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Family resilience – a new research challenge

Abstract

Researchers and practitioners dealing with the concept of resilience focus mainly on resilience in relation to the individual. However, there are relatively few studies devoted to family resilience. This situation is slowly changing. The need to look at the family, not only from the perspective of dysfunction, but also through its strengths and resources, is evident. Reliable research on family resilience processes, is needed to describe their properties and methods of action. Information obtained in this way will guide psychologists, practitioners, and therapists working in the field of prevention to strengthen the resilience of the family.

In order for the conducted research to be reliable, allowing for the comparison of the obtained data, it is important for it to be embedded in theory. The purpose of this article is to present and briefly characterize the concepts and models of family resilience that can form the theoretical basis for research carried out in the area of family resilience.

Keywords: family, crisis, family resilience, research models

Prężność rodziny – nowe wyzwanie dla badań naukowych

Streszczenie

Badacze i praktycy zajmujący się koncepcją resilience koncentrują się głównie wokół prężności w odniesieniu do jednostki. Stosunkowo niewiele jest natomiast badań poświęconych prężności rodziny. Sytuacja ta powoli się zmienia, co uwidacznia się w potrzebie patrzenia na rodzinę nie tylko przez pryzmat dysfunkcji, ale jej mocnych stron i zasobów. Potrzebne są jednak rzetelnie badania nad procesami rodziny resilientne, które pozwolą opisać właściwości i sposoby działania rodzin prężnych. Uzyskane w ten sposób informacje będą wskazówką dla psychologów praktyków, terapeutów do pracy w obszarze profilaktyki, wzmacnianiem prężności rodziny.

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Aby prowadzone badania były wiarygodne oraz by istniała możliwość porównywania uzyskanych danych ważne jest, by osadzone były w teorii. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest prezentacja i krótka charakterystyka koncepcji i modeli prężności rodziny, które mogą stanowić podstawę teoretyczną badań realizowanych w obszarze family resilience.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, kryzys, prężność rodziny, modele prężności rodziny

Introduction

The family is the first and the most important system to which every human being belongs. When analysing issues related to the family, it should be taken into account that this system is not a simple sum of the properties of people constituting it (de Barbaro, 1999; Braun-Gałkowska, 2007). The functioning of individual family members is based on interdependencies. In the family, causality is of circular nature and based on feedback, which means that the same causes can lead to different effects, and the same effects can have different sources. Related to this are the principles of system functioning, such as equipotentiality and equifinality. Equipotentiality means that causes originating from the same source can cause various effects, and equifinality is connected with the fact that, starting from various sources, the same results can be achieved.

The family does not function in a vacuum, it is surrounded by other systems, i.e. acquaintances, friends, society, state (Gąsior, 2014). Family members are biologically, emotionally, legally, and culturally connected. They have a common history, but also a common future. The lessons learned from the family of origin have an indelible impact on the lives of individual members. Seeking answers to the questions: who is the man? – it is impossible not to refer to the area related to the family. Hence, research on family is extremely important and concerns the family structure, family processes, the role of the family in the functioning and development of individuals, and its relationships with other social environments (Janicka, Liberska, 2014).

The contemporary family experiences many threats, faces various crises that lead to serious development problems, and often end in disintegration. Various forms of family support have developed in Poland in recent years. Support activities are aimed at repairing disturbed relationships and eliminating discomfort, resulting from mismatches between mutual expectations of family members relative to each other (Pietras, 2014). Researchers and psychologists, however, increasingly express the view that activities that underlie helping families should be more balanced. It is necessary to shift attention from psychopathology, deficits and limitations towards health, family forces, and its resources (Walsh, 2012). Such an approach opens the space to deal not only with dysfunctional families, but also with those that

function relatively well, so that they can function even better. This idea gives the opportunity to examine the family's resources, its potentiality and protective factors in the light of the resilience concept.

The concept of resilience, which was created and developed in the second half of the last century, provides a theoretical basis for explaining the phenomenon of good functioning of an individual, despite unfavourable living conditions, adversities, and traumatic experiences (Gamezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1994).

Previous research conducted on the basis of the resilience concept most often concerned the search for determinants of immunity of children and adolescents from risk groups (Werner, 1994; 2000). Their basis was the question „what causes some people, in the face of threats and adversities, to stay healthy and well, while others do not?” (Patterson, 2002, p. 233). In the Polish context, this concept constituted the theoretical basis for the study of psychological immunity of children and adolescents from high-risk groups (Borucka, Ostaszewski, 2012; Grzegorzewska, 2013; Sikorska, 2016).

The concept of resilience focuses mainly on issues related to human functioning, however, the most important concepts and conclusions developed in the research refer not only to the individual, but also to wider systems, including family (Walsh, 2012; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993; Patterson, 2002). This approach provokes the question: „How is it that some families, despite crises or persistent adversities, are still doing well, are developing well, and are even strengthening and enriching?” (Walsh, 2012). This question is absolutely fundamental in families facing serious problems such as disability or long-term disease (Liu & Potměšil, 2012; Potměšil & Pospíšil, 2013; Potměšilová, 2013; Welch, Harrist, 2017)

Family resilience – an attempt to conceptualize the idea

Literature uses many terms referring to resilience. In the Polish translation, it usually is resistance, the concept of resistance-flexibility, and resilience (Opora, 2009; Urban, 2011; Jarczyńska, 2011). English-language literature uses many terms interchangeably, such as resistance, flexibility, elasticity, indestructibility, or viability.

The variety of terminology used implies different approaches to this phenomenon. The first group of definitions includes elasticity as a psychic strength or ability to mobilize available resources and protective factors in the face of adverse circumstances. The second group of formulated definitions of resilience emphasizes the role of the individual's ability to positively adapt or rebound from unpleasant experiences, while giving a positive direction to their own development (Mudrecka, 2013). According to the third

approach, resilience is defined as a dynamic, multifactorial process in which the individual, despite experiencing unpleasant events, can adapt to them positively (Juczyński, 2009).

The mentioned points clearly show that the concept of resilience is considered a metaphor of processes that co-create the phenomenon of proper human functioning, despite objectively unfavourable conditions (Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987; Borucka & Ostaszewski, 2008). This approach most generally points to the role of the adaptation process, in which the individual activates internal and external potentials (protective factors), in order to overcome the negative effects of life events leading to a general sense of well-being (Black & Lobo, 2008).

The term resilience is used more often in research on the functioning of the basic social cell – the family (family resilience) (Black & Lobo, 2008). The concept of family resilience creates the opportunity to look for protective factors and resources that increase the family's resilience to problematic situations and enable it to effectively overcome the negative effects of encountered events, while leading to maintaining and developing health (Mangham et al., 1995).

It should be emphasized that the concept of family resilience is rooted in systemic theory. In accordance with this approach, the family is captured in the categories of a uniform, changing, open and self-regulating psychosocial system, co-created by its members, closely related and mutually interacting each other (Czabała, 1988; de Barbaro, 1999; Braun-Gałkowska, 2007). A change in any of the elements of the system entails changes in the whole system, which in turn affects the person who is the direct source of change (Kaleta, 2013). Not only the mutual relations of individual family members (e.g. the mother's influence on the child) are analysed, but above all, the whole system in which each person depends on the members of the family. This kind of understanding of the family allows us to talk about relationship resilience, i.e. resilience as a theoretical construct at the level of the group as is the case of the family (Walsh, 1996).

The definition of resilience in relation to the family was first defined by Hamilton and Marylin McCubbin. According to these researchers, the term can be defined as characteristics, positive behavioural models, or properties that help the family avoid breaking up in the face of a variable, difficult, and complex reality (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). This means that the health and strength of the family is the result of resilience processes that appear in response to stress, negative experiences, or change. They help the family not only survive crises, but also help to restore harmony and integrity as a whole, leading to the development of its potential and the health of individual family members (Pisarska, Ostaszewski, 2012; Lachowska,

2014). A similar approach to family resilience is presented by Walsh (2006), pointing out that this resilience is a dynamic process related to the positive adaptation of the family in the face of various adversities or stressful and traumatic experiences. In turn, Patterson (2002, p. 522) proposes that the family's resilience should be understood as a process in which interactions between risk factors and protective factors are associated with a specific result, wherein the protective factors moderate or mediate the risk, which in effect leads to good results. These definitions underline the importance of family subjectivity, which, struggling with a difficult situation or crisis, is able to avoid the occurrence of pathological changes through the use of protective factors (resources).

Black and Lobo (2008) presented a list of protective factors that promote family health and positive adaptation. They include:

- positive outlook, which is associated with the perception of difficult and traumatic events as challenges and crises as a chance for change,
- spirituality, which is a system of beliefs and values shared by all family members, giving a deeper meaning to the critical events encountered,
- family member accord, constituting the basis of showing mutual respect, care, and giving a sense of security and psychological comfort,
- flexibility, expressed in the ability to modify the rules of functioning of individual family members depending on the needs and challenges encountered while maintaining the stability of the family as a system,
- family communication, understood in terms of a sincere, open dialogue conducive to solving emerging conflicts and the ability to express feelings, including those difficult,
- financial management, and therefore sound management of money,
- family time, fostering closer mutual relations by eating meals together, doing everyday housework,
- shared recreation, that is the source of positive experiences and the basis for the rebound of negative emotions,
- support network, is the ability to reach for help of other people or social institutions.

According to this approach, the property of effective family adaptation to difficult and threatening situations is conditioned by the family belief system, its organization, and the style and quality of communication (Juczyński, 2009). Thanks to the protective factors, the family is able not only to overcome the difficulties encountered, but also to return to sustainable functioning and maintaining a high sense of quality of life and health.

It should be emphasized that resilience, understood as a process, can take place in different ways in different phases of family life. Similarly, the protection factors described above may be different for each family and may

co-decide on its competence to deal with critical life events. Nevertheless, this is a positive conclusion, because it clearly indicates that resilience can be shaped and strengthened through the potentials available to the family (Juczyński, 2009).

Concepts and models of family resilience

The concept of family resilience is derived from the theory of family stress and coping, but it significantly extends it. This concept assumes the possibility of personal change, relations, and the possibility of growth as a result of experiencing crisis and adversity (Lachowska, 2014)

The Family Stress Model ABCX Hill (1949) was an important step in the development of the family resilience concept and research conducted within its framework. The author included the family resources and family definition of stressor in this model, which gave the opportunity to strengthen family resilience. The model proposed by Hill was expanded by Burra (1973), and its important element was the separation of the factors of family susceptibility and regenerativeness. The susceptibility of the family was understood as the family's ability to prevent the stressor from developing into a crisis, and the regenerativeness was the family's ability to recover from crisis (Van Breda, 2001).

The next changes in the Family Stress Model were made by McCubbin and Paterson (1983), which resulted in the Model of the Double ABCX. From the point of view of family resilience, researchers drew attention to the post-crisis period. The ABCX Double Model focuses on the fact that some families emerge from the crisis stronger and more resilient than they were before. McCubbin and Paterson stated that the reduction of the crisis is not a sufficient indicator of adaptation and introduced the concept of adaptation. Adaptation was understood as the ability to match the requirements of one system or subsystem, with the ability to meet the requirements by another system or subsystem

Along with the development of research, emphasizing the position that adjustment and adaptation of the family to a crisis situation is characterized by high dynamism, and considering the types of families, their potential and opportunities, conceptualization of the ABCX Dual Model was started. Taking into account the mentioned variables, the T-Double ABCX Model was developed. This model drew attention to the key factors related to the change in the way the family reacted to the stressful situation. These factors included the family typology, defined as a set of essential family system properties that characterize and explain how the system usually assesses,

acts and behaves (...). This is a family-standard, predictable model of family behaviour (McCubin & McCubin, 2001).

Another important change in the development of the Family Stress Model was the creation of the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response model, the so-called FARR, by Joan Patterson (2002). From the point of view of family resilience, it was important to introduce two important effects by the author: adjustment and adaptation that take place in families struggling with adversities and failures. Adjustment was understood as minimizing the degree of change that must be made in the family and included the processes of: avoiding – denying the stressor in the hope of it disappearing, eliminating – releasing from the stressor, and assimilation – making minimal changes that reduce the negative effect of the stressor. Adaptation concerned family efforts to cope with prolonged, heavy, and multiple stressors. According to Patterson, the indicator of family resilience is a change in functioning towards better functioning – adaptation. Success in this respect means the ability to maintain the family as a whole, thanks to which it can carry out its development tasks and support the development of individual members.

Still another important theoretical construct in the Patterson model is the concept of meanings given by the family. The author has distinguished three types of meanings: situational meanings, that is, family-defined requirements with which they confront and the possibilities of the family; the identity of the family as a whole, i.e. how family members see themselves as a whole; picture of the world, that is how family members see their family in relation to systems outside the family. The author emphasizes that these meanings shape the nature and scope of risk and the family's protective capabilities (Lachowska, 2012).

The most developed theoretical model of family resilience is the Resilient Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation (McCubin & McCubin, 1996; 1998). In this model, the authors focus on how families adjust and adapt to a stressful situation. According to the concept, the families respond to stress in two basic, separate, but related phases: adjustment and adaptation. The effect of the first stage is adjustment, which can be described as good or as lack of adjustment.

The course of the adjustment phase in the Resilient Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation is presented in the Figure 1.

In the adaptation phase, the stressor interacts with the family susceptibility, which is shaped by the accumulated stress occurring at the same time as the stressor. Family susceptibility interacts with existing, stabilized models of behaviour, which in turn interact with family resilience resources, a family cognitive assessment of the stressor, and family strategies for

solving problems and coping. A family who found themselves in a stressful situation can survive and get an adjustment status between requirements and abilities. If the stressor is not too big, the family is not very susceptible, it has a favourable functioning model, positive stressor assessment, good immune resources, great problem-solving and coping abilities. The aim of this stage is to cope with the stressful situation by the family without introducing fundamental changes in the existing models of functioning (Lachowska, 2014).

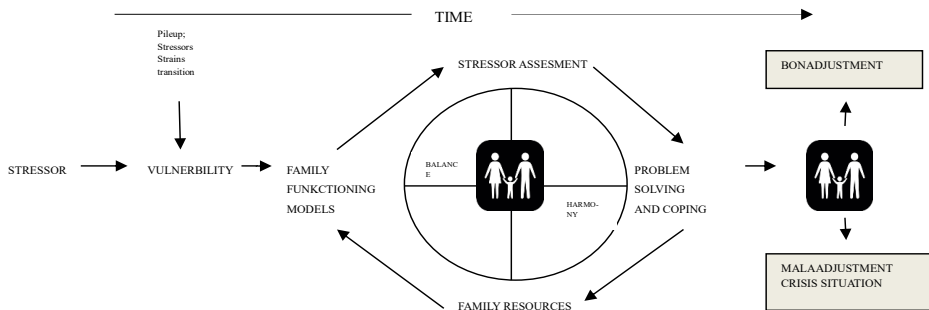


Figure 1. The adjustment phase in the Resilient Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation developed on the basis McCubbin and colleagues (McCubbin et al., 1996, p.15; 1998, p. 7).

Lack of adjustment means a crisis situation in the family, which entails the necessity of changes in order to deal with the stressor. The initiation of changes by the family marks the beginning of the adaptation phase. Positive adaptation is the effect of the interaction of many elements: new functional models developed in the family, existing functional models that have been maintained or modified, family resilience resources, family social support networks, family cognitive assessment of the situation, problem-solving and coping abilities of the family. Adaptation, appearing in response to the crisis experienced by the family, indicates its resilience.

The course of the adaptation phase in the Resilient Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation is presented in the Figure 2.

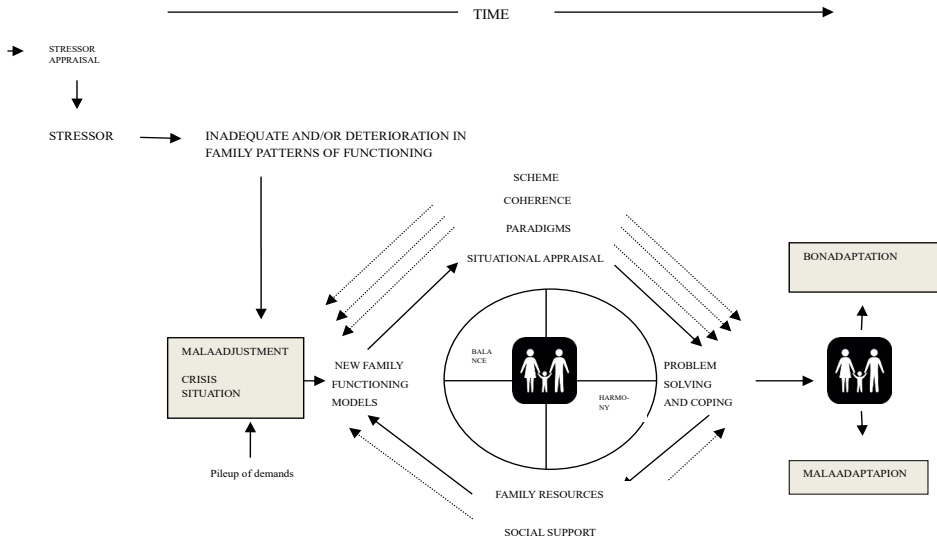


Figure 2. The adaptation phase in the Resilient Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation developed on the basis McCubbin and colleagues (McCubbin et al., 1996, p 25; 1998, p. 13).

Families achieving success in the adaptation process continue to show the ability to support the development of their members, and also show a willingness to maintain the family as a whole, thanks to which they can carry out development tasks typical for individual family life cycles (Paterson, 2002).

A slightly different look at the resilience of the family was presented by Walsh (2012). When reviewing literature in the field of social sciences, the author defined key processes for family resilience. According to Walsh, these are processes that reduce the risk of dysfunction, promote recovery and growth after the crisis, and give the family strength to overcome long-term difficulties. These processes are related to the three main areas of the family's functioning, they are: the family belief system, family organizational models, and family communication. The resilient families perceive the crisis as an opportunity for change and a common challenge. They believe that by acting together they will overcome adversities. These families have an optimistic vision of life, they focus on the present, not on trauma and the past. They can find sense in adversities, allowing them to be overcome. They are distinguished by transcendent values and spirituality. The resilient families have a flexible structure, which they can modify depending on their needs. They are flexible in terms of family roles. Mutual support, cooperation, and respect of the individual needs of family members are also important. Resilient families also benefit from non-family and environmental

support networks to deal with the crisis. Ways of communication in these families are clear and the level of trust is high. There is openness in expressing feelings, including difficult ones. Members of resilient families are able to realistically define a problem, jointly decide on how to solve it, then work together and cooperate to overcome difficulties. These processes remain in mutual interaction and are mutually reinforced, which makes the family immune to crises.

The family resilience model proposed by Foma Walsh was partially confirmed in the research of James P. Coyle (2009). The study was conducted among American and Canadian families with alcohol problems and showed that the development paths of these families, as well as their members, are very diverse. Some families were characterized by high resilience despite alcoholism. These families functioned correctly and their members were developing. Other families, however, experienced a number of negative effects, and their resilience was very limited.

Based on the concept of Walsh, the FRAS questionnaire Family Resilience Assessment Scale (Sixbey, 2005) was constructed to measure family resilience. The method is used in the United States, and has been adopted also in other countries, among others, Turkey and Malta. The work on the adaptation of the FRAS Questionnaire is also underway in Poland, and the results presented so far should be considered satisfactory (Nadrowska, Błażek, Ewandowska-Walter, 2017).

When considering issues related to the factors that make up family resilience, it also seems interesting to look for relationships between attachment styles of family members and the aforementioned resilience. According to John Bowlby's theory of attachment (2007), the ability to create close emotional ties is a basic element of human nature. Attachment is formed in early childhood (secure attachment, unprotected attachment) and defines the course of development through life (Józefik, Iniewicz, 2008). As it is shown in numerous studies, the pattern of ties created in childhood persists in later periods of human development and is important for equal aspects of its functioning. Analysis have shown, among other things, that the style of partner attachment is related to their relationship in the relationship. The more partners are attached to each other in a safe manner, the more positive their mutual relations are (Liberska, Suwalska, 2011; Tryjarska, 2017). Little is known, however, about the importance of adult attachment styles for the way of constituting relationships (e.g. cooperation, communication, conflict resolution) and how this translates into the functioning of the entire family system in terms of family resilience. Searching for the answers to these questions would be theoretically interesting especially to practitioners working with families.

Conclusion

Contemporary families experience many serious problems, struggle with various types of difficulties and traumas, which often lead to their disintegration. There are many different forms of family support in Poland, but they are usually of therapeutic character and are aimed at eliminating pathologies or dysfunctions. The concept of resilience presented in the study gives the opportunity to look at the background of family problems from a broader perspective and strives to justify why, despite being exposed to aggravating factors, families develop properly and maintain a sense of psychophysical well-being. In other words, resilience is a complex process that breaks the path leading from risk factors to problematic behaviour, providing a basis for recognizing the state of affairs (Borucka, Ostaszewski, 2008). The concept of resilience in the research provides, at the same time, the scientific basis for constructing different forms of prevention and therapy of families and marriages. For this purpose, however, it is necessary to conduct systematic and reliable scientific research that will answer the questions: what is the resilience of the family?, how do resilient families work? how to build and strengthen family resilience?

Each research should be embedded in theory, which gives a certain clarity and consistency in the course of the conducted argument. Trying to systematize the information presented in the article, it can be concluded that there is no single universal theory, by which the mechanism of adjusting the family to the crisis situation could be explained. However, the presented models and concepts do not constitute a superficial interpretation of the family situation. The presented theories draw attention to various factors, i.e. family resources, family type, family susceptibility, which seem to be important in the context of family resilience. In the presented models and concepts, it is pointed out that resilience is a process that lasts until the crisis occurs, until the family adapts to the new situation. There is also a discussion concerning requirements that the family faces and the way in which it experiences stressful situations.

The ongoing discussion on the models and concepts of family resilience can be a contribution to the design of research in the area of family resilience. This allows us to hope for greater interest of researchers in the area of resilience of the family, which may result in comprehensive research on this topic and the increase of support for families in the future.

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