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Self-regulation of behaviour in the context of peer pressure and risk behaviour

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Abstract

In their research the authors focused on uncovering the mechanisms of self-regulation of behaviour of minors living in children's home in the context of peer pressure and problem behaviour. The aim of the research was to uncover the mechanisms of self-regulation of behaviour in adolescents (aged 15–18) living in institutionalised environment of children's homes in relation to peer pressure and risk behaviour. Researchers used a system of inductive qualitative research methods. Namely, the team applied a phenomenological approach. Out of the research techniques, they chose phenomenological interviews with open questions conducted with 15 minors living in children's homes. The data obtained were transcribed and analysed. Significant statements were sorted into groups according to their meanings and re-validated. 113 significant statements were abstracted from the interviews and classified into two main groups – statements implying a high or low level of self-regulation of behaviour. We based the research on the contention that a high level of self-regulation involves activities which the individual performs independently and freely, because they consider these important, and vice versa. The result was an extensive description of the phenomenon – i.e. the experience of adolescents of self-regulation of their own behaviour in situations where peers encourage them in risk behaviour. The results showed that a high level of self-regulation manifests itself in situations where the feeling of doing wrong comes from within.

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1. Theoretical background

In the **study presented we focused on** the area of regulation of behaviour in adolescents living in children's homes. The focus of the study was self-regulation of behaviour in relation to peer pressure leading to risky behaviour. Scientific theories suggest that the conditions for self-regulation in people living in institutions (Goffmann, 2007) are rather difficult and in addition we see an increased incidence of risky behaviour in the target group of young people. We believe that we currently have a sufficient amount of information concerning risk behaviour of youth placed in children's homes. However, little is known about how adolescents think and what they experience. The main objective of the research was to describe and analyse the lived experience of young people with a specific phenomenon, in our case with self-regulation in connection with peer pressure leading to risky behaviour within children's homes.

Self-regulation of behaviour is understood in accordance with Vávrová et al. (2012) as a controlled change of one's own behaviour on the basis of internal and external determinants. A high level of self-regulation involves activities which the individual performs independently and freely, as he considers them to be important. A low level of self-regulation includes activities which the individual performs as he is aware of external pressures by adults and at the same time experiences these in an unpleasant way (Deci, Ryan, 1996). Therefore, there is a direct link between prevalence of internal determinants and a high degree of self-regulation, while a low degree of self-regulation is associated with predominance of external determinants.

Peer pressure is subjectively perceived as an effect of a group on the individual, while the individual is actively encouraged by other group members to perform a certain activity. Such an activity may be attractive for the individual and the group merely helps overcome the initial barrier. It is also possible that the individual does not actually wish to perform the activity however compliance with the group seems more important to him at the moment (Brown, Classen & Eicher, 1986). For our purposes, we will see peer pressure as a situation: "when people of your age make you do activities you do not want to do, or they discourage you from activities you want to do".

Risk behaviour is defined as a type of behaviour that means oscillation between the possibility of negative consequences and losses with positive consequences and profit (Moore, Gullone, Konstanski, 1997; Lane, Cherek, 2001).

Children's home in the Czech Republic provides care for children with ordered institutional care. In relation to children, the institution primarily has an educational and social role (§ 12 of Act No. 109/2002 Coll.) In accordance with a Canadian sociologist Goffman (2007) children's homes can be considered a type of total institutions. Total institutions, as claimed by Goffman, are forced residential communities that significantly limit a contact of persons entrusted in their care with the outside world. The combination of attributes of a residential community with a formal institution is called a social hybrid by Goffman (2007). Upon entering a total institution, the process of "mortification" of the user begins - the individual is "programmed", "trimmed" and "framed" into a form that is more manageable by the apparatus of a formal organisation. The child institutional care system has been currently going through the process of a necessary transformation and deinstitutionalisation in the Czech Republic, partly due to a large number of children placed in all types of long-term institutional care. By 2018 the Government of the Czech Republic undertook to have created a functional system ensuring consistent protection of the rights of children and meeting their needs. The transformation is based on the assumption that the best social environment for the life of a child is family. Institutional care should thus be the last and extreme option in dealing with a difficult life situation of a child.

A minor in the Czech Republic is an individual aged 15 to 18 years (Hartl, Hartlová, 2000). We focused on this age group in connection with peer pressure leading to risky behavior mainly for two reasons. The first reason was the fact that the sense of belonging to a peer group is very important in adolescence. The group provides a space for self-fulfillment, creating a sense of belonging. Group members find new models of behaviour there, they experience feelings of personal autonomy without an interference of adults, create own method of reward and punishment. The second reason was the fact that, under the current legislation, i.e. Act No. 218/2003 Coll., on juvenile courts, a

juvenile is criminally responsible. Based on the above, we consider it necessary to uncover the mechanisms of self-regulation of behaviour in adolescents in situations where other members of peer groups encourage them to risky behaviour.

2. Research methodology

We approached the social phenomena in hand - self-regulation of behaviour of minors living in children's homes in relation to peer group pressure leading to risky behaviour - phenomenologically. Such an approach has enabled us to understand the research material obtained from the perspective of the study subjects. In order to reveal the essential structure, we had to determine the way adolescents perceive and experience self-regulation of their behaviour in situations when they are encouraged by their peers to risky behaviour. It was necessary to tap into their inner world and understand the experiences and meanings attributed to this phenomenon. We have assumed that it is not necessary for a phenomenological study to start with a research question (Hendl, 2008). We therefore set a broader conception of the research problem, i.e. **the experience of minors with regulation of their own behaviour in situations when they are encouraged to risky behaviour by their peers.**

The data were collected by means of qualitative interviews, which were analyzed in relation to the degree of self-regulation and divided into two phases (see Table 1).

Table 1 The phenomenological interview phase

Phase	Context	Questions asked*	Number of respondents
I.	High level of self-regulation of behaviour regarding peer pressure to risky behaviour	Think of an event, when your peers enticed you to risky behaviour and you felt control over your behaviour. Tell us about the experience. How did you feel in the situation?	15
II.	Low level of self-regulation of behaviour regarding peer pressure to risky behaviour	Think of an event, when your peers enticed you to risky behaviour and you did not feel control over your behaviour. Tell us about the experience. How did you feel in the situation?	

*We assumed that the concept of self-regulation was unknown to minors. Therefore, it was clarified in the interviews (and replaced) using the concept of control.

In accordance with Creswell (1998), who recommends interviews with a minimum of 10 and maximum of 15 individuals within a phenomenological study, we selected 15 respondents. The selection of respondents was based on researcher's judgment in respect of the essential characteristics of the sample:

- a stay of the interviewed person in a children's home,
- the age of the interviewed person 15 to 18 years,
- a consent of the interviewed person with participation in the study.

A phenomenological interview containing open questions was conducted with the individuals selected by the criteria above. The interviews were recorded. Respondents agreed to be interviewed and recorded by giving a written consent.

3. Data analysis

The interviews with 15 respondents were literally transcribed and the transcripts were subsequently subjected to a phenomenological analysis using Colaizzim's methodology (1978). In the first phase, we carefully perused all the transcribed interviews and abstracted **significant statements** (i.e. literal phrases and collocations) which showed a

direct connection to the issue. On the whole, we abstracted 113 significant statements. 22 statements related to a high degree of self-regulation of behaviour (see Table 2) were selected. Moreover 18 statements illustrating a low degree of self-regulation of behaviour were chosen (see Table 3). Categorising the statements was based on the initial assumption that a high level of self-regulation involves activities which the individual performs independently and freely, because he considers them to be important. We excluded semantically very similar statements or those that appeared repeatedly while including the most concise statement representing the group of analogous or identical statements.

Table 2 Significant statements related to **high levels of self-regulation** of behaviour regarding peer pressure persuading to risky behavior

Significant statement / Meaning groups (see Table 4)		
1.	If I got caught, I would gain bad reputation.	H1
2.	I think about the possible consequences. What would be the pluses and minuses.	H1
3.	If it could continue, even into jail.	H1
4.	It is important for my future. To be a good, decent person.	H1
5.	I am not even 18. I cannot do this.	H1
6.	I know it is illegal.	H1
7.	I know what is right and what is wrong.	H1
8.	This is not the way to solve it.	H1
9.	I thought to myself if they were normal, they would not ask of me for something like this.	H5
10.	It was not a good thing what they did. That is not how you do things.	H1
11.	I said that I will simply not take it. It is crap. I just said that I will not do it. Told them to stop forcing others into things they do not want to do.	H2 H5
12.	They are laughing at me but I do not care anymore.	H3
13.	She did not talk to me afterwards. But I did not care.	H3
14.	They never managed to persuade me into anything. I always stood my grounds.	H2
15.	Everyone is a master of their own life and is in charge of it.	H2
16.	Rely on yourself and make your own decisions. Then only I am responsible for the consequences.	H2
17.	It is important because it is my decision.	H2
18.	When I base my decision on someone else it feels stupid.	H2
19.	The hardest thing is to control myself.	H3
20.	First you have to think whether you have it under control.	H2
21.	If I had not done the things did, I could have been somewhere else, not where I am now.	H4
22.	It depends on the situation. What it offers. A theft is a theft and it is not right. Even if my best friend offered, I would not do it.	H6

Table 3 Significant statements related to **low levels of self-regulation** of behaviour regarding peer pressure persuading to risky behaviour

Significant statement / Statement groups (see Table 5)		
1.	I do not want people to know what I've done, who I am. I could have a bad reputation.	L1
2.	The caretakers will be dealing with it at the meeting and we will be punished.	L2

3.	I realized that there is a camera that records it.	L2
4.	I do not want to be caught by the security.	L2
5.	Not that I wanted it myself, it was forced.	L3
6.	She was so rough ... she was older, and I was afraid of her so I took it.	L3
7.	Because I was afraid. That she will tell on me. That she will unleash the whole family against me.	L3
8.	When someone makes me do things, I am scared. They are dominant compared to me. They might be of the same age but they have a family.	L3
9.	I did it because I did not want to be a douche.	L3
10.	It is usually a friend who has already tried it who eggs me on. Then they start laughing at me, like I do not know how to do it.	L3
11.	When I need something from him afterwards he will not give a damn.	L4
12.	That they would have me in the team. That they would take me on. As a member of the group.	L5
13.	I did it to be one of them.	L5
14.	My buddies say that who did not do it will not go there either. So they would not accept me then.	L6
15.	I was worried, did not want to be the only one who did not take it.	L7
16.	That my friends means something to me. That we have been friends for a long time and I do not want to betray him.	L9
17.	I do not know, I think I wanted to show them that I can do it, That I am not a coward.	L8
18.	For me, it is important who comes up with it, not what it actually is.	L9

Significant statements were subsequently **categorised according to their meaning** and sorted into statement groups. First we categorised statements associated with a high level of self-regulation of behaviour (see Table 4).

Table 4 Categorisation of statements associated with a **high level of self-regulation** of behaviour regarding peer pressure to risky behavior

Statement group	Statement group name
H1	Internalisation of norms and values.
H2	Knowing that my life is controlled by myself and that I am solely responsible for my decisions.
H3	Importance of controlling will and emotions.
H4	Awareness of past mistakes and their linking to the current state of affairs.
H5	Feedback to members of the peer group, namely to the main actor.
H6	Assessment of the risk activity as such - regardless of the person who offers it.

Similarly, we proceeded to categorize significant statements regarding a **low level of self-regulation** of behaviour of minors living in children's homes (see Table 5).

Table 5 Categorisation of statements associated with a **low level of self-regulation** of behaviour regarding peer pressure to risky behaviour

Statement group	Statement group name
L1	Moral behaviour as a result of public opinion.
L2	Knowledge of written values and norms and the resulting penalties.
L3	Compliance with, often unjustified demand of peers due to unpleasant experience of pressure - fear, anxiety, ridicule, fear of blackmail.

L4	Belief that relationships among group members work on the basis of reciprocity.
L5	Desire to become a member of the group.
L6	Desire to remain a member of the group.
L7	Fear of being different.
L8	Gaining social prestige.
L9	The person who offers a hazardous activity is more important in the process of deciding than the risky activity itself.

In the analysis we uncovered 6 semantic categories, i.e. statement groups (H1 to H6) associated with a high degree of self-regulation of behaviour regarding peer pressure leading to risky behaviour of minors living in residential care and 9 statement groups (L1 to L9) associated with a low level of self-regulation of behaviour regarding peer pressure leading to risk behaviour. Subsequently, we conducted a phenomenological interpretation, which is the outcome of the qualitative research.

Matching the statement groups against the original transcripts of the respondents was used to validate the data (every transcript had to be included in any of the statement groups while checking whether each topic area is based on the original transcript). The result is an exhaustive description of the research phenomenon, i.e. the essence of **the lived experience of minors regarding self-regulation of behaviour in situations when they are encouraged to risky behaviour by peers.**

4. Phenomenological interpretation

Every person attempts to somehow regulate their behaviour in the course of their life. Differences between people are to be found in the success rate, i.e. the quality of their self-regulatory process. In our investigation we sought the essence of the lived experience of high and low levels of self-regulation of behaviour of adolescents/minors living in an institutionalised environment in situations when their peers encourage them to participate in risky behaviour.

The resulting essence related to higher level of self-regulation can be expressed in words of one of the respondents: *"Everybody is the master of their own life"*. Situations where adolescents apply a high degree of self-regulation of behaviour are characterised by internalisation of written norms and values. They know that what is not prohibited to them by the law is often prohibited by shame. They feel that they have sole responsibility for their decisions. Self-regulation of behaviour is considered to be very important to them, yet at the same time they also realise the complexity of this process. The situations in which, despite the indignation of the peer group they withstand their pressure were referred to by the minors interviewed as very challenging. It is particularly difficult for adolescents to handle the situation itself and the days immediately following the event, which usually lead to social rejection by members of the group. Sometimes the sanctions imposed by the peer group for an "inflexible" member might be far-reaching. The group excommunicates the individual who often finds himself in social isolation. It is surely a positive finding that despite these unpleasant feelings the individual still finds their decision to be the right one. Regulation of behaviour in adolescents is conditioned by risk assessment of a specific activity to which they are encouraged by peers. However, it is rather interesting to find out that one of the most important roles is played by the person who persuades the individual to participate in risky behaviour. The results of the survey showed that this person is far more important than the level of risk of the potentially problematic situation.

On the contrary, **the essence of the experience of a low level of self-regulation of behaviour** could be best expressed by *"Among one's own (people)"* which well describes the effect of group identity. In situations associated with a low level of self-regulation minors apply moral behaviour as a result of public pressure. Their behaviour is managed and controlled from the outside – by someone (e.g. educators, caretakers, the public) or something (e.g. CCTV security services). Their own benefit and enjoyable experiences are the key factors when deciding. A control

using their own self-regulatory system, through checking against social requirements, fails in this situation. The situation is characterised by adolescents, who are under peer pressure, not resisting the authorities or providing feedback. They do not resist even if the level of risk is disproportionately higher than demand. The key role is played by the possible impact of the loss of a social status of the individual within the group. A strong motive was detected showing a significant desire to become a member or to remain a member of the group. Minors choose the option which brings immediate relief from the pressure of the peer group - conformist behaviour (in relation to the risk group). They do so even in situations where it is clear that they risk behaviour will be revealed and exposed. Regulation of behaviour is based on the subjective perception of the person who offers the activity. Willingness to engage in the activity, even in generally very risky ones (e.g. stealing, drug dealing, vandalism) grows with prestige of the "exhorting person".

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of self-regulation of behaviour in young people in children's homes in connection with peer pressure leading to risky behaviour. Our aim was to describe the experiences of minors in situations where they applied a high, but also a low level of self-regulation of their behaviour

The survey showed that adolescents living in children's homes applying a **high degree of self-regulation of their conduct** exhibit internalisation of written norms and values, personal responsibility, adequate experience of peer pressure and risk considerations as such. In situations in which they apply a **low degree of self-regulation of behaviour** are controlled from the outside - usually by public opinion and group identity. The desire to become a member, or remain a member of the group are predominant motivating factors. A crucial finding was made, namely a fact that the decision-making process is affected by the person offering a risk activity rather than the activity itself. Even in situations which adolescents themselves assess as generally highly dangerous. If prestige of the person offering a risk activity is high, they can easily persuade a minor to almost anything. The desire for group identity eventually outweighs the potential risks, as individuals that fail to fit into a peer group perceive such a situation as a social stigma.

We summarise the most important topics or areas that emerged while examining self-regulation of behaviour in adolescent in relation to peer group pressure leading to risky behaviour (see Table 6). The key topics/areas were bipolarised based on the level (high / low) of self-regulation of behaviour. It should be noted that these are not two extreme poles, but rather a dimensional range, a spectrum on which the individual respondents found themselves oscillating when evaluating control of their behaviour in these areas. We can therefore speak of a model of comparison of high and low levels of self-regulation concerning the following key issues: an individual system of values and standards of each individual, issues of personal responsibility, experiencing peer pressure, providing feedback to members of the peer group and internal preferences controlling one's decision-making.

Table 6 Comparison of common themes of different levels of self-regulation

Area	Degree of self-regulation	
	High "Master of own life"	Low "Among one's own (people)"
The system of values and norms	Internalisation of values and norms	Moral behaviour and compliance with the norms as a result of public opinion (external pressure) and under the threat of sanctions
Personal responsibility	Being aware of the impact of own actions and individual responsibility	Group identity reducing individual responsibility

Perceiving peer pressure	Adequate experiencing	Unpleasant experiencing (associated with fear, anxiety, fear of pressure and blackmail)
Feedback to peers	Assertive or aggressive	Passive or completely absent
Preferences	Considering the risk as such	The significance of the person offering the activity

In accordance with Navrátil and Mattioli (2011) we believe that functional, reactively stable control of behaviour of an individual cannot be ensured from the outside, but from the inside, through self-regulation. One can therefore assume that through a mere change of external behaviour, without relation to internal conditions, we cannot achieve the desired changes. This study has enabled us to clarify the mechanisms of self-regulation of behaviour of adolescents living in children's homes in relation to peer group pressure leading to risky behaviour. However, we believe that such an achievement is only the first step. The second step is to use the acquired knowledge in practice when working with young people at risk of dangerous behaviour.

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