

Theses of Doctoral (Phd) Dissertation

**Research of background factors influencing college
students' future-orientation**

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Consultant: Dr. Ede Frecska



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Faculty of Arts
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Program in Psychology

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The aims of the study

Being concerned with future plays an important role in every age, as setting goals for the future is natural part of human thinking, so are exploring options, planning and trying to work out these plans. In childhood, everything seems to be possible. We make courageous, fanciful imaginations about our adult life. As time advances, more and more conscious and specific plans and purposes are made about future that motivate and direct our activities in the present. This function becomes particularly important in adolescence and youth, because in this period important decisions are made about different aspects of life: choosing a career, engagement in an intimate relationship, strengthening friendships, commitment to certain ideas, values and ideologies etc. These decisions influence our behaviour, activities, our purposes and plans about future in short and long term as well; and their consequences affect all our adult life.

Future-orientation refers to the image the individual have about oneself as reflected in his goals, plans and strategies (Nurmi, 1991). According to Gjesme (1975, 1979, cited by Husmann and Lens, 1999), future orientation is a uni-dimensional trait that is often not situation specific. It has 4 main components: involvement, anticipation, engagement in the future, and prediction.

According to Nurmi (1994), in the psychological process of future orientation 3 sequential elements can be distinguished: motivation, planning and evaluation. Motivation is essentially a drive to satisfy the needs of the individual, but at the same time a tension that is reflected in our personal goals. In the process of planning, we think through the personal and objective conditions needed to realize a particular future goal, and which can influence the extent to which our plans can be fulfilled. In the course of evaluation, we choose the events that are executable, that have a realistic level of risk, and are cognitively interpretable for us. We have to add that personal goals not only have a motivating force, but also affect self-esteem. If after considering abilities and possibilities the personal goals are realized, this increases the feeling of competence of the individual, and thus, by providing positive experience, helps to set up more objective goals and plans, and contributes to more successful coping with conflicts and difficulties in the course of fulfilling the goals.

Thinking about the future, setting up goals and aims is not solely determined by the mechanisms operating the individual, but by such personal dispositions as: the belief in a just world, the external-internal locus of control , and the mental health of the person. Beyond

these factors, there is a wider range of social and economic shifts that affect the entity, which assert their effect through the agents of socialisation, and the above mentioned personal dispositions.

Aim of our research was to study the role of family atmosphere, parenting style, parents' attitude, family situation, personal dispositions and mental health in the development of future-orientation and to present a more global picture of those effects, which either directly or indirectly have an effect on the personal future goals in the long run.

The hypotheses of the study

In connection with **the differences of gender** we assume that (1) girls mention future goals in connection with their family life more frequently and more concretely, while in case of boys, career and the possession of property and goods comes first. (2) Parents are less strict and more encouraging their boys' strife for independence, girls, on the other hand, benefit in a greater proportion from maternal support and the motherly way of treating them is more characterised by love and care, since mother and daughter relationships are more likely to be based on warmth, openness and intimacy. (3) Girls report symptoms of depression more often than boys .

Regarding **the differences of age** we assume that (4) the older generations are more concerned with the issue of finding a job and that of a family life along with the importance of starting an independent life. This can be observed in their future-oriented contents, since they are closer to making such decisions, while for the young ones the realisation of their plans concerning studying are the most important factor. (5) There is a closer correlation in connection with the time extent and the controllability of its manifestation of the future-oriented contents of the older generations, since they have more concrete plans related to the realisation of their future goals.

Related to **the effects of family situation** we assume that (6) young ones raised at a broken home talk about the goals of a future family life more frequently, due to the fact that living a happy and harmonious family life is a stressed part of their image of the future. (7) Youngsters grown up in incomplete families perceive their family atmosphere more conflict-ridden, whereas youngsters grown up in complete families characterize their family

environment as rule-oriented and consistent. (8) Youngsters raised in a single parent family are less likely to believe in a generally and personally just world, are more characterised by an external locus of control and thus there is a higher possibility of producing symptoms of depression.

Considering the relationship of effects between family socialisation and personal dispositions and their influence on future-orientation we assume that (9) young ones raised in a rule-oriented environment tend to believe more in a just world, are characterised by internal locus of control, and have a better mental health, thus this atmosphere aids them in finding hope for education, a future family and a job, and also makes it possible to formulate more concrete goals, since this atmosphere leads to a more accurate goal-orientation. (10) Young people raised in a conflict-ridden and restrictive home environment tend to believe more in random fairness, are more likely to be characterised by a faith in external control, often report severe depression, thus fear is more likely to predominate this atmosphere in connection with the plans relating to studies, future family and a job. In addition, they see these future goals less likely to be realisable, since they receive less family support in achieving their aims.

Subjects and measurements

Subjects

Data were collected at Eszterházy Károly College, Eger, Hungary. Participation in the study was on a voluntary base, per person, anonymity was guaranteed. 493 students took part in the research (105 males, 388 females). Mean age was 21,72 years (SD = 3,217, median age = 21 years).

57 subjects were grown up in an incomplete family. 50 of them was raised by the mother (11 males and 39 females), 7 of them by the father (1 male and 6 females). 427 subjects were grown up in a complete family (92 males and 335 females). 6 of the subjects were grown up by the grandparents, and 2 by foster parents (all 8 females), and one subject was raised by an other relative.

Measurements

Our subjects' perceptions of the family and parenting style were measured by the Hungarian version of the Family Socialization Questionnaire (Dalbert and Goch, 1997). The questionnaire describes the family climate as well as parenting aims, attitudes and styles. In addition, the subjects completed the Parental Support Questionnaire (Parker és mtsai, 1979).

Belief in a just world were assessed with the justice questionnaire comprising the General Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, Montada and Smith, 1987), and the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, Katona-Sallay, 1996), and the Belief in a Random World Scale (Dalbert, 1993). The questionnaire also contains statements in connection with religion, with fairness at the workplace, and with belief in an unjust world.

The locus of control was measured by Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966).

The mental health was measured by the short version of Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al.1972).

Future-orientation of college students was measured by the short version of the Future-orientation Questionnaire (Nurmi, Poole and Seginer, 1995). In this questionnaire, the college students had to make a list about their future aspirations, goals and fears. Furthermore they had to estimate in a 7- point Likert-type scale how concrete, how realizable these goals, and how much support they get from their parents and from the school to accomplish these hopes in the future. And they had to estimate how old they will be when these goals are realized.

Results and conclusions

In accordance with our first hypothesis, girls did mention in a significantly larger proportion family-related plans, and also verbalised more goals in such subtopics as relationship, marriage and having a child, than boys did. However, the second part of our first hypothesis was not justified, since it was the girls, who put more of their ideas into words in connection with hope of a future job, whether we examined the type of the job or the expectations related to the workplace.

In contrast with our second hypothesis, we experienced that parents gave their daughters a much greater freedom to make their own decisions about their lives, thus providing them with a greater independence. A further finding was that boys perceived their parents' upbringing more consistent and more conformity-demanding, than girls.

The age of the young adults were also affecting the forming of future-oriented goals. Our findings reflect the major tasks of the specific life periods and also adjust to their list of priorities. The highest percentage of hope – related to future studies – was to be found at the age-group of 18-19, and they were the ones who trusted the most that their parents will support them in realizing their goals. The 23-26 year-olds were the ones mostly motivated by the prospect of a job, and a family of their own, and to set aims related to these topics. Thus, our fourth hypothesis was justified as well. We have also found that younger people predicted the time-of-realization of their goals concerning studies, job, and family to be a further date, in contrast with the older generations, and though we have not found any significant difference, there was a trend of formulating more accurately, more precisely what they were wishing for in each of the categories as time went by. Our findings thus justify our hypothesis that the members of the older generations place the time of realization closer, and these are more controllable thanks to the clearer verbalisation of the set goals in all walks of life.

When examining the family situation's effect on the planning of the future, we have found that young people, who were raised in a whole family put their future intentions of a family life, and marriage into words in a larger percentage, however, the family plans to broken families are more frequent in younger adults. Therefore, our sixth hypothesis is justified.

When considering the dimensions of child-rearing from the perspective of the family's social standing, we experienced that those people, who were raised in an incomplete family claimed that the family atmosphere was conflict-ridden, unlike that of those raised in a whole family. With broken homes comes the lack of maternal support and the higher level of a manipulative attitude from the mother, which is paired up with an atmosphere that is tension-ridden, while in case of whole-families, this atmosphere is characterised by the father's inconsistent, manipulative, but at the same time, consistent and punitive parenting style. This result justified our seventh hypothesis.

Based on the family situation no significant difference have been found between those raised in a broken home and those of a whole family as far as the degree of depression and the belief in a just world is concerned. The only noticeable difference could be found

regarding the faith in the external or internal control in case of the two ways of rearing, i.e. those, who were raised in a broken home were more prone to have an external control attitude, while this was not the case when the parents raised their child together. This means that our eighth hypothesis was only partially justified.

One of the aims of this research was to map the mental health of college students. 52% of the students are considered to be 'normal', while 33.6% of them showed 'mild', 5.9% 'moderate' and 7.9% 'severe' symptoms of depression. Of the symptoms of depression, worthlessness was the most characteristic, but fatigue and hopelessness also outlined more than half of the students. These findings reinforce the experience of previous inquiries (Margitics, 2005, Bugán és Margitics, 2006).

During the enquiry into the difference between the sexes we have found that - with the exception of the symptoms of failure and self-punishing – girls produced more subclinical symptoms than boys. Thus, our third hypothesis – which stated that the symptoms related to depression were more frequently appearing in the case of women, also they were the ones who reported a larger extent of loss of interest, indecisiveness and fatigue – was justified. These results indicate that, in case of women, the symptoms of depression are more frequent and more intensive.

Our results show that those subjects who were raised in a rule-oriented atmosphere tend to believe that the world in which they are living is working justly, not only in general, but in their personal life as well; what happens to them is to be considered fair. Those with internal control tended to have a more affectionate relationship with their father. In addition, the more unpredictable, the more conflict-ridden they perceived their parenting environment, which lacked the parental support in realizing their aims and goals, the more severe symptoms of depression the students reported. Whereas a rule-oriented, supportive rearing, which is supplemented with a belief in a just world results in more concrete goals and aims in connection with future studies, job opportunities and family. Thus our ninth hypothesis was justified.

Finally, it can be said that a conflict-ridden atmosphere strengthens the faith in unfairness, leads to a worse mental health, and those young people who were raised in such circumstances are characterised by a stronger external locus of control. Furthermore, this family climate reduces the chance of the realisation of future-oriented goals and darkens the judgement of family support, thus our tenth hypothesis was justified.

In conclusion, we can claim that the affectionate, supportive child-rearing style of the parents, which does not fail to provide independence and set rules for the child, will

definitely lead to the belief in a just world, enhances the development of internal locus of control, and establish a better mental health. These effects all combine together to help the young ones' positive future-orientation, and that they set valuable, realisable goals for which they will work hard. Moreover, the favourable family atmosphere will provide 'resource' through its support for the upcoming challenge.

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