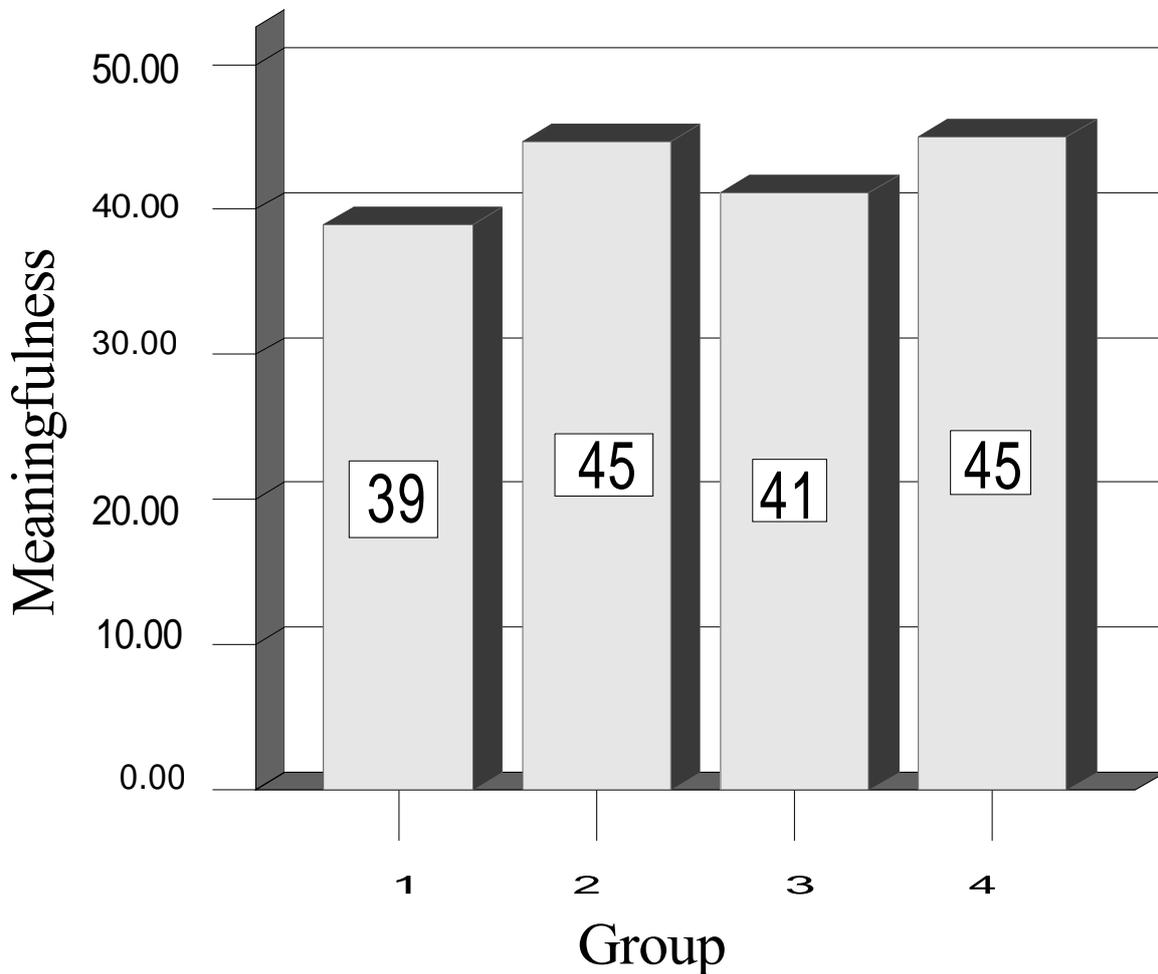
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1. Fathers of children with Down syndrome
2. Fathers of children with autism
3. Fathers of children with cerebral palsy
4. Fathers of typically developing children

Figure 1. Meaningfulness in fathers

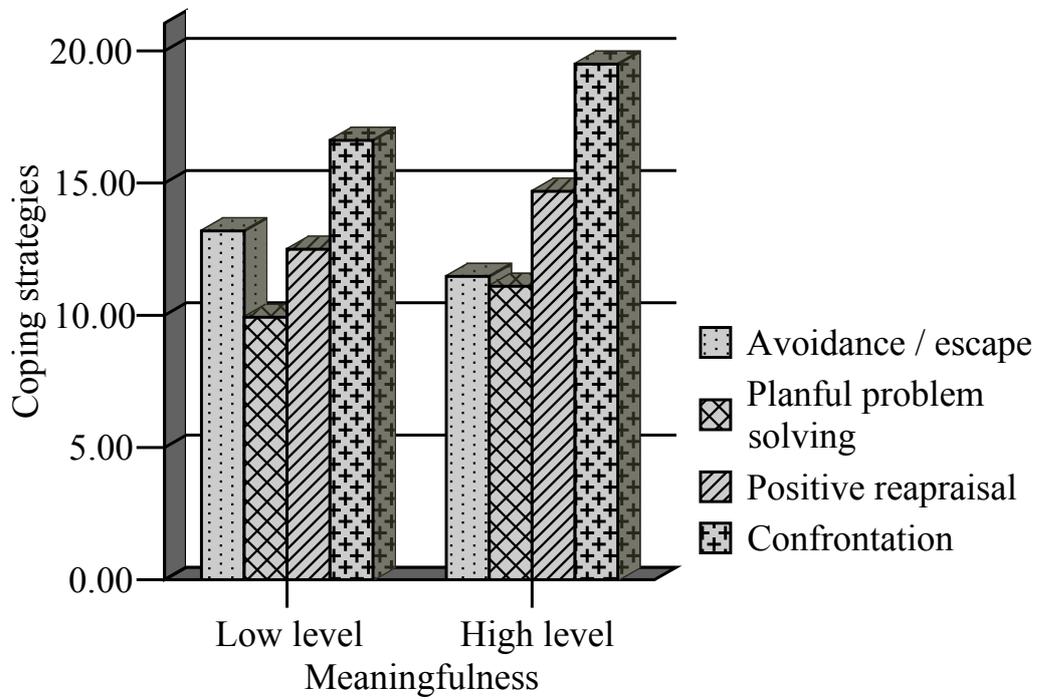


Figure 2. Level of meaningfulness and coping strategies in fathers